

Payton

The Ghosts of Culloeden Moor, #4

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Published: 2015



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*To the inventors of American football...
for supplying a distraction
for my husband
every fall
so I can write in peace.*

Chapter 1

Fitzjames Payton pushed his way to the fore of his band of fellow Highland ghosts and hoped he'd be chosen next. If he never had to wake again to find Moonie's face smashed against his own ear, it would be too soon. But even a day or two apart from the broody man was welcome. So if wee Soni was offering tickets for time away from the moor, he wasn't going to wait about to see if there were any of those tickets left when she got around to him.

No. He would take the initiative. It was the kind of Scot he was. Not a sitter, a waiter, or a time-bider was he.

"Soni, lass. I'm willing and ready."

The wee witch smiled kindly at him and her face wrinkled about her eyes. 'Twas one of the things he loved most about her.

"I'm not surprised at all, Fitzjames. Ye've never been the patient sort, so I'm amazed it took ye so long to rise from yer grave, aye? Number 48 indeed." She shook her head at him, but it was only in teasing. "Step forward."

Truth be told, he'd been a bit surprised as well to find that so many others had managed to shake themselves awake again the morning after their final mortal battle, before he'd thought to rise.

He advanced as far as he dared what with the green light swirling about the skirts of her robe. "Prove meself, ye said?"

"Aye, my friend. It's all ye need to do."

"Then vengeance is mine?"

She gave him a sidelong look. “Don’t be stealing the Lord’s own thunder now.”

The scripture sounded in his head and he was immediately contrite.

“Weel, what I meant to ask, of course, was if I would then be able to... sit down with our young prince and show him just where he went wrong?”

Soni listened carefully, then nodded with approval. “Help the lad see the errors of his ways. Sounds noble itself, aye?”

They laughed together. Number 32 chuckled too, since he was standing close enough to hear it all whether his ears were working correctly or nay.

Soni raised an arm and Fitz reached out to stop her. “How much time will I have, lassie?”

“Auch, now. I wouldn’t know, Fitz. Ye’ll just have to see how long it takes ye, aye? Just like the rest.” She winked then. “Have a bit of faith.”

He nodded, and before he could raise his head again, the light of her grand bonfire, and the swirl of green was gone. And in their stead was darkness, black as pitch. Then that blackness was broken by hundreds of wee round lightbulbs strung in a row.

Sound returned to his ears in a roar, but he stood his ground and waited to see the direction the danger came from. Little by little, the sounds separated into different directions. The murmur of an engine behind him. The peal of laughter from his right. A car door slamming shut to his left.

The wee line of lights was reflected again and again in large panes of glass before him. Then the panes began to spin.

A revolving door.

A smiling doorman tipping his hat to a couple stepping into the building.

A large red sign above Fitz’s head—*Dalworthington Gardens Country Club*.

A hissing sound. He turned toward it and found a young, blond woman standing to the far side of a wide, cylinder-shaped shrubbery that was nearly as tall as she was. For the moment, all he could see was her head.

She motioned him to her and glanced nervously at the doors. Fitz looked about, and since no one else seemed to be interested in speaking to him, he closed the distance. If all she needed was clothing, he’d give her his plaid and his noble deed would be finished in the time it took to make a toast to the king over the water.

The lass was lovely, to be sure, and strong—for she pulled on his arm and swung him around to stand even deeper into the bushes before he ever thought to resist. Her golden hair never moved a whit. Her lips were blazoned red with lipstick, and her eyes were the deep green of moss under water. And she was in no need of clothes thanks to a striking ruby-red gown that fell to her painted toes.

“Good eve to ye, miss.” He made as much a bow as the cramped space would allow.

She groaned. “Look, don’t overdo it, okay?” She rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe they sent you in a kilt! That’s just—” She groaned again, obviously willing to leave the rest of her words unspoken.

Even with the knowledge he’d gained from watching the tellie, he had no idea what those unspoken words might have been. She was clearly unhappy he wore a kilt, but he hadn’t had much choice in the matter.

He peered down to see if his clothing was perhaps out of place, but indeed, it looked new as could be. The colors in his plaid were more vibrant than he’d ever

remembered, but that might be due to the fact that he was able to see it once again with mortal eyes. For it was the truth—everything had much more color than he'd seen in quite a time, and not just the young woman's lips.

"I apologize for the kilt," he said, remembering the words of many a man on the moor and television alike—better to admit you are wrong than to argue with a woman in the 21st century.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and while she exhaled, she smiled and opened her eyes. "No problem. I'm sorry I freaked out on you." She lifted a pretty hand with red nails that matched her gown.

He shook it gently and noticed how thin the lassie seemed. The bones in her hand felt as sharp as the ring on her finger.

"I'm Grace."

"A lovely name—"

"And you're Jim."

He was confused. "I am?"

"Look, I'm sorry, but I've been telling my family about my boyfriend, Jim, for months now. And I would have thought of a better name, but The Office was on, and... well, you're just going to have to go by *Jim* for the rest of the weekend." She grimaced. "Okay?"

Ah. So the lass needed him to play a role, to appease her family. And though he was none too happy about the dishonesty of it, he had little choice but to participate if his quest was somehow connected to the lass.

He sighed, and gave her a nod, agreeing to the pretense. "My name is Fitzjames, by the way. Those who know me well call me Fitz."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. You're going to have to be *Jim*. That was the deal, right? I mean, didn't they explain this to you?"

He shook his head. "Regrettably, nothing was explained to me, lass."

She smiled warmly. "Lass. I like that." She looked up into his eyes for a long moment and he felt the thrill of having won her attention. But then she shook her head as if shaking off a spell. "I can't believe they didn't give you the details. That's just..." She noted his concern and quickly washed the worry from her face. "Never mind. You know what? We'll just work with it, all right? I can give you a run down and we'll just have to wing it. What do you say?"

He'd like to say he appreciated her straight white teeth in spite of the lipstick, but he simply had to make the lass happy. There was something about her that needed... cheering.

"I say, I appreciate yer optimism, and I shall endeavor to be optimistic as well."

Her brow furrowed, but she didn't lose her smile. "You're really Scottish, aren't you?"

"Until the day I die." His voice caught on the end when he realized that day had already come and gone.

Her top teeth bit into that plump lower lip and she gave him a smile sweeter than any he'd ever seen before.

"Okay then, *Jim*. Here's the set up." She looked about them, then leaned close. "We're both from Eugene, Oregon. My sister's getting married, and we're about to go inside for the wedding supper. My family is dying to meet you, of course. And I've put them off as long as I can. Hiring you to play the part was the only choice I

had if I'm going to keep my mother from making me move back home, okay?" She didn't wait for his response. "We met at a Scottish festival. The one in Eugene."

"That sounds plausible."

"We have been dating long-distance since last August, but I didn't tell anyone until Christmas. You were my excuse not to come home last year." She looked guilty for a breath or two, then it passed. "You're an engineer."

"What sort?"

She shrugged. "I never said."

"You have two sisters and a brother, but they live in Scotland."

A long time ago, he truly had three sisters, but no brother. And if he were a caring brother at all, he would use some of his mortal time trying to discover what had happened to them.

"And my parents?"

"Died in a car crash. I'm sorry."

He nodded solemnly, then smiled at the ridiculousness of it. His parents had died long before the invention of cars. And of course, the lass couldn't be sorry they'd died in a car crash, but perhaps she was sorry she hadn't created a cheerier story for him.

"Yer condolences," he said gravely, "are appreciated."

With their heads bent together and a jest shared between them, it became an intimate moment he didn't intend to pass up. So he leaned closer and kissed her lightly on those red lips.

She pulled back and frowned.

He held up his hands to feign innocence. "I just supposed, if we had the first one out of the way, we would seem more familiar with each other—to others."

She nodded, but still frowned. "Okay." She pointed a shiny finger at him. "But don't do it again. I'll kiss *you*, okay?"

"Aye." He couldn't help the grin, and eventually, she lost the frown and allowed her smile to return, which seemed a natural state for her. "Ye should always smile, Grace. Always. Even in yer sleep."

They stepped out from the bushes and turned toward the door. She was nervous and clung to his arm like they'd known each other for much longer than they had. And he liked to think that his kiss had been a good idea after all, and not just an advantage taken.

"What's her name?" he asked quietly.

"Who?"

"Yer sister."

"Oh! Patience."

"Patience and Grace. Fine names."

"The groom is Shawn. Oh!" She leaned up close to his ear which entailed rising onto her toes and pulling him down to her. "You're a Cowboys fan from when you were little."

"Cowboys?"

"Football."

"Ah."

And with that, they stepped up to the door, nodded to the pleasant doorman, and entered the elegant building. He only hoped that playing the role of Jim was

all the noble deed required. For surely it was a presumptive to expect an honest Scot to pretend an appreciation for American Football.

Chapter 2

Clive Owen in a kilt! Were they kidding?

Grace had to focus on breathing and walking or she was going to end up on the sidewalk from either lack of oxygen or the inability to put one foot in front of the other.

She couldn't believe her luck. In fact, she never remembered having any luck at all, and if this was Karma's way of making up for a lifetime of neglect, Grace was going to take it—gladly!

The talent agency had promised, if the guy she'd chosen wasn't available, they would send a suitable replacement. All she'd insisted on was, whoever he was, he had to be able to pull off a Scottish accent. Ever since she'd heard the news that Patience was engaged, she'd been kicking herself for telling her family she was dating a Scotsman. At the time, it had been a way to make her older sister just a little jealous—something that never happened, ever—but when Grace realized she was going to have to produce this imaginary man, she'd wished she'd described him as a boring, bookish guy who lacked any social graces.

But not anymore. For once in a very long time, she was glad of the mistake she'd made.

She took another peek at him when he stood aside for her to enter the country club ahead of him.

Yep. Clive Owen in a kilt.

No. Clive Owen with a *five o'clock shadow and shoulder length hair, in a kilt*. A little thrill shot up through her and pinged every chakra along its way.

Patience Cunningham, eat your heart out.

The Scot offered her his arm and they followed the signs to the Cunningham/Forrester Event and she realized, besides the strange looks his kilt attracted, her "date" was moving kind of slowly. He checked out the fancy lighting like he'd never seen the inside of a nice restaurant before. Then his attention swung back to her and she gazed into those sweet green eyes for a drawn out second before he gave a wink. And it occurred to her he might be walking slowly on her account. Maybe he'd noticed the way her ankles wobbled on the heels that, though they were three inches high, only brought the top of her head up to his shoulder.

That thrill started pinging through her again and she shivered.

"Are ye chilled, lass?"

She shook her head and decided it would be safer if she stopped gawking at him.

They stepped through a wide doorway with thick rounded walls and came face to face with her family. And just like that, the pleasantness was over. People were clustered as they usually were. The Entitled, or the money-grubbers as she liked to call them, milled around the money-handlers—the Lawyers. The money-

handlers smiled and nodded and tried to keep the grubbers from bothering the money-makers—the Oil Men.

Home. Sickeningly-Sweet. Home.

It turned her stomach to see that all the stations were exactly as they'd always been. She was the odd man out, but that was the one thing she could be proud of.

"There's Grace," her aunt Mary called out, like everyone had been looking for her or something.

There was always a snide edge to Mary's words. But the slight curl to her nose temporarily disappeared when she got a look at Clive Owen's lookalike. She reluctantly broke away from Daddy's lawyer, Anthony, and hurried forward like she was the official family greeter.

"You can't be Grace's date." She slid diamond encrusted fingers around *Jim's* elbow and tried to tug him away.

He stared at the woman like he thought she'd lost her mind and pulled his arm up out of Mary's grasp and held that big, fluffy, pirate sleeve in the air like he thought she might attack it if he didn't.

With his arm still raised, he turned to look at Grace like he was begging her to save him from an out of control dog. But somewhere in the middle of that look of horror on his face, he managed to sneak in another wink.

"Sorry, Jim," she said and dragged his arm back down to his side. "Let me introduce you to my aunt Mary." It took everything she had not to laugh at her aunt's red face. "Mary Vandergriff, this is... uh... *Jim*."

"Madam," he gave Mary a curt nod. "Ye're correct. I am nay her date. I'm Grace's besotted suitor." He slipped an arm around Grace's waist and gently pulled her closer. And no matter how romantic it may have seemed, she suspected he was getting ready to use her as a shield between him and Mary.

She didn't blame him. Mary was just as passively aggressive as Grace's dad, and it wasn't pleasant to be around either one of them. Whatever kind thing they said was usually a thinly veiled insult, and Grace had spent the first half of her twenty-five years recognizing it, and the other half concentrating on becoming a different sort of person.

It was like any other form of abuse, really. She just had to make sure the circle was broken with her. And if she never had kids, she wouldn't have to worry about passing on the trait.

She took pity on Jim and stepped between him and her aunt. "Don't mind Jim. He's my biggest fan. Can't trust a word he says."

The actor frowned down at her. But what had he expected her to do, fan herself in the wake of his flattery? They were in the South, yes. But she was no simpering southern belle.

"All right," Mary said and stepped back. "Good luck winning over her daddy, Jim. I don't think he'll be too impressed by your skirt." Her excuse for a pleasant smile was replaced by an outright sneer, and Grace was embarrassed she'd had to expose the guy to the nasty woman. But she was paying him for his time with a big old bonus planned to cover all the unpleasantness ahead. It was almost enough to soothe her conscience.

Almost.

She shrugged. "Sorry about that." She peeked at his face and he was still frowning.

"Ye canna expect the woman to give ye yer due if ye cannot accept a compliment from a man who already loves ye, aye?"

She opened her mouth, but couldn't think of a rational argument, so she clapped her lips shut and just nodded. Thankfully, he stopped frowning. And just in time too. The second most important test was at hand.

"Please tell me my sister did not just refer to your kilt as a skirt, sir." Her dad stepped forward and his large, solid belly filled the space in the center of their little circle. He waved Mary away, who then walked over to join another group of grubbers who were foundering without someone more substantial toglom onto.

The Scot shook Daddy's outstretched hand. "She did, sir, but perhaps she doesnae ken any better."

"Oh, she knows."

"Daddy, this is Jim. Jim, this is my father, Rockefeller Cunningham."

"Rocky to my friends." He always started out friendly, so if they kept their conversation brief, her dad might not have time to turn offensive.

The actor's eyes narrowed. "Cunningham?"

"Yes. It's Scottish, but maybe you didn't know that?"

Grace panicked. She'd requested an actor who could do a believable Scottish accent. She hadn't expected anyone to have to study Scottish history to get the job. After all, she wasn't paying them that much.

"Auch, aye," her actor said. "I ken well enough that Cunninghams are Scottish. A unicorn on yer crest, I believe."

"Yes." Her father grinned. "With a horn of gold."

