



# BEYOND FOREVER

DEBRA DIER

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# Chapter One

*Our birth is but a sleep  
and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us,  
our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds  
of glory do we come...  
—William Wordsworth*

*You're the one, Julia.*

The masculine whisper rippled through Julia Fairfield, tingling her skin as though she had been touched by a warm breath. She glanced over her shoulder, her heart hammering. From the edge of the cliff where she sat the ground sloped down to a wide expanse of open field before reaching a dark expanse of woodlands. To the west the rugged slopes of Ben Cuimhne rose like a great beast awakening in the moonlight. No one was in sight. Nothing stood near, except an ancient oak stationed like a lone sentinel on the edge of the cliffs.

“Jet lag,” she whispered, shaking her head. She stood and stretched, easing the tension from her shoulders.

Mist swirled in from the sea, climbing the rocky cliffs until it curled around her feet like an affectionate feline. Filmy strands of mist entwined the branches of the oak, silken veils abandoned to the breeze. In the distance to the southeast, gray stones rose, forming a rugged structure at the edge of the cliffs. Countless spires, turrets, and towers reached upward toward the face of the full moon. Mist swirled in from the sea, curling around the base of the castle, severing its ties to earth.

Dunmore Castle didn't merely look like something from another century. It looked as though it came from another world, where magic ruled the realm. The story of Brigadoon came to mind. Julia could easily believe Dunmore appeared for only one day every hundred years. Why did it seem so familiar?

Although she had accompanied her grandmother on trips to visit her friend Helen Bainbridge in the past, they had always stayed at Helen's estate in Devonshire. This year, Helen had invited Julia, her grandmother, and Julia's niece to spend the summer with her at Dunmore. From the first moment Julia had glimpsed the castle, an odd sense of déjà vu had gripped her.

She frowned, taking note of how far she had walked from the castle. The mist had already started swirling over the path she had taken along the cliff top. Even though the path was rough, littered with stones and clumps of grass, the hike had been lovely—golden light from the setting sun glinting on the rippling dark waves, cool air kissed with salt brushing her face—a treat from the summer heat of Illinois. The hike was exactly what she had needed to ease the tension in limbs that had spent too much time confined in an airplane, a train, a taxi, and, finally, a boat. Getting to the Isle of Mist off the coast of Scotland had required nearly every form of transportation available to man.

She hadn't really intended to stay on the cliff quite this long. Her gaze plunged two hundred feet to the shoreline, where rugged masses of rock peeked through a thickening field of vapor. The crash of water pounding the rocks carried on the mist, bringing the sound of waves so close they seemed to crash against her.

Her throat tightened when she thought of the hike back. More than once she had nearly tripped on a clump of grass, and that was when she could see the ground beneath her feet. She should have paid closer attention to the incoming fog. She shouldn't have lingered so long.

“You cannot go back that way. It's too treacherous.”

Julia gasped and pivoted in the direction of that deep, masculine voice. At first, she thought her mind was playing tricks with her again. No one was there. Moonlight shimmered on the mist, a glimmering column piercing the filmy veil. Then the gossamer strands swirled, as though caught in a slow exhalation of breath. Moonlight shifted with the mist, a shimmering spotlight on a darkened stage. Pale vapor parted, filmy curtains drawing away as a man materialized from the mist.

Julia stared transfixed, unable to move in spite of a small voice shouting in her brain *Run!* She was not a child. She was not frightened, she told herself, though the gooseflesh rising on her arms disputed that fact.

He moved closer, the moonlight revealing his features. Dark hair fell in undisciplined waves to the white fabric covering his broad shoulders. Dark brown eyes regarded her with a hint of mischief, a blatantly male look that kicked her blood into a mad dash through her veins. He wasn't merely handsome. The word was far too simple for the complexity of his appeal.

An artist had sculpted the high blades of his cheekbones, the slim straight line of his nose, the full curve of his

lips, the intriguing cleft in his chin. The mist glowed around him, as if radiating the power of this man. A soft scent of leather and sandalwood teased her senses as he paused before her, so close she could have touched his cheek. She didn't, even though she wanted so very much to touch him. She certainly did not go around caressing the faces of strangers. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she knew this man. She felt that truth reach deep into her soul. Yet reason told her she had never in her life met him before. No one would meet this man and forget him.

"You will get yourself killed if you're not careful."

His words were colored with a deep Scottish burr. Not so thick and slurred that she had trouble understanding, as she had with several people at the train station, but a soft lilt that could make a recitation of dictionary entries as fascinating as Shakespeare. Recollection nibbled at the corner of her mind, like a distant, half remembered memory trying to work its way out of the shadows. Why did he seem so familiar?

He tilted his head, black brows lifting over his stunning eyes. "Did you fall, lass? Bump your head?"

It was then she realized she was staring. With her mouth open. She snapped her mouth closed, then realized she needed to reply. "No. I'm fine. Perfectly fine."

He frowned. "You'll be perfectly dead if you keep running about like a goose without a head. One misstep and you'll be explaining to St. Pete why he should be allowing hen-witted females to be entering the pearly gates."

Julia stiffened. "Hen-witted females?"

"That's fair enough, considering where you're standing."

He grinned, and she nearly forgot her indignation. Nearly. "I didn't realize the fog was coming in."

"At this time of night the cliff walk isn't safe. Even without the fog."

"I needed to stretch my legs. I didn't realize the fog would be coming in. I was just thinking I might..." She paused, angry at her own ridiculous need to explain herself to this arrogant stranger. He might be one of the most beautiful men she had ever met, but she didn't need to explain her behavior to this man, to any man, hadn't needed to for a long time. "This really isn't any of your concern."

He shrugged, white cloth crinkling over broad shoulders. "It appears as though it is. Someone has to make sure you don't get yourself killed."

"I can take care of myself." Julia pivoted and started back the way she had come, only to halt a few feet away when the path disappeared beneath a carpet of mist. Filmy strands of vapor curled around her and stretched out toward the ocean, the crashing waves hidden beneath a blanket of fog drenched moonlight.

"Does your stubborn streak often get you into trouble?"

Julia could hear the roguish, all too self-assured grin in his deep baritone. She closed her eyes and counted to ten before turning to face the rogue. He stood leaning his shoulder against the oak, twirling a sprig of clover in his fingers, mist curling around his close fitting knee-high black boots. She shouldn't have noticed the way his buff colored breeches molded the powerful lines of his legs, but she did. The breeze ruffled the sleeves of his white shirt. The garment looked like something out of a movie, a shirt for a Regency rake—loose-fitting, falling open at the neck, revealing a dark wedge of skin and hair. Once again a slow simmer started low in her belly and spiraled outward, heating every inch of her skin. "Does your arrogance often get you into arguments?"

He laughed, a dark rumble that tempted her lips into a smile. "I do apologize for teasing you. But it really is not safe to be here at this time of night. There is a path through the woodlands that leads right to the front drive of Dunmore another that leads to the gardens. You choose the path and I will see you home safely."

She glanced toward the thick stand of trees spreading out from the border of the field. Fingers of fog were already spreading outward across the clover. Her chances of finding her way through that small forest without him were slim at best. She could risk spending a cold, damp, thoroughly miserable night lost in the woods, which would also cause anguish for Gram, or follow this inexplicably familiar stranger.

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and headed toward the woods. "Come along. If we hurry, we can get you back to Dunmore before the island is lost to the mist."

She stared at his broad back, good sense warring with her desire to show the rogue she could do fine without him. Apparently he thought she would just trail after him, like some grateful puppy. From the looks of him, she suspected more than a few women trailed after this man. The sound of waves crashing against the rocks below shivered through her.

He paused and turned back to fix her in a steady gaze. "If you are frightened to be alone with me—"

"I'm not frightened of you."

"I'm glad. I promise I will see you back to Dunmore safe and sound, Miss Fairfield."

"How do you know my name?"

"The Isle of Mist isn't a big place. The entire village of Dunmore knows three Americans arrived late this afternoon to spend the summer with Miss Bainbridge at Dunmore."

"You're from the village?"

"As much as I would enjoy continuing this delightful conversation, I think it best if we get started. I for one don't plan to be sleeping in the woods tonight." He turned and strolled down a gentle slope, leading to a wide field that skirted the woodlands, leaving Julia with a choice.

She cast one last glance along the foggy cliffs, and then hurried to catch up with her intriguing guide. She fell into

step beside him, matching his long-limbed stride. He didn't spare her a glance. Using her own five-feet-eight-and-a-quarter inches as a guide, she judged he was one or two inches over six feet tall. Not extraordinarily tall. Still, he gave subtle subtext to the simple word *commanding*. "If the cliff walk is so dangerous at this hour, what were you doing on it?"

He grinned. "I saw you and thought someone needed to rescue you."

Julia shoved a damp lock of hair back from her face. She didn't need a mirror to know the long, thick strands were curling into a frizzy mess. It shouldn't bother her to know she looked dreadful, but it did. The fact she cared added more fuel to her anger. "I really didn't intend to walk back along the cliffs in the fog."

He looked at her, his dark brows sliding upward. "Didn't you?"

"I was going to head off in this direction, before you showed up and made me so angry I couldn't see straight."

Moonlight caught the humor in his eyes. "Is that what I did? And here I thought I was only offering to keep you safe."

In spite of her anger, and her humiliation at being caught in such a foolish and possibly dangerous situation, she managed a smile. "I assure you, I'm quite capable of taking care of—" Her words ended in a gasp as she tripped over a stone hidden beneath the swirling carpet of mist. Even with her hiking boots, her toes stung from the impact. She caught herself before she fell, staggering a step before gaining control of her balance.

He stood a few feet in front of her, grinning. "Be careful. The field is littered with stones."

She shot him a sarcastic smile, gritting her teeth against the sting in her battered toes. "Thank you for the warning."

He inclined his head in a small bow. "At your service, milady."

She fell in behind him, deciding it was safer to use him as a guide across the minefield than try to walk beside him. The scent of crushed clover drifted on the mist swirling around them. The pale vapor glimmered in the moonlight, lending an odd preternatural glow to everything it touched, including the man walking ahead of her.

*Larger than life*. It was a term often attributed to fictional characters, but in his case it fit. He was tall and broad shouldered, each movement filled with a patently male brand of confidence, the kind that led men into battle and women into reckless choices. He moved at a steady pace, as though he knew where every stone lay hidden. She suspected he would be just as sure of himself in a boardroom on Madison Avenue as he would in a field in Scotland.

There was something about him, something aside from the obvious male magnetism and her unfortunate female response. For some reason she could not banish the strange sense of familiarity. Why did she feel as though she knew him? She was certain she had never met him before. She would not have forgotten him. She defied any female to meet this man and forget him.

They hiked for more than a mile in silence across the field before turning into the woodlands. Wood chips muffled their footsteps here. The path had been carved out of the wilderness by the Dunmore gardeners. Moonlight filtered through the leaves overhead, illuminating their way. They came upon a clearing where a small lake shimmered in the moonlight, before taking one of the paths leading into another section of woods.

"Do you often hike on Dunmore property?" she asked, resuming a place beside him.

"Aye. It brings me peace to walk the land."

Moonlight pierced the darkness, a shimmering column of silver spilling over his face. The wistful look in his eyes made her wonder why this place should be so special to him. Perhaps he was one of the servants. It wasn't unusual for the servants of large estates to have worked on the same one for generations. Still, there was something regal in his carriage, an overwhelming air of command that made her doubt he had ever served anyone. "It's a long way from the village. Did you drive?"

"No. I didn't." He grinned in a way that made her think he was enjoying a private joke. "Tell me, why are no gentlemen accompanying three ladies from America?"

"My grandfather died several years ago. My niece lost her parents five years ago." On the same night and in the same accident that had taken the lives of Julia's parents.

"Have you become your niece's guardian?"

Julia drew in a deep breath, tasting the faint salty spice of the mist. "Yes."

"And you aren't married?"

Julia kept her gaze on the path, hoping to hide her expression. "No. I'm not."

"You manage to take care of your niece and your grandmother without any man to help you?"

She looked up into the endless beauty of his dark eyes. "We manage quite nicely without a man. In case you didn't notice this is the twenty-first century."

He grinned at her. "You're independent."

"Yes." Very independent, she assured herself. At least she tried to be. She had been taking care of herself, her grandmother, and Claire for five years, without any help from anyone.

They stepped from the woods onto the wide expanse of the front lawn of Dunmore Castle. Mist swirled around them as they walked toward the huge manse. He paused on the gravel leading to the house. Light poured from several windows on the ground floor, providing golden beacons in the gathering mist.

"As I promised. Safe and sound."

Julia glanced up at him, searching for something terribly sophisticated to say. She settled for, “Thank you, Mr...” She hesitated, realizing she didn’t even know his name.

“MacKinnon. Gavin MacKinnon.”

The name swirled through her memory. Why did it sound so familiar? “Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.”

“It was my pleasure.” He smiled, a warm and generous curve of sensual lips.

She finally understood how someone’s knees could go weak. Hers suddenly felt like overcooked spaghetti. “Good night.”

“Good night, Miss Fairfield.”

She stood on the drive, watching him, wanting to deny an attraction that played like Chopin through her veins. The fog swirled around him, until mist and man seemed to dissolve one into the other. She blinked at the trick of the moonlight. She stared at the place where he had disappeared, trying to shake off the odd sense of loss coiling around her. For some strange reason she wanted to run after him. Why did he feel so important to her?

“Easy,” she whispered as she headed for the house. She might be guilty of being shamefully romantic—the three unpublished manuscripts sitting under her bed at home were testament to that affliction. Her fellow English professors at Chamberlain College would shudder in horror if they ever discovered their colleague hoped one day to see her romance novels in print. Still, she had only been reckless once in her relationships with the opposite sex. It was a lesson she would never forget.

