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Written by Diana Gabaldon

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DRAGONFLY
IN AMBER



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PROLOGUE

I woke three times in the dark predawn. First in sorrow, then in joy, and at the last, in solitude. The tears of a bone-deep loss woke me slowly, bathing my face like the comforting touch of a damp cloth in soothing hands. I turned my face to the wet pillow and sailed a salty river into the caverns of grief remembered, into the subterranean depths of sleep.

I came awake then in fierce joy, body arched bowl-like in the throes of physical joining, the touch of him fresh on my skin, dying along the paths of my nerves as the ripples of consummation spread from my center. I rebelled consciousness, turning again, seeking the sharp, warm smell of a man's satisfied desire, in the reassuring arms of my lover, sleep.

The third time I woke alone, beyond the touch of love or grief. The sight of the stones was fresh in my mind. A small circle, standing stones on the crest of a steep green hill. The name of the hill is Craigh na Dun; the fairies' hill. Some say the hill is enchanted, others say it is cursed. Both are right. But no one knows the function or the purpose of the stones.

Except me.

PART ONE

Through a Looking Glass, Darkly
INVERNESS, 1968

Mustering the Roll

Roger Wakefield stood in the center of the room, feeling surrounded. He thought the feeling largely justified, insofar as he *was* surrounded: by tables covered with bric-a-brac and mementos, by heavy Victorian-style furniture, replete with antimacassars, plush and afghans, by tiny braided rugs that lay on the polished wood, craftily awaiting an opportunity to skid beneath an unsuspecting foot. Surrounded by twelve rooms of furniture and clothing and papers. And the books – my God, the books!

The study where he stood was lined on three sides by bookshelves, every one crammed past bursting point. Paperback mystery novels lay in bright, tatty piles in front of calf-bound tomes, jammed cheek by jowl with book-club selections, ancient volumes pilfered from extinct libraries, and thousands upon thousands of pamphlets, leaflets, and hand-sewn manuscripts.

A similar situation prevailed in the rest of the house. Books and papers cluttered every horizontal surface, and every closet groaned and squeaked at the seams. His late adoptive father had lived a long, full life, a good ten years past his biblically allotted threescore and ten. And in eighty-odd years, the Reverend Mr. Reginald Wakefield had never thrown anything away.

Roger repressed the urge to run out of the front door, leap into his Morris Minor, and head back to Oxford, abandoning the manse and its contents to the mercy of weather and vandals. Be calm, he told himself, inhaling deeply. You can deal with this. The books are the easy part; nothing more than a matter of sorting through them and then calling someone to come and haul them away. Granted, they'll need a lorry the size of a railcar, but it can be done. Clothes – no problem. Oxfam gets the lot.

He didn't know what Oxfam was going to do with a lot of vested black serge suits, circa 1948, but perhaps the

deserving poor weren't all that picky. He began to breathe a little easier. He had taken a month's leave from the History department at Oxford in order to clear up the Reverend's affairs. Perhaps that would be enough, after all. In his more depressed moments, it had seemed as though the task might take years.

He moved toward one of the tables and picked up a small china dish. It was filled with small metal rectangles; lead 'gaberlunzies,' badges issued to eighteenth-century beggars by parishes as a sort of license. A collection of stoneware bottles stood by the lamp, a ramshorn snuff mull, banded in silver, next to them. Give them to a museum? he thought dubiously. The house was filled with Jacobite artifacts; the Reverend had been an amateur historian, the eighteenth century his favorite hunting ground.

His fingers reached involuntarily to caress the surface of the snuff mull, tracing the black lines of the inscriptions – the names and dates of the Deacons and Treasurers of the Incorporation of Tailors of the Canongate, from Edinburgh, 1726. Perhaps he should keep a few of the Reverend's choicer acquisitions... but then he drew back, shaking his head decidedly. 'Nothing doing, cock,' he said aloud, 'this way lies madness.' Or at least the incipient life of a pack rat. Get started saving things, and he'd end up keeping the lot, living in this monstrosity of a house, surrounded by generations of rubbish. 'Talking to yourself, too,' he muttered.