He clapped the Scot on the shoulder, but surprisingly, the man didn't move at all under what had to have been a lot of force. Her dad liked to keep men off balance any way he could, and if he couldn't do it with words, he'd get physical. But this time, Grace thought her father might have meant the move as a sign of approval.

"Either you know your stuff, Jim, or you've done your research." Her father narrowed his eyes at Grace as if to say, "you don't fool me." Then he turned back to the Scot. "Where are you from?"

She had to jump in. "I'm sure you've never heard of it, Daddy. And besides, he's from Eugene now." She gave the actor a smile and a quick wink and hoped he had brains enough to play along. It was clear he was pretty enough for any part and buff enough to make him look like a medieval Highlander wrapped cleverly in a plaid package. But how bright he was, she couldn't guess.

She'd been stupid to think she would really get away with lying to her family. And she could have gotten out of it by saying they'd broken up, but before her mother shred the news about Patience's engagement, she'd first asked if Grace was still dating that Scot she talked about.

"Oh yeah," Grace had said. "Still with him. Still happy."

Then her mother had pounced. "Good. Now don't mess it up between now and April. I want you to bring him to the wedding."

The shock of finding out whose wedding she would be bringing him to was upstaged by the fear of producing a boyfriend by April. And not just any boyfriend. He had to be a Scot!

After a few sleepless nights, she'd considered telling her mom she'd caught her Scottish boyfriend cheating on her, but she didn't want anyone thinking she was stupid enough to date a cheater. And she would much rather use her savings to hire a boyfriend for a short weekend than flush all the work she'd done. And it had taken a heck of a lot longer than just a weekend to prove she could survive away from the "family shelter" in Texas.

But the lie hadn't been so simple. And she was about to be exposed.

He was a real Scot? Maybe. But how much would a Scottish Texan know about Scotland?

Chapter 3

The Scot gave her a worried look and then turned back to her father. "I hail from Paisley, Renfrewshire," he said. But for a second there, it sounded like he'd been forcing his words through clenched teeth. She'd seen plenty of people struggle to be civil to Rocky, but this guy hadn't even met the true Rockefeller Cunningham yet. So what would he do when he did?

The important thing, she told herself, was that his supposed hometown sounded awfully Scottish. Believable, even.

She gave him a big smile, but his attention was still on her father. And thankfully, her father was busy trying, but failing, to ignore the school of grubber fish moving slowly in his direction.

Daddy scowled at his sister, Mary, then brought his attention back. "Just outside Glasgow, isn't it?"

Jim nodded. "It is."

"Visited an Abbey there once, a long time ago."

Grace's mother appeared next to her father and he relaxed. His handler had arrived. She was a butterfly... with armor. Mother turned her back to the oncoming mob of relations and they turned away as if they'd hit a force-field. No one messed with Barbara Cunningham.

"You must be Jim," she said, and stepped forward briefly to fake an embrace and kiss the air next to the actor's face. Then she resumed her position.

Her mother was Queen of the Money Handlers. She wasn't a money maker, but she was married to one. And she definitely trumped the other money handlers—the lawyers—who consisted mostly of her own younger brothers—those who didn't expect to inherit their own family businesses—and her nephews—who had no hope at all. But her mother also held an honorary position in the Grubbers Association because the grubbers were big spenders, and they'd learned their craft from Barbara Cunningham herself.

She was like a goddess to them.

The reason why local charities did so well financially was because they were shrewd enough to offer a throne to handlers like Grace's mother. Because most men, even powerful oil men, couldn't spend all that money on their own.

"Mother, this is Jim. Jim, my mother, Barbara Cunningham."

"Jim?" Her mother raised her perfectly penciled brows. "*Just Jim?*"

Her apparently authentic Scotsman took her mother's hand and pretended to kiss her knuckles, just as she'd pretended to kiss his cheek. And those penciled brows stayed where they were.

"The name is Fitzjames Arthur Payton, at yer service." He let go of her hand and it just hung out there, in the air, for a whole five seconds before she pulled it back. "Ye've permission to call me Fitz if ye must."

"Payton?" Her father was turning red. "*Payton?*"

"Yes, sir." Jim lifted his chin, apparently in no mood to take anymore guff about his name. "Perhaps ye were nay aware *Payton*, too, is a Scottish name."

Grace wasn't sure when she'd closed her eyes to pray, but the sound of her dad's laughter brought her back. Apparently, the man was still human enough to know when he was being teased, even though no other humans, in that particular room, dared to tease him anymore.

She looked at the Scot to see if he realized just how lucky he was and ended up getting caught in those terrific green eyes again, and she couldn't help thinking what beautiful eyes their children would have. Of course, that would never happen. Ever. But she still wished the rest of the room would just disappear for a few minutes so they could have a decent conversation.

One of the man's cheeks lifted with half a smile and she realized he might be thinking the same thing.

Her heart began to race. These were the kind of moments that other girls lived for. For anyone else, this frozen scene was what started fairy tales, and she wouldn't be surprised to look down and find her foot on the first of a long road of yellow bricks just begging her to take a walk.

But she wasn't other girls. She was Grace Cunningham. And Grace Cunningham had a legacy she had to keep buttoned up in her genes. She turned away and acted as if the moment had never happened, hoping the heat in her face wasn't showing through a carefully applied layer of liquid base.

Her cousin, Charles, rapidly tapped the heavy handle of a knife on his champagne flute, and the room quieted. He pointed to the opening and everyone broke into applause when they realized the bride-to-be was standing there. Patience basked in the spotlight and waved like a beauty queen on a float, the family her adoring masses. She was as gorgeous as money could buy, but her eyes had an extra little twinkle to them that Grace hoped meant her sister was actually happy.

The grinning groom appeared over her shoulder and the bride rolled her eyes, like he'd ruined her big moment.

So much for happiness.

Patience then ignored those who called out to her and bee-lined it for Daddy. A true grubber. And if Shawn was working at Forrester Oil with his father, the bride was about to graduate to Handler. Sadly, Grace suspected that little detail was a more probable source of that gleam in her sister's eye. Patience Cunningham was

going to graduate and never look back. All she had to do was play nice with Shawn until his purchase papers were signed.

Grace would have felt guilty for thinking such a thing if it wasn't so typical of Barbara Cunningham's Mini-me.

Grace would have considered warning Shawn, but she knew him from when they'd all been teenagers. He knew just what he was getting into. For the moment, he was happy to move around the family gathering like he had no assigned class, like his only goal in life was to marry Patience. But he was fully aware of the distant cousins who leaned close for a faux embrace, but only wanted to pad their chances of rising to the top of the food chain, stuck to his underbelly like parasites.

This wedding wasn't about love. Wasn't about high school sweethearts finally uniting. And even though the ceremony would take place in a church, that ceremony would be all about money.

Money that went as deep as oil wells. Money that could change the world if only the right people were given some of it.

If it were mine, I could do so much good with it.

The walls were suddenly too confining, the milling mob too invading, and Grace had to get out of there! It was bad manners, she knew, since she hadn't yet greeted the bride, let alone everyone else. But it was just too much. If she didn't get away from them, she was going to become one. She'd be lined up next to a chosen, worthy, future money-maker in front of a priest, waiting to graduate, waiting to funnel money where she privately wanted it to go.

She'd never get out of Texas again!

Something clamped down on her arm and swung her around, and by the time she understood it was the Scot's broad hand, she was being lifted off the ground. He'd scooped her off her feet like some groom carrying his bride across the threshold!

The guy was simply too big for her to have any effect on, so all she could do was bend her head toward him and try not to die of embarrassment before he decided to put her down.

They moved toward the glass doors and she could see the sunset and fresh air, and most importantly, empty space awaiting them.

"Grace." Her mother's warning tone cut through the crowd, but luckily for her, the actor was immune.

Jacob, a young, distant cousin grabbed the handles and pushed both doors open for them. The Scot's deep voice rumbled beneath the hand she held against his chest for stability.

"Thank ye, laddie. And close them again, if ye would."

A few smooth steps later, they were outside on a wide veranda with nothing but flowers crowding the space. Their sweet, spicy fragrances rose with the heat and surrounded her and her rescuer in a cloud. If she closed her eyes, she could pretend she was back in Eugene where blue and white hydrangea bloomed all around her little yellow house. Where breezes blew to her the fragrance of acres and acres of wildflowers she'd planted for the bees.

She was jarred back to reality when her feet touched down. The Scot held one of her arms and pressed a hand to her stomach while he frowned at her, probably waiting to see if she was going to be able to stand on her own.

"I'm fine. Fine." She nodded and smiled and he removed his hands. Even in the Texas heat, her skin felt a little cold where his hands had been. Had it been so long since anyone had actually touched her?

Pathetic.

He nodded sharply, then turned to look over the swimming pool that had been changed into a fountain for the festivities. Large, geometric rafts, covered with a precise pattern of flowers, floated slowly back and forth, moored to something below the water. Even with the setting sun, the heat cooked the expensive flowers. They wouldn't last long, but she was sure a fresh batch would be baking for the reception the following night.

She leaned on the balustrade and left more than a foot of space between them. She shivered when she remembered the feel of his arm around her waist. If anyone else would have tried it, she would have freaked out. But there was something strangely non-threatening about the Scot in spite of his size. And his muscles. And the fact that he'd been tough enough to give her dad a good handshake and keep his balance under a heavy thump on his shoulder.

The sight of him probably sent other men running for the gym, and maybe the local wool clothier...

She couldn't just stand there for the rest of the night in silence, listing to the patter of water falling on water, close enough to feel his body looming within reach, wishing there was something real for her sister to envy.

Finally, she sighed. "How did you know I needed to get out of there?"

He took his time answering. "Ye began to pant, lass. And yer neck jumped with the beating of yer heart." He glanced back at the closed doors. "I would have expected yer mother, at least, to come see what ails ye. Not that it's my business, ye ken."

Grace laughed. "Are you kidding? She's got guests to see to. And if she comes out those doors it will be to bawl me out for making a scene."

Those green eyes told her his heart broke for her. But as sweet as that was, she definitely did not want his pity. Her family dynamic was just... complicated.

She shook her head. "Don't worry about it. Really. If I'd been dripping blood or something, I'm sure she would have come running."

He turned back to the view. The fountain program started over again and wider sprays splashed on the grateful flowers. They wouldn't be grateful for long, of course, since it was chlorinated pool water. But it might keep them looking and smelling good until the dinner was over. Even if no one else wandered outside to enjoy them.

Of course, if some money-makers—her dad and uncles—decided to come out, the flowers would have a nice-sized audience.

Ugh. We still have to sit through dinner.

The Scot shifted his weight beside her. A little closer maybe. "If ye'll tell me what upset ye so, I can do what I can to keep it from happening again."

She wasn't about to tell him what brought on her panic attacks, so she didn't say anything.

“Though, to prevent it, I suspect I’d have to gag all the guests,” he turned and grinned, then fingered the tartan draped over his shoulder, “and I’ve just the nine yards of plaid, mind.”

Chapter 4

The seating arrangements for this auspicious wedding supper may as easily have been assigned in medieval times. On a raised floor at the head of a ballroom sat the King and Queen with the heir apparent—a rude lad called Young Rock—their two daughters, the groom, and one Scottish guest.

Himself.

The last of the seats surrounding the circular table sat empty due to the unexpected illness of Young Rock’s wife. And all the while the guests were finding their own assigned seats, almost to a man, they glanced at the empty chair as if were made of gold, and they were but waiting for the bravest among them to attempt to take it. Eventually, Barbara became annoyed and asked for a servant to take the thing away.

The other guests sat on lower tables and looked on in reverence. Happily for them, they’d all been allotted their own shakers of salt, so that, in itself, proved the times were either modern, or Rocky Cunningham was wealthier than any other medieval king.

Fitz had been introduced to a fifty people and forgotten fifty names, but thankfully, his wee Grace assured him he wouldn’t be expected to remember any.

She was a fine companion for his two days’ sojourn in mortal skin, and he planned to thank Soni heartily for sending him to this Texas city called Arlington. As for his quest—the heroic deed expected of him—he could only hope that he would be called upon to take revenge on this cluster of Cunninghams.

Except for Grace, of course.

A den of vipers, to be sure. Even the lovely bride lost her beauty when she first laid eyes upon her younger sister. Though Grace hadn’t witnessed it, one side of Patience’s nose had curled at the mere sight of her, and he was hard pressed to understand why his lovely wee lassie had deigned to attend the wedding festivities at all.

Her home was in Oregon, a generous distance from Texas. Surely it had been an effort to travel all that way, but in his opinion it was an effort lost and unappreciated by her own family. He had hope in his heart that wee Grace would understand, and quickly, that family did not always mean Clan, and Clan did not always mean family.

What the lass needed was a new assignment of both. But judging from the fact that she’d hired someone—someone who had not arrived in time—to play the role of an imagined suitor told him she had no current prospects.

The idea frustrated him, for what lass as sweet as Grace would go unnoticed for so long? Something was amiss.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t possible to fill her needs himself. He was only there for the rest of the evening, or perhaps another full day after. There was no time to wed

the lass and give her a new name and clan. Besides, she'd find it hard to be grateful for either if he simply vanished afterward.

She'd never agree to such a thing in any case. After all, he was spending the evening with her under false pretenses. She'd have no reason whatsoever to trust him if she ever discovered his deception.

His Grace was sweet and kind. She was *not* a fool.

She'd had a generous word for every acquaintance to whom she'd introduced him. She'd grimaced a time or two when someone had been a bit rude in their conversation with him, but she'd excused them without thought.

"I'm sorry," she'd said dozens of times between introductions. "You'll have to forgive Thus and Such because of this and that." She found fault with no one while all her closest kin had insisted Grace had faults aplenty. And each and every time he'd spoken up for her, knowing instinctively she was incapable of those faults, she'd sided with her accusers!

He heaved a heavy sigh into the depths of his wine glass. These people did not deserve to be in the same room with Grace Cunningham.

Cunningham. Why in Heaven's name did she have to be a Cunningham?

"Come on, now." The groom grinned at him and leaned forward. The table was large and round, however, so he couldn't have expected a private word in truth. "Is your name really Payton? Or are you and Grace just pulling one over on Rocky?"

Rocky cleared his throat rather violently and from the corner of Fitz's eye, he noticed his wife reaching for her husband's hand, not to comfort him, but to pinch him.

"Aye. Fitzjames Payton."

The groom shook his head, laughing. "But you're in Texas. And you're here." He pointed at the window with his butter knife. "If you were smart, buddy, you would have lied."

Fitz exchanged a glance with Grace. She bit her lip and blushed. Perhaps it was the wee glass of wine she'd had, but she seemed to be much more relaxed than she had been, in spite of her family's continued coldness toward her.

"What is that?" he said, nodded at the monstrosity in the distance, though he knew full well what it was. He'd been dead for two hundred and seventy years, but he hadn't been deaf. Nor had he been blind. The stadium to which the bridegroom referred had been on the tellie many a time.