Gravel crunched beneath her boots. What did she know of Gavin MacKinnon? Nothing. True, he could send her heart racing. And yes, she had never in her life felt such an instant connection to another person. But, she might never see him again. She squeezed her hands into tight balls, hating the sudden sinking feeling that gripped her stomach at the thought of never seeing him again.

She certainly would not go running around the island looking for him. That would be careless. Reckless. She was not reckless. She examined all sides of an issue before voting. She read consumer Web sites, customer reviews, did her research before making purchases. She was not going to jump into anything. She glanced over her shoulder at the place where he had disappeared.

Why did he seem so familiar? She turned and marched up the wide stone steps. Idiot! One encounter and she was acting like an infatuated idiot. She would not let a handsome face and splendid body turn her into a blithering imbecile. No matter if his dark voice did make her want to hear him whisper *good morning* in her ear. She had never been one of those women who flitted from one relationship to another. She was in fact cautious.

She managed to reach her first year of graduate school without ever having a serious relationship. While her social life had remained stunted, her inner life had flourished. Romance novels were her escape from reality, her promise of a happy ending. Jane Austen had penned the most perfect romance of all time, a novel she still read when she needed a little lift in life. Although she knew nothing could truly compare to Elizabeth and Darcy, Julia had written her first novel when she was a junior at Northwestern. She had studied and graduated with honors in both Literature and History, useless degrees as far as most people believed. Useless, except for a girl who wanted to teach British Literature, a romantic who secretly wanted to write stories filled with hope and love.

Her future had held all the possibilities of youth, until her first year in grad school, until the day she had met Nathan Thatcher. Even now, the thought of Nathan and everything that had followed could still leave her tense and edgy and disgusted with herself.

Warmth and light flowed into the mist when she opened the huge front door of Dunmore. The door closed with a soft thump that rumbled through the huge entry hall. Once inside, her shoes tapped softly against alternating squares of black and white marble, the sound echoing against the mahogany paneled walls. A fire burned in the huge stone hearth dominating a far wall of the hall, chasing away the chill, spilling a scent of burning wood into the air. She stripped off her jacket and hung it in a closet that had been built behind one of the wall panels. She headed for the drawing room, where she had left her grandmother and Helen. She had tucked Claire into bed shortly before she took her solitary walk.

The scent of lemon oil drifted from the polished mahogany wainscoting where artificial flames flickered behind crystal and brass wall sconces. Julia halted in the middle of the hall, an odd sensation seizing her. She suddenly felt unsure of herself, as though she were wandering around in a half remembered dream, as though she had something important to do but couldn’t remember what.

In some distant, hazy part of her brain, she became aware of subtle changes around her. The candles glowing against polished wood no longer flickered with the predictable pulse of electric current, but with the dancing red-gold flame of fire trapped behind crystal. She stared at the wide mahogany staircase that rose from one end of the hall, her heart pounding. She felt disconnected, as though she stood outside of her body watching the world from a distance.

Through the haze fogging her mind, a figure took shape at the base of the stairs, a lovely woman with dark hair and a warm welcoming smile. *It’s so good to see you again, Eliza.* The image vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Julia remained fixed in the hall, until the clang of a tall case clock sounded the hour. She jumped at the soft burnished sound of the chimes. Chills scattered across her arms.

She had never been here before today. Why did it all seem so familiar? Why was she having glimpses of

memories she could not possibly have made? Suddenly, she didn't want to be alone.





## Chapter Two

*They that love beyond the world  
cannot be separated by it.  
Death cannot kill what never dies.  
—William Penn*

Julia hurried down the corridor leading to the green drawing room. She found Louise and Helen where she had left them hours earlier. Here emerald silk damask flanked the long diamond-shaped panes of the windows, allowing moonlight to filter into the room. Figured mint-green silk wall coverings flowed from the high plastered ceiling to the polished mahogany wainscoting.

The ladies sat on a camelback sofa in front of a large mahogany framed fireplace. Helen and Louise were still chatting in the all-consuming way of close friends who haven't seen each other face to face for several years. The friendship between the women had begun when they were children at boarding school, had continued through their years at Oxford and beyond.

After greeting the ladies, Julia served herself hot chocolate from a tea cart that stood beside the sofa. She sank into a wing-back armchair near the hearth, the deep seat firm beneath the mint green silk brocade upholstery. Even though it was early June, she was grateful for the logs burning on the hearth. She felt cold from more than the damp chill of evening. Why did she keep getting glimpses into another time?

"Louise was just telling me that you have finished another one of your manuscripts," Helen said. "I would love to read them."

Julia crinkled her nose. Gram was always touting Julia's stories. "They really aren't good enough for public consumption."

Behind the oval lenses of her black-rimmed glasses, the corners of Helen's blue eyes crinkled with her warm smile. She never bothered coloring her hair. She wore the curly gray and brown mass twisted up in a bun. At seventy-four, she still walked three miles every morning, and often rode one of the Thoroughbreds she raised. She not only sat on the board of directors for the bank her great-great-grandfather had started, she also contributed articles to the National Historical Society's magazine, and worked with several charities. Short and slim, she had a preference for slacks, like the gray tweeds she was wearing, and a supply of energy that could put a ten-year-old to shame. "I would wager it is common for writers to doubt the merit of their work."

"I keep telling her that she has to mail her manuscripts off to a publisher." Louise nibbled a chocolate cookie. At one time the honey-blond shade of her hair had been as natural as Julia's. Now a stylist kept the chin-length waves perfectly tinted. Louise had no intention of allowing the years to win without a fight. Although she insisted she was five foot five, she was closer to five foot three in her stocking feet. With a rounded figure that betrayed her passion for sweets and pastries, she looked lovely and sweet. "I think her books would make wonderful movies."

"Thank you, Gram. But they just aren't good enough. Not yet."

Louise shook her head. "All you need is confidence."

"You know, Julia, I think you might find some wonderful inspiration at Dunmore."

"I hope so." English literature and history had always fascinated Julia. The architecture of Dunmore alone would keep her interested for weeks. Fortunately, Helen shared Julia's love of history. She had given them a quick tour of this wing soon after they had arrived that afternoon, but Julia was looking forward to weeks of exploration.

"Tomorrow, if you like, we can start with the library," Helen said. "I think you'll find some of the journals interesting. It's a wonderful way to touch the lives of people who have lived in another time."

"I would enjoy that." Still, there was a man of this time Julia would like to know first. An image of Gavin MacKinnon blossomed in her mind. Would Helen know him? "I met a man on the cliff walk this evening."

"The cliff walk?" Helen settled her cup on her saucer. "I didn't realize you had taken the cliff walk. I should have warned you that it can become quite dangerous if the fog rolls in. And it usually rolls in."

"Thank heavens you didn't get stranded in it," Louise said.

"I did. But, Mr. MacKinnon brought me home through the woods. Otherwise, I might still be wandering in the fog."

"I'm terribly sorry," Helen said. "I should have warned you."

Julia smiled. "It's all right. I'm fine."

"Did you say his name was MacKinnon?"

"Yes." Julia sipped her hot chocolate, trying to appear calm when she wanted to ask a hundred questions. "Gavin MacKinnon. I thought you might know him."

"Gavin MacKinnon?" Helen lifted her brows, her expression revealing her surprise. "How very odd."

"Odd?" Julia smoothed the pad of her thumb over the handle of her ivory porcelain cup. "In what way?"

“MacKinnon was the family name of the first earl. He built Dunmore in 1372. The MacKinnons lived here until the early part of the nineteenth century. The family bloodline ended with the death of the seventh earl.” Helen set her cup and saucer on the tea cart. “And, unless I have my history muddled, his name was Gavin.”

Julia frowned. “There must be another family on the island with that surname.”

“Not that I am aware of.” Helen sat back, pursing her lips. “I suppose he could be from a different branch of the MacKinnon family. Perhaps he is here doing some research on the family name.”

“Perhaps. Still, I don’t think he was a tourist. He knew his way around Dunmore. And he said he often liked to walk the grounds.”

Helen tapped her forefinger against her chin. “Now that is odd. I’m surprised I have never come across this man. Or perhaps I have just never noticed him.”

Julia shook her head. “Mr. MacKinnon is not a man to go unnoticed. If you saw him, you would remember him.”

“Attractive?” Louise asked.

Julia grinned. “If you like that tall, dark, and devastating look.”

Louise’s blue eyes glittered with humor. “He made an impression, I can see.”

“I suppose he did.” Julia sipped her hot chocolate, the steam brushing her upper lip, the sweet milky taste flooding her tongue. “For some reason, Gavin MacKinnon seemed familiar to me. Although I’m certain I have never met him before.”

“You felt that way about Dunmore,” Helen said.

“I know.” Julia stood and set her cup and saucer on the tea cart. “I can’t shake the feeling I’ve been here before. Everything seems so familiar. It’s as though I were walking through a half-remembered dream.”

Louise brushed a crumb of chocolate from her chin. “If your grandfather were here, Kenneth would say you had been at Dunmore before, in another life.”

“Another life?” Julia rubbed the stiff muscles at the back of her neck. “You mean to say Grandfather believed in reincarnation?”

“Oh, your grandfather had a great many theories on life.” Although it had been more than fifty years since she had lived in England, Louise had never lost the English in her accent or in her humor. “He also believed colonists from Atlantis lived in the Bermuda Triangle.”

Julia grinned. “You mean you don’t?”

Louise lifted her carefully sculpted brows. “It would explain a great many odd occurrences.”

Julia wasn’t ready to blame reincarnation for the odd feelings she had about Dunmore. “I prefer to think jet lag is the problem.”

“It isn’t so odd, the concept of reincarnation.” Helen absently rubbed her hand over her knee. “What are we but souls wandering about, contained for a brief span of time in a corporeal body? I have to say I honestly believe it is possible that the Almighty sends us back to earth for more than one chance at life. I know the first time I met Frederick...” She hesitated, looking at Julia. “Frederick was my fiancé. He died before we had a chance to marry. A sculling accident at school. He really shouldn’t have gone out alone that morning.”

“Gram told me about him.” Gram had also said it was a shame her dear friend had never married. According to her grandmother, a legion of young men had tried to coax Helen to the altar. But she had chosen instead to live with memories.

“The first time I met Frederick, I felt I knew him. I know it sounds very Eastern of me, but I honestly believe we were soul mates. We had loved in another lifetime, perhaps a hundred lifetimes.” Helen smiled, her eyes soft with memories. “And I believe we shall meet again. And love again.”

Louise propped her elbow on the arm of the sofa and rested her chin on her hand. “It’s a comforting thought.”

“Soul mates.” The concept appealed to Julia’s innate sense of romance and at the same time poked her cautious side. “It seems a bit risky.”

Helen looked curious. “Risky?”

“What if my soul mate steps out in front of a bus before I ever get a chance to meet him? Or he marries someone else because he hasn’t gotten the message? What if I just don’t recognize him if I do meet him?”

Helen laughed softly. “If you ever meet that one special soul, you will know.”

For some disturbing reason an image of Gavin MacKinnon rose in her mind. She had to admit the feeling he conjured within her was something new: familiarity entwined with an odd sense that he was important to her. It was as though she already knew him better than she had ever known any other man. No doubt about it, she was an incurable romantic.

Soon after the case clock in the hall chimed eleven, Julia bid both ladies good night and headed for her bedchamber. Unlike her grandmother, she had not been able to take a nap soon after arriving this afternoon. The time difference and exhaustion of a day of travel were piling up on her. As she approached the wide staircase leading from the hall to the first floor, she held her breath, half expecting to see the specter of a lovely Regency lady to appear before her. Still, she managed to climb the stairs without seeing a glimmer of a ghost.

According to Helen, this wing had been added in the late eighteenth century. Though the exterior was built to compliment the ancient gray stones of the original fourteenth-century castle, the interior was designed for luxury. Her

chamber was on the first floor, overlooking the Atlantic. On the way to her room, she stopped at the chamber her niece had been given. Claire's room overlooked the sunken gardens. Rose velvet drapes had been left open, allowing fog-tinted moonlight to flow into the room. Julia had expected to find Claire sleeping. Instead she found her niece sitting on the side of the bed, holding the photograph she always kept on the bedside table. Her niece often had trouble with dreams that woke her in the middle of the night. Claire smiled when she saw Julia, but there was a lingering sadness in her brown eyes.

Julia sat on the bed beside her and looked down at the photograph. A smiling couple looked up at her. It was a portrait of a young couple sitting in front of a Christmas tree, with their first and only child sitting on the floor between them. John, Diane, and Claire. It had been taken the Christmas before John and Diane had died.

"I don't remember them," Claire said softly.

Julia's chest tightened as she looked at the photograph of her brother and his wife. After all this time, she still could not think about it without feeling her throat tighten. It was hard not to think of the decision that had set things in motion. If she hadn't planned the wedding, John and Diane wouldn't have been in town that weekend. If she had never planned the wedding, the accident wouldn't have happened. Or, if she had gone through with the wedding, everyone would have been at the reception the night it happened. Either way, she often caught herself thinking of how her choices had led to the accident. "You were very young when they died."

Claire nodded, her gaze riveted on the photo she still held. "I just wish I could remember something from the time I had with them. But I don't. Sometimes I pretend I do, but I can't remember. Not really."

"Your mommy would read you stories every night before you went to bed." Julia wrapped her arms around Claire's small shoulders and held her close, tears burning her eyes. "And your daddy would swing you high in his arms, and you would giggle, and laugh and ask him to toss you higher."

Claire slipped her arms around Julia's waist and held her close. "I'll keep trying to remember, Aunt Julia."

Julia rested her cheek on Claire's soft hair. "If you just remember how very much they loved you, it will be enough, Claire."

"You won't ever go away, will you? You'll always stay with me?"

The desperation in Claire's soft voice tore at Julia's heart. "I will always be here for you, Claire. No matter what."