The thought of generations of rubbish reminded him of the garage, and he sagged a bit at the knees. The Reverend, who was in fact Roger's great uncle, had adopted him at the age of five when his parents had been killed in World War II; his mother in the Blitz, his father out over the dark waters of the Channel. With his usual preservative instincts, the Reverend had kept all of Roger's parents' effects, sealed in crates and cartons in the back of the garage. Roger knew for a fact that no one had opened one of those crates in the past twenty years.

Roger uttered an Old Testament groan at the thought of pawing through his parents' memorabilia. 'Oh, God,' he said aloud. 'Anything but that!'

The remark had not been intended precisely as prayer, but the doorbell pealed as though in answer, making Roger bite his tongue in startlement.

The door of the manse had a tendency to stick in damp weather, which meant that it was stuck most of the time. Roger freed it with a rending screech, to find a woman on the doorstep.

‘Can I help you?’

She was middle height and very pretty. He had an overall impression of fine bones and white linen, topped with a wealth of curly brown hair in a sort of half-tamed chignon. And in the middle of it all, the most extraordinary pair of light eyes, just the color of well-aged sherry.

The eyes swept up from his size-eleven plimsolls to the face a foot above her. The sidelong smile grew wider. ‘I hate to start right off with a cliché,’ she said, ‘but my, how you have grown, young Roger!’

Roger felt himself flushing. The woman laughed and extended a hand. ‘You *are* Roger, aren’t you? My name’s Claire Randall; I was an old friend of the Reverend’s. But I haven’t seen you since you were five years old.’

‘Er, you said you *were* a friend of my father’s? Then, you know already. . . .’

The smile vanished, replaced by a look of regret.

‘Yes, I was awfully sorry to hear about it. Heart, was it?’

‘Um, yes. Very sudden. I’ve only just come up from Oxford to start dealing with . . . everything.’ He waved vaguely, encompassing the Reverend’s death, the house behind him, and all its contents.

‘From what I recall of your father’s library, that little chore ought to last you ’til next Christmas,’ Claire observed.

‘In that case, maybe we shouldn’t be disturbing you,’ said a soft American voice.

‘Oh, I forgot,’ said Claire, half-turning to the girl who had stood out of sight in the corner of the porch. ‘Roger Wakefield -- my daughter, Brianna.’

Brianna Randall stepped forward, a shy smile on her face. Roger stared for a moment, then remembered his manners. He stepped back and swung the door open wide, momentarily wondering just when he had last changed his shirt.

‘Not at all, not at all!’ he said heartily. ‘I was just wanting a break. Won’t you come in?’

He waved the two women down the hall toward the Reverend’s study, noting that as well as being moderately attractive, the daughter was one of the tallest girls he’d ever seen close-to. She had to be easily six feet, he thought, seeing her head even with the top of the hall stand as she passed. He unconsciously straightened himself as he followed, drawing up to his full six feet three. At the last moment, he ducked, to avoid banging his head on the study lintel as he followed the women into the room.

‘I’d meant to come before,’ said Claire, settling herself deeper in the huge wing chair. The fourth wall of the Reverend’s study was equipped with floor-to-ceiling windows, and the sunlight winked off the pearl clip in her light-brown hair. The curls were beginning to escape from their confinement, and she tucked one absently behind an ear as she talked.

‘I’d arranged to come last year, in fact, and then there was an emergency at the hospital in Boston – I’m a doctor,’ she explained, mouth curling a little at the look of surprise Roger hadn’t quite managed to conceal. ‘But I’m sorry that we didn’t; I would have liked so much to see your father again.’

Roger rather wondered why they had come now, knowing the Reverend was dead, but it seemed impolite to ask. Instead, he asked, ‘Enjoying a bit of sightseeing, are you?’