Cowboy Stadium. Locals, he'd heard, called it the Death Star, it was that massive and imposing. Even from the short distance, perhaps a mile away, Fitz would rather not go near the thing, for he reckoned that, surely, it wouldn't be good for a man's soul to feel so small and insignificant beside it.

He also reckoned that when Grace had instructed him to play the part of a Cowboy's fan, she hadn't realized what it was she'd been asking. But she was about to learn.

"What do you mean?" The groom looked to Grace. "What does he mean, *what is that?* Are you sure you two are *dating?*"

Grace choked, and for that Fitz was truly sorry, for she seemed honestly distressed and not pretending in order to distract the conversation. She nodded, held him off with an outstretched hand, and drank from her water goblet with desperation. Perhaps she was afraid he would scoop her into his arms and carry

her outside at the first sign of stress. But if that were the case, he'd have already done it dozens of times.

He turned his attention to the mother.

Barbara Cunningham wasn't watching her daughter. She was looking around the room, watching to see how much attention Grace's coughing fit was drawing. The woman blushed deeply, but with the amount of makeup she'd applied to her face, it only seemed as if a cloud had covered the sun and dimmed the light near her.

A strange hissing noise seemed to come from beneath the table and Fitz pushed his chair back and lifted the edge of the rich linen that covered his knees. He'd ceased worrying about snakes and the like long ago, but now that he was back in mortal form, he didn't want his limited time with Grace to be cut short because his instincts failed him.

There was nothing beneath the table but a number of shining shoes and his own square toed boots. But the hissing continued while Grace repeatedly cleared her throat.

Nowhere in the room could he see anything that resembled a tire of any sort. Then he wondered if the light hanging above their table was worked with gas.

But no.

Grace finally nodded to her mother and set her napkin aside.

The bride laughed. "Apparently Gracie doesn't want us talking about the Cowboys. Maybe she isn't really a fan. Maybe she's embarrassed her family is from Texas." Her voice had grown louder as she spoke, and strangely enough, so had the hissing.

Has the bride sprung a leak of some kind?

He chuckled. But when he turned his head to look at Grace, the direction of the hissing was clear. It came from Grace's mother. She was obviously using the tactic to reign in her daughters.

Embarrassing Barbara Cunningham was apparently a sin.

"I'm not ashamed you're all Cowboys fans," Grace whispered to her sister, obviously trying to appease both her and their mother.

"Did you hear that, Daddy? She said *you're all Cowboys fans*. Like she's not one of us." The bride narrowed her eyes in a rather triumphant scowl. "Grace doesn't like the Cowboys."

"That's bull," Rocky growled. "Grace hasn't forgotten where she came from. Of course she's a Cowboys fan. It's not her fault if the only fellow she can find doesn't know the first thing about football. She's obviously trying not to embarrass the boy."

Boy?

"Ah," Fitz grinned. "Forgive me, sir. I didna ken ye wished to discuss *football*. I believe I ken all that needs knowin'." He gave Grace a wink, but she showed a disturbing lack of confidence in him when she closed her eyes and hung her head.

Rocky gave him a glare. "Don't tell me I've just paid for the dinner of a Bronco's fan." He turned to his wife. "And if I have, I mean it, *don't* tell me."

"Nay, sir." Fitz grinned.

Barbara had been hissing again, but no one paid her any mind, so she gave up.

Rocky held his hands out over the table as if trying to control his family. “Don’t ask him. You hear? I don’t want to know.”

“There’s only one football team on the side of God Himself,” Fitz continued. “So there would only be one team to which to rally, aye?”

Grace’s hand covered her eyes, but her mouth was moving silently. It was clear she was saying the word Dallas over and over like a prayer.

Fitz snorted, enjoying the fact that he’d managed to render the entire family speechless. But eventually, ye simply have to drop the ball...

“Celtics, of course.”

The bride’s brows twisted. “Celtics? The Boston Celtics aren’t even a football team! Hah!” She leaned a nasty face toward Grace as if she’d committed the gravest sin for bringing an ignorant man to her wedding supper.

“Nay. They’re not,” he said to Patience. “And neither are yer Cowboys.”

Rocky growled. Truly.

The bridegroom burst into laughter. “He’s talking about soccer? Hah! He’s talking about soccer!”

“I’m speaking of real football, laddie. The kind that takes much more ability than to clap yer hands and rush forward a few steps at a time, aye?”

“I beg your pardon, son?” The fact that Rocky had spoken slowly and mannerly was as clear a sign as a hissing snake, and he decided to answer Grace’s obvious prayer and stop poking the man.

“Forgive my poor manners, sir. This is not the time nor the place to school ye and yers on the finer points of football.”

Rocky snorted. Fitz was surprised his food didn’t come out his nose the sound was that violent. Then the big man burst into laughter and the rest of the room fell silent while everyone waited to learn why their patron was so delighted.

“Barbara?” Rocky said, while staring at Fitz.

“Mmm?” She was perhaps too embarrassed to speak.

“What time will the wedding be over in the morning?”

“Not until noon, at least. Why?”

“And the reception?”

“We need to be dressed by four. Why?”

Rocky turned to the groom. “Two hours should be enough. I assume you can ditch your wife from one to three?”

The bride gasped. Her bridegroom laughed, then nodded.

“Then we’ve got ourselves a game.” He turned to Fitz. “I believe you need a proper introduction to what you call American Football, son.”

Fitz grinned back, but then he realized that it would be up to a young witch from Scotland whether or not he would be available for such an appointment. He looked into Grace’s eyes for a precious few seconds and hoped, if he didn’t manage to do anything particularly noble before one o’clock on the morrow, he would be permitted to stay.

He turned back to Rocky. “If I am allowed, sir, I welcome the challenge.”

The man suddenly frowned and leaned in Fitz’s general direction. “Please tell me you have something to wear besides a kilt.”

Chapter 5

Grace knew for a fact she'd had too much wine because she was having a lovely time while sitting at the same table as her family. She hadn't been worried about the money, or the greed, or the cloud of depression that would inevitably follow her home to Eugene on Sunday—because her mind was completely occupied with Jim. Jimbo. No, wait. She was supposed to call him Fitz, or James. But definitely not Jim.

The best man, Ronnie, stood to make a toast. His shoulders were twice as broad as the fabric-covered chair behind him. His neck was nearly as wide as his head. Ronnie, the football buddy from Shawn's high school team. But someone had forgotten to tell the guy he could stop bulking up. He wasn't on a team anymore.

Ronnie turned to face the bride's table and any definition in his neck and head disappeared. Together, they looked like a straight, fat pipe and the only things interrupting the surface was his ears. The solid column disappeared into his muscle-bound chest that made it impossible for his suit to fit right. And there was something about the shock of red hair spiked on the top of his head that looked... familiar.

Laughter burst from her when she realized why.

He's Beaker. From the Muppets!

Her mother started hissing and Grace tried very hard to get a grip. Ronnie was still talking, so she turned and faced him again, determined to show good manners. But all she could see was Beaker.

The laughter sneaked out between her teeth, and when she clamped her hands over her mouth, it then tried to escape through her sinuses, making her snort. The hissing grew louder, and a little angry. But it wasn't her fault! How could anyone be expected not to laugh while Beaker was giving a wedding toast?

Fitz or James or Jimbo—definitely not Jim—stood up and excused himself. Then he took her hand and asked her to dance. Or maybe not, since she stood up to go to the dance floor, but they ended up back on that lovely veranda again.

She'd been taken away for laughing.

"I embarrassed you," she said, trying to look sorry about it.

"I don't embarrass easily, lass." He guided her to the edge of the stone railing so she could lean against it. "Ye didna eat much, I reckon."

"I reckon I didn't. But I had plenty to drink. I think."

He chuckled.

She pointed at his lovely trim stomach. "I noticed you didn't drink your wine."

He shrugged a shoulder, then bit his lip for a minute. And she very much wanted to volunteer to bite that lip for him.

She had to be drunk, and she said so.

"A wee bit," he said. "And I've recently... That is to say, I'm nay certain how much of yer American wine will affect this body of mine, so I thought it best not to test it."

"Ah." She pretended to understand.

The rafts of flowers still floated, but candles had been added to the water and the fountains had been turned off. The infinitesimal breeze nudged the glass balls

with candles all to one end of the pool, however, leaving one raft neglected in shadows.

“What is required of me, Grace Cunningham?”

She winced at her own name. She really wished she could change it so she could stop being ashamed, but her family would never forgive her. And they would find out.

“I need you tonight,” she said, then gasped at how that sounded.

His eyes laughed at her.

“I mean, for tonight’s wedding supper, of course.”

“Of course.” He was still laughing.

“And for the wedding tomorrow.”

He nodded. “And after? Would ye mind if I toyed with yer father a bit?”

“Toyed?”

“Aye.”

She grinned. “Only if I can watch.”

“I’d have it no other way.” Then he looked worried. “And after? Do ye need me by yer side for this reception?”

She nodded. She wanted him by her side until the minute she got on her plane, if not as a buffer between herself and the rest of the Cunningham clan, then as a distraction. But that would be expecting too much.

He cleared his throat and it made a low rumbling sound in that lovely wide chest. “I am embarrassed to say... all I have at my disposal is my kilt.”

“No worries,” she said. “We’ll just call Daddy’s tailor first thing in the morning.”

He looked absolutely mortified.

Had it been such a snotty thing to say, that she could call a tailor at any time? Though she dreaded hearing it, she had to know. “What’s wrong?”

He held his hands out to his sides. “I’ve no coin, Grace. None at all.”

She laughed, relieved. “Well, you’ve come to the right place.” Then she realized she’d insulted him, lumping him in with the other grubbers, even though he wouldn’t understand. “I’m sorry. I was teasing. It’s no big deal. I mean, we can just take the cost out of your fee, if that’s all right with you.”

“My fee?”

“I’m paying you, remember?” She turned and leaned back against the stone and waved toward the French doors. “It’s not like you would dance through this gauntlet if you didn’t have to, right?”

“I believe I would dance with ye anywhere, lass.”

She searched for his face in the shadows, trying to read those eyes, wondering if he was laughing at her again. But she couldn’t focus well, so she gave up.

“That’s very sweet of you, Jimbo. Or Fritz. Or—”

“It’s Fitz, not Fritz. But perhaps ye should simply call me Payton. The rest of my name seems too difficult.”

She giggled. “Payton. My father won’t appreciate it at all.”

“Then I insist.”

She laughed again, then got a grip. “I don’t hate my father, you know.”

“Ye don’t?”

“No. I don’t. I hate his money. I hate what he does with it,” she gestured toward the thousands of dollars’ worth of flowers floating unappreciated in the pool. “And what he doesn’t do with it.”

Chills spread over her and raced down her arms toward her fingertips when the Scot’s voice moved closer and dropped lower. “And yer mother?”

“Mother?” She thought about the Queen for a minute. There weren’t a lot of fond memories there, but instead of feeling sorry for herself, Grace pitied the woman. “I don’t think she knows how to be happy.” Then she giggled again. “But she knows how to hiss, doesn’t she?”

She couldn’t help herself and bent over because she couldn’t use her stomach muscles to both laugh and hold herself up. And she was tickled to hear that she wasn’t laughing alone. With her lips closed, she tried to stifle her own noise just so she could listen to his. The sound was too delicious to waste.

Eventually, they both wound back down.

“Forgive me, lass. I’ve not enjoyed a good belly laugh in centuries.”

She forced a deep breath into her lungs. “Me neither.”

“But tell me, does she truly believe that no one kens the hissing comes from her?”

Grace sighed. “I know. Sad, isn’t it?”

“Sad indeed.” He was watching her again and thanks to a shift in the breeze and the drift of some candles, she was finally able to focus on his eyes. But he cleared his throat and stepped back. “I believe the air has done us good. Shall we go back?”

He led her inside and she realized there was a tension between them that hadn’t been there before. She was pretty sure he was trying to be careful to keep their relationship all business, and she was grateful. After all, looking like Clive Owen in a kilt gave him an advantage over any woman under ninety, and he could have easily pushed that advantage. But he didn’t.

And the last thing she needed, or wanted, was to fall for a guy in Texas of all places.

Coffee and dessert were waiting for them and he forced her to finish both. Then, finally, her mother gave them permission to leave and walked them out the front doors and ordered her car brought around.

The gloves came off as soon as the doorman stepped away from them.

“You’re in no condition to drive,” the woman hissed. “So your father’s car will take you to the Omni.”

Grace shook her head. “I’ve already made reservations—”

“I know. I cancelled them. You’ll have the Governor’s Suite. I had your things moved for you.”

She imagined some bell hop getting a kick out of packing her panties back into her suitcase. And what about the pair she’d left on the floor of the bathroom? How perfectly humiliating!

Mother’s specialty.

“And don’t get any notions about changing rooms and pocketing the money. It’s paid for, all right? Enjoy it. Don’t enjoy it. I don’t care. But you won’t go slumming in Arlington. Not as long as I’m alive.”

“Yes, mother,” she said through gritted teeth and prayed for the car to come quickly.

“You’ll make sure Jim is dressed decently for the wedding?” She ignored the fact that he stood right next to her.

“Yes, mother.”

“Then I’ll see you both at the church in the morning. I’ll send the car at nine-thirty.”

“Yes, mother.”

The long town car slid up to the curb and the Queen disappeared back inside the country club.

Grace turned to the Scot and was surprised to find him smiling, though his jaw was rigid, his gaze intense.

“Nay need to telephone yer father’s tailor, lass.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I’ve decided my plaid is just the thing to wear to yer sister’s wedding on the morrow.”

She grinned. “I was thinking the same thing.”

He opened the door for her to climb in the car, but he didn’t follow. She leaned out to keep him from shutting the door. “Do you live far? I can drop you.”

He laughed. “My home, lass, is in Scotland, as I’ve said. I dinna reckon I can make it back in time for the wedding if I go there.” He waved one hand toward the far side of the street. “There is a park nearby. I’ll find a soft bit of grass and I’ll meet ye right here in the morning, aye?”

She rolled her eyes. “Get in.”

“Nay, lass. Go on yer way.”

“*Get. In.* I’d rather risk having you in my hotel room than leave you to be eaten alive by fire ants while you sleep.”

“Fire ants?”

“Yes. Angry ones.” She scooted back to make more room.

His face twisted while he obviously pictured it. Then he nodded and climbed into the car. When the vehicle started moving, his arms flew out like he was afraid he might fall out.

“First time in a car?” she teased.

“The answer to that depends, lassie.”

“On what?”

“On how drunk ye are.”

Chapter 6

The grandness of the Omni Hotel was equaled only by its chill. However, it was not the refrigerated air blowing past Fitz’s knees that gave that impression. Everywhere he looked were flat, unwelcoming surfaces. Severe. Clean. Contemporary.