Claire squeezed her arms tighter around Julia. "Promise."

Julia smoothed her hand over Claire's soft brown hair. "Promise. Now you need to get some sleep."

Claire slipped under the covers and hugged a teddy bear named Henry. The bear showed all the signs of being well loved—the light brown plush on his belly was worn, one ear drooped, and if you looked closely, you could see the stitches where Julia had repaired his leg. Still, that teddy had been salvaged from the wreckage of Claire's young life. Julia stayed with her until she fell asleep.

Five years ago Julia hadn't had the slightest idea of how to mother a child. But a drunk driver had plunged her into a crash course on motherhood. Five years ago she had taken over guardianship of her brother's only daughter; at the time Claire was only three years old.

Necessity was a wonderful teacher. Over the past five years, Julia had learned a great many things. How to cope with the loss of her parents, her brother John, and her sister-in-law Diane. How to handle—for all intents and purposes—being a single mother. How to face herself in the mirror every morning with the knowledge she might have prevented that accident. She was still working on that one. Some days were better than others. She brushed her lips against Claire's brow, catching the scent of berry scented shampoo.

By the time she reached her chamber, Julia was so tired she felt like crawling into bed without changing her clothes. Still, she forced herself to get ready for bed. After climbing between the cool sheets, she lay for a long time wide awake, her body exhausted, her mind a jumble of thoughts. The excitement of travel, of visiting this huge, ancient pile of stones, made sleep elusive. She closed her eyes, concentrating on her breathing, coaxing the rhythm into a slow, deep cadence until she finally hovered on the verge of sleep.

Still, something pricked at her consciousness. Her skin tingled. She had the distinct feeling she was being watched. She opened her eyes and tried to focus. Someone was standing by the foot of her bed. A man. The man she had met on the cliff top that evening: Gavin MacKinnon.

Moonlight flowed through the windows, carving his image from the shadows. His dark hair fell in tousled waves around his face. He wore a rake's shirt, close-fitting buff breeches, and a smile that tore at her heart. She had never seen such longing in a smile before, such need. He looked at her as though she was the only thing in the world he wanted, and the only thing he couldn't have.

For a moment, her sleep-drenched mind could only take in the sheer male beauty of this man. Then it registered. *A man was standing in her bedchamber.* She jackknifed into a sitting position, breaking free of her drowsy state like a swimmer breaking the surface of a pool.

"What are you doing in..." Her words faded in a sudden gasp of breath. She stared at the spot where Gavin MacKinnon had been standing. That space was filled with moonlight. She leaned over the edge of the bed. He wasn't hiding on the floor.

She stood and glanced around the room. A pair of wing-back chairs stood in front of the porcelain-tiled fireplace.

A tall rosewood armoire stood against the far wall. A vanity stood between a chest of drawers and the door leading to the bathroom. Even though rationally she knew he couldn't have made it across the room without her seeing him, she still rushed across the room, pulled open the door, and stared inside. Moonlight from the window poured over the porcelain bathtub, the brass handles glimmering in the soft light.

"I wasn't dreaming," she whispered, heading back for bed. "I wasn't asleep."

Still, Mr. MacKinnon had obviously been nothing more than a figment of her imagination. She had just manufactured his image, imagined him standing by the bed looking at her as though he wanted to take her in his arms and hold her until the end of time. She fell back against her pillow and stared up at the dark folds of the blue velvet canopy above her head.

She had just met the man and already she was spinning fantasies about him. She clenched her teeth and rolled over to her side. *Cautious and steady*, that was her motto. Still, she couldn't deny a very reckless urge when it came to one incredibly compelling Scottish Highlander.

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Julia squeezed the top plank of the paddock fence, her fingers sliding against the smooth white painted pine. The tang of cedar chips drifted on the cool morning breeze. Sunlight filtered through the leaves of an oak growing beside the paddock, sprinkling gold medallions on the horse and rider as they passed Julia. Claire looked so small sitting atop that horse. She waved to Julia, smiling as though she had just been given a wonderful present. There was no reason to worry, Julia assured herself. This was perfectly safe.

"Claire will be fine," Helen said, resting her forearm on the fence beside Julia. "Bronte is a true lady. She would never think of harming a little girl."

Julia studied the chestnut mare named Bronte as Claire rode the animal out of a gate on the far side of the large paddock. The animal seemed gentle enough, walking with a lazy sway of her hips, her long tail swishing slowly. The three other young girls who lived at the castle—Megan and Shannon, the housekeeper's daughters, and Nicole, the daughter of Helen's secretary—were also mounted. The muted sound of horse hooves thudding wood chips accompanied the parade of little girls and horses as they formed a train and rode out of the paddock with a groom in the lead and one in the rear.

"I never had children of my own." Helen's gaze remained fixed on the girls as they rode across the wide expanse of lush green lawn, headed for one of the woodland paths. "It is my greatest regret."

Julia looked at the small woman standing beside her. Helen's bun was perched on the side of her head this morning loose strands of gray and brown had fallen free of their pins to flutter in the breeze. Although the years had etched lines upon her face, the beauty that had been hers as a youth could still be seen.

Helen lifted her face to the breeze. "When I lost Frederick, I couldn't imagine ever giving my heart to another man. Frederick was my one and only love."

*Her one and only love.* What would it be like to meet him, that one man who made your heart soar, only to lose him after an all too brief span of time? On an intellectual level she knew a person could find happiness with more than one individual. It was a big world. Yet deep inside, Julia could not deny the sense she was waiting for one particular man.

"I keep telling Julia she needs to settle down and have babies of her own." Louise nibbled a cinnamon pasty, crumbs falling on the lavender flowers embroidered along the front edges of her white cardigan. She brushed them away as she continued, "She hasn't allowed any man to get close to her, not since that horrible debacle five years ago. She is gun-shy."

Julia tensed at the reminder of her near escape from a horrible situation. "I prefer to say cautious."

"In a way that dreadful young man is still manipulating you, Julia."

Julia didn't need any reminders of how manipulative Nathan Thatcher had been. Handsome, wealthy, destined for a high powered career in his father's law firm, Nathan had always been certain of what he wanted from life. He kept a list and checked off each item as he managed to acquire it. He had penciled Julia in as his wife. Apparently she fit his criteria perfectly—a female he could twist and shape until she fit his ideal.

After their engagement, Nathan had immediately started the process of molding her into his image of the perfect wife. The girl who had preferred t-shirts and jeans was suddenly in designer clothes. Since she had never taken much of an interest in her looks, he had encouraged her to go to a salon to learn how to use make-up and properly style her hair. No more ponytails for his fiancée. She stopped discussing politics, because he had a different brand than she did. She found herself losing to him at chess, because it was easier than dealing with his sulks. She gave up riding, because he didn't like horses. She only discussed books he found interesting.

When she looked back on it, she was amazed she had ever fallen for Nathan's brand of male dominance. Of course, Nathan was a master at manipulation, and she had been so damn vulnerable. She would never allow herself that kind of vulnerability again. Never.

Fortunately, her parents had recognized what was happening to their daughter. With their emotional support, Julia had regained her wits before she made a horrible mistake and married the bastard. But none of them had realized that saving Julia would cause so much tragedy. She only wished to God she had never planned that wedding in the first place.

“I have been busy Gram.”

Louise smiled at Julia. “You can’t expect to meet the right man if you never go looking for him.”

Unbidden, an image of Gavin MacKinnon rose in her mind. Julia had only just met the man. It was ridiculous to think of him in the context of happily ever after. Yet she couldn’t get him out of her mind, or her dreams. Last night he had invaded her sleep, holding her, kissing her, loving her. Never in her life had a man made her feel this way. It was foolish, reckless, and far too exciting. “I intend to be sure this time, Gram. If it feels wrong, it is wrong. No one is going to fool me again.”

“I understand how you feel.” Helen tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her right ear. “After I lost Frederick, I shut myself off from the idea of ever marrying anyone. I admit, sometimes I wonder if it was a mistake. Perhaps it is better to live with affection and companionship, the love of family, even if you can’t give your heart completely. Of course, you are too young to think of those things.”

Julia had nearly settled for something less. She would never settle again for anything that wasn’t real. *Her one and only love*. Inwardly she cringed at the fatally romantic notion, but she couldn’t change who she was—a hopeful romantic right down to her bones.

“Come back here!” A masculine shout shot from the stables. A moment later a huge black horse charged through the open stable doors. Hoof beats pounded the ground as the beast dashed across the paddock, kicking up cedar chips in his wake. Two grooms chased the horse, legs pumping with all their might. Julia watched their progress, expecting the chase to end when the horse reached the fence. Instead, the animal jumped, soaring over the white-painted planks in a glorious arc of power and grace.

“I see Emerson is at it again,” Helen said, her voice low and unconcerned.

“This has happened before?” Julia stared, following the horse’s progress as he dashed across the lawn and plunged into the woods.

“Yes,” Helen said. “Nearly every morning Emerson decides to take a solitary run. No one is quite certain how he gets out of his stall.”

“You never have any trouble finding him?” Julia asked.

“He comes back on his own.” Helen lifted her brows. “I suppose he knows where his oats are.”

“On his own. That is strange,” Louise said. “Still, you could probably put his runs to an end if you made him a gelding.”

“He is a wonderful stud. And as long as he doesn’t hurt himself, I don’t mind. Besides, if it is the Ghost of Dunmore, I like to think he enjoys his morning rides.”

“The Ghost of Dunmore?” Julia asked.

“Yes.” Helen smiled, a glint of humor filling her eyes. “Dunmore is haunted by at least one spirit. Perhaps more.”

“You mean you have your very own ghost and you never told me about him?” Louise asked.

“I’ve never actually met him. Although I have heard the piano playing in the music room when there has been no one in there.”

“You actually heard the piano?” Julia asked.

“On occasion I was certain I did. Of course it was always at night and I was always half asleep.” Helen turned her gaze toward the castle. “Every old castle and country home in Great Britain boasts a ghost or two. I suppose any time a structure is witness to the passage of centuries, there will be tragedies and legends that arise from them.”

Julia had never really taken ghost stories seriously. Since coming here she was beginning to believe there was a great deal more to this world than what could be seen and touched. “Who is the ghost supposed to be?”

“No one is really certain. Through the years several people have reported catching a glimpse of a young man wandering the unfinished tower. Since the last MacKinnon earl died so tragically, many feel it must be he.”

“Well, I would prefer not to see a ghost, if there are any.” Louise rubbed her arms. “The whole idea gives me shivers.”

“I have spent many summers here, and I have yet to see one. If we have ghosts, they are a solitary lot.” Helen linked her left arm through Julia’s and her right through Louise’s. “Shall we take a look at the library? I want to show you the MacKinnon journals.”

Although Julia wanted very much to see the journals and explore the rest of the library of Dunmore, she found herself anxious for a long walk along the cliff walk. And she didn’t try fooling herself as to the reason she wanted to prowl the grounds of Dunmore—Gavin MacKinnon. He liked to walk the grounds of Dunmore. Well, she liked taking long walks. Perhaps, if she walked long enough, she might just bump into him again. She drew in her breath. *Don’t get your hopes up*. She had learned a long time ago it wasn’t safe to pin any hopes on a man.

The mellow scent of leather drifted from the sofas and chairs, wrapping around Julia as she followed her grandmother and Helen into the large library. In spite of the sunlight filtering into the room, Helen switched on the overhead lights, chandeliers of brass and crystal that cast golden light upon hundreds of books lining the mahogany and brass bookcases.

Cut velvet drapes in a green and burgundy floral pattern framed the long windows and a pair of French doors at the far end of the room. A thick wool carpet of burgundy, green, and ivory medallions—a replica of the one Adams had designed for the room—cushioned their footsteps. The gallery wrapped around three walls of the room. It was

reached by a wooden spiral staircase. Julia glanced at the leather-clad volumes on the shelves, wondering what treasures she would find hidden between the covers.

“I keep the family journals in this cabinet.” Helen opened a glass door and pulled a book from the cabinet against the wall near a large mahogany desk. “I think you’ll find this one particularly interesting.”

Julia paused in front of the fireplace, her attention snagged by the portrait hanging above the polished mahogany mantel. From the confines of an ornately carved frame, a man gazed down at her.

Unlike most of the portraits she had seen at Dunmore, this was not a formal pose. This man looked as though he had just dismounted from the glossy black stallion that stood beside him. He didn’t wear a coat. His white shirt was open at the neck. It was loose fitting, with full sleeves, a shirt any Regency rake would be proud to wear. Buff colored breeches hugged his narrow hips and the strong lines of his legs before plunging into knee-high black boots. Dark, tousled waves just a whisper lighter than black framed a face carved with strong lines and angles, a face designed to test the limits of a woman’s heart. Her own heart thumped wildly against her ribs. It was the face of... “Gavin MacKinnon. That’s him.”

Helen moved to her side, holding a large brown leather-bound book in her hand. “Yes. That’s Gavin MacKinnon, the seventh Earl of Dunmore. I found the portrait in storage and decided he must be displayed.”

Although the words registered in Julia’s brain, they didn’t make sense. “The seventh Earl of Dunmore?”

“Yes.” Helen looked up at her, light reflecting on the wide lenses of her glasses. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

Julia’s mind wrestled with the facts Helen presented her. “This is the man I met last night on the cliff path.”

Helen frowned. “You couldn’t have met this man.”

Julia looked up at the portrait. He seemed to be smiling right at her, and the smile conjured a disturbing sense of familiarity. “But I did. I know it’s him.”

“Julia, this man, Lord Dunmore, died in June of 1816.”



## Chapter Three

*Coincidence is God's way  
of performing a miracle anonymously.  
—Anonymous*

Beneath the soft white cotton of her sweater, chills scattered across Julia's arms. "The man I met last night looks exactly like the man in this portrait."