‘Yes, we drove up from London,’ Claire answered. She smiled at her daughter. ‘I wanted Bree to see the country; you wouldn’t think it to hear her talk, but she’s as English as I am, though she’s never lived here.’

‘Really?’ Roger glanced at Brianna. She didn’t really look English, he thought; aside from the height, she had thick red hair, worn loose over her shoulders, and strong, sharp-angled bones in her face, with the nose long and straight – maybe a touch too long.

‘I was born in America,’ Brianna explained, ‘but both Mother and Daddy are – were – English.’

‘Were?’

‘My husband died two years ago,’ Claire explained. ‘You knew him, I think – Frank Randall.’

‘*Frank Randall!* Of course!’ Roger smacked himself on the forehead, and felt his cheeks grow hot at Brianna’s giggle. ‘You’re going to think me a complete fool, but I’ve only just realized who you are.’

The name explained a lot; Frank Randall had been an eminent historian, and a good friend of the Reverend’s; they had exchanged bits of Jacobite arcana for years, though it was at least ten years since Frank Randall had last visited the manse.

‘So – you’ll be visiting the historical sites near Inverness?’ Roger hazarded. ‘Have you been to Culloden yet?’

‘Not yet,’ Brianna answered. ‘We thought we’d go later this week.’ Her answering smile was polite, but nothing more.

‘We’re booked for a trip down Loch Ness this afternoon,’ Claire explained. ‘And perhaps we’ll drive down to Fort William tomorrow, or just poke about in Inverness; the place has grown a lot since I was last here.’

‘When was that?’ Roger wondered whether he ought to volunteer his services as tour guide. He really shouldn’t take the time, but the Randalls had been good friends of the Reverend’s. Besides, a car trip to Fort William in company with two attractive women seemed a much more appealing prospect than cleaning out the garage, which was next on his list.

‘Oh, more than twenty years ago. It’s been a long time.’ There was an odd note in Claire’s voice that made Roger glance at her, but she met his eyes with a smile.

‘Well,’ he ventured, ‘if there’s anything I can do for you, while you’re in the Highlands . . .’

Claire was still smiling, but something in her face changed. He could almost think she had been waiting for an opening. She glanced at Brianna, then back to Roger.

‘Since you mention it,’ she said, her smile broadening.

‘Oh, Mother!’ Brianna said, sitting up in her chair. ‘You don’t want to bother Mr. Wakefield! Look at all he’s got to do!’ She waved a hand at the crowded study, with its overflowing cartons and endless stacks of books.

‘Oh, no bother at all!’ Roger protested. ‘Er . . . what is it?’

Claire shot her daughter a quelling look. ‘I wasn’t planning to knock him on the head and drag him off,’ she said tartly. ‘But he might well know someone who could help. It’s a small historical project,’ she explained to Roger. ‘I need someone who’s fairly well versed in the eighteenth-century Jacobites – Bonnie Prince Charlie and all that lot.’

Roger leaned forward, interested. ‘Jacobites?’ he said. ‘That period’s not one of my specialties, but I do know a bit – hard not to, living so close to Culloden. That’s where the final battle was, you know,’ he explained to Brianna. ‘Where the Bonnie Prince’s lot ran up against the Duke of Cumberland and got slaughtered for their pains.’

‘Right,’ said Claire. ‘And that, in fact, has to do with what I want to find out.’ She reached into her handbag and drew out a folded paper.

Roger opened it and scanned the contents quickly. It was a list of names – maybe thirty, all men. At the top of the sheet was a heading: ‘JACOBITE RISING, 1745 – CULLODEN’

‘Oh, the ’45?’ Roger said. ‘These men fought at Culloden, did they?’

‘They did,’ Claire replied. ‘What I want to find out is – how many of the men on this list survived that battle?’

Roger rubbed his chin as he perused the list. ‘That’s a simple question,’ he said, ‘but the answer might be hard to find. So many of the Highland clansmen who followed Prince Charles were killed on Culloden Field that they weren’t buried individually. They were put into mass graves, with no more than a single stone bearing the clan name as a marker.’