The strangest effect of all came from the floors themselves. So well-polished they may as well have been walking on mirrors—something no self-respecting, kilt-wearing man would do.

There were contradictions at every turn.

Signs bid them welcome, but the staff behind the desk were careful to keep all expression from their faces while speaking to Grace. Only when a woman handed his lass a small packet, claiming keys were inside, did she deign to smile long enough to wish her a good night.

In the elevator, it was his turn to hide his expression. He was determined to show no fear as his internal organs fell and lifted along with the blood in his veins. And, just as he'd expected, when the doors opened again, they were no longer in the lobby they'd left a moment before. He'd seen elevators on the tellie and heard them explained before, that the box was lifted by a series of pulleys, to different levels inside the building. But the sensations in his stomach hadn't coincided with anything he'd expected.

He'd simply had to trust Grace, and if she trusted the box, he would as well.

In silence, they made their way to a set of apartments that put to shame the majestic rooms at Culloden Castle—now called Culloden House.

"This is grand, aye?" The furnishings looked far more comfortable than the rest of the hotel. For a while there, he'd wondered if he might be more comfortable sleeping on the grass and fighting off an ant or two. But even the davenport appeared as comfortable as a bed, and it might even accommodate his length as well.

The lass strode straight for the large bedroom and he followed. She checked the drawers, then seemed relieved to find luggage was waiting for her. "Un-opened. Thank goodness." She noticed him leaning in the doorway. "You really aren't from around here, are you?"

He smiled to cover his uneasiness at the question. "To use your football language, you could say I might have been a last minute substitution."

"Luckily for me," she murmured, and he wondered if she meant for him to hear it.

Was she truly feeling blessed to have him there?

They returned to the large common room. "I shall sleep on the davenport," he said firmly. "Er, the couch as ye call it." With modern women, he didn't know what she might feel entitled to. There had been some disturbing things on the tellie—

"Yes. You will. And you can use one of these other bathrooms. She pointed back to the bedroom. "If you even scratch on that door, I'll call security first and then ask what you wanted. Got it? I mean, for all I know, I dragged you off the street just because I assumed you were the guy I hired. Just because you were wearing a kilt."

He laughed outright and hoped she believed he was truly amused and not terrified to have her sniffing so close to the truth. For it was a certainty, he'd met no one else that night who might be in need of a gallant hero other than Grace. So, no matter how it went against his nature, he simply had to watch and bide his time until the right opportunity presented itself. But what she needed at the moment was some assurance from him.

He placed his fist on his heart and bowed his head. "I vow, I will not so much as scratch upon yer door, lass."

She nodded, satisfied. "I'll text my sister and have her bring some of Shawn's gym clothes to the church, so you can wear them to play football. Did your luggage get lost or something?"

"I... I arrived with only the clothes on my back."

"If you call the airlines, they can have your things delivered here when they find them. It usually only takes a day."

"I'll do that. Thank ye."

She nodded. "Well, goodnight then." She strode slowly toward her large bedroom, dragging her painted toes a wee bit.

"Lass?"

"Yes?" She turned back with a smile.

"I'll not find my rest any time soon." He wouldn't waste a mortal minute if he could help it. "If ye wish to come out and visit for a piece, I'd welcome ye."

Her head bobbed quickly, then she hurried away. She may not wish him in her bed, but it would be a grand gift if she decided to share more time with him.

He wandered about the place and noted the wonders he'd seen on the tellie. The refrigerator. A magical microwave oven that could cook things without getting hot itself. The water that ran hot and cold on demand. The loo.

He stripped and took a shower simply to feel the sensations of hot and cold on the whole of his body. He wrapped a bath sheet around his waist and rinsed out his clothes before hanging them on the backs of dining chairs. In the Texas heat, he was sure they'd dry by morning.

At the sound of a gasp, he spun 'round.

Grace stood near the davenport grasping together the edges of a large and fluffy white robe. A towel had been twisted around her hair and the tail of it rested on her head.

Her eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"The wash?" He thought she referred to the shirt and plaid draped over the chairs, but her gaze was fixed to his bared chest.

She shook her head, speechless, and gestured toward the towel that covered the bottom half of him.

"Auch, forgive me, Grace, but I've nothing else, aye?"

"A robe maybe?"

"Too small. I would have expected, in the land of football giants, they would supply large enough gowns for them."

Finally, she nodded and stepped around a low table to sit on one end of the couch. She bit her lip when he joined her, but she made no complaint. He was careful to cover his knees. For a minute or two, they sat in silence while all he could manage to think of was white cotton, and how little of it separated the two of them. But he shook such unworthy thoughts away and tried to think of nothing at all.

On the moor, clearing his mind would end the day and he'd return to his rest on the ground until some thing or thought roused him again. But he was pleased to see that he was still as he had been a moment before, resting his head on the back of a comfortable seat.

The silence stretched like an empty field before them, but he left it to her to speak first.

“You made a joke in the car,” she finally said, “and I was wondering if you could explain it to me.”

He’d hoped she’d forgotten. “A joke? What was it?”

“I asked you a question, but you said the answer depended on how drunk I was. So? I’m not drunk now.”

Oh, but heaven help him, he wished she were...

Chapter 7

Damn my loose tongue!

He grinned and wagged his brows in a teasing manner. “If ye’re sober, I’m afraid I cannot tell ye. I was only willing to give ye the God’s honest truth if ye wouldna remember it in the morning, aye?” He chuckled, still hoping to distract her. Since the moment he’d let the words slip out of his mouth, he’d been praying to be able to take them back.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

He hated to tease, but the lass had enough difficulties without being told she’d spent the evening in the company of a ghost.

He could put her off no longer. Surely there was something of the truth he could give her, about why the ride in the car had rattled him, but he couldn’t manage it. In an attempt to gain more time to think, he said, “Tell me. Do ye remember the question? For I’m having a difficult time remembering myself.”

She worried at her bottom lip for a bit, then huffed. “No.” And together, they laughed like children.

In spite of his honorable intentions, he couldn’t resist wanting her closer, to feel the heat of her mortal form while he still had senses to feel it. So he waved her toward him and patted his knee. “Come. I shall help dry yer hair as I used to do for my sisters.”

“Sisters?”

“Aye. Three, and all were younger.”

“Were?”

He cleared the emotion from his throat. “They’ve all passed, I’m sorry to say.”

“Aww.” Her sympathy brought her closer, but her gaze caught on his towel. “I am not going to sit on your lap.”

He pulled a small pillow onto his thighs for modesty’s sake and dropped another on the floor between his feet and pointed at it. “Sit there.”

She obeyed and as she turned her back to him, he caught sight of a smile.

First, he untwisted the towel from her head and tossed it aside. He chuckled when she shivered. Then he began combing through her thick blond tresses with his fingers, spreading the locks, then spreading them again.

“At home,” he said quietly, “my sisters would line up behind each other, sitting before the fire, spreading each other’s hair. And if I was about, the one at the end would whine until I agreed to help her. I would give in to her pleas, eventually, and

sit behind her. And when I'd demand to know how they managed without me to help, they'd insist that one of them would have died from the cold."

He could see it clearly as if the sisters were lined up in front of Grace with the fireplace to the left.

"They had such thick hair, ye see. It took hours for it all to dry."

"No blow dryers?"

"Nay. And what of ye? Tell be about Eugene, Oregon. What do ye there that took ye away from home?"

She shrugged lightly. "I couldn't wait to get away, actually. I went to California to college, and my parents allowed it only because I promised to come back. Then... I didn't. Part of the time, I work for an environmental agency—which means the pay isn't good. But I don't care. I have a charming little house I painted yellow, and two old ladies who live next door. I cook and clean for them, and they let me plant wildflowers in their empty fields and keep bees along the back of their property line."

She paused to groan in appreciation for his fingers massaging her head. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet.

"They're twin sisters, maybe eighty years old, but I they think they'll live forever. They think that I'll keep them healthy just so I can keep my bees. I make most of my living from selling honey. Which, of course, humiliates my parents."

His hated the way her shoulders slumped when she spoke of the Cunninghams. So he veered the conversation around again. "Twins, ye say?"

"Yes. And they look just alike, still."

He forced his fingers to resume their work. "Are they Scottish, perhaps?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. They don't sound anything like you. But they do drink a lot of tea."

"With milk?"

She laughed. "Yes. With milk. I offer to get cream for them, but they're too frugal for that, they say. Like they're worried they'll never be able to afford the lifestyle if they got a taste for it!" After a long moment, she asked, "How did you know they liked milk?"

"Oh, just a guess. Scots drink milk in their tea. And there is a clan with more than a usual number of twins born to them. Some say they're witches."

"They're Anna and Aggie Muir. Is Muir a Scottish name?"

He swallowed the news as silently as he could. "That would be the clan, lass."

"That's funny. They're always telling me they're witches. But I think it's just their excuse for being odd."

In truth, it was a relief to finally see some connection between Grace and the Muir witch who had placed him in her path. There was no doubt about it now. He'd been right to pretend that he was the actor she'd been expecting.

"What about you? What about your sisters?"

He had to change the subject or he'd accidentally reveal more than just the fact that he'd had no electricity in his cottage. But what to say? If Grace Cunningham wished to know him better, how could he share anything when it might lead to the truth?

An idea struck like a gift from God, and he realized he might be able to tell her all, but in a round-about way. He was so pleased, in fact, it was difficult to keep

his seat. For if he was able to tell his own tale, there would be a wee something of him left behind—a living memory. More than just a bump beneath Culloden’s surface. More than just the never-remembered brother because his sisters had already left this earth.

And perhaps, when he was on the other side, he would have some notion of it whenever he crossed her mind...

Chapter 8

It began innocently enough, but he felt a bit devious manipulating her so.

“I believe the only quiet time I spent with my sisters,” he said, “was helping them dry their hair. And to pass the time, I would tell them stories.”

She turned and smiled over her shoulder at him. “What kind of stories? Like knights and dragons and damsels in distress?”

He wrinkled his nose and worried she wouldn’t like his idea after all, but with no alternative to hand, he pressed on.

“Nay, lass. I’d tell them of the brave lads who fought to put Bonnie Prince Charlie on his rightful throne and take Scotland back from the English.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said with mild interest and turned away again. “I think I saw that on the news. But that was just last year, wasn’t it?”

He barked with laughter. “Nay, lass. These stories hail back to the Year of Our Lord, seventeen hundred and forty-five.”

“Oh. So you’re a history buff?”

“Yes. Ye could say as much. For what happened in ’45 was as real to me as... as if I’d been there.”

“Then you probably tell a great story.”

“Aye, lassie. Would ye care to hear one?”

“Yes, please.”

Unfortunately, Grace’s hair dried much faster than his sisters’ had, but he continued to work it about for the lass seemed to be enjoying the contact nearly as much as he was.

“All right, then. First, I’ll tell ye of the battle. And then, if ye’re nay too weary, I can tell ye a ghost story that came after the battle.”

She scrunched up her shoulders and all but squealed with delight. And he was swamped with a sudden sadness on her behalf. For, considering her siblings, it was likely the lass had rarely enjoyed a quiet night of stories around the fire. He could hardly imagine Patience being patient enough to spend any quiet time with her younger sister to help with her hair or anything else so personal.

Perhaps Grace had never felt a gentle, caring hand on her head, let alone a kind word. And yet, Grace continued to be sweet Grace, unjaded by the unpleasant folks who had surrounded her.

He sucked in a breath to chase away the morose thoughts and applied himself to his story.

“Once upon a time, in 1715...” He started with a brief history of the first rising, when the Scots tried to put Charlie’s father, King James, back on his throne. Then

skipped forward to the day when Prince Charlie arrived in the Western Isles looking for support. It wasn't for fear of losing her attention that he kept to the most interesting parts, but for his need to tell her his own story.

Soon enough, he described the morning he stood outside his wee cottage, bidding his sisters goodbye. Of course he told it under the guise of his ancestor, the Fitzjames for whom he'd been named.

"Three young sisters, like mine. The oldest was capable of caring for the others for a few weeks. And by then, the Prince would surely be where God had intended, on the British throne, and Fitz... Fitzjames would be home again. No matter how the politics played out, he vowed to return in two weeks' time."

"And did he?"

He swallowed past the obstruction in his throat. "Nay. He couldn't return. He had died, ye see, on Drumossie Moor, which is now called Culloden. It was a horrible slaughter. A folly before the first shot was ever fired. And all because the young prince failed us."

"Failed all of Scotland, you mean?"

"Aye. Failed us all."

"I'm so sorry."

She was sorry?

Her sweet, innocent words eased through his chest and beyond like a patch of cool, wet mud applied to a burn. Her simple condolences soothed him more than he could have expected.

With her hair still wrapped in his fingers, his hands had stilled, so he bent again to his ministrations, while at the same time, he touched lightly on all the mishaps that made that morning, back in 1745, so monstrous and so monumental. When he finished, he realized she was crying. Her quiet sobbing shook the bones of his calves.

"Forgive me, lass. I should have invented a story of dragons and damsels and knights in armor well cared for. But instead, I've brought Culloden's own sadness to yer doorstep! I'm a fool!"

She shook her head, turned, and maneuvered around to kneel before him with tears still in her eyes. "No. I *wanted* to hear it. I never knew. I mean, my dad always talked about Scotland like it was the greatest place only because his ancestors are from there, or because of the money he'd made off the oil deals. It was never real to me, until now. I never thought about the people who actually lived and died there. And Scotland was just a subject I brought up when I wanted my dad to change the subject."

She lowered her head, embarrassed. But he couldn't be denied her sweetness any longer, so he used the sash of her robe to pull her against the front of the couch. He tucked a knuckle beneath her chin and lifted her face to meet his in a gentle kiss. 'Twas all he wanted when he began, but soon it wasn't enough, and he deepened the kiss until neither of them was breathing quietly. It took all his strength of will to end the embrace and allow her to pull back.

She composed herself before standing and leaving the room, and while he was still resisting the urge to follow her, she returned with a box of tissues.

“All right,” she said cheerfully, as if the kiss had never happened. “I want to hear this ghost story. And it had better be good.” She pointed to the cushion on the floor. “Your turn. Your hair’s nearly as long as mine, and still not dry.”

“That may be, lass, but I reckon yer fingers running through my hair is not such a grand idea.” He dropped his eyes to his lap for only a second, but she seemed to get the essence of the problem.

“Oh, well.” Her eyes widened slightly and she blushed. “Sorry. Um, well, I’ll just...”

He patted the cushion next to him and leaned back. “Come. Sit here. I promise not to bite, if ye promise not to pet me.”

She laughed and the tension of the moment was gone. “Fine. But I still want the story.”

With glasses of water and a plate of cheese and crackers before them, Fitz began the tale he’d bene trying to avoid before. But he wanted her to know why he’d come that day, just in case she turned around and found him gone. Perhaps she would look back and think, “Maybe he’d been one of those ghosts after all.” And it might keep her from looking for him, or waiting for him to return, waiting in vain as his sisters must have done.