Helen looked surprised, her blue eyes growing wide behind her lenses. "Exactly?"

Julia rubbed her arms, trying to quell the goose bumps rising there. "Exactly."

Louise joined them in front of the portrait. Since she insisted she only needed glasses for reading, she wore her gold-rimmed glasses on a chain around her neck. She slipped them on to take a look at the portrait, and then let them drop once more, where they settled against the lavender silk blouse peeking out from her white cardigan. "And he called himself Gavin MacKinnon?"

"Yes."

Louise squinted up at the portrait. "He must be a descendant."

Julia drew in a breath forcing air into her constricted lungs. Could genes combine to produce two identical men who lived centuries apart? Yet what other answer could there be? "I suppose he must be."

"Not according to the history I've been able to piece together about the family."

"You don't think he is a descendant?" Julia asked.

"Gavin was the last of the MacKinnon earls. His older brother Aidan was killed at the age of nineteen, in a fall from the bell tower at Oxford. His younger brother Patrick was killed in an accident in London in March 1816, the same year Gavin died. Gavin's son died from a fall from the cliffs a few days after Gavin's death. His sister Alison inherited Dunmore. By Scottish tradition she gave the title to her husband, an Englishman by the name of..." Helen hesitated a moment, tapping her lower lip with the pad of her forefinger. "Talbot. Sir Neville Talbot. I should remember him, he is the reason we are at Dunmore today. According to Mary's journal Alison's marriage to Talbot was a disaster. Apparently Talbot was somewhat abusive. Alison never had children."

"Gavin truly was the last MacKinnon earl," Julia said.

"It's very sad." Helen looked up at the portrait. "The bloodline died with this man."

"At least the legitimate line of the family." Louise fiddled with the chain of her glasses. "I suspect Gavin MacKinnon was quite popular with the ladies."

Julia thought of how the man she had met could set her pulse racing with a glance. The man looking down at her from his perch above the mantel had that same devilish glint in his dark eyes. "He would be."

"The Gavin MacKinnon you met is more than likely a descendant from one of this man's liaisons," Louise said, warming to her solution of the mystery. "One of his mistresses must have decided to use the MacKinnon name."

Julia didn't appreciate coincidences. And she wasn't at all certain she trusted this handsome stranger who called himself Gavin MacKinnon. "I wonder why this man is lurking about Dunmore."

"You sound as though you think he has some nefarious reason for being here," Helen said.

Julia shifted on her feet, uncomfortable with her own suspicions. "I don't suppose there is any way he could lay claim to Dunmore?"

Helen shook her head. "The property wasn't entailed properly. My father's great-great-great-grandfather won Dunmore Castle and the grounds in a card game in 1817 from Talbot. I'm certain all of the proper papers were transferred at the time. I believe Talbot died soon afterward. As I recall, he jumped from the cliffs, a suicide. From what I have learned of the man, it was a proper ending. According to Mary's journals, he was a terrible husband to Alison. He married her for her beauty and then proceeded to try his best to change everything about her. Apparently he was constantly berating her for the smallest things."

Julia shivered deep inside. She had almost fallen into that same trap. Although for her, divorce would have been an option. Alison would not have had that safeguard.

"Mary said Talbot carried a horrible darkness within him, a darkness no one saw before the marriage. It was not a happy union. Finally Mary took Alison and went to live with her sister, Lady Shauna Holdsworth, while Talbot remained at Dunmore."

"It sounds horrible." Julia tried not to think of her own near disaster in matrimony. "It's a shame they didn't realize what type of man he was before she married him."

Helen nodded. "After Talbot died, Alison and Mary spent the remainder of their lives with Shauna. Alison never remarried."

"Perhaps it's curiosity that's brought Mr. MacKinnon here," Louise said. "If he is a descendant, he probably knows about the earl."



"I hope he is a descendant." Helen studied the portrait for several moments before she continued. "I've always thought of this man as the 'tragic earl.' I have never been able to look at this portrait without thinking it a shame for such a man to die so young. It would be nice to think one of his direct descendants lives today."

"He was a fine figure of a man." Louise smiled at Julia, a glint of speculation in her blue eyes. "I can see why the young man you met last night made an impression."

An impression that had her anxious to hike around the countryside, searching for him. "I suspect he makes an impression on most women he meets."

Helen kept her gaze on the portrait as she spoke. "So much promise. And it all came to an end when he was just twenty-six. Well before his time."

Julia glanced up at the portrait, wondering about the man who had lived and died so many years ago. She couldn't prevent a pang of regret for a life lost so young. "How did he die?"

"An accident. It happened here at Dunmore."

"This is the Ghost of Dunmore?" Louise asked.

Helen nodded. "Yes. The last MacKinnon. Most people believe he is the one haunting the castle."

"Well, if you must have a ghost haunting your home, at least he is very easy on the eyes." Louise tilted her head, and grinned up at the portrait. "I might not mind meeting him after all."

"The whole idea of a ghost is so very sad," Julia said. "A spirit roaming the earth, lost, lonely."

"Tragic." Helen handed Julia the book she had been holding. "This is one of his mother's journals. I was able to track down all of her journals and a great deal more about the family. The other journals are here in the cabinet by the desk. You are welcome to read all of them. Her journals have helped me enormously in piecing together the history of the castle and the MacKinnon family. I thought she might give you an idea for a novel."

Julia smoothed her fingertip over the gold lettering tooled on brown leather. "M.C. MacKinnon."

"Mary Catherine."

A chance to touch the life of a woman who had lived in the early nineteenth century. The prospect excited her as it could only excite someone who found history fascinating. "Are you certain you don't mind me reading this? It's very old."

"It's in very good condition. And I trust you will handle it with care."

"I will."

"The journals provide great detail into their lives and deaths. Fortunately, Lady Shauna's family kept everything. I also have bundles of letters you can read, Mary's and her daughter's. A few from other members of the family, including the earl. The correspondence really helps reveal their lives. Alison was quite a good artist. Several of her paintings still hang throughout the castle. I have several of her sketches framed in the long gallery. The sketches help bring the people she knew to life. Some of the sketches are of people in the correspondence. So you can look at their letters and then see Alison's rendition of them." Helen patted Julia's arm. "I'm certain you will find inspiration here."

Julia glanced up at the portrait of the "tragic earl." There was no doubt she could find inspiration at Dunmore. Could she also find the living image of this man? She was more than a little curious about the Gavin MacKinnon she had met last night. She only hoped she would have a chance to delve a little deeper into his story. Still, she wasn't going to conduct a search for the man. He knew where she was staying. If he wanted to see her, he could come to her. For now, she contented herself with glimpsing life in a different time.

Julia had always loved the Regency period. All of the novels she had written were set during the Regency. She felt comfortable with that time period, as though she knew it intimately, not just through research.

While Louise and Helen spent time together, Julia spent hours in the past. As she read Mary's journals, she absorbed all the details Mary had preserved. The notes of day to day life of a Countess living in that fascinating time of manners and social dictates fascinated her, but the entries concerning the family intrigued her the most.

In an early journal she learned of Aidan's death. The eldest son had been cursed with an adventurous spirit that had led to his death. A prank had gone horribly wrong. Aidan had fallen from a bell tower in Oxford. Handsome, charming, adept at every sport he had ever tried, always quick with a smile; his death had devastated the entire family, no one more than his brother Gavin. Although Gavin was only sixteen, they had both been at Oxford at the time of his brother's death. Mary knew Gavin had never wanted the title. He had always preferred to stay hidden in the background, while his brother took center stage. Two years after Aidan's death, Gavin headed to London for his first Season, and plunged straight into disaster.

Julia closed Mary MacKinnon's journal, her chest heavy with a certain sadness. She had spent the morning and afternoon with Mary's journal, stopping only long enough for lunch before delving back into the past. The journal had shed light on Gavin's disastrous marriage and the woman who had married him for wealth and a title.

She looked at the portrait hanging above the mantel. Gavin gazed at her, a devilish glint in his eyes, as though he dared her to flirt with him. He should have been wearing a sign: LADIES, PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK. The portrait had been painted the year he died.

Without warning, a wave of familiarity swept over her, dragging her into a different time. The room dimmed, candles flickered in place of electric lights. It was as if she had been here before, staring at this portrait, a long time

ago, in a different time, a different life. A horrible sense of loss shrouded her, as though she had lived through the loss of this man, and that loss ached deep inside of her. *Eliza dear, I do wish you and my son had met again.* The whisper swept across her memory, scattering chills across her skin, a memory she had never made. A thought flickered to life inside of her, a thought she could not possibly have owned: *Too late. I'm too late.*

Julia was alone in the room, alone with Mary's words and Gavin's portrait. Alone with memories she had never made. She left Mary's journal on the polished top of the claw footed mahogany desk and crossed the room, drawn to the portrait of the seventh earl. The artist had captured a spark of vitality in oils. Confidence glowed in this man. He was a man who accepted any challenge life threw at him. A man who deserved better than a treacherous wife. A man who had died far too young.

"Why do I feel I lost you?" she whispered. She knew the pain of losing loved ones. She understood the terrible sorrow Mary must have felt when she lost her sons. She didn't understand her own reaction to a man who had died so long ago, this raw pain of loss and regret.

"You look sad, lass."

Julia sucked in her breath. For one fleeting moment she thought the portrait had spoken to her. Then she saw someone out of the corner of her eye. She pivoted and found Gavin MacKinnon standing near the desk. Excitement slammed through her, shaking her limbs.

Images from a dream swirled inside of her, like leaves caught in a silent whirlwind. She could almost feel his arms around her, his lips pressed against her neck, his breath a warm caress, his hands sliding upward over her... She trembled and tried to block the images. This wasn't good. Not good at all. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled, not just with his lips, but with his incredible eyes. "I came to see you. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I didn't hear you come in." She glanced at the door leading to the hall. It was closed. It was also on the opposite side of the room. "You didn't come in that way."

"No. I was walking through the gardens when I saw you in here."

"You just came in? Without even knocking?"

"The door was open."

"Do you often barge into homes?"

"I didn't barge. I walked through the open doors." He sat on the edge of the desk, as though he owned the place.

She glanced up at the portrait, then at the man sitting a few feet away. She hadn't imagined the resemblance. The two men were cast from an identical mold. "You just decided to stop by this afternoon. To see me?"

He lifted his brows, his expression revealing his surprise at the suspicion she hadn't kept from her voice. "I had to see you again."

He wanted to see her again. The sudden surge of her blood made her light headed, as though she had been plucked from sea level and deposited on the peak of Everest. She drew in her breath, trying to quell her all too feminine response to this compelling male. As much as she would like to believe he was here because of her, she couldn't dismiss her suspicions concerning this particular coincidence. "I wonder if you might not have another reason for coming to Dunmore."

He was dressed much as he had been the day before, although today he wore a dark green riding coat over a white shirt that he had left open at the neck. Buff-colored breeches molded his long legs and were tucked into close-fitting shiny black boots just below his knees. Once again she was struck with the restrained power this man exuded. "And why do you suppose I'm here?"

"I'm not sure." She looked up at the portrait then at the man sitting on the edge of the desk. They were identical, right down to the glint of mischief in their dark eyes and the dimple in their chins. Even the clothes were a similar style. Too much of a coincidence. "Did you know the first owners of Dunmore were named MacKinnon?"

"Aye. I'm aware of the history of Dunmore Castle." He lowered his gaze to the journal on the desk. A muscle flickered in his cheek as he ran his fingertip over the gold lettering on the journal. "Are you reading Mary MacKinnon's journals?"

"Yes." For some reason she suddenly felt like an intruder, with no right at all to read the thoughts of a woman who had died in a different century. She felt a strange need to justify the intrusion into Mary MacKinnon's privacy. "Helen thought I would enjoy them. I love history."

He looked up from the journal, his face an unreadable mask. "And so you are taking a look into her life?"

"Yes, I am." She frowned, a thought striking her. "How did you know that was one of Mary MacKinnon's journals?"

He shrugged, dark green wool stretching over the breadth of his shoulders. "It looks like a journal and it has her name on it."

"It has initials on it. You knew the *M* stood for Mary." Julia suspected he had done a great deal of research into the MacKinnon family. It made her all the more suspicious of this handsome stranger. She cast a pointed look at the portrait. He followed her gaze, glancing up at the portrait of the seventh earl. Still, he refrained from commenting on his resemblance to the man in the painting. She glared at him, daring him to deny the obvious. "Do you have any connection with the family?"

He smiled, a slow curving of sensual lips that made her feel as though he was sliding his arms around her. Her

skin warmed and tingled. "I'm a direct descendant of the first MacKinnon."

"And you had no other reason for coming here, except to see me?"

"You are very suspicious." He stood and moved toward her with the lithe grace of a born athlete.

"I prefer to say cautious." She resisted the urge to step back as he drew near. It wasn't for fear of bodily harm. Physical injury would be mild compared to the havoc this man wreaked on her senses.

Gavin paused, so close she could catch the scent of leather and sandalwood drifting from his skin. Memory stirred within her, a memory that seemed to come from a great distance. She felt as though they had stood this way before, in this place, in another time.

His hair was tousled into rich glossy waves that framed his face. The moonlight the night before had not done this man justice. Afternoon light caressed his face, revealing the subtle nuances of his features. Faint lines flared from the corners of his warm brown eyes, lines forged by his easy smile. Dark pinpoints of beard lay beneath the surface of his skin, tempting her to test the texture of his freshly shaven jaw. In her dreams she had kissed that finely chiseled jaw, tasted the heat of his skin beneath her tongue. With her gaze, she traced the full curve of his smile, and resisted the urge to touch that tempting cleft in his chin.

"Tell me, who was the man who destroyed your trust in men?" he asked, his dark voice tinged with the intriguing Scottish lilt.

