

A young man and woman are embracing on a wooden bridge. The man is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark pants, and the woman is wearing a white sleeveless top and light-colored pants. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a lush green landscape with trees and flowers. The image has a soft, romantic feel.

THE HEIR OF THE CASTLE

SCARLET
WILSON

Cherish

Scarlet Wilson

The Heir of the Castle

Аннотация

The surprise inheritance: a castle! When the closest person tycoon Callan McGregor has to a father dies, it's down to him to organize the inheritance of Annick Castle. And the most suitable candidate seems to be stunning lawyer Laurie Jenkins. Even though she makes the usually brooding Callan's pulse race, this is business—he cannot afford a distraction. But she's a bubbly breath of fresh air who shakes the castle and Callan to its foundations. This time, he's not going to walk away—from either his home or from Laurie....

Содержание

He bent down and brushed his lips next to Laurie's.

5

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

57

He bent down and brushed his lips next to Laurie's.

He felt her instantly stiffen in shock. He hadn't given her any warning. He hadn't given it much thought himself. He'd just been playing along and it had seemed like the natural thing to do.

Her lips were soft and pliable, and oh, so inviting. He'd meant just to brush, the slightest touch, but his lips caught the taste of wine from her and his gentle brush became instantly more intense.

Only the briefest few seconds had passed but he was conscious of the audience around them—and conscious of the fact that if she did object, she might not want to do so in front of others.

He pulled back, but felt her lips still connected with his. It was as if she didn't want the kiss to end. As their noses brushed against each other he opened his eyes. Her dark brown eyes were already open, staring straight at him.

She looked a little stunned. As if she didn't quite believe the kiss had happened. Her hand came up automatically to her lips, which seemed even redder than before.

Her eyes still hadn't left his. All he could see was how chocolate-coloured they looked in this light and the definite dilation of her black pupils. His body reacted instantly—a natural response. Her hips were still pressed against his and her eyes

widened, but the smile that appeared on her face was one of pure mischief.

The Heir
of the Castle
Scarlet Wilson



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SCARLET WILSON wrote her first story aged eight and has never stopped. Her family have fond memories of *Shirley and the Magic Purse*, with its army of mice, all with names beginning with the letter 'M'. An avid reader, Scarlet started with every Enid Blyton book, moved on to the Chalet School series and many years later found Mills & Boon.

She trained and worked as a nurse and health visitor, and currently works in public health. For her, finding Mills & Boon was a match made in heaven. She is delighted to find herself among the authors she has read for many years.

Scarlet lives on the West Coast of Scotland with her fiancé and their two sons.

This book is dedicated to all those little girls who ever dreamed of being Liesl and dancing in the gazebo in a pink floaty dress.

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CHAPTER ONE

‘THANK YOU FOR coming to the last will and testament reading of Angus McLean.’

The solicitor looked around the room at the various scattering of people, some locals, some not.

Get on with it, thought Callan. He'd only come because the ninety-seven-year-old had been like a father to him. Thoughtful, with a wicked sense of humour, and a real sense of community

about him. He'd taught Callan far more than his father had ever taught him.

He wasn't here to inherit anything. He could have bought the castle four times over. He'd offered enough times. But Angus hadn't been interested. He'd had other plans for the estate. And after pretty much living there for part of his life Callan was curious as to what they were.

The solicitor started reading. 'Some of you are here by invitation. Others have still to be contacted. As you may well be aware Angus McLean had a considerable estate.'

He started with some charitable donations, then moved on to the staff that had served Angus over the years—all of them left sizable bequests that would see them into a comfortable age.

Then he cleared his throat and looked nervously around the room, his eyes deliberately skittering past Callan.

Uh-oh. The castle. What has old crazy done now?

'Most of Angus McLean's friends and relatives knew that Angus was a bachelor. It was always assumed—at least by those of us who knew Angus well—that Angus had no children.' He hesitated. 'But it seems that wasn't the case.'

'What?' Callan couldn't help it. He'd spent most of his life around Angus McLean. Never once in all those years had Angus ever mentioned any children.

Frank, the family solicitor, was clearly not designed for situations like this. His legalese seemed to leave him and he laughed nervously. 'It appears that in his day Angus McLean was

a bit of a rogue. He had six children.'