“Once upon a time,” he began again, and Grace giggled. He reached for her hand and she surrendered it willingly. Then he toyed with her fingers while he searched for the right words to use. “Once upon a time, there was a horrible battle on Drumossie Moor. Many died.”

“Too many.”

“Aye. They did. And the morning after the battle, some of them rose again.”

Her brow furrowed. “Some? Why only some?”

He grunted with impatience. “I dinna ken. Now, am I to tell it, or are ye?”

“My bad. Go ahead.”

He gave her hand a tug and started again. “The morning after the battle, seventy-nine of the fallen rose again, including a wee lad named Rabby, and his dog.”

“And a man named Fitzjames Payton.”

He looked into her eyes for some sign that she knew what she was saying, but she only winked at him and nodded. “Go on.”

“Aye. And a man named Fitzjames. He was the forty-eighth to rise.”

“Nice touch,” she whispered.

He pressed his finger against her lips to insist she hold her wheesht. And after he dragged that finger away, he was then able to move on through the story with no more interruptions. Eventually, the lassie’s head lolled to the side and propped itself against his shoulder and she breathed sleep into her chest and out again.

He’d lost her.

But he decided to keep talking, even though she couldn’t hear him. Perhaps, he thought, he could tell her subconscious about himself and when she woke, days from now, she would somehow sense that he wouldn’t be coming back again.

So he told it all.

He told how he’d been tickled to find himself in Texas and immediately lured into the bushes by a short lass with a kind heart. He told her what he thought of her family, and that she needed to find herself a new one. And he told her, quietly,

that after he performed some noble deed for her, a witch would come and take him away forever.

Then he explained how, one day, she would shed her own mortality and go looking for the gates of Heaven, and that she shouldn't fear, because if it was in his power to do so, he'd be biding his time right there at the front. Easy to find. Waiting with arms flung wide and a grin on his face.

She suddenly took a deep breath and startled from her dreams. "What?" She pulled away and frowned at him. "Hello."

"Hello."

She rubbed her face. "I think I fell asleep."

"Aye, ye did. And no harm done."

She looked around. "Will you tell me the end of the story tomorrow?"

"If not tomorrow, then another time, aye?"

She blinked rapidly and smiled. "Sometime when I'm not drunk or asleep?"

He laughed lightly and rose to help her to her room. "I promise. When I give ye the end of the tale, ye will be neither asleep, nor drunk."

She yawned. "I don't really drink, you know. Except when I'm in Texas."

"Well, some places are like that." He turned her toward the bedroom and pushed her to get her moving.

"Like, if you were in England?"

He nodded behind her and gave her a little shove before letting her go on without him. "If I were in England, lass, ye can bet money I'd be drinking."

She laughed and left him at the doorway. Then she came back. "You know what you could do, even if I am half asleep, or half drunk?"

"What is that, lassie?"

She searched his eyes. "You could kiss me." Her voice was little more than a whisper. Her face was only inches away.

He gave her a crooked grin and ran his knuckles along her cheek. "Oh, can I now?"

She bit her lips together and nodded. He finally noticed she wasn't wearing that red lipstick anymore.

"All right," he said. "But only because ye begged me."

Her mouth opened on a gasp and he hurried to catch her by surprise. The kiss itself was sweet and innocent—just like Grace herself. Her arms came up to capture him around the neck and he let her take the kiss where she would. After all, he wasn't the most experience young man when it came to wooing lasses, and it wasn't as if he'd learned much in the past two and a half centuries, with or without tellies and mobile screens.

In fact, he realized his sweet Grace might have been a wee more educated than himself. At least, with his own limited experience, he would never have thought that a kiss could last so long, or be so... like a conversation.

She inhaled swiftly and it was enough to bring him back to his senses. He ended the kiss and pulled back.

"I believe, Grace, that if we go on much longer, ye'll fall asleep on me again."

She giggled and turned away. He pulled the door closed before she had the chance to undress without realizing she'd left the portal open.

"Goodnight, my Grace," he murmured through the door.

“Goodnight, Fitzjames,” she called. “I’m sorry about your sisters.”

He froze, wondering if he’d heard her aright, or if, perchance, her subconscious was already confusing the fictional Fitzjames with himself.

He knelt before the davenport and offered a prayer as he had done nightly, long ago. He prayed with all his might that Grace would find the happiness he wished he could give her himself. And he thanked God for a wee lass named Soncerae, and for whatever miracle had brought him into Grace’s life, if only for a day or two.

He also prayed that his noble deed, whatever it needed to be, would be clear to him on the morrow. He prayed he would be brave and strong and capable to complete it...

And if it wasn’t too much bother, he’d like to also be brave and strong and capable when it came to humbling some American Football fans in the afternoon.

Chapter 9

Grace was pretty proud of herself for being able to think clearly the next morning, let alone have the forethought to send the Scot’s clothes to be pressed. But there was something sobering about defying one’s mother on the day of your sister’s wedding, and if she intended to have Fitz wear his kilt again, he was going to look good doing it.

Not that he wouldn’t look incredible in just a robe—if there had been one his size.

She’d hoped to have the outfit back before the man woke up, but he turned out to be an early riser.

He’d opened the curtains and figured out the coffee maker and she privately cursed him for the first and blessed him for the second as she walked carefully to the kitchenette, shielding her eyes from both the sunlight and what the Scottish god might or might not be wearing.

“What have ye done with my plaid, lass?” His soft words made her think that maybe he knew she had a hangover. “And please doona say ye’ve changed yer mind about allowing me to wear it, for ye canna attend yer sister’s wedding on the arm of a man covered with only a towel. And I’ve my heart set on escorting ye.”

She started to shake her head, but stopped when internal bells started ringing between her temples. “I sent them out to be pressed. They’ll be back in time.”

“I thank ye for that, then. And now I’ll thank ye to drink this before the coffee.” He lifted her arm and pressed a mug into her hand.

“What is it?”

“A bit o’ the dog. Go on now. Gulp now, taste later.” He nudged her arm up.

No matter what it was, it couldn’t hurt any worse than her current pain, so she did as she was told. The first time she swallowed, she realized she’d made a horrible mistake, but the second gulp was on its way to the back of her mouth and it was either spit it all out into the man’s face or suck it up, so she grabbed onto his arm to brace herself and forced the rest of it down.

He laughed when she started beating on his chest with one hand. “Here now. Wash it down with the coffee. Not too hot, now.”

Another mug was pushed into her hand and she didn't care if it scalded her, she just had to get that... *crud* taste off her tongue!

It didn't burn, just like he'd promised, but she decided she was never going to trust him again anyway.

"What was in that?"

"Best ye doona ken, lass. But ye may want a wee lie down while the effects take hold, aye?"

"Aye," she whispered and headed back to the bedroom with the coffee cup, her hand still over her eyes. Just as she was closing the door to the bedroom, she had a horrible lapse in self-control and peeked back toward the kitchen—just to make sure he had been wearing that towel while they'd been talking.

He was leaned back against the counter, mussed hair skimming his muscled shoulders, pumped arms folded above his flat stomach, and his ankles crossed. Towel in place.

He shook his head at her, but with a smile on his face.

She was almost... disappointed.



An hour later, a town car arrived for them and they were off to the wedding. She'd been so distracted by the man sitting next to her she hadn't paid attention to where they were going. And when the Scot helped her out of the car, she thought for a second they might be in the wrong place.

The church looked ancient but charming. There was a wide stairway leading up to a porch that ran all the way around the building. A place to get out of the sun, probably. The big doors stood open and a large wreath of pastel flowers hung on each. And for once, Grace thought that particular expense was possibly worth it, the picture was just that perfect.

Her mother stepped out of the doors and ruined the peace of the moment. She wore a dress suit of glittering champagne, and though the sky was overcast and the sun was hiding, the outfit shimmered even from a distance.

"Way to upstage the bride, Mother," she murmured.

The woman waved a hand in their direction and a valet hurried down the steps with an umbrella. He opened it and brought it to hold over Grace's head.

"It's not raining, but thank you," she told him.

The umbrella stayed where it was and the guy's eyes bulged a little. "Please," he said, moving his mouth as little as possible, like a ventriloquist. "Allow me."

She understood completely, and she nodded so the guy would relax. Barbara Cunningham had given him orders and he wouldn't defy those orders even if someone had a gun to his head. Kind of like those soldiers Fitz had been telling her about the night before. The whole story was still pretty fuzzy. And the ghost story was coming back to her in little snippets, but she'd been falling in and out of sleep while he'd been talking and she wasn't sure which parts had been the history lesson and which details belonged to the ghost story.

The strange pall that hung over her head that morning might have been from his stories and not from how much wine she'd had with dinner—or rather, instead of dinner. The battlefield had been described in such detail, she felt like she'd actually been standing on it while both stories were told. It was the weirdest thing.

Like she'd been caught in a spell and held there. And this charming old chapel had reminded her. Maybe it had been built the same time as that cottage on Culloden Moor...

Fitz took her hand in a firm grip and supported her across the soft, damp driveway to the steps. Together against the enemy, she thought. Knowing her mother was going to flip out about the kilt didn't sound so satisfying anymore. She just wished the morning could be over with already.

"Really, Grace," her mother said by way of a greeting. "If you're going to play your silly games, try not to do it on a day that is so important to me."

All Grace's guilt fled. "I'm sorry, mother. But I thought it was Patience's important day, not yours."

Fitz gave her hand a squeeze, but he kept his eyes on her mother.

The woman ignored the dig. "Just tell him to sit down before he makes a spectacle of himself."

"Tell yer mother," Fitz said, still looking at the woman, "that I shall do my best not to outshine the bride."

Grace choked, realizing he'd heard her quiet comment before.

Her mother pretended not to know what he meant, but the red skin just above her collar gave her away as she disappeared into the church.

"I feel horrible," she said, facing him.

"Auch, Grace, Even if this was the first time ye've ever spoken back to the woman, the pair of ye will survive, and be better for it, I'm certain."

She grinned. "Oh, I don't feel bad about that. It felt kind of... overdue. But I feel horrible because I have to leave you to sit by yourself."

He picked up her hand and kissed the knuckles, sending shivers through her like a damp breeze. "Will ye be thinking of me, lass?"

"No question about it," she admitted.

"Then I shall not be alone, shall I?" He straightened and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "For luck," he said.

She shook her head and tried not to smile. "Have you met my family? I'm going to need a lot more luck than that."

He frowned for a second, then caught on and pulled her close. They grinned at each other, then kissed again. And she tried to tell herself, the entire time, that this was all just for show, that he'd been hired to treat her well, that it would be odd if they didn't display some affection.

But there was something very real about the way he looked into her eyes when it was over. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to analyze it because an angry hissing noise was coming from just inside the church.

"We'll continue this discussion later, maybe?" she said as she dragged her arms from his shoulders.

"Maybe?"

She smiled over her shoulder. "Probably."

His deep, unhurried laughter followed her all the way to the bride's room.

When she opened the door and saw her sister's reflection in the mirror, and the frustrated look on her face, Grace was flooded with an overwhelming sense of pity. She couldn't help but think that every bride, on their wedding day, deserved to feel the way she herself was feeling at that moment. Like her feet were easily two feet

off the ground, like nothing anyone said, no matter how heartless, could touch her mood.

Like she'd just discovered that falling in love was every bit as wonderful as the poets said it was.

Sadly, she suspected that Patience and Shawn, with their carefully laid plans for the future of their bank accounts, would never know it. At least not with each other.

Grace watched the other bridesmaids lined up against the far wall, ready to start the march into the chapel, and realized they were more nervous about the woman with the whip—the mother of the bride—and less concerned with the bride, with whom they were supposed to be celebrating.

This was not a wedding. It was the money ceremony. A pretty bouquet, some pretty words, and it all would mean so little.

Chapter 10

As the least important bridesmaid—the post assigned to her only because of their blood and not her personal relationship with the bride—Grace marched first. She took her time walking down the aisle, as instructed, and tried not to think about the ugly gown she wore. It was the most awful cross between periwinkle and brown—a color her mother insisted was chocolate, a perfect match to the champagne and chocolate invitations that had been hand done.

Unfortunately, *hand done*, in Patience's case, meant finished at the last minute. There had been no time to complain and the invitations had been sent. When Grace received hers, she'd thought it was a joke. But then the joke had been on her when she'd been forced to wear the sickening color.

As soon as the reception was over, she was going to find the nearest barbecue pit and make sure no one would ever see the dress again, not even at a thrift store. After all, poor people had enough going against them.

She smiled at Shawn and tried not to show any of the pity she felt for him. Beaker stood to Shawn's right but she turned her head to the left to keep from losing it. The last thing she needed was to laugh through the ceremony. Her parents would probably commit her to rehab at the end of the day, thinking she had a serious drinking problem.

But all she really had was a case of the... happies.

Her body was still in Texas and she was happy! Who would have thought?

She was tough and forced herself not to look at Fitz until after she hit her mark. Once she did, she turned to wait for the rest of the party to take their spots. When her eyes found the dark, broodingly handsome figure on one of the back rows, her heart felt like it was dancing in her chest.

The sash of green plaid matched his eyes. That charming face looked just as sexy without its five o'clock shadow as it had with it. And for the occasion, he'd tied his hair behind his neck, but she couldn't wait to see it loose again. Maybe on the football field. She only hoped she'd be around when he changed his shirt.

Her mother started hissing in the middle of the bride's entrance and Grace looked right into the woman's eyes and shook her head. If she ever got married herself, which she wouldn't, but if she did, she'd make her mother promise to keep a cork in it—if she allowed the woman to attend at all.

Her mom looked a little surprised and a lot mad. Boy was she going to get an earful when this was all over. But for the moment, Grace didn't care. She had her hero sitting on the back row waiting for her, willing to stand beside her—and it didn't seem to matter to him whether or not she was paying him to do it. In fact, they hadn't talked about money at all.

Why was that?

The bride finally made it down the aisle. Patience turned to their father, whose job it was to lift her veil. Tears rushed into Grace's eyes when she saw the pride on the man's face. It was a touching moment—naturally, or maybe intentionally, caught on camera—and then it was over. She was pretty sure Rocky's part hadn't been planned, but suspected Patience's perfect pose had been practiced.

That will never happen with me.

The realization kept the tears coming. Unless she moved home and married whom she was told to marry, Rocky Cunningham would never look at her that way, and maybe, not even then. Never once had he been genuinely proud of her. Even as a child, when she'd had something worth bragging about, he'd seemed unimpressed.

She just wasn't Cunningham-worthy, for some reason. And as much as she'd celebrated it, consoled herself that she didn't want to be anyway—because of the inherent greed that came along with those genes—it was kind of like failing at being a dog when you were obviously born a dog.