She had to swallow hard before she could use her voice. "I think it's reasonable to be suspicious."

He studied her face, as though he was making notes for a portrait he would paint. "I understand how difficult it can be to trust when you have been betrayed."

She wanted to lick her dry lips, but all the moisture had evaporated from her mouth. "Are you speaking from experience?"

"Unfortunately, I am." He lifted his hand as if to touch her face. Her skin warmed in anticipation; her pulse quickened. She held her breath, waiting for a touch that didn't come. Instead, he closed his fingers into the palm of his hand. Emotion flickered in his eyes, a glimmer of surprise, as if he had been caught off guard suddenly. He frowned and stepped back from her.

Julia hid her turmoil behind a smile. She wanted this stranger to touch her, and more. She caught herself wanting to feel his arms around her, the brush of his breath against her cheek, the slide of his lips upon hers. She really had to sort through these sensations later, when she had a clear head.

She stepped back, hoping distance would cool the heat flaming her blood. Who was this man? And what was he doing here, besides turning her world upside down? "You look exactly like the tragic earl. And you share the same name. At least you say you share the same name. It just seems too much of a coincidence to think you happened upon Dunmore by accident."

He met her gaze, his black brows lifting over his incredible eyes. "The tragic earl?"

"That's what Helen—Miss Bainbridge—calls the last MacKinnon earl. And it just seems to fit. He was young when he died."

"I know."

She studied him for a moment, hoping her worst thoughts about this man were unfounded. She could find nothing of the villain in those expressive eyes, nothing to suggest he had come to Dunmore for any nefarious reason. Instead she found a dark sadness in his gaze, a reflection of the emotion she felt when she thought of the man looking down at them from the portrait. "You've done research about the family. Is that why you're here? To do research?"

He smiled. "I told you, I came to see you."

She ignored the sudden surge in her pulse. "And you have no interest at all in Dunmore?"

"I'm not here to steal the family silver, if that's what you think."

"Tell me the real reason you are here."

He studied her a moment and she had the impression he was weighing his words carefully. "I have been waiting a very long time for you to come to Dunmore."

She stared at him. "You have?"

"Aye. I need to speak with you, on a matter of grave importance."

*Grave importance.* What could he possibly want to discuss with her? Her mind got sucked into the same whirlwind that had gripped her heart the moment he had stepped into the room. "What is it you want to discuss?"

"Julia!"

He frowned. "Someone is looking for you."

"My grandmother." Still, she couldn't look away from his eyes; she was trapped in the connection with him. It seemed almost tangible, as though someone had wrapped thick bands of silk around them, binding one to the other.

"Julia!" A rattling of the door punctuated Louise's words.

"She seems to want you for something."

"Yes. She does." Julia dragged her gaze from his and turned her head toward the door. "I'm in here, Gram."

"I know, dear." The brass doorknob jiggled. "But the door is locked."

"Locked?" She turned away from Gavin and crossed the room. She gripped the brass handle. It turned in her hand. The heavy door opened on well-oiled hinges, revealing Louise standing in the hall.

"I came to see if you wanted to play cards." Louise smiled. "Why did you lock the door?"

"I didn't. In fact it wasn't locked."

"It wasn't?" Louise jiggled the handle on the hall side of the door. "That's odd. Are you sure it wasn't locked?"

"It takes a key to lock it." Julia smoothed her fingertip over the empty keyhole. "I suppose it just stuck."

"I suppose." Louise stepped into the library and glanced around the room, fiddling with the chain of her glasses.

"I thought I heard you talking to someone."

"I was." Julia smiled in anticipation of introducing Gavin to her grandmother. "I want you to meet someone."

Louise frowned. "Who?"

Gram really needed to wear those glasses all the time. "Mr. MacKinnon."

"Mr. MacKinnon." Louise looked around. "Where is he?"

Julia turned, her gaze raking the space where she had left Gavin. He had vanished.

Louise lifted her glasses and peered through the lenses. "I don't see him, dear."

"He left." Julia hurried across the library and out the French doors. The doors opened onto a stone terrace and a sunken garden beyond. A cool breeze swept across the garden, stirring the silvery green leaves of the white birch growing near the terrace. The soft breeze brushed her face with the scent of flowers from the many colorful beds planted in a geometrical pattern around a lily pond. Woodlands stood on the far edge of the garden. Gavin was nowhere in sight.

Louise joined her at the stone balustrade of the terrace. "I wonder why he ran off so quickly. You didn't make him feel unwelcome, did you?"

"No, I'm certain I didn't."

Louise didn't look convinced. "You were very suspicious of him. Are you sure you didn't chase him away?"

Julia tapped her fingers on the stone balustrade, thinking of the way she had questioned him. "I just asked a few questions."

"Still suspicious about him, I see." Louise slipped on her glasses and glanced around. "After seeing him again, do you still think he looks like the earl?"

Julia leaned back against the thick stone balustrade. "They could be identical twins."

"I would love to meet him. It isn't everyday a man catches your interest. And you are interested; I can tell."

"I just met him."

"Sometimes all it takes is a glance. I married your grandfather two weeks after I met him."

"I don't intend to do anything on impulse."

"Impulse?" Louise released her breath in a sigh. "Julia dear, it usually takes you twenty minutes to decide which side of the bread to butter in the morning."

Julia crinkled her nose. "Are you saying I'm indecisive?"

"Not indecisive. Cautious." Louise removed her glasses and let them fall against her blouse. "You usually take a few weeks to investigate anything before committing yourself. As I recall, it took you two months to decide on the precise car you wanted."

"And your point would be?"

"My point is, sometimes you just have to follow your heart and not your head." Louise hesitated for a moment before she continued. "You have to put the past behind you."

"I have."

Louise twisted the chain of her glasses, setting them spinning. "Not all men are as manipulative and untrustworthy as Nathan Thatcher."

Julia rubbed her arms. "I know. I don't judge all men by Nathan. Not really."

Louise lifted her brows. "I think you do. I think that is the reason you won't allow any man into your life."

"I know absolutely nothing about this man, except that he is a direct descendant of the tragic earl."

"So, the earl did have a mistress or two." Louise tapped the corner of her glasses against her chin. "It doesn't surprise me, not after seeing the portrait. I would suspect that man had a way of putting all manner of naughty thoughts in a woman's head."

The Gavin MacKinnon she knew had the same ability, Julia thought. She stared past the woodlands. The fields she had hiked the night before gradually slid into hills that rolled into the rugged slopes of Ben Cuimhne. Where had Gavin gone?

"Do you want to play cards?" Louise asked.

Julia wanted to remain in the library and read Mary MacKinnon's journals, all of them. Still, she had locked herself away most of the day. "Sure."

Julia followed Louise back into the library. Her grandmother stopped in front of the portrait of the tragic earl and slipped on her glasses. "My goodness, he was a handsome man. Do you think he might inspire your writing?"

"Perhaps."

Louise linked her arm with Julia's as they left the room. "Next time you see him, you must detain him long enough for me to meet him."

"I will try."

After playing several games of cards, Julia left the other women in the drawing room and returned to the library to read more of Mary's journals. It was ridiculous really, to be so infatuated with the life of a man who had died in 1816, but for some reason she couldn't get enough information about Gavin MacKinnon. She read all of the journal entries, the day to day trivia, details of dresses ordered, and parties given. She carefully perused the correspondence, lingering on the letters Mary had saved from her wandering son.

Although Mary had often hoped for Gavin's return, he chose to spend years away from home. On each of his visits home, Mary had tried to convince him to stay, but each time Gavin had chosen to once again sail far away from Scotland. It was another tragedy that finally brought him home to Dunmore for good. In the early spring of 1814, Duncan MacKinnon became ill, a lingering illness that slowly wasted his strength. Although they had sent word to Gavin, it took months for the message to reach him and for him to return home. Gavin arrived in time to spend the last few weeks with his father before Duncan's death on October 4, 1814.

Julia stared up at the portrait above the mantle, where the devilish-looking earl smiled down at her, but another man filled her thoughts. There was something about Gavin MacKinnon, something more intriguing than a handsome face and a splendid body. For some reason he seemed so familiar to her—the sound of his voice, the way he smiled. A familiarity that slipped around her and drew her toward him. Still, as much as she wanted to draw him into her arms, she couldn't shake the feeling he was hiding something. What did he want of her? How could he possibly have been waiting for her to come to Dunmore? Each time she thought of him—and she thought of him more than she should—she had more questions. “Who are you, Gavin MacKinnon? And what do you want from me?”



## Chapter Four

*Fool! All that is, at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall;  
Earth changes,  
but thy soul and  
God stand sure;  
What entered into thee,  
That was, is, and shall be:  
Time's wheel runs back or stops;  
Potter and clay endure.  
—Robert Browning*

Julia sat on a wing back chair in the library, devouring every word of Mary's journal. Although the night before she had read until after midnight, this morning she had plunged back into the journals right after breakfast. With each page came a revelation, each word a stroke of Mary's brush, shaping a portrait in words of her son, Gavin. Somehow as Julia learned more about the man who had lived and died so long ago, she felt closer to the man she had met a short while ago.

Julia frowned at the neatly penned words. Mary was filled with such hope, a mother's wish for happiness for the son she adored. She had been so unsuspecting, so certain Gavin would live a long and happy life. But then, tragedy usually hit hard and fast, like a drunken driver crossing the median.

She stood and rolled her neck, easing the stiffness of hours spent reading. She glanced at the portrait of Gavin. Had he met that one special woman before he died? Had he fallen in love with her? Had she chased away all the ugliness of his marriage to Lavinia? Had they lost it all just as they were discovering love? The journals were triggering all manner of questions, the kind she needed to answer in the book she intended to write.

"Julia, come take a walk," Louise called from the doorway. "Helen promises to show us something special this morning."

"I'll grab a jacket."

After donning a blue jacket, Julia joined Helen and Louise in a walk through the gardens. The sun had hidden behind gray clouds this morning, and it looked as though it might not make an appearance the entire day. A damp wind swept in from the ocean, chilling her through the jacket and the red cotton sweater beneath. She followed Helen and Louise through the gardens, walking a gravel path that led to an unfinished wing of the castle.

They passed through an arched gate set in a stone wall and entered a large walled garden. The scent of roses infused the salty air, brushing her face. Julia froze, memories crashing through her. She glanced around. Ivy clung to the stone walls that shielded the gardens from the fierce ocean winds. Hundreds of old-fashioned roses grew in a star-shaped pattern around a central fountain.

She brushed her fingertips over the damp petals of a garnet-colored rose. Memory stirred within her, bringing with it a dull ache. *I'm too late*. Too late for what? The memory eluded her. Only the pain remained; the horrible longing that came with terrible loss. Her heart pounded. Her skin tingled. She had been here before. Yet she knew she had never set foot in this garden until now.

"Julia." Louise touched her arm. "Are you all right? You're very pale suddenly."

Julia looked into her grandmother's concerned blue eyes. "I just had the oddest feeling."

Louise frowned. "What was it?"

"I felt as though I had been here before." Julia swallowed hard, trying to understand the poignant longing streaming through her. "It's uncanny."

"Is something wrong?" Helen asked.

"No, I'm fine. I just..." Julia shivered. "I have the strangest feeling about this garden. A sadness that I can't explain. It's as though I was here before, and something dreadful happened. Isn't it strange?"

Helen considered this a moment. "There are those who would say *déjà vu* is simply a product of chemicals in the brain. Of course, there are others who believe the feeling comes when we have crossed a path we have walked once before, in a different life."

"A different life?" Julia rubbed her hands over her arms, trying to warm her suddenly chilled skin through the layers of cloth. "I'm sure it is nothing more than my overactive imagination."

"Perhaps." Helen smiled as though she had a different opinion.

*Past lives?* Julia drew in a deep breath as she followed Helen and Louise along the garden walk. Was it possible? She wasn't at all comfortable with that possibility. Still, there was something about Dunmore, something that had crept into her imagination, twisting fantasy and reality until she had trouble telling one from the other. It

must be the book she intended to write. The characters were already coming to life in her mind; that must be the reason for these odd sensations. Or it could be the journals. She had spent far too much time immersed in tales from that long ago time.

The path led to a stone terrace that stretched in a wide arc from the base of a tall stone tower. It was a magical looking place, designed by someone with romance in his heart.

Helen paused on the terrace. “The tragic earl had a passion for building. He was the inspiration behind the west wing of the castle, when he was just sixteen. The long, sweeping East wing, which culminates in this glorious tower, was his last project. According to his mother’s journals, he sent ideas for the project to his father while he was abroad. He continued the work after he returned to Dunmore and inherited the title from his father. You can really see an Italian influence in the design.”

Julia shivered at the words. “Gavin MacKinnon designed this wing?”

“Yes. Isn’t it wonderful?” Helen turned her gaze toward the double doors leading into the tower. At least they would have opened to the tower, if they had not been filled with brick. “It has a fairy tale quality.”

As far as Julia could see, there was no longer any way to enter the tower from the garden, unless you broke a window. She peered through one of the long diamond-paned windows, a chill creeping up her spine. A scaffold stood along one side of the huge circular room. Wall panels lay stacked on the floor. Buckets and brushes were scattered about. It looked as though the workmen had walked away from the room last night and planned to return this morning. “It’s eerie,” she whispered, her breath condensing on the glass.

“It’s where Gavin MacKinnon died,” Helen said softly. “Afterwards, Mary had all the doors leading to the tower bricked closed. No one has ever changed it. The tower is as it was the last day he lived. Mary meant it to stand as a monument to Gavin. According to her journal, the garden had been barren at the time of his death. She filled the garden with rose bushes after he died. The garden today is much as it would have been during Mary’s time. It was part of her tribute to her son.”

“I understand how she must have felt.” Louise said, her voice barely rising above the distant sound of waves crashing against the rocks on the shore below. “We aren’t meant to live longer than our children.”