‘I know,’ Claire said. ‘Brianna hasn’t been there, but I have – a long time ago.’ He thought he saw a fleeting shadow in her eyes, though it was quickly hidden as she reached into her handbag. No wonder if there was, he thought. Culloden Field was an affecting place; it brought tears to his own eyes, to look out over that expanse of moorland and remember the gallantry and courage of the Scottish Highlanders who lay slaughtered beneath the grass.

She unfolded several more typed sheets and handed them to him. A long white finger ran down the margin of one

sheet. Beautiful hands, Roger noted; delicately molded, carefully kept, with a single ring on each hand. The silver one on her right hand was especially striking; a wide Jacobean band in the Highland interlace pattern, embellished with thistle blossoms.

‘These are the names of the wives, so far as I know them. I thought that might help, since if the husbands were killed at Culloden, you’d likely find these women remarrying or emigrating afterward. Those records would surely be in the parish register? They’re all from the same parish; the church was in Broch Mordha – it’s a good bit south of here.’

‘That’s a very helpful idea,’ Roger said, mildly surprised. ‘It’s the sort of thing an historian would think of.’

‘I’m hardly an historian,’ Claire Randall said dryly. ‘On the other hand, when you live with one, you do pick up the occasional odd thought.’

‘Of course.’ A thought struck Roger, and he rose from his chair. ‘I’m being a terrible host; please, let me get you a drink, and then you can tell me a bit more about this. Perhaps I could help you with it myself.’

Despite the disorder, he knew where the decanters were kept, and quickly had his guests supplied with whisky. He’d put quite a lot of soda in Brianna’s, but noticed that she sipped at it as though her glass contained ant spray, rather than the best Glenfiddich single malt. Claire, who took her whisky neat by request, seemed to enjoy it much more.

‘Well.’ Roger resumed his seat and picked up the paper again. ‘It’s an interesting problem, in terms of historical research. You said these men came from the same parish? I suppose they came from a single clan or sept – I see a number of them were named Fraser.’

Claire nodded, hands folded in her lap. ‘They came from the same estate; a small Highland farm called Broch Tuarach – it was known locally as Lallybroch. They were part of clan Fraser, though they never gave a formal allegiance to Lord Lovat as chief. These men joined the Rising early; they fought in the Battle of Prestonpans – while Lovat’s men didn’t come until just before Culloden.’

‘Really? That’s interesting.’ Under normal eighteenth-century conditions, such small tenant-farmers would have

died where they lived, and be filed tidily away in the village churchyard, neatly docketed in the parish register. However, Bonnie Prince Charlie's attempt to regain the throne of Scotland in 1745 had disrupted the normal course of things in no uncertain terms.

In the famine after the disaster of Culloden, many Highlanders had emigrated to the New World; others had drifted from the glens and moors toward the cities, in search of food and employment. A few stayed on, stubbornly clinging to their land and traditions.

'It would make a fascinating article,' Roger said, thinking aloud. 'Follow the fate of a number of individuals, see what happened to them all. Less interesting if they all *were* killed at Culloden, but chances were that a few made it out.' He would be inclined to take on the project as a welcome break even were it not Claire Randall who asked.

'Yes, I think I can help you with this,' he said, and was gratified at the warm smile she bestowed on him.

'Would you really? That's wonderful!' she said.

'My pleasure,' Roger said. He folded the paper and laid it on the table. 'I'll start in on it directly. But tell me, how did you enjoy your drive up from London?'

The conversation became general as the Randalls regaled him with tales of their transatlantic journey, and the drive from London. Roger's attention drifted slightly, as he began to plan the research for this project. He felt mildly guilty about taking it on; he really shouldn't take the time. On the other hand, it was an interesting question. And it was possible that he could combine the project with some of the necessary clearing-up of the Reverend's material; he knew for a fact that there were forty-eight cartons in the garage, all labeled JACOBITES, MISCELLANEOUS. The thought of it was enough to make him feel faint.