Her heart pounded a little harder, like it did every time she so much as thought about coming back to Texas for good, or for money. So she closed her eyes and pulled her bouquet up to her face, to pretend that she was home again, in Eugene. Where she belonged.

But she was also sad at the thought of getting on the plane the next day because she'd have to say goodbye to Fitzjames.

She looked at the back of the chapel, hoping to seal the sight of him into her memory. But he wasn't there.



Fitz got quietly to his feet and sidled to the end of the bench. The priest harped on about the sanctity of marriage to a clan of folks who couldn't appreciate the sanctity of kindness. And he certainly didn't care if it upset Grace or not, he couldn't sit there and watch her suffer any longer.

He'd seen the tortured emotions parade across her face and known her tears were caused by so much more than just a little sentiment at watching her sister marry. The lass was in pain. And when she'd closed her eyes, he'd realized she was close to having another anxiety attack. She would need him near her if it truly hit.

He'd seen many such attacks at Culloden. Visitors had been overcome by the sadness of the place long before the Great Visitor's Center had been built and the War Room installed. After that, not a week would go by without a lass or two—and

sometimes a veteran—fleeing from the building in the same sort of panic suffered by Grace.

Sweet Grace.

How was he ever going to save her from these people?

He moved slowly along the aisle outside the pillars until he reached the front of the chapel. There he stood and waited, hoping not to draw notice while he watched the lass. When she opened her eyes and looked to the back row, searching for him, he could be silent no longer. The lass's brows furrowed and her chest rose and fell quickly.

First, he tried hissing, but that only brought her mother's attention to him. Grace had apparently learned how to tune out the strange noise.

"Grace," he said clearly. "I am here."

Her gaze flew to his and she took a deep, slow breath. A relieved smile bloomed and all was right with the world again. Then he realized the room had fallen silent. All faces had turned toward him and even the priest, the bride, and her groom stared at him expectantly.

"Tis all right now. Ye may get on with it."

The priest's brows finally lowered back to their original position and he resumed his speech. Fitz looked to Grace and found her grinning happily at him. And for the rest of the ceremony, they remained lost in the sight of each other, careless of what others might think.

Poor lass. She needed him so. And him with only the rest of the day to spend with her. Hopefully the evening as well. But what then?

At the very least, he had to get her on an airplane headed back to Oregon. He couldn't leave her in Texas where her mother might peck her into the ground with her nastiness. And her father certainly wouldn't be a protection, for the man was just as oblivious to Grace's needs as her mother.

But how to save her?

Would something more dangerous than her family come along to threaten her?

He could only continue to pray that the deed required of him would become clear before all his sand was gone from the glass.

Chapter 11

Thankfully, Barbara Cunningham was too preoccupied with the turn of the weather to chastise him and Grace for being a distraction. She was busy directing valets and umbrellas while the wedding guests tried to reach their cars without ruining their finery. By the time the church was nearly empty, the rain began in earnest.

Rocky swaggered toward Grace and him huddling in a corner near the door, waiting for her mother to direct them. The man noted Shawn's blue sack of clothes dangling from Fitz's fingers, then bent his head to look at the sky beyond the open doorway.

"Fine Scottish weather we're having," Fitz said with a smile.

Rocky grinned. "So you're not gonna beg off on account of weather?"

Fitz chuckled low in his throat. "Why? Are ye expecting some?"

Rocky waved a young man to him, then took hold of the back of his neck and leaned close. "You know where Martin High is?"

"Yes, sir." The boy looked a little shocked, as if the man had never spoken directly to him before.

"You tell Mary you're going with Grace, to make sure they get to the school. All right?"

The boy grinned. "Yes, sir."

Once they were in the car and on their way, Grace introduced the lad. "Fitz, this is Jacob Vandergriff, my aunt Mary's grandson."

The lad grinned. "I hope I get to play. I mean, I'm the sophomore quarterback, so I can help."

Fitz nodded. "Then I hope ye'll be allowed on my team. But we'll have to see what Lord Cunningham has to say about it, aye?"

Jacob grinned wider.

Grace's smile was fairly wide as well.

"What are ye so happy about, lass?"

"I'm just looking forward to someone making my father eat crow, that's all. It doesn't happen often."

The boy snorted. "It doesn't happen ever."

The car pulled into the large, busy parking lot. The sign read *Welcome to Warrior Country, James W. Martin High School*. Whatever events that had filled the car park must have been canceled due to the weather, because people were leaving in droves.

Grace peeked out the shadowed window. "Looks like someone got a generous donation today, huh?"

Fitz forced a smile. "If yer father has paid the school for the use of the grounds, then I suppose not all his money is spent unwisely."

She rolled her eyes and he knew his little jest had gone amiss. So he decided he would have to put that much greater effort into impressing her on the field of battle.

When they got out of the car, they found that all the wedding guests had followed in spite of the weather. The womenfolk took umbrellas and headed toward the stadium while the men bent their heads and hurried into the school. And since all of them carried small bags, Fitz assumed the invitation had gone out the night before, calling the men to arms. He just hoped he wouldn't be expected to face all of them at once.

Jacob led him to the locker room and he changed into a generous pair of black shorts and a gray t-shirt. Just as he was about to put his boots back on, Shawn, the groom, showed up with a pair of cleats.

"I prefer my boots, thank ye just the same."

Shawn shook his head. "Not on wet AstroTurf, son. You're going to need these or you won't move more than a foot or two."

When they gathered on the field, there seemed to be half as many men as he expected, but plenty to fill two teams, from what he could remember of the game.

Rocky finally joined them and walked to the center of the mob. From his jogging suit, Fitz suspected the man had no intentions of playing himself. Young Rock was

his father's shadow and hobbled on a crutch he hadn't needed at the dinner the night before.

"Cunninghams, raise your hands," the elder man bellowed. A little over half claimed the name. Rocky then turned to Fitz and grinned. "I guess that means you get the rest. That is, unless you want to complain that I've got all the muscle on my side."

Fitz lifted his eyebrows. "Is that what ye call it then, muscle?" He glanced at Rocky's belly.

The crowd fell quiet and waited for the big man's reaction, then laughed when he laughed.

"Would you like a rundown of the rules?"

Fitz shook his head. "I've seen the game played. Twice. In what ye Americans call yer Super Bowl."

Rocky laughed hysterically as if Fitz had told a grand joke. Then he asked, "And you don't mind facing off with the Cunninghams?"

Fitz stepped closer to the man and leaned to within a foot of his big face. With hands on his hips, he said clearly, "I've been wanting it for centuries."

Rocky cocked his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, son."

Fitz snorted. "Culloden? Are ye familiar with it?"

Rocky put his hands on his hips to mirror his stance. "I'll have you know, the Cunninghams *fought* at Culloden."

Fitz was far too close to the man to shout, but he did it in any case. "Aye! Ye did!" He paused for a breath so the man could gloat a bit, then he moved in for the kill. "But ye bastards fought on the wrong side!"

Red faced and sputtering, Rocky turned and shooed his team aside. The rest of them looked like they might like to reconsider their team assignment.

"Any of ye who aren't afraid to fight, come with me." He gave Jacob a wink and stomped off toward the south end of the field. There were thirteen of them altogether, since no one wanted to admit to being afraid. When they gathered around him, he made his confession. "I wasn't jesting when I said I've only seen the game played twice. So, I thought our best move would be to put young Jacob here in charge."

The rest looked at the lad and eventually nodded. It took a moment, but they seemed to relax a bit, smile a bit, and realize this game might not be the serious contest they'd been expecting—or fearing. And though Fitz was relieved the lad knew how to play the game, he was a wee disappointed that there wasn't another full grown man who felt capable of leading them. But no matter. A willing leader was better than a seasoned one, he reckoned.

The only thing that needed proving was that Fitz was man enough for Grace—even though there was nothing he could do to keep her. The truth of it surprised him—that he wasn't truly there to pound the Cunninghams into the ground for bringing about his own death. But if he managed to shame them, even a wee, no one could stop him from doing a proper jig—perhaps on the hoods of their cars...

Jacob gave him simple instructions, and while the lad plotted with the others, Fitz popped up to look over their bent heads and searched the bleachers for Grace's face. His eye was drawn to a hand waving beneath a large black umbrella.

The lass sat in the top left corner removed from the others. Just as she'd been removed from the rest, standing in a corner, during her sister's wedding ceremony.

He so worried about her.

And as if she sensed his worry, she lifted a thumb to him.

He did the same in return, but then glanced at his wiry team and gave her a shrug, as if to say, she shouldn't get her hopes up. And a second later, he was rewarded with the peal of laughter he was beginning to recognize.

He needn't worry, he realized. The lass would hold nothing against him if he failed to humble her father. But still, how pleased she'd be if he did...

Chapter 12

The ball was theirs.

Jacob began the play and Fitz ran to the place where he'd been told to go. But someone knocked Jacob to the ground before he threw the ball. So they resumed their places and tried again.

For the next play, Jacob threw the ball to Fitz, but one of Rocky's team knocked it down before it could reach him. And to add to the confusion, two others began to argue on the far side of the field.

Rocky stomped onto the false turf. "What's going on?"

"He tackled me," complained one man.

Rocky's eyes bulged. "So?"

"So he's on my team!"

Rocky took the whistle dangling over his belly and blew it in the man's face. "That's it. Shirts and Skins!"

Fitz thought he could hear that peal of laughter again, though much more enthusiastic than before.

"Please, Uncle John," shouted Jacob. "Keep your shirt on! We'll be skins!"

Everyone laughed, including some of the women, and Fitz pulled off the gray t-shirt. Some of his teammates gave him an unkind look before doing the same. He glanced down at his abdomen to see if he was covered in dirt or something more foul, but he still appeared to be as clean as when he'd finished his shower the night before.

Jacob laughed outright, but when Fitz gave him a questioning frown, the lad simply shook his head and called the players to him.

"Obviously, everyone's a little distracted by Fitz's six-pack," said the lad. "So we're going to take advantage."

The plan was for Fitz to run down the field with his arms raised like he was expecting the ball to hit those hands at any moment, and the rest of the team would try to block both him and Shawn, who would actually be carrying the ball down the opposite side of the field.

"You take the left side," Jacob told him. "So the women can see you too."

"The women?" He looked down at his stomach again, then at the middles of his teammates, and finally understood. "Shall I blow them kisses while I'm at it?"

Jacob giggled. "If you want."

“Here. This ought to help,” said one man with a belly much like Rocky’s only a third the size. He reached behind Fitz’s head, pulled the tie from his hair, and spread out the curls a bit and tossed the tie aside.

They were enjoying a good laugh when Rocky blew the whistle and shouted, “Time!”

Jacob, as it turned out, was a very clever lad. And for most of the game, they held their own. When the time came, however, they were ten points down with no hope but to kick the ball between the goal posts so there would be less difference in the score. The confounding rains had ceased, but not in time.

“No worries,” he told his team. “We fought well, and we fought hard. No shame in that.”

We fought well. We fought hard. No shame in that.

He’d said those words before to a larger team of comrades. And he’d said it often.

His gut clenched while he moved into position and the past rose up to meet him like an oncoming opponent. The ball was snapped, then kicked. But he had no attention to give the game. He was simply too overcome with grief.

He collapsed to his knees and concentrated on breathing. After two and a half centuries, he’d never mourned over the massacre of Culloden while trapped inside a mortal body—a body that was unable to contain all the horror it had been witness to. And just as his legs had remembered how to run, his eyes remembered how to weep.

With his chin lowered, his hair fell around his face and he could do nothing more to hide his grief.

He was barely aware of his comrades celebrating around him. The ball must have flown true. Then, into his awareness, strode Rocky Cunningham, descendant of those who had cut him down on the battlefield, Captain Cunningham’s artillery company.

“You still lost, Payton,” the man said above him. “The Cunninghams have won again. It’s what we do.”

Fitz clenched his fists and held on to whatever willpower his body was still capable of, for Grace’s sake. Then he felt the heavy hand of his enemy pat him gently on the shoulder. Not gloating. Not attempting to knock him off balance.

“Don’t be hard on my grandnephew now, will you? When you send a boy to do a man’s work, you can’t blame the boy. Am I right?”

Two more pats and the hand was gone. The presence was gone. But the words hung in the air like the first shot of a canon.

When you send a boy to do a man’s work, you can’t blame the boy...

Only the boy that came to mind, at that moment, wasn’t Jacob Vandergriff. It was a young Charles Edward Stuart, a prince that had been barely older than himself back in 1745. And in his mid-twenties, Fitz couldn’t say what he’d have been capable of himself. Could he have rejected his advisors and gone to the battlefield sooner? Would he have recognized the disastrous terrain, the fatal flaws before they were exposed?

He couldn’t say.

And he couldn't sit in the middle of a football field in Arlington, Texas and allow a young man to feel worse than he already must. So he dried his face and pushed himself to his feet, then looked around for Jacob.

He found the boy standing at the edge of the field being comforted by Shawn.

Fitz hurried toward him. "Forgive me lad. Both legs cramped into knots and I couldn't lift my head to see if ye scored."

The lad still looked dejected.

"Well?"

"Straight down the middle," he said, with a smile growing slowly across his face.

Fitz whooped and slapped the lad on the back. Then slapped Shawn's raised hand as well.

Rocky was standing at the end of the bleachers helping his wife down the steps.

Fitz nodded in his direction. "I guess we showed him, aye?"

Grace walked toward him with a worried frown. He gave her a slight shake of his head and she smiled.

"Uh." Jacob looked confused. "Just what did we show Uncle Rocky?"

"That we wouldn't give up, laddie. That even when we were faced with certain death, we fought our best."

"I think you're getting real life mixed up with your battle stories again." Grace slipped her arm around his waist in spite of the foul smell. Her fingers against his bare flesh sent a welcome shiver through him.

"I tend to do that, do I not?"

She grinned up into his face. "Aye, ye do."

Rocky frowned in their direction and Fitz couldn't resist schooling the man while he still could.

"Do ye see this?" he hollered and pointed at Grace.

"What?" the older man answered.

"How can I have lost when I have this?"

Rocky shooed away the remark with the wave of his hand, rolled his eyes, and led his wife away.

Fitz turned and gazed into the green depths of Grace's eyes and wondered how her father could be such a fool. "I'm sorry, lass, but it is my considered opinion that Rocky Cunningham is blind in all ways."

She smiled a brave smile and cleared the hurt from her face. "Rocky Who?"

His pride in her, at that moment, stole his breath away and he thought his chest might burst. But along with the satisfaction, that perhaps he'd aided the lass in some way, to help her see her family for the fools they were, he worried that his time with her would come to a close.

Was that all that was needed? Would he suddenly feel himself lifted from the ground again?

He searched the field for any sign of a wee witch in a long dark robe, but saw nothing of the kind. Only clusters of youngsters looked on, no doubt wondering why their grand events had been cut short just so a bunch of motley men could play at being young and fit again.