Julia could see the pain Gram normally kept hidden, the open wounds that would never truly heal. And once again she felt the sting of guilt. If only she could change the past, alter the decisions that had led to so much tragedy. Yet that wasn’t possible. The past could not be changed. One could only learn to live with what had come to pass.

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The tall case clock in the entry hall stirred then sounded the last hour of the day. Julia closed Mary MacKinnon’s last journal and glanced at the laptop sitting open on the emerald desk pad atop the big claw-footed desk in the library.

*Find a different ending for the tragic earl.* Gavin MacKinnon should meet the love of his life. They should live the rest of their lives together. That’s the way it should have been.

At least in books, she could make things work out the way they ought. Her chest felt tight. She had spent the day reading personal letters of the MacKinnon family, and all of Mary MacKinnon’s journals. Although the rest of the entries were interesting, Julia had consumed every word about Gavin. There was no way around the truth: the man fascinated her.

Mary’s words had painted a portrait of the man more vibrant than the one in oils hanging above the mantel. Julia felt as though she knew Gavin, knew his triumphs, his struggles, his joys, and his sorrows. He had lived a bold life that had ended far too soon. A man who had died before ever claiming his one true love. Had that woman been Elizabeth Fitzgerald? For some reason Julia couldn’t explain, she felt certain Eliza and Gavin had been meant for one another. Instead, Eliza had chosen to live her life as a spinster after Gavin died. Mary always believed Eliza had never recovered from Gavin’s death. She supposed in that time when the world was smaller, Eliza had never met another man who had touched her heart. Julia knew it was not uncommon to remain unmarried, but it seemed so horribly sad.

According to Mary’s journal, Elizabeth was to have come to Dunmore for the Season, but her trip had been delayed for a family matter. She arrived after Gavin MacKinnon’s death. All the hope Mary had held for her son had been buried by the time Elizabeth had arrived at Dunmore. *Too late.* The words echoed in her mind, a distant memory bathed in a dark sense of loss. Julia couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if Elizabeth had arrived earlier. Would the accident have happened? Would she and Lord Dunmore have married? The decisions we make every day sway the course of our lives. She knew that far too well.

The entries in the journals from 1816 had been sporadic, the year of so many tragedies. First her youngest son had died in a carriage accident in London in March, then Gavin in the tower in June, her grandson in a fall from the cliffs a few days later. Odd, so many accidents in so little time. Were they all accidents? Perhaps it was her overactive imagination, but Julia wondered if something else might have been at work aside from fate.

Julia smoothed her fingertip over the letters raised upon the leather cover. Thanks to this woman’s words, Julia had met a man from another time. A fascinating, all too tragic man. Julia had hoped to find inspiration for a novel at Dunmore; she had found it in Gavin MacKinnon. Perhaps this time she would even be happy with the result.

“You are smiling as though you have a secret to tell.”

Julia jumped, startled at the sound of that deep Scottish lilt. She swiveled the big leather chair and found the



present-day Gavin MacKinnon standing a few feet away, smiling at her. Her heart crashed into the wall of her chest.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

Julia stood, appalled to find her legs unsteady. She had hoped to see him again. She had just never expected to see him here, at this time of night. “You wanted to see me, so you just decided to break into the house? At midnight?”

“I didn’t break into the house, Julia.” He approached her, his stride slow and sure, filled with the athletic grace and assurance that radiated from him along with sheer masculine power. He sat on the edge of the desk, at an angle, so that his left foot dangled just above the carpet. He was so close; she could catch a subtle fragrance of sandalwood and the salty scent of the mist clinging to his clothes. “I saw the light in the library and came to see you.”

She should be angry, or frightened by the boldness of this man. Yet, she couldn’t dredge either of those emotions from the turmoil washing through her. It seemed so natural for him to stroll into this room and sit here. “How did you know I was in here? It could have been Helen or anyone.”

“I had a feeling it was you.” He rested his hand on his thigh, drawing her attention there. It was a large hand, well formed, his fingers long and tapered, his sun-darkened skin a sharp contrast to the buff-colored riding breeches he wore. She tried not to think of that hand stroking her skin, as he had in her dreams, but she couldn’t quite manage to pry the image from her mind.

“And what’s this?”

She frowned, confused by his question. “What?”

“This strange little box.”

Strange little box? “My laptop.”

His black brows lifted. “Laptop?”

“Haven’t you ever seen one before?”

“No, I cannot say I have.” He studied the small computer for a moment. “It captures the words you put into it?”

How could he manage to live in today’s world and not ever have seen a laptop? “Yes.”

“You’re making notes.” He turned his head and grinned at her. “Is it for a book you’re writing?”

She stared at him, feeling exposed, as though he had discovered all of her darkest secrets. “How did you know?”

“A good guess.” He glanced down at the screen. “You’re going to write about the last MacKinnon earl?”

“Perhaps. He led an interesting life.” She only hoped she could do the tragic earl justice. Too many times she felt inadequate in putting her thoughts on paper. Perhaps her lack of confidence stemmed from teaching the great works of fiction to the freshmen at Chamberlain. “Of course, the ending would have to be changed. The hero should not be killed in the prime of his life.”

“Aye. The ending should be changed.”

He lowered his gaze as he spoke, hiding his expression. She caught a note of sadness in his voice, a sorrow in him that couldn’t be explained by a distant connection to a man who had died in a different century. It only added to the mystery of this man. “Well, it’s pretty clear you don’t work in an office. Not if you have never seen a laptop.”

“No.” He looked up and smiled at her. Yet a trace of sadness remained in the dark depths of his eyes. “I was never expected to do anything except take care of my family’s estates. But, I did go abroad for a few years. I got involved in several enterprises that proved to be very profitable. Still, it wasn’t what I truly wished to do.”

“What did you truly want to do?”

“I wanted to design buildings and watch them take shape. But, my family thought it was beneath me to go into such an enterprise. So I kept myself amused by making improvements to my family estate.”

Exactly what the tragic earl had done. Her heart hammered against her ribs. That was one too many in a long line of coincidences. “What game are you playing?”

He lifted his black brows. “Game?”

“Don’t play innocent with me; you don’t have the face for it.” She snatched Mary MacKinnon’s journal from the desk and held it against her chest, like a shield. “What do you hope to gain by coming here and pretending to have the same name, the same background, as the last MacKinnon earl?”

He held her gaze a long moment before he spoke. “I’m not playing a game, Julia.”

The soft lilt of his dark voice rippled through her. She stared straight into his eyes, expecting to see some sign of his lie, hoping against logic to see only the truth. “You can’t really expect me to believe you could have so many things in common with a man who died in 1816?”

He curled his hand into a fist on his thigh. “There is a reason for it. Still, I wonder if you are ready to hear it.”

Julia squeezed the journal against her chest, a tendril of fear curling upward along her spine. Not the fear that came from a threat to her person, but the kind that came with disillusion. In two days this man had managed to find his way into a secret little place deep inside of her, where she hid her hopes and dreams. “Tell me what you are doing here, and why you have so much in common with a dead man.”

He glanced down at the tip of his boot for a long moment before he spoke. “I think you should sit down, Julia.”

Her stomach tightened at his words. They were the type of words that preceded something awful. She remained standing, clenching the book in a desperate hope of retaining her composure. “Tell me.”

He looked at her, his gaze as solemn as a judge about to pass judgment. "I am Gavin Duncan Campbell MacKinnon, seventh Earl of Dunmore."

She stared at him, his words tapping at her brain, the sense of them utterly lost. "You are the seventh Earl of Dunmore?"

"Aye."

She wasn't certain what she had expected to hear, but she knew it wasn't this. "You are saying you are a man who died in 1816?"

A muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched. "Aye."

She stared at him while thoughts swirled through her brain. "Do you honestly think I will believe you are a dead man?"

"It's the truth. I came back to Dunmore because I have been given the chance for a miracle. But, I cannot make it happen without you."

She shook her head, trying to clear away the fog. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but I am not about to..."

"It isn't a game. I wish it were."

It figured. For the first time in her life she had actually thought she had met the man of her dreams and he was either a con man or a certifiable lunatic.

He leaned forward, reaching out as though he intended to take her hand. Instead he clenched his fingers against his palm and lowered his fist to his thigh. "I know this is difficult to believe, but I am the Earl of Dunmore."

She stared into his eyes, seeing the conviction of his words burning in the dark depths. "You really believe you are a dead man."

"I realize this isn't easy to explain or to accept, but it is the truth."

She closed her eyes, shutting out the compelling image he made sitting before her. "You need help."

"Aye. I need your help."

"No." She laid the journal on the desk. "I mean you need therapy. You aren't well. It isn't healthy to go running around pretending to be dead."

"I'm not ill. And I'm not insane. I'm—for lack of a better term—a ghost."

"There, you see. You're just proving my point."

"Julia, I can prove to you who and what I am."

She smiled at him, feeling sad and somehow cheated. Would therapy help him? Was she insane to even think of starting a romantic relationship with a man who thought he was dead? She suddenly had a horrible image of herself sitting with the gorgeous lunatic in a room where the wall coverings were done in early mattress. "Unfortunately, you already have."

"You're still up," Louise said.

Julia jumped at the sound of her grandmother's voice. Louise stood in the doorway, smiling at her. "Gram. You startled me."

"You're certainly jumpy tonight." Louise walked toward her, the blue satin of her robe flapping around her legs. She held a plate full of cookies in one hand and a glass of milk in the other. She glanced around the room squinting. "I thought I heard you talking to someone."

Julia looked at Gavin, who remained sitting on the desk, then looked back at her grandmother. Gram wasn't wearing her glasses. "Mr. MacKinnon stopped by to see me."

Louise paused beside Julia's chair. "At this time of night?"

Julia smiled at Gavin, her chest so constricted it hurt to breathe. "Midnight is his favorite time of day."

Gavin smiled, a glint of mischief entering his eyes. It made her wonder what outrageous thing he would say next.

Louise glanced at the desk, then back at Julia, a curious expression on her face. "He seems to have a habit of disappearing before I get a chance to meet him."

Julia frowned at Gavin. He was smiling at her in a way that released a trickle of fear into her blood. He was sitting no more than a foot away from Gram. Even without her glasses, she should have seen him. "Gram, can you see my laptop?"

Louise turned and glanced down at the small computer. "It's right there. Did you forget where you put it?"

"No." Julia's throat tightened. "You don't notice anything strange about the desk?"

Louise turned and examined the desk, staring straight through Gavin. She frowned when she looked at Julia. "Nothing that I can see. What is it?"

Julia stared at Louise, frost whispering across her skin. Why couldn't Gram see MacKinnon? Yet the answer was there, sitting right before her. There were simply too many coincidences, too much that made sense, if she was only willing to accept a completely irrational explanation. *A ghost*. The man of her dreams was a ghost.



## Chapter Five

*No, no, I'm sure,  
My restless spirit never could endure  
To brood so long upon one luxury,  
Unless it did though fearfully, espy  
A hope beyond a shadow of a dream.  
—John Keats*

“Julia?” Louise squinted at her. “All the color has drained from your face. Are you ill?”

Julia swallowed hard before she could use her voice. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m fine. Perfectly fine.” Except she was seeing things, such as the gorgeous ghost sitting behind her grandmother. He winked at her. “I’m just a little tired.”

Louise nodded. “You should go to bed. All of this will still be here when you get up in the morning.”

“Yes. Rest. I need rest. I just need to put a few things away before I go to bed.”

“Do you want some cookies?” Louise asked, offering her the plate of chocolate wafer cookies.

“No, thank you.”

Louise kissed Julia’s cheek, surrounding her with mingled scents of floral perfume and chocolate. “Good night, dear.”

Julia forced her lips into a smile. “Good night, Gram.”

She stared at Gavin as Louise left the room. She listened to Gram’s footsteps growing fainter, until she was certain her grandmother was out of hearing range. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then looked straight at Gavin. “She couldn’t see you.”

“I thought it best if she didn’t see me.”

“I can still see you.”

Gavin smiled. “That’s because I am still here.”

“How?”

He laughed softly, a deep rumble in the quiet room. “My mother was fond of saying there was a great deal more to the world than what we could see and touch. I don’t think I ever really appreciated those sentiments until after I died.”

She leaned forward and poked his shoulder. He felt solid and warm. “I can feel you.”

He looked surprised. “That’s new.”

“You can’t be a ghost.”

“I can.”

“You aren’t. You are solid. Ghosts aren’t solid.”

“I cannot explain that.”

“Ghosts don’t exist. This is a trick.”

“I suppose you need proof.”

“How did you fool my grandmother into...”

Gavin blinked out of existence, as though he was a light and someone had just turned off the electricity. One moment he was there, the next he was gone. A heartbeat later he popped back into view.

He winked at her. “Proof enough?”

“How did you do that?”

“I told you.”

“You can’t be a ghost.”

“You really are a wee bit stubborn.” He tilted his head and studied her a moment. “I could walk through a wall if you like, but I would rather not.”

Julia felt the blood draining from her limbs. “Walk through a wall?”

He cringed. “Unpleasant sensation. How about this?”

Julia stared as he slowly dissolved until nothing remained but his head. He smiled at her like the Cheshire Cat. The truth of the situation hit her like a clenched fist to the solar plexus. “Good God.”

He popped back into view. “Julia, you aren’t going to faint, are you?”

“I never faint. I will not faint.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“This can’t really be happening. I’ve made you up; that’s what I’ve done. I’ve always had an overactive imagination.” She stared straight into his beautiful dark eyes and willed her words to be true. “You are a figment of

my imagination.”

He leaned forward and smiled. “Do you really believe that?”

She closed her eyes, wondering which was worse. Either she was having a conversation with a man who didn't exist, or she was talking to a ghost. A ghost! “Good God.”

“Take a deep breath lass.”