With a wrench, he tore his mind away from the garage, to find that the conversation had made an abrupt change of subject.

'Druids?' Roger felt dazed. He peered suspiciously into his glass, checking to see that he really had added soda.

'You hadn't heard about them?' Claire looked slightly disappointed. 'Your father – the Reverend – he knew about

them, though only unofficially. Perhaps he didn't think it worth telling you; he thought it something of a joke.'

Roger scratched his head, ruffling the thick black hair. 'No, I really don't recall. But you're right, he may not have thought it anything serious.'

'Well, I don't know that it is.' She crossed her legs at the knee. A streak of sunlight gleamed down the shin of her stockings, emphasizing the delicacy of the long bone beneath.

'When I was here last with Frank – God, that was twenty-three years ago! – the Reverend told him that there was a local group of – well, modern Druids, I suppose you'd call them. I've no idea how authentic they might be; most likely not very.' Brianna was leaning forward now, interested, the glass of whisky forgotten between her hands.

'The Reverend couldn't take official notice of them – paganism and all that, you know – but his housekeeper, Mrs. Graham, was involved with the group, so he got wind of their doings from time to time, and he tipped Frank that there would be a ceremony of some kind on the dawn of Beltane – May Day, that is.'

Roger nodded, trying to adjust to the idea of elderly Mrs. Graham, that extremely proper person, engaging in pagan rites and dancing round stone circles in the dawn. All he could remember of Druid ceremonies himself was that some of them involved burning sacrificial victims in wicker cages, which seemed still more unlikely behavior for a Scottish Presbyterian lady of advanced years.

'There's a circle of standing stones on top of a hill, fairly nearby. So we went up there before dawn to, well, to spy on them,' she continued, shrugging apologetically. 'You know what scholars are like; no conscience at all when it comes to their own field, let alone a sense of social delicacy.' Roger winced slightly at this, but nodded in wry agreement.

'And there they were,' she said. 'Mrs. Graham included, all wearing bedsheets, chanting things and dancing in the midst of the stone circle. Frank was fascinated,' she added, with a smile. 'And it *was* impressive, even to me.'

She paused for a moment, eyeing Roger rather speculatively.

'I'd heard that Mrs. Graham had passed away a few years ago. But I wonder . . . do you know if she had any family? I believe membership in such groups is often hereditary; maybe there's a daughter or granddaughter who could tell me a bit.'

'Well,' Roger said slowly. 'There is a granddaughter – Fiona's her name, Fiona Graham. In fact, she came to help out here at the manse after her grandmother died; the Reverend was really too elderly to be left all on his own.'

If anything could displace his vision of Mrs. Graham dancing in a bedsheet, it was the thought of nineteen-year-old Fiona as a guardian of ancient mystic knowledge, but Roger rallied gamely and went on.

'She isn't here just now, I'm afraid. I could ask her for you, though.'

Claire waved a slender hand in dismissal. 'Don't trouble yourself. Another time will do. We've taken up too much of your time already.'

To Roger's dismay, she set down her empty glass on the small table between the chairs and Brianna added her own full one with what looked like alacrity. He noticed that Brianna Randall bit her nails. This small evidence of imperfection gave him the nerve to take the next step. She intrigued him, and he didn't want her to go, with no assurance that he would see her again.

'Speaking of stone circles,' he said quickly. 'I believe I know the one you mentioned. It's quite scenic, and not too far from town.' He smiled directly at Brianna Randall, registering automatically the fact that she had three small freckles high on one cheekbone. 'I thought perhaps I'd start on this project with a trip down to Broch Tuarach. It's in the same direction as the stone circle, so maybe . . . aaagh!'

With a sudden jerk of her bulky handbag, Claire Randall had bumped both whisky glasses off the table, showering Roger's lap and thighs with single malt whisky and quite a lot of soda.