"Come on, Fitzjames Payton, American Football player." Grace nudged him with her shoulder under his arm. "Let's go get cleaned up for tonight."

“Will ye change yer clothes as well?” He wasn’t interested in seeing the lass undress, he only thought the gown she wore was hardly flattering. But then again, it would hardly be flattering to one of those zombies they showed on the tellie. The color was that sad.

“Oh, no.” She walked ahead of him and twirled about, trying to make the dress come to life, but failing. “I have to wear this to the reception. And if I take it off, you’d only be able to get it back on over my dead body.

He chortled at her wrinkled nose, a nose that was slender and pert. A nose that shared nothing with the curled, nasty looks on the faces of her father, her aunt Mary, or her sister.

A nose that made his heart do surprising feats in his chest.

Chapter 13

Back at the Country Club, Grace stood in the deserted hallway off the rear of the ballroom and waited for her Highlander to join her. Since they weren’t allowed to dance, as per Queen Barbara, because Fitz’s kilt might fly up—stupid excuse—they saw it as a chance to hide for a while.

Fitz, however, thought he needed another plate of refreshments first. So she snuck out first.

She could easily see down the road a week or two and imagine herself sitting on the Oregon coast, relaxing in front of the waves, watching for dots on the horizon...and bawling her eyes out.

First of all, she knew better than to fall for a guy who was from Texas. But she’d stopped thinking of Fitz as being a Texan. In fact, with that accent of his, she’d had a hard time believing he’d ever spent much time in the state at all. For all she knew, he could have just come from the airport and hadn’t had time to realize he’d touched down in Hell.

Secondly, she knew better than to imagine herself having children with someone, no matter how green his eyes were. And then she’d gone so far as to imagine them standing *in front of a priest—exchanging vows*—and wondering if she was going to let her mother come to her wedding!

Okay, so she’d screwed up. But that didn’t mean little replicas of herself and her sister were going to come chasing down the corridor at any minute. They wouldn’t hide under the long tablecloths, eavesdrop on Grandpa Rocky and Grandma Barbara, and take lessons on how to be cruel and uncaring of anyone in the world but themselves.

It didn’t mean any of that would happen. It only meant that, once she got home, she’d need a little gas money to get to the beach and a few dozen boxes of tissues. That was all.

But for now, it was too late to fight it. Too late to lie to herself and pretend she wasn’t head over heels for the guy she hadn’t even paid yet.

That reminded her—she needed to look through her old emails and figure out how much she needed to get out of the ATM. If he stayed in her hotel room again, she’d still need to pay him first thing in the morning before she left for the airport.

If his money and clothes had been found and delivered to the OMNI, he might want to head out as soon as the reception was over.

She dug through her small purse and pulled out her phone.

A large, warm form sidled up behind her and snaked its arms around her waist. Then his head lowered to her shoulder where he left an unhurried kiss that sent chills racing through every vein.

“What do ye there?” A familiar low voice rumbled through her bones and she turned to face her own personal fantasy.

She laughed and wiped a tiny spot of whipped cream from his cheek. “I’ve got to find the email from your agency again.”

A cloud chased the smile from his face. “Dinna do that, lass. Let us not talk wages and such until the magic of this night has faded, aye? I have little time left, I should think. Far too little to waste.”

Her heart sank, but she kept a brave face in spite of it. “Then I need to get to an ATM and get your money for you.” She looked at her phone again and powered it up.

He plucked it from her hands and pushed it back into her purse. “No need, lass. What I’ve done, I’ve not done for money. I swear it.”

She shook her head. “No way. You were subjected to... my family. There is no way you are walking out of here without at least enough money to cover the therapy you’ll need, right?” She chuckled like it was a joke and wished it wasn’t true. It was like she’d exposed him to a virus and knew he was going to have to go see a doctor as soon as the offices opened on Monday morning.

He took both her hands and held them together between them. “Grace,” he swallowed nervously. “Sweet Grace—”

“Grace!” Mary had found them in the corridor and gave them both a nasty scowl. “They’re waiting for you. They want to take a picture before they cut the cake.” She waved Grace to her.

“I’ll be back,” the lass promised. “Don’t you go *anywhere!*”

He nodded and waved his fingers. He only wished he could make that promise.

Slowly, he followed along and entered the ballroom again where Barbara Cunningham had forbidden him to dance with her daughter *in that get-up*. And so they’d found a quiet place to talk instead, which he preferred in any case.

They simply should have found a better hiding place.

Now the entire wedding party posed for photographs for the fourth time that evening. The young women in those horrid dresses, the young men in fancy suits with ties that matched the horrid dresses. The patriarch in his precisely tailored suit with nothing ridiculous about it but the belly beneath, and the grand dame herself in a dress almost too fancy for a bride. The bride wore a simple gown of the same shade, but it looked little better than a shift compared to her mother’s glittering guise.

They posed. They moved and posed again. And all the while, Fitz studied them.

Grace was far shorter than even the shortest bridesmaid, and Patience was the tallest of all. The bride also had been blessed—nay, cursed—with that curled nose. When she wasn’t paying strict attention to the photographer, it twisted out of habit and was nearly identical to that of Mary, Rocky’s sister. Rocky, of course, sported a larger, wider version of the same.

But not Grace.

He studied Barbara's nose, then looked back to Grace, but was pleased to find the lass's features bore no resemblance to her mother's at all. He looked at Patience, then at Grace again. To Rocky, then to Grace again. Finally, he looked at Barbara once more and found her watching him. Her lips parted in what he supposed could have been a hiss, but he was too far away to hear it, and the crowd was none too quiet in their "celebration of free liquor," as Grace had termed it.

To Grace. To her mother. To Grace. To her mother. His attention whipped back and forth so many times that he was certain he'd unraveled the mystery.

"Enough," Barbara barked, and though the photographer immediately lowered his camera and the wedding party relaxed their poses, Fitz was fairly certain she'd meant the command for him alone.

She held his attention and nodded toward the veranda. He was loathe to taint his memories of Grace on the balcony, but he followed the woman. After all, they had important things to discuss and she was obviously choosing her battleground. And though she may have fought many battles in her life, whole wars perhaps, he doubted she'd ever stood toe to toe with a genuine Highlander.

She didn't stand a chance.

Chapter 14

Barbara Cunningham stood by the stone rail and waited for him to step outside. Then she walked to the end of the balustrade and around the corner. Fitz followed. After he turned the corner, he found there was another tier, level with the pool, covered with small sets of tables and chairs, backed up against the shrubbery where no one, looking down upon the pool, would see.

I should have brought Grace here.

The candles floating on the pool made her fancy coat shimmer—too cheery an effect for so sober a woman.

She sat on the far side of a small table and avoided his gaze. "Sit down," she said.

He sat opposite her and looked over the chaos floating on the water. Different from the night before. Just how many gardens had been sacrificed for this celebration?

"Name your price," she said, as soon as he was settled.

"My price?" He snorted. "And just why would ye wish to purchase me, Lady Cunningham?"

She turned sharply, thinking he had mocked her. He made no apologies.

Again, she looked away, seeing something more than just the pool and its decorations. "I know what you're thinking, and I want you to go, now, before you share those *suspicious* with Grace."

"*Convictions*," he corrected.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I know who you are. I know you're not from Eugene. And I know she was lying about having a boyfriend. She hired you to play

a role. You have nothing invested here. So name your price and go. Tonight.” Her eyes narrowed farther. “Now.”

He folded his arms and raised a brow. “No haggling?”

“No haggling. I told you to name your price. I’ll have a car take you wherever you wish to go, but only if you leave now and never speak to Grace again.”

He shook his head and stood. “Ye’ve a twisted heart, madam. And Grace will be well rid of ye.”

She bounded to her feet as well. “I don’t think you understand, *Jim*. You can name any price. Any price, and it’s yours. Tonight. *In cash*.”

“Money means nothing to me—”

“Money means nothing to a dog,” she snarled, needed no curling nose to show her nastiness. “Shall I have you put down like a dog?” She reached into the lapel of her fancy suitcoat and pulled out a mobile. “I should have thought of this in the beginning.”

“Your money means nothing to me, either, mother. Are you going to have me put down too?” Grace stepped around him and faced the woman. He reached out for her, but she eluded him.

Barbara sneered at Fitz. “You fool.”

He shrugged. “I didna ken she’d followed me.”

“Sure you did. That’s why you had to be so noble and refuse my offer, only because she was listening.”

Grace braced her feet apart and shifted her weight back and forth. “Let’s hear it mother. What’s the offer. Maybe I’ll be interested, if he’s not.”

“This doesn’t concern you,” the woman said and sat back in her chair. She brought her hand up to her chin and looked off in the distance, ignoring Grace outright.

The lass grunted in disgust. “You would actually pay him not to see me anymore? I’m pretty sure it concerns me.”

Barbara waved a hand, dismissing the lass’s accusations like they meant nothing at all.

“What if we were in love?”

“You’re not.” Still she wouldn’t look at her daughter.

“You couldn’t know that for sure. I mean, look at him. What’s not to love? He’s the only man in Arlington, including my relatives, who cares if I’m happy. He’s the only person who cared when I had a panic attack and almost collapsed at your precious wedding supper. And you never even asked if I was okay.”

She gave Fitz a long, sad look, then moved to stand between Barbara and whatever she saw in the distance, trying to force her attention.

Grace pointed at him. “This is the kind of guy you wanted to pay off? To send away? Why? To keep me from hoping? Is that what you want? Because I lost all hope a long time ago, mother. Too bad you never noticed. You could have been pleased with yourself without it costing you a cent.” She wiped her face and dried her hands on her horrid, twisted gown. “Really, mother. What is wrong with you?”

Grace finally turned away and seemed determined to leave alone, but he stepped in front of her. “Wait, lass. There is more ye need to know.”

The bitter woman sucked air through her teeth, but in the end, just turned away again. Telling Grace was apparently up to him. So he did.

“I understand now why yer siblings treat ye so meanly. They were taught to do so, following only what they’d seen. Yer parents are vipers, no question. But as far as I can gather, they might never treat a child with such distain... *unless the child was never their own to begin with.*”

A gasp came from above, followed by hurrying feet and a few heartbeats later, the bride appeared with her father hobbling quickly to catch up. Young Rock trailed behind, eating as he came. After all, he had his father’s belly to duplicate and he seemed to have a slow start thus far.

Once Rocky’s heavy breathing quieted, Fitz addressed the man. “Ye take such pride in the others when they’ve not a kind bone to their bodies. But perchance ye see much of yerselves in them, aye? And in dear, sweet Grace, ye see only that which is foreign.”

He strode to Grace then and took her face in his hands. “I knew from the beginning ye needed a new family and a new clan. And though I cannot give ye mine, for my time here is nigh gone, I can at least do ye the favor of removing ye from the clan and family to whom ye dinna belong.”

Patience finally stopped glowering at Grace and turned that look on her mother instead. “What is he talking about, Mother? Is he saying Daddy isn’t her real father?”

Barbara Cunningham had only herself to blame. And her children wouldn’t allow her to retreat, to fight another day. Finally, realizing she was defeated, she stood, straightened her shimmering jacket, and lifted her nose in the air like some queen preparing for the guillotine.

She sighed dramatically. “He’s saying that we’re not Grace’s real parents. And he’s right.” After the blow sent both her real children grasping for a seat, she went on to explain how humiliated she was when she gave birth to a stillborn baby boy. So rather than tell the world and suffer through the pity of everyone they knew, they quickly found a baby they could buy and none would be the wiser.

Grace moved to stand before Fitz, her eyes bursting with barely contained hope. “I was never theirs?”

“Ye were never theirs, lass.”

“And you found this out how?”

He smiled and touched his finger to the end of her nose. “This. It just doesn’t fit in the Cunningham mold.”

She shook her head rapidly. “She told me it was just like her grandmother’s nose.”

“She told an untruth.”

Grace spun to face the woman who was no longer her mother. “Who are my real parents?”

Barbara shrugged, distaste back on her face. “She insisted on seeing you a few times, to make sure you were being cared for. But eventually, it became too awkward and we put an end to it. You knew her as Melissa.”

“I remember her.” Her voice pitched high. “I remember her! I used to see her outside the fence at the school. She said she was watching her daughter.” She rushed over to Barbara and clapped her hands on her shoulders, ignoring the attempt to shrug her off. “Is this really true? You’re not teasing me?”

“Why on earth would I tease you? I’m humiliated here. You’ve destroyed me.”

Grace removed her hands like the shining beads had been sticky and left some residue on her palms. “Destroyed you? Yeah, like throwing water on a witch. It’s you who have nearly destroyed me.” She turned toward Rocky. “You shouldn’t have done it, you know.”

“Oh, honey, we realized that too late.” He looked thoroughly humiliated, but Fitz was saddened that the man made no move to comfort his wife. They were at opposite ends, watching their family come apart between them.

“No,” Grace said. “You shouldn’t have done it—not because it was despicable, which it was—but because I think, if you’d have dealt with losing a child, you might have been better people.”

She faced Fitz and he noticed she hadn’t lost that spark of hope. “I really don’t have to see these people again, do I?”

He laughed. “Nay, lass. Even family, sometimes, isn’t clan.”

“I think it’s time I found my new clan.” She pulled her dangling purse around, dug out a pen and paper, and laid it on the table nearest Barbara. “I want her name.”

The woman snarled. “And if I don’t give it to you?”

“I don’t know. How about... you go in the pool.”

The woman’s eyes popped wide. “You wouldn’t!”

Grace pointed a thumb at Fitz. “I bet he’d do it if I asked. For *free*.” She then breathed deeply and seemed to regret her words. “Just let me go. You never wanted me anyway.”

The woman looked past the lass to narrow her eyes at her husband. “I knew we’d be blackmailed, in the end.”

Grace gasped in frustration. “Don’t you get it? I hate your money. I *hate* it. I don’t want it. I don’t want anything from you. And what I *have* needed from you, all these years, you didn’t have it to give.” She glanced at the paper. “But maybe *she* does. Please.”

Chapter 15

As desperate as Grace was to get out of that country club and never look back, there was one thing she needed to do first.

She retrieved her bag from the dressing room and took it into the restroom where she could lock the door. No one was going to step into her life, or into that bathroom, without her permission first.

The ugly dress resisted like it knew its fate, but she got it peeled off and tossed aside. Then she pulled on her soft jeans and favorite t-shirt, which she’d packed like comfort food, knowing she’d need them. She considered flushing the dress, or just leaving it in a wad on the floor, but then she remembered her promise to humanity and pushed it to the bottom of the sack in the garbage can, since she doubted she’d find a barbeque pit between then and when she headed to the airport.

She turned the lock and stopped with her hand on the door handle.

On the other side of that door was the man to whom she had very nearly given her heart, even if it wouldn't mean anything in a week or two. Even if he had other places he needed to go. Even if she was only a job to him.