Julia tried, but her throat tightened around each attempt.

“Julia, you have to breathe. You are going to faint.”

She would not faint. She never fainted. Still, she couldn't quite convince her paralyzed muscles to draw a breath. Blood pounded in her temples. Pinpoints of light danced against her closed eyelids. He reached for her and she stepped back, away from him, swaying, her legs betraying her balance. In the next instant she sat down, hard, on the floor. She felt as though she had slipped into an icy stream, all the heat draining from her body.

“Julia.” His dark voice brushed against her.

He had such a wonderful voice. He touched her face, a brush of warm fingers. How in the world could a ghost feel warm and solid? The warmth of him slipped beneath her skin and spilled into her blood, spreading through her limbs like a soothing balm. Fear and panic melted under that warmth. The tightness in her muscles relaxed. She dragged air into her lungs like a swimmer who had spent too long below water.

“Julia, open your eyes. Look at me. There is no need to be frightened. I'm not here to harm anyone.”

That was a matter of opinion. She looked at him, stared at his handsome face, and saw in his eyes all that she had ever wanted in a man. “How did you do that...the warmth thing?”

He laughed softly. “If you exist as long as I have, you learn a few things.”

“You're really a ghost?”

He smiled, a slow curving of his lips. Longing filled his eyes and wrapped around her. “You know the truth, lass,” he said, his dark voice colored by a trace of sadness. “Don't be frightened of me. I'll not hurt you.”

He was wrong. With a single confession, he had managed to destroy all the delicate little hopes she had planted in his name. Of course, that confession was the most remarkable she had ever heard. Julia rubbed her damp palm against her knee; the blue denim of her jeans rough against her skin. “Are you sure I'm not dreaming?”

“Julia, I wish it were a dream.” He lowered his eyes, his gaze touching her neck, where the soft cotton of her sweater fell away from her skin. “I wish I could face a brand-new day with all the hope and promise of a mortal man. But any hope I had for my future died a long time ago.”

Only now did she realize how much hope she had placed in him. *Dead*. She pulled herself to her feet and walked to the fireplace. She stared into the lifeless hearth, where streaks of black etched the stones. She had heard of star-crossed lovers before, but this was just ridiculous.

“Julia, I know this is all difficult to accept.”

“Difficult?” She laughed, the sound hollow and far too close to hysterics to suit her. “You have a flair for understatement.”

He moved to her side, bringing with him a scent of sandalwood and mist. “There is something that must be done, and I cannot do it. Not without your help.”

“You need my help? How in the world could I possibly help you?”

“It's difficult to explain.”

“Why doesn't that surprise me?” She rubbed her arms, wanting nothing more than to curl up into a tight ball. “Let's see. You are a ghost who needs my help. If I can manage to grasp that concept, I can take on theoretical physics.”

His expression betrayed his puzzlement. “Theoretical physics?”

She waved her hand. “Never mind. What is it you need from me?”

He rested his arm along the mantel and studied her for a moment, as though taking her measure. “I need you to save my son.”

“Save your son? Brandon?”

“Aye.”

“But, he died a few days after you did. In 1816.”

“Aye. Except he shouldn't have died that day.” He curled his hand into a fist against the smooth mahogany of the mantel. “Neither should I have died as I did. It wasn't my time.”

Regrets crowded her chest, hurting her. She thought of her parents, of John and Diane. She would always mourn them. They too had died long before their time. She looked up into Gavin's beautiful eyes and wondered how long she would mourn what might have been. “Many people die before their time, Gavin. It's a sad fact of life.”

“Aye, it's true. But there are times when mistakes are made, even by a guardian angel.”

“I guess you have met a few?”

“Aye. Most are quite capable.” He lifted his brows. “A few are not.”

“I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at anything.”

“I was granted one chance to alter the past, one chance to make things right. But I cannot do it unless you help me.”

“Me? You mean me specifically, or do you mean anyone who happens to be lucky enough to be able to see you?”

“You. Only you. You are the only one who can save Brandon.” Gavin glanced down at her, and she could see a glimmer of frustration in his eyes. “You are the only one who can help me. I have been waiting for you a very long time.”

His words swam in her head, refusing any attempt at making any sense. “How could you possibly have been waiting for me?”

“I cannot explain it. I don’t know the reason for it. But we are connected, you and I. Our lives entwined in ways beyond my understanding.”

She felt the truth of what he said, knew it for fact, even though it tested everything she thought logical. She had felt the connection with this man the first moment she had glimpsed him in the mist.

“The only thing I know for certain is the fact only you can help me. No one else.”

“I don’t understand how I can help you.”

“You can go back, and save my son.”

“Do you mean actually travel back in time and prevent your son’s death?”

“Exactly.”

“Isn’t it against the laws of physics to change the past?”

Gavin grinned. “I think this chance to change history comes from a higher authority than the laws of physics.”

The sheer beauty of the thought struck her. “You can actually take me back to your time?”

“Aye. We can leave right now.”

She felt she was on an elevator and all the cables had snapped. “You are serious. You want me to go back in time.”

“I have been waiting a long time for you to come to Dunmore. I couldn’t be more serious. You are my one chance to make things right.”

The hope shining in his eyes mocked her every inadequacy. “This must be a mistake.”

He shook his head. “There hasn’t been a mistake. I know you are my only chance for a miracle.”

“I can’t be anyone’s miracle. I can’t go flying back in time. I have responsibilities. Claire. My grandmother. I teach English Lit. I’m not some super hero. I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what to do.”

“Julia, you are the only one who can save Brandon.”

She shook her head. “You must be mistaken.”

He leaned toward her, his expression fierce with determination. “You are my only hope.”

She stepped back. “You stay away from me.”

A muscle in his cheek flickered with the clenching of his jaw. “You have nothing to fear from me. I would never harm you.”

She saw the pain in his eyes, his need. “I’m sorry. I really am, but I am certain there has been a mistake. You must be looking for someone else. Not me.”

“You are the one, Julia. My only hope.”

“I am sorry. I can’t do this.” She turned and ran from the room.

“Julia, come back. We must talk.”

She clenched her teeth and kept running away from him. She couldn’t help him. She didn’t stop running until she reached her bedchamber. The door closed with a soft thump behind her. She turned the key in the lock, and then realized it was foolish. A locked door couldn’t keep a ghost out of her room.

“A ghost.” Tears blurred her vision as she stumbled across the room and sank to the edge of the bed. He was a ghost. As insane as it sounded she couldn’t deny the truth. And he needed her help. “This has to be a mistake.”

Now, if she were a heroine in one of her books, she would take the challenge. She would fly back in time, rescue Gavin and his son, and win her happy ending. But she wasn’t a heroine in a book. She was an English professor with a little girl who needed her. But Gavin had a little boy who needed her also. It was just too fantastic to believe. Except she did believe it. *I can’t think about Gavin. I can’t think of the boy. They both died a long time ago.* Claire was here. Claire needed her.



## Chapter Six

*Cold in the dust this perished  
heart may lie,  
But that which warmed it once  
shall never die!  
That spark unburied  
in its mortal frame,  
With living light, eternal,  
and the same.  
—Thomas Campbell*

The next morning, Julia stood at the open French doors of the green drawing room, watching as Claire presided over a very proper tea party. A table had been placed in the garden beyond the wide stone terrace. White linen ruffled in the breeze, the tablecloth spilling over the edges of the low table. Claire and the three other girls who lived at the castle had become close friends in a space of a few days. They all sat at the child-sized table in the shade of a tall chestnut tree, wearing oversized straw hats that Helen had dragged from storage, sipping lemonade from floral teacups.

Julia would fight anyone who threatened to take her away from Claire, even a ghost with a noble cause. Still, she knew he wouldn't give up easily. He had too much at stake.

She stiffened, sensing the moment Gavin entered the room. Her heart pounded as she felt him drawing near. Without looking, she recognized the instant he paused behind her. As irrational as it might be, she could feel the energy emanating from him; it bathed her back with comforting warmth. She stared at the children, gathering her courage for the encounter to come.

What would the girls think if they knew a ghost resided in the castle? Though Julia wasn't frightened for them. She didn't imagine for a moment that Gavin was dangerous. At least not dangerous to anything except her heart.

"My son was seven when he died."

Regret pressed against her heart at the soft sound of Gavin's dark voice. She turned and faced him. Morning light flowed over his face, burnishing every detail. It was just her luck to run into a ghost who seemed solid and real and so handsome her heart ached. "I am sorry about your son, Gavin. I regret you both died before your time. But there is nothing I can do to help you."

"You are mistaken, Julia." His eyes revealed the determination of a man who would face any challenge life or death presented to him. And she had just become his number-one target. "You are the only one who can set things right."

"You are wrong." Her chest ached, as though his needs were a boulder pressing against her. "Please, just leave me alone."

"I cannot lass. I have been waiting too long for you to come to Dunmore."

"I cannot possibly be the right woman to help you."

"I know you are the one."

"No. I'm not. You need someone more than a little reckless. Not me. That's definitely not me." She marched out of the drawing room, intending to ignore him. If she ignored him, he might eventually lose interest in tormenting her. She kept her chin up, her eyes focused straight ahead, but she could still see the ghost walking beside her down the hall.

She would work on her book, she thought, marching into the library; that was the distraction she needed. She would focus her thoughts on her book, concentrate, forget Gavin was even there. She flipped open her laptop and pressed the power button.

He sat on the edge of the desk, draping a finely muscled thigh near her left hand. All an illusion she assured herself.

"I'm not going away, Julia."

She stared at the screen, trying in vain to ignore the infuriating male sitting so close. *He is a ghost*, she reminded herself. "It will not do any good, Gavin. I told you, I have responsibilities. I can't go anywhere with you."

"Once you save my son, I will bring you back to your niece and your grandmother."

It sounded so easy. "What if I can't save your son? What happens then?"

He smiled. "You will save him."

"How can I be sure you would bring me back to my own time?"

He rested his hand on the fist she held against the polished desktop, his palm warm against her skin. "I give you my word. You will return safely."



“No matter what happens?”

“I promise you.”

She pulled her hand away from his. “I have read your mother’s journals. And there is something I need to know.”

“What?”

“There were so many accidents in such a short time. Were they all accidents? Or did someone murder you and your family?”

He stared at her a long moment before he spoke. “I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“I was in the tower; something struck me from behind, hard enough to kill me. I awoke in...” He hesitated, as though weighing his words before he spoke. “I awoke somewhere else. After a while, and a certain amount of discussion, a judgment was made. I was given a chance to set things right. By then, no one I knew was here. My son was gone. My mother and sister had gone to live with my aunt, Lady Shauna Holdsworth. Strangers were living here.”

She thought of what he must have faced returning here as a spirit. “It must have been horrible.”

He glanced away from her. “It has been difficult. But, I had hope. I still do.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

“Julia.” He clenched his fist on his thigh. “I have to believe you were chosen because you can do this.”

“You see that is the problem. I can’t believe I’m the one who would be chosen to do this. I think you have me mistaken with someone else. I’m sure she will come to you, in time. And you have to admit, time is really not an issue with you.”

He released what sounded like a frustrated sigh. Neat trick for a man who was no longer breathing. “Are you always so stubborn?”

“Look who is talking.” She glanced up at him and immediately wished she hadn’t. He was smiling in a way that made her want to capture that smile beneath her lips; which of course was impossible, because he was a ghost. It wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t fair.

“Julia,” he said softly. “Please, save my son.”

“Please go away. Haunt someone else.”

“Julia?” Louise asked from the doorway. “Is something wrong?”

“Wrong?” She glanced at Gavin, then at Louise. “Nothing is wrong. Do you see anything wrong?”

Louise moved toward her, a puzzled expression on her face. “You were carrying on a conversation with your computer. What did you mean, ‘haunt someone else’?”

“I was just...” *Trying to exorcise a ghost.* Gavin winked at her. Julia balled her hands into fists on her lap. “I was just...going over some dialogue for my book.”

Louise looked content with the explanation. “I’ve never known you to do that before.”

Julia slanted a glance at the ghost, who sat grinning at her. “Gavin MacKinnon is inspiring me.”

“You know, dear, I have a feeling this book could be the one that gets published. You know what they say: fourth time is the charm.”

Gavin leaned toward her. “Julia, I need to talk to you.”

Julia slanted him a look. “Not now.”

Louise smiled. “Well of course not now. Not until after you finish the book.”

Gavin stood, strolled to the fireplace, and rested his arm on the mantle. Julia glared at him. “I’m still not certain there is a story in the life of Gavin MacKinnon.”

Louise gestured with her hand, as if to toss away Julia’s words. “Of course there is. Just look at the man.”

Julia’s heart stumbled. “You can see him.”

“Of course I can see him.” Louise moved to where Gavin was standing. He side-stepped, avoiding a collision. Louise glanced around. “My goodness, there is a draft in here.”

Julia stood, the blood pounding in her temples. “You can see Gavin MacKinnon?”

Louise frowned. “My eyes haven’t gotten that bad.”

Julia tried to swallow, but couldn’t manage to find enough moisture in her mouth. “You can really see him?”

“Julia, what has gotten into you this morning?” Louise glanced up at the portrait. “Of course I can see him.”

“Oh.” Julia’s legs weakened as hope deserted her. “The portrait.”

“What did you think I meant?”

Julia clenched her teeth as Gavin walked toward her. “The portrait. Of course. What else could I mean?”

Gavin leaned toward her. “Julia, I will bring you back to your family.”

“Go away,” Julia whispered.

Louise stared at her. “Go away?”

Julia rubbed her throbbing temples. “Not you, Gram.”

Louise glanced around, as though looking for someone else in the room. “Who do you mean?”

Julia shook her head. “No one.”

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine. Perfectly fine.”

“I’m glad you are both here,” Helen said as she entered the room. A tall, slender young man walked beside her.