'I'm terribly sorry,' she apologized, obviously flustered. She bent and began picking up pieces of shattered crystal, despite Roger's half-coherent attempts to stop her.

Brianna, coming to assist with a handful of linen napkins seized from the sideboard, was saying 'Really, Mother, how they ever let you do surgery, I don't know. You're just not safe with anything smaller than a bread-box. Look, you've got his shoes soaked with whisky!' She knelt on the floor, and began busily mopping up spilled Scotch and fragments of crystal. 'And his pants, too.'

Whipping a fresh napkin from the stack over her arm, she industriously polished Roger's toes, her red mane floating deliriously around his knees. Her head was rising, as she peered at his thighs, dabbing energetically at damp spots on the corduroy. Roger closed his eyes and thought frantically of terrible car crashes on the motorway and tax forms for the Inland Revenue and the Blob from Outer Space – anything that might stop him disgracing himself utterly as Brianna Randall's warm breath misted softly through the wet fabric of his trousers.

'Er, maybe you'd like to do the rest yourself?' The voice came from somewhere around the level of his nose, and he opened his eyes to find a pair of deep blue eyes facing him above a wide grin. He rather weakly took the napkin she was offering him, breathing as though he had just been chased by a train.

Lowering his head to scrub at his trousers, he caught sight of Claire Randall watching him with an expression of mingled sympathy and amusement. There was nothing else visible in her expression; nothing of that flash he thought he'd seen in her eyes just before the catastrophe. Flustered as he was, it was probably his imagination, he thought. For why on earth should she have done it on purpose?

'Since when are you interested in Druids, Mama?' Brianna seemed disposed to find something hilarious in the idea; I had noticed her biting the insides of her cheeks while I was chatting with Roger Wakefield, and the grin she had been hiding then was now plastered across her face. 'You going to get your own bedsheet and join up?'

'Bound to be more entertaining than hospital staff meetings every Thursday,' I said. 'Bit drafty, though.' She hooted with laughter, startling two chickadees off the walk in front of us.

'No,' I said, switching to seriousness. 'It isn't the Druid ladies I'm after, so much. There's someone I used to know in Scotland that I wanted to find, if I can. I haven't an address for her – I haven't been in touch with her for more than twenty years – but she had an interest in odd things like that: witchcraft, old beliefs, folklore. All that sort of thing. She once lived near here; I thought if she was still here, she might be involved with a group like that.'

'What's her name?'

I shook my head, grabbing at the loosened clip as it slid from my curls. It slipped through my fingers and bounced into the deep grass along the walk.

'Damn!' I said, stooping for it. My fingers were unsteady as I groped through the dense stalks, and I had trouble picking up the clip, slippery with moisture from the wet grass. The thought of Geillis Duncan tended to unnerve me, even now.

'I don't know,' I said, brushing the curls back off my flushed face. 'I mean – it's been such a long time, I'm sure she'd have a different name by now. She was widowed; she might have married again, or be using her maiden name.'

'Oh,' Brianna lost interest in the topic, and walked along in silence for a little. Suddenly she said, 'What did you think of Roger Wakefield, Mama?'

I glanced at her; her cheeks were pink, but it might be from the spring wind.

'He seems a very nice young man,' I said carefully. 'He's certainly intelligent; he's one of the youngest professors at Oxford.' The intelligence I had known about; I wondered whether he had any imagination. So often scholarly types didn't. But imagination would be helpful.

'He's got the grooviest eyes,' Brianna said, dreamily ignoring the question of his brain. 'Aren't they the greenest you've ever seen?'

'Yes, they're very striking,' I agreed. 'They've always been like that; I remember noticing them when I first met him as a child.'

Brianna looked down at me, frowning.

'Yes, Mother, really! Did you have to say "My, how you've grown!" when he answered the door? How embarrassing!'

I laughed.

'Well, when you've last seen someone hovering round your navel, and suddenly you find yourself looking up his nose,' I defended myself, 'you can't help remarking the difference.'