Only it hadn't been his gig in the first place.

She'd learned the truth. Her imposter was an imposter. Everyone in her life had turned out to be an imposter, but his betrayal was the one that caused the sharpest pain.

What was she supposed to do now? She'd fallen in love with a guy who didn't exist. Or did he? Had he lied to her every time he'd opened his mouth? Or did she even want to know?

Her heart had just been reborn, or so it felt. And though it was new and might end up healthier than it ever had been, she also felt like it was small and vulnerable. And if anyone could hurt her now—maybe the only one who could hurt her now—was the guy she knew as Fitz.

Was he out there? Because she felt like he had disappeared the second she'd answered the phone.

Of course he was out there. All she had to do was pull on that door and confront him. But she couldn't do it! If only the agency hadn't called to apologize until after she was back in Eugene...

The door moved toward her and Patience stepped inside.

"You're still here," she said.

"Don't worry. I'm going."

"Wait. I mean... I should have said, I'm glad you're still here."

Grace took a step back. "Why?"

The girl shrugged. "Because, even if this is all messed up, and our parents are psycho—"

"Your parents."

Patience nodded. "My parents. And they are."

She wasn't seriously looking for Grace to disagree with her, was she?

"I still feel like... you're still my sister."

Grace shook her head. "I'm sure you'll be relieved when you wake up tomorrow and realize you're the only daughter. Of course, you've probably always felt that way."

"No! See? I don't *want* to feel that way. I've been horrible to you. But now that I understand that it wasn't your fault you were always upsetting them..."

Grace rolled her eyes. "What? Now you can forgive me?"

Patience shook her head, caught Grace in her arms, and forced a hug on her. "No. I want *you* to forgive *me*."

Grace tried to shrug her off. The girl finally let her go.

"I know it's going to take some time, but, when you can forgive me, I want you to call me. I want to stay... sisters."

"We'll see." It was the best she could promise at the moment. "I'll call you after your honeymoon maybe." She reached for the door, then paused again. This was her chance.

"My advice? You and Shawn should consider getting an annulment. I mean, you both should marry someone you love. You should be excited to be in the same

room, you know? And when he has his arms wrapped around you, well... Anyway..." She opened the door and fled before she started caring.

Because the only thing she wanted, for the rest of the night, was not to care.

Chapter 16

She found him sitting next to the revolving door, watching out the window like he was expecting someone. There was no getting around it. She couldn't just walk away and pretend that he hadn't meant something to her, not after she'd just relived it all when trying to explain to her stupid former sister what real love was like.

And though she felt mean at the moment, she wasn't quite mean enough to hurt the guy. In fact, she was probably just mourning the guy she'd fallen for and it seemed like the imposter was the one who was responsible.

He stood when he saw her and smiled as she came near.

She held her bag over her shoulder and kept her elbow poking out between them, keeping him at a distance.

Quick and painless.

"Look. The talent agency called and apologized that they hadn't been able to find anyone who could pull off a Scottish accent. They had been trying to call me since yesterday, but my phone has been off, so..."

His head snapped back, then he nodded slowly. He understood he'd been busted, and though she didn't see him take a step, it felt like he'd backed away.

"I'd like to thank you, though. I mean, your timing was great, right?"

His smile was forced. "Aye, it was."

She lifted her shoulders and made a face. "And if you want, I mean, I'd be happy to pay you what I was going to pay the other guy. After all, you earned it. And a bonus, you know, for that therapy you're going to need."

He nodded. "Very generous, indeed. But I have no need of it, truly."

She nodded. "Well, okay then." She stepped around him, then faced him as she walked backward. "I've got an early flight tomorrow, so..." She pointed at the door.

"I shall walk ye to yer car."

The cab was there, waiting. The sun was gone and little remained of the sunset. Only a few streaks of pink and purple edged the west horizon.

The imposter opened the car door. She tossed in her bag and climbed in after it. He closed the door gently and leaned in the open window. With the string lights and marquee behind him, his face was in shadow and he looked like a Highlander straight from the history books. Or maybe...a ghost.

Her heart squeezed.

"Fare thee well, lass," he said quietly.

Her insides melted at the lilt of his brogue and the way he said lass. And two stories that had been floating around in her head all day suddenly combined and became so much more than just clouds. But she had no time to figure out what her heart was trying to tell her.

Desperate, she scooted back toward him. “Look.” She wanted to reach out to him so badly. She had to sit on her hands just to think straight. “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Not at all.” The headlights of another car flashed across his face and revealed his smile—still forced, still sad—and it was killing her.

“Would you tell me how your sisters died?”

The jerk of his head proved she’d managed to surprise him. “The truth?”

“The truth.”

“And yer not half-asleep, nor half drunk?”

She bit her lip and shook her head.

He looked away for a second, then sighed and looked back. “I canna be certain of it, mind. But I must hope they died of old age.” He quickly straightened away from the window, knocked on the roof, and the cab started moving.

Younger sisters. Died of old age? Then he would have to be old too, but he wasn’t! If he was telling the truth, which he couldn’t have been, he was either a real-life vampire or...

“One of the ghosties he told ye about?” Grace jumped at the sound of the voice beside her. A young girl sat there, and she was positive no one had been in the cab when she’d climbed inside, even though she’d been distracted.

“Where did you come from?”

The girl laughed. “Why, from Scotland, where else? Were ye sleepin’ then, when Fitz got to the part about the young witch?”

“Soncerae!”

“The same.” The girl seemed pleased and smiled. “Now, what do ye suppose we’re going to do about Fitzjames Arthur Payton?”

“Do? What can I do? If he’s one of those ghosts he was talking about, then he doesn’t get to stay.”

The girl bit her lip and gave Grace a wink. Then she tapped on the Plexiglas behind the cabbie and got his attention.

Chapter 17

Fitzjames Arthur Payton was not at the country club. The doorman said the Scottish gentleman had crossed the street and started walking north, so Grace and her new friend got back in the cab and started searching.

They found him in a park under a flood light, sitting sideways on a metal bench with his feet up, furiously plucking things from his wool socks. His boots sat beside him with laces dangling.

He cursed as they approached and Soncerae giggled.

“It’s not really funny,” Grace said, and hurried to the bench to help the poor guy. “I warned you about the fire ants.”

“So ye did.” Then he muttered something she didn’t understand.

The witch peeked over her shoulder. “Did ye say something, there Fitz? Have ye had enough of mortality then? Ye’d like to be taken straight away? Before the mighty ants finish ye off?”

"I didna say that," he grumbled, still plucking insects and tossing them at the bush behind him.

"Well, ye didna say it very loud, is all."

He suddenly roared and shucked off the socks and tossed them in the bushes too. Then he rested his arms on top of his knees and glared at Soncerae while he wiggled his toes.

Grace shook her head and tried to keep a straight face. "How are you going to get out of the park?"

He nodded at the witch. "Ask her." Then he bit his lips together and wouldn't look at either of them.

The girl put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes dramatically for Grace's benefit. Then she tilted her head at Fitz. "That's it then? Ye've done it?"

He nodded sharply, once.

"Oh, ye think so?"

His head whipped around and he narrowed his eyes. "No thanks to ye, Soni, I figured it out on my own. I helped her escape her ghastly clan." He picked up his boots and knocked them together over the grass, upside down.

"Heroic, was it?" Soncerae looked at Grace expectantly.

"Heroic?"

"Aye, it must have been heroic. Did ye cheer?"

"Cheer?"

Fitz gave them both a dirty look, then started tapping his boots again.

Grace tried to stop smiling, but she just couldn't help it. She was just too glad to get to see him again, if only for a few minutes. And if she could draw it out for a while longer, she would take him aside and tell him she understood now. She understood... everything.

But at the moment, he still wouldn't look at her. Had she hurt his feelings so badly?

The witch snorted. "Ye may have been clever, Fitz. But it was hardly heroic."

"Oh?" he took one boot and started working it over his foot. "If it was nay heroic, Soni, then why have ye come?"

The witch rolled her eyes again and let her hands drop to her sides. "Ye're no fun a'tall, Fitz." She tilted her head to the side. "That's it then. Come now. Time for yer reward, aye?"

Grace's stomach fell. She couldn't believe he was really leaving.

"I doona want it," he grumbled.

"What?" Grace and the witch said the word in unison.

Grace took a step closer, wanting to reach out and touch him, but worried that, the second she did, she'd burst into tears. "What do you mean, you don't want it? I thought this reward was what you came for."

"What good will it do?" He finally looked at her. His nostrils flared and she could see actual torment in his glistening, emerald eyes. There was no imposter. Only the man she'd fallen in love with. And he was hurting. "A noble deed hasn't won me you, has it, then?" When his gaze finally fell away, he finished tying the first boot and impatiently reached for the second.

"Don't be an idiot, Jimbo," she said, and was thrilled when he looked up again.

Man, she was going to be in a lot of trouble if she could get that kind of a rush from just a look. And the second she'd become addicted, her drug of choice was going to be taken away and she'd be forced into withdrawals. Cold turkey.

She touched him lightly on his hand. "You've already won my heart, you silly ghost. And if that's all you can take with you, then take it. But why not take your reward too?"

He still looked shell-shocked from her saying he'd won her heart. But after a few seconds, he recovered. "I regret I cannot."

She couldn't help it. Her body was all primed and ready to fall apart. A few tears were just the beginning. "You can't take my heart?"

"Auch, aye. I'll take it and gladly. 'Tis the reward I won't take, for there is no reward if it is not you."

The witch cleared her throat. "And what of yer revenge?"

He looked almost embarrassed. "If ye ask a lad to do a man's job, ye canna blame the lad."

"What's that?" Soni leaned closer.

He wrestled with his boot. "Ye heard me, ye mean thing."

She laughed. "Me? Mean?"

He shook his hair away from his face. "Nay. I suppose not. Ye gave me two days with my Grace. I canna fault that."

"Where is this wise man who has beaten his wisdom into that stubborn skull?"

"Nay. He wasna wise at all. Not where it mattered most."

The witch nodded sharply. "Well, I'm glad. I worried what might have become of ye had ye met with the prince."

"At Judgment?"

"Aye. For *I've* judge ye to be a worthy man, Fitzjames Payton. And if ye can forgive the prince, perhaps God will see ye the same."

"Auch. I hope it as well." He smiled into Grace's eyes and ran his knuckles gently along the side of her face. "For ye see, I'd prefer to bide a while by the gates of Heaven if He'll allow me, so I'll be there to greet a certain lass."

"I see," Soni said. "Well, ye'd best get on then. I believe someone is holding the gate open for ye now." She gestured toward a long row of hedges in the shadows where light reflected off something shiny. But as it grew, Grace realized what it was—the way to the other side.

"No!" she screamed and pounced, wrapping her arms around Fitz, keeping him put. "Don't take him. I know what I said in the car. I know I promised to be tough, that I could go on without him, but I can't let you take him! *I can't!*"

Fitz slipped his arms out from under hers, then pulled her against him and turned to put his booted feet back on the ground. When he closed his eyes tight, tears leaked from the corners.

"Forgive me, lass," he whispered. "I knew I couldn't stay and I sought yer heart in spite of it. The fault is mine. But try to remember me in a kind light from time to time, for I shall be waiting at the gate for ye, in any case."

"No. You can't go without me." She turned to the witch without releasing him. "Take me, too. Let me go with him."

The girl gasped. "Ye don't know what ye say, lass. Fitzjames goes now to leave mortal life behind. If ye go, ye *die*."

Grace shook her head against his chest and held tighter. "I know this man. I know his story. I know how he suffered before and after Culloden. He's too honorable to take revenge on the prince, even though he's waited for it all those years. So it's about time he got what he wants." She faced him and forced him to look into her eyes. "Do you want me, Fitz? Forget everything else and just tell me, do you want *me*?"

"More than life itself, lass. But—"

"You see?" She whispered to Soncerae past the tears in her throat. "He wants me, and that is all that matters. I don't care what's fair, or what rules you play by. You take us together, or not at all."

Fitz inhaled sharply, but it wasn't because of what she'd said. She followed his gaze to the bright light. Standing in front of it were three girls in long skirts and braids. They smiled and waved at Fitz, gazed at him for a long minute while Grace held her breath, then nodded and turned away, disappearing in the brightness. And Grace finally exhaled.

His sisters were there, waiting for him. He didn't really need her after all. But she needed him, and she wanted him to stay so badly she was sure God would understand.

"That will have to be reward enough for now, my friend." Soni told Fitz, then stepped close and wrapped her arms around them both. "Fare thee well."

Grace was petrified. "Are... Are we going now?"

Soni shook her head. "Just I."

"I don't understand."

The witch shrugged and stepped away. "Maybe, someday, the two of ye will puzzle it out."

She wiggled her fingers at Fitz, who smiled back with tears still leaking from the corner of his eye. When Grace looked again, Soncerae was gone. By the hedges, there was nothing but shadows. And by some miracle, Fitz was still there. Still warm, still solid.

She shook her head, not daring to smile. Not daring to hope. "I still don't understand."

Her Highlander grinned and a dozen lines rippled out around his smile. He took a hold of her head and pulled her close until their foreheads were mashed together. "The noble deed was yers, lass. Ye've won." He shook her shoulders. "Ye've won!"

She finally dared to smile, but only a little. "But what did I win?"

He threw his head back and laughed, then brought his forehead back to hers and whispered, "Me."

Epilogue

Fitz's chest tightened as he watched the Muir sisters traipse through the flowers on their way to his front door for the third time that day.

“Are ye certain, Grace,” he called toward the kitchen, “ye wouldna prefer a larger house before my son is born?” He lowered his voice. “Perhaps one without witches for neighbors.”

“Be careful,” she whispered and set a plate of cookies on the coffee table. “They can hear through walls.”

“I have no doubt of that.” He’d been in enough trouble to know.

His wife moved to the front door before the bell was rung. “Are ye sure, wife, ye’ve not wee dram of Muir blood in ye?”

Grace laughed—his favorite sound in the world—and opened the door. “Don’t be silly, Fitz. I saw them coming from the kitchen window.”

The sisters greeted her with a kiss as if they hadn’t just been in her kitchen an hour before. One of them crept between himself and the coffee table to take a seat beside him on the davenport—the seat he was hoping to save for his wife.

“When will ye learn to trust us, Fitzjames?” she said. “When we say it’s a daughter, you can bet money, it’s a daughter.”

Grace stepped toward the kitchen and he grabbed her gently and spun her around so she had no choice but to land on his lap.

“It can’t be a daughter,” he said, more to Grace than the sisters.

“Why is that,” his wife said, her green eyes peering deep into his own like she might find a lost treasure if she only looked deep enough.

“Because, lass. To have a wee copy of ye running about, stomping on the flowers and chasing the dog...”

“Yes?”

“I could never be so lucky.”