“Great,” Julia muttered, drawing a horrified look from her grandmother. She forced a smile. “It’s always great to see you, Helen.”

“Why, thank you, dear.” A momentary look of puzzlement crossed Helen’s features before she turned and smiled up at the young man standing next to her. “I want you to meet someone.”

Helen introduced the gentleman as her attorney, Fraser Montgomerie, who was also the eldest son of her only sister. Helen’s words buzzed in Julia’s ears, barely registering on her poor abused brain. Her attention was riveted on the ghost who stood a few feet away, observing everything, invisible to all except Julia. *Lucky me.*

Apparently Mr. Montgomerie had traveled all the way from London to deliver a few papers for Helen to sign. Though from the speculative gleam in Helen’s eyes and Gram’s satisfied grin, Julia wondered if Mr. Montgomerie had been invited with something else in mind. Matchmaking was not beyond the scope of either lady.

“Aunt Helen tells me you are a writer, Miss Fairfield.”

Julia watched as Gavin strolled over to get a closer look at Fraser Montgomerie. What was he up to?

“Miss Fairfield?”

Julia glanced up at Mr. Montgomerie. He had a quizzical look as he regarded her. She had a feeling he was waiting for something. “Pardon me?”

Fraser frowned, looking uncomfortable. “I understand you are an author?”

“Oh, no. Not really. I write, but I’ve never had anything other than a few papers on the history of British literature published. I actually teach English literature at a small college outside of Chicago.”

Gavin stood beside Fraser, tilting his head as he examined the unsuspecting mortal. “Reminds me of someone I once knew.”

Fraser was a little taller than Gavin, yet his shoulders failed to fill out his brown tweed sport coat the way Gavin’s would have. Still, he was an attractive man, with thick, light brown hair swept back from a wide brow, a slender nose, and a generous mouth. And he had one major advantage over Gavin—Fraser was still breathing.

“I’m sure Dunmore can provide a great many ideas for books, especially if you like gothic romance,” Fraser said. “I remember all the stories about Dunmore from the days when my parents would bring me here as a boy.”

Gavin grinned at her. “Pretty puppy, isn’t he?”

Julia shot him a dark look. “Yes, the history of Dunmore is fascinating. Although I’m not sure I’m really interested in doing a story concerning the last MacKinnon. There is something about the man that irritates me.”

“Really?” Fraser looked surprised. “I have always thought he lived an interesting life.”

Julia smiled. “Of course, there is the question of whether or not he murdered his wife. It puts his character in question.”

Gavin looked at her from beneath his lashes. “That was a low blow.”

Fraser laughed softly. “I should think his possible homicidal tendencies would only make him a more dashing figure.”

Gavin lifted his black brows in mock shock. “I would watch out for this one, Julia. He seems a bit bloodthirsty to me.”

Julia curled her fingers against her palms. She had tolerated all she intended to take from the infuriating ghost. “If you will excuse me, I feel a little chilly. I think I’ll run upstairs and put on a sweater.”

“But you’re wearing a sweater,” Louise said.

“Oh, so I am. But it’s not the one I want.” Julia walked from the room, wondering just how long it would be before someone had her committed.

“I see they still play matchmaking in this century.” Gavin strolled down the hall beside her. “What do you think of Mr. Montgomerie?”

She glared at him. “What I think of anyone or anything is none of your concern.”

“Someone has to look out for you, Julia. I feel it’s...”

“Go away. Leave me alone.”

“I cannot do that.”

She ducked into the drawing room and turned on him. “Stop following me. Stop bothering me. Go away.”

“After you save my son, I promise to stop haunting you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling defensive. “Why am I the only one who can see you?”

He shrugged, broad shoulders lifting the white cotton of his shirt. “I don’t have any reason to allow anyone else to see me. They cannot help me.”

“Are you sure you don’t enjoy driving me crazy?”

He smiled, a grin designed to add an extra beat to any female heart. Her own was already racing too hard to feel the full impact of that smile. “Julia, come back with me. Make things right.”

“Why won’t you listen to me? There has been a mistake. I can’t possibly help you.”

“Julia?”

Julia jumped at the sound of her grandmother’s voice. She turned and found Louise standing in the wide doorway.

Helen and Fraser stood a little behind her in the hall. They were all looking at her as though she had just announced her intention to take a flight to the moon, without benefit of a spacecraft. "I suppose you are all wondering what I was doing?"

"Well yes, dear." Louise moistened her lips. "It did look a little...peculiar."

"There is a simple explanation, really." Julia rubbed her damp palms together, resisting the urge to look at the ghost standing next to her.

Louise smiled, the tension in her face revealing her concern. "Was it dialogue, dear?"

"Dialogue? Yes. Yes it was." Julia snatched the idea like a hungry frog catching a fly. "Dialogue. I...ah...I had some ideas for dialogue. I just thought I would try them out. Here. Now. Before I forgot them."

"Oh, dialogue," Helen said, relief filling her voice. "For your book."

Julia nodded. "Yes. For my book. The book I'm writing about the last MacKinnon. That book."

Louise frowned. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"Yes. Fine. Perfectly fine. I just need to get my sweater. A different sweater." She hurried from the room, trying not to notice the odd look Fraser Montgomery slanted her as she rushed past him. The man must think she was a lunatic. She wasn't entirely certain she wasn't crazy. She rushed up the stairs and ran down the hall to her room. If Gavin MacKinnon weren't already dead, she would strangle him. She closed her bedroom door and locked it.

"Julia, we need to talk," Gavin said, from the other side of the door.

"I've said all I intend to say. Just go away." She threw open a drawer of her dresser. Everyone thought she was insane. Maybe she was. Sane people did not have conversations with ghosts.

"Julia, you cannot ignore me."

Julia pivoted in time to see MacKinnon walk through her closed door. "You just walked through my door."

"Aye." He shivered, a grimace crossing his features. "And it isn't at all pleasant."

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. "I really wish you wouldn't do that sort of thing."

"You locked the door."

"That's because I didn't want you to come in." She glared at him. "I have no doubt everyone downstairs thinks I've lost my mind. Thanks to you."

Gavin shrugged. "You're a writer. You're expected to be eccentric."

"Of all the ghosts in Scotland, you have to be the one haunting Dunmore."

He grinned at her. "You are lucky I'm here to give you advice."

She rolled her eyes toward heaven. "I wonder if I will still think I'm lucky when I'm sitting in a padded cell."

"It's clear your grandmother and Miss Bainbridge are going to try making a match between you and that young pup." He sat on the arm of a wing-back chair near the hearth. "He isn't the man for you."

"Oh?" She tossed her blue sweater on the bed and grabbed a pale yellow one from the drawer. "And what makes you an expert on the right man for me?"

He studied her a long moment, his dark eyes revealing a warmth no proper ghost should conjure. "If I were alive, I would show you the kind of man you need."

"Infuriating?"

He rose and moved toward her. She took a step back, then froze, determined not to cower in front of him. He smiled down at her, in a way that made her think of things beyond her reach, things that might have been. "He hurt you very deeply."

She frowned, wondering how he could read her so well. "Who do you mean?"

"The man who made you suspicious of all men. I don't know what he did, but he hurt you."

"My past is really none of your concern."

"I think it is. I think the man who hurt you is one of the reasons you won't trust me to bring you back here, safe and sound. You can trust me, Julia. I am a man of my word."

She turned away from him, hoping he wouldn't see how close to the mark his words had hit. She leaned her shoulder against the window frame and stared out at the ocean glittering beyond the cliffs. From everything she had read of Gavin MacKinnon he was an honorable man. Honest. Trustworthy. Loyal. "You expect me to be some heroine out of a novel. I'm not. I have a little girl to think of."

"I will return you to her. I promise."

"You have one chance for a miracle. You need someone more capable than I am. If you wait, I'm sure you will find that person."

"There is some reason the Almighty chose you for my miracle. I don't pretend to know why, but I do know you can do it. I know in my soul you can save Brandon."

It was such a seductive thought, a chance to right a horrible wrong. "I wonder."

"What do you wonder?"

She shook her head, trying to shut off the thoughts creeping into her mind. "Let's say you could actually take me back in time, how do you expect me to change the past? Do I just stroll up to the front door of Dunmore and say, 'Hi, I'm here from the future and I've come to rescue you.'? Somehow I don't think that would work."

"Julia, all you need do is make certain Brandon doesn't fall that day. When you prevent his death, I will bring you

home.”

“So you would just take me back to that day on the cliffs. I would save Brandon. And then you would bring me back?”

Gavin hesitated, all of his doubts revealed in his eyes. “I believe that is how it would work.”

“But you aren’t certain?”

“All the details were never made clear to me. All I know is that I need to take you back and you need to save Brandon. You can do this, Julia. I have no doubts about you.”

She studied him, searching his eyes, seeing the honesty of his words. All day long she had kept thinking of one thing: what if one of her parents or her brother or Diane had been given a chance for a miracle? What if their chance depended on someone just like Julia? She would hope that person would help them. There was so much at stake. Could she do it? It was odd, but his faith in her made her more confident than she had in a long time.

“I have this feeling about you.” He paused, looking at her as though he were trying to solve a puzzle that had been plaguing him. “You seem so familiar to me. I feel I met you before, in another time and place.”

She shifted on her feet. “I know the feeling.”

He touched her cheek, a warm caress of his fingers. “We were destined to meet in my lifetime. I know it.”

She looked up into his eyes and once again felt an odd sense of familiarity. They were connected in some way she didn’t understand, in a way that was best not explored. Not now. Not when it was all so hopeless. “In case you didn’t notice, you died a long time before I was born.”

“We are meant to live more than one lifetime.”

“And I suppose you would have fallen madly in love with me had we met in your lifetime.”

“After the disaster of my marriage, I vowed never to become entangled with a woman again. Still, I do not think I could have resisted you.”

He, on the other hand, was the type of man she had avoided since the disaster of Nathan. Yet, even as the thought formed, she recognized the differences in them. Nathan had been a manipulating bully. Gavin was strong willed, but even as a ghost he possessed more gentle warmth than any man she had ever known. “I guess we will never know.”

“Who were you in my lifetime, Julia? I have this feeling you were meant for me.”

Past lives? Love that endured beyond forever. Was it possible? If it was true, her true love had never been born, because he was still wandering around Dunmore. Hopeless. If he were truly the love of her life, her chance for true love was utterly hopeless.

She glared at him, suddenly angry with him for directing her down this twisting, all too depressing path. He was not her true love, she assured herself. She refused to believe this ghost was the missing half of her soul. He was a ghost, for heaven’s sake. They had a clinical name for women who lusted after dead men.

“If I agree, I assume it will take more than a few minutes to do what you want. Gram and Claire would be frantic with worry.”

“The passage of time for you in the past will not be the same as for those you leave behind.”

“I suppose that could be true.”

“It is true.”

She looked straight into his eyes. “If you aren’t telling the truth I could be trapped in the past.”

“I am telling you the truth. You will return to your time. No matter what happens.”

There was no room for deception in his eyes. Could anyone look that sincere and lie? Perhaps some men could lie with ease, but not this man. She turned away from him and walked to the fireplace. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t escape the simple truth: she wanted to believe in him. She wanted to believe in the chance for a miracle. Warmth against her back told her he had moved behind her. “What if something goes wrong? What if I fail?”

“I have never in my life lied to a woman, not for any reason.” He rested his hands on her shoulders, those ghostly hands that felt warm and solid. Her skin simmered beneath his touch. “You will return. No matter what happens. I swear it.”

Only a fool denied the chance for a miracle. She just needed to trust him. Trust was something she had in short supply.

He squeezed her shoulders gently. “You are my only hope, Julia.”

A dark current in his voice brushed against her, a need so deep it could not be denied. She turned to face him. He was looking at her, as though she could send him to heaven or hell. She held the fate of his son in her hands. She knew it. In that instant she knew she could not refuse him. “Gavin, I will do my best. I promise.”

He closed his eyes, his breath escaping on a long sigh. “Thank you.”

“You will bring me back to Claire. Promise me.”

He slipped his arms around her. “I promise, Julia. You will return.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.”

Now that she had made the decision, she couldn’t escape a certain sense of euphoria, as though she had jumped from a ledge and discovered she could fly. “I need a few days to prepare. We have to come up with a story. Some

reason why I just appeared at Dunmore.”

“Don’t worry about anything.”

“But we have to plan everything.”

“It has all been planned by someone more capable than I.”

He was going to take her back. Now. She could see it in his eyes, feel it in the energy building around her. “But, I’m not ready. I don’t know what to say.” She struggled against his embrace, but the energy binding her to him was far too strong. “I have no idea what to do. We should plan this, figure out the details.”

“That is out of our hands. You have to trust in the miracle.”

Julia never took a trip of any kind without careful planning. She could not fly back in time without preparation. She needed the proper clothes and a good story for why she was there. The room wobbled, everything around her blended together, like a watercolor in the rain. She felt as though the floor was dropping away from her. She gripped Gavin’s shoulders, those phantom shoulders that suddenly felt more solid than anything in the world.

“I’m not ready!”

“Trust me, Julia. Trust in the miracle I have been granted.”

His voice sang with the blood pounding in her ears. The world swirled in her vision, all the colors blending into black. She whipped her arms around Gavin’s neck, held on for dear life. They were flying; she was certain of it.

“I promise, lass,” Gavin whispered, his voice swirling through her brain. “You will return. No matter what happens.”

How would she deal with everyone at Dunmore? How could she explain her sudden appearance? What in the world was she going to do when she landed in 1816?

“Believe,” the word flowed through her, a warm silky current cutting through her fear.

Without knowing the reason, she realized the path had already been determined, all the planning taken from her hands. She had only to release her fear, abandon hope for control, and believe. She closed her eyes and surrendered her fate to the promise of a miracle.