'Mother!' But she fizzed with laughter.

'He has a very nice bottom, too,' I remarked, just to keep her going. I noticed when he bent over to get the whisky.'

'Mo-THERRR! They'll hear you!'

We were nearly at the bus stop. There were two or three women and an elderly gentleman in tweeds standing by the sign; they turned to stare at us as we came up.

'Is this the place for the Loch-side Tours bus?' I asked, scanning the bewildering array of notices and advertisements posted on the signboard.

'Och, aye,' one of the ladies said kindly. 'The bus will be comin' along in ten minutes or so.' She scanned Brianna, so clearly American in blue jeans and white windbreaker. The final patriotic note was added by the flushed face, red with suppressed laughter. 'You'll be going to see Loch Ness? Your first time, is it?'

I smiled at her. 'I sailed down the loch with my husband twenty-odd years ago, but this is my daughter's first trip to Scotland.'

'Oh, is it?' This attracted the attention of the other ladies and they crowded around, suddenly friendly, offering advice and asking questions until the big yellow bus came chugging round the corner.

Brianna paused before climbing the steps, admiring the picturesque drawing of green serpentine loops, undulating through a blue-paint lake, edged with black pines.

'This will be fun,' she said, laughing. 'Think we'll see the monster?'

'You never know,' I said.

Roger spent the rest of the day in a state of abstraction, wandering absently from one task to another. The books to be packed for donation to the Society for the Preservation of Antiquities lay spilling out of their carton, the Reverend's ancient flatbed lorry sat in the drive with its bonnet up, halfway through a motor check, and a cup of tea sat half-drunk and milk-scummed at his elbow as he gazed blankly out at the falling rain of early evening.

What he should do, he knew, was get at the job of dismantling the heart of the Reverend's study. Not the books; massive as that job was, it was only a matter of deciding which to keep himself, and which should be dispatched to the SPA or the Reverend's old college library.

No, sooner or later he would have to tackle the enormous desk, which had papers filling each huge drawer to the brim and protruding from its dozens of pigeonholes. And he'd have to take down and dispose of all of the miscellany decorating the cork wall that filled one side of the room; a task to daunt the stoutest heart.

Aside from a general disinclination to start the tedious job, Roger was hampered by something else. He didn't *want* to be doing these things, necessary as they were; he wanted to be working on Claire Randall's project, tracking down the clansmen of Culloden.

It was an interesting enough project in its way, though probably a minor research job. But that wasn't it. No, he thought, if he were being honest with himself, he wanted to tackle Claire Randall's project because he wanted to go round to Mrs. Thomas's guesthouse and lay his results at the feet of Brianna Randall, as knights were supposed to have done with the heads of dragons. Even if he didn't get results on that scale, he urgently wanted some excuse to see her and talk with her again.

It was a Bronzino painting she reminded him of, he decided. She and her mother both gave that odd impression of having been outlined somehow, drawn with such vivid strokes and delicate detail that they stood out from their background as though they'd been engraved on it. But Brianna had that brilliant coloring, and that air of absolute physical presence that made Bronzino's sitters seem to follow you with their eyes, to be about to speak from their frames. He'd never seen a Bronzino painting making faces at a glass of whisky, but if there had been one, he was sure it would have looked precisely like Brianna Randall.

'Well, bloody hell,' he said aloud. 'It won't take a lot of time just to look over the records at Culloden House tomorrow, will it? You,' he said, addressing the desk and its multiple burdens, 'can wait for a day. So can you,' he said to the wall, and defiantly plucked a mystery novel from the shelf. He glanced around belligerently, as though daring any of the furnishings to object, but there was no sound but the whirring of the electric fire. He switched it off and, book under his arm, left the study, flicking off the light.

A minute later, he came back, crossing the room in the dark, and retrieved the list of names from the table.

'Well, bloody hell anyway!' he said, and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. 'Don't want to forget the damn thing in the morning.' He patted the pocket, feeling the soft crackle of the paper just over his heart, and went up to bed.

We had come back from Loch Ness blown with wind and chilled with rain, to the warm comfort of a hot supper and an open fire in the parlor. Brianna had begun to yawn over the scrambled eggs, and soon excused herself to go and take a hot bath. I stayed downstairs for a bit, chatting with Mrs. Thomas, the landlady, and it was nearly ten o'clock before I made my way up to my own bath and nightgown.

Brianna was an early riser and an early sleeper; her soft breathing greeted me as I pushed open the bedroom door. An early sleeper, she was also a sound one; I moved carefully around the room, hanging up my clothes and tidying things away, but there was little danger of waking her. The house grew quiet as I went about my work, so that the rustle of my own movements seemed loud in my ears.

I had brought several of Frank's books with me, intending to donate them to the Inverness Library. They were laid neatly in the bottom of my suitcase, forming a foundation for the more squashable items above. I took them out one by one, laying them on the bed. Five hardbound volumes, glossy in bright dust covers. Nice, substantial things; five or six hundred pages each, not counting index and illustrations.

My late husband's Collected Works, in the Fully Annotated editions. Inches of admiring reviews covered the jacket flaps, comments from every recognized expert in the historical field. Not bad for a Life's Work, I thought. An accomplishment to be proud of. Compact, weighty, authoritative.

I stacked the books neatly on the table next to my bag, so as not to forget them in the morning. The titles on the spines were different, of course, but I stacked them so that the uniform 'Frank W. Randall's at the ends lined up, one above the other. They glowed jewel-bright in the small pool of light from the bedside lamp.

The bed-and-breakfast was quiet; it was early in the year for guests, and those there were had long since gone to sleep. In the other twin bed, Brianna made a small whuffling noise and rolled over in her sleep, leaving long strands of red hair draped across her dreaming face. One

long, bare foot protruded from the bedclothes, and I pulled the blanket gently over it.

The impulse to touch a sleeping child never fades, no matter that the child is a good deal larger than her mother, and a woman – if a young one – in her own right. I smoothed the hair back from her face and stroked the crown of her head. She smiled in her sleep, a brief reflex of contentment, gone as soon as it appeared. My own smile lingered as I watched her, and whispered to her sleep-deaf ears, as I had so many times before, ‘God, you are so like him.’

I swallowed the faint thickening in my throat – it was nearly habit, by now – and took my dressing gown from the chairback. It was bloody cold at night in the Scottish Highlands in April, but I wasn’t yet ready to seek the warm sanctuary of my own twin bed.

I had asked the landlady to leave the fire burning in the sitting room, assuring her that I would bank it before retiring. I closed the door softly, still seeing the sprawl of long limbs, the splash and tumble of red silk across the quilted blue spread.

‘Not bad for a Life’s Work, either,’ I whispered to the dark hallway. ‘Maybe not so compact, but damned authoritative.’

The small parlor was dark and cozy, the fire burnt down to a steady glow of flame along the backbone of the main log. I pulled a small armchair up before the fire and propped my feet on the fender. I could hear all the small usual sounds of modern life around me; the faint whirr of the refrigerator in the basement below, the hum and whoosh of the central heating that made the fire a comfort rather than a necessity; the passing rush of an occasional car outside.

But under everything was the deep silence of a Highland night. I sat very still, reaching for it. It had been twenty years since I last felt it, but the soothing power of the dark was still there, cradled between the mountains.

I reached into the pocket of my dressing gown and pulled out the folded paper – a copy of the list I had given Roger Wakefield. It was too dark to read by firelight, but I didn’t need to see the names. I unfolded the paper on my silk-clad knee and sat blindly staring at the lines of illegible type. I ran my finger slowly across each line, murmuring each man’s name to myself like a prayer. They belonged to the cold spring night, more than I did. But I kept looking into the flames, letting the dark outside come to fill the empty places inside me.

And speaking their names as though to summon them, I began the first steps back, crossing the empty dark to where they waited.