Heads shot around the room, looking back and forth between each other aghast.

But a few heads stayed steady—as if they'd already heard the news.

Callan couldn't believe his ears. 'Six children? Who on earth told you that?' This had to be rubbish. Was a bunch of strangers trying to claim part of the McLean estate?

Frank looked him clearly in the eye. 'Angus told me,' he said quietly.

Callan froze. Every hair on his body standing on end. It couldn't be true. It just couldn't.

Frank cleared his throat nervously. 'As a result of Mr McLean's heirs—and with some further research—we've discovered there are twelve potential inheritors of the estate.'

Callan shook his head. No. Twelve people all wanting a part of Annick Castle. It would be sold without hesitation to the highest bidder. Everyone would want their share of the cash. Angus would have hated that.

'On Mr McLean's instructions, all twelve potential inheritors are to be invited to attend a weekend at Annick Castle.' He bit his lip. 'With true Angus McLean style, they are to be asked to take part in a Murder Mystery Weekend—with the winner becoming the sole heir of Annick Castle. After confirmation of their claim with DNA testing, of course.' His eyes finally met Callan's. 'Mr McLean's last wish was that Annick Castle stayed in the family

and was inherited by one person.'

The words chilled Callan to the bone. It was exactly the kind of thing Angus would have said—the only thing they'd ever argued about in this world. But Callan had always assumed there was no real family to inherit, at best, or worst, a few far-flung distant cousins. Nothing like this.

Chaos erupted all around him. Voices shouting and asking questions, people talking amongst themselves, pulling phones from their pockets and dialling numbers frantically.

There was a reporter in amongst the mix who walked out with his phone pressed against his ear. Who inherited Annick Castle was big news—particularly when it was being decided in such an unusual manner. It was one of the few privately owned castles in Scotland.

Callan stood up and walked outside into the rain and biting wind. His eyes landed on the building in front of him. Annick Castle. The place he'd called home for the last twenty-five years.

From the first night Angus had found him cowering in the bushes, hiding from the drunken, abusive bully that was his father, he'd welcomed him into his home. It had become his haven. His safe place. And in later years, when Angus had become frail and needed support, Callan had been the one to provide it.

Annick Castle was the place he'd laughed, cried and learned to be a man.

And it was all, doubtless, about to be destroyed by some

stranger.

* * *

‘Sign here, please.’

Laurie looked up at the electronic screen placed under her nose. She looked around; her secretary had vanished and the courier looked impatient. She lifted the electronic pen and scrawled her signature. ‘Thanks.’

She stared at the envelope. It was hardly unusual. A letter from another firm of solicitors. She put it on the pile on her secretary’s desk. It would need to be logged in the system.

She rubbed her forehead. Yet another tension headache—and it wasn’t even nine a.m. She would be here for at least the next twelve hours. She sighed and picked up the court papers she would need for later and headed back to her office.

Five minutes later Alice appeared at her office door. ‘Laurie, did you see who signed for this letter?’

Laurie looked up. It was the heavy cream envelope. ‘Yip. It was me.’

Alice looked a little embarrassed. ‘Sorry I missed it.’ Her hand rested on her slightly protruding stomach. ‘I’ve been at the bathroom three times already this morning.’

Laurie waved her hand. ‘No worries.’

Alice smiled. ‘I think you should look at this yourself. It’s not work-related. It’s personal.’ She crossed the office and laid the now opened envelope on Laurie’s desk. Receiving letters from other solicitors was an everyday thing. But none of them had ever

been personal.

Laurie looked up at Alice's retreating back as she closed the door behind her.

Why had she closed the door? Alice had already seen the contents of the letter and unless Laurie was in a meeting with clients her door was always left open. It felt kind of ominous. Was someone suing her? But if they were, surely that would be work-related, not personal?

She picked up the envelope and turned it over in her hands. She didn't recognise the logo on the outside. Ferguson and Dalglish.

She pulled the letter from the inside. Heavyweight white bond paper. Exactly like the kind they used for legal documents. Her eyes scanned the page... 'as the daughter of Peter Jenkins you've been identified as a possible heir to the estate of Angus McLean... invited to attend Annick Castle...' The next page gave contact details and a map of how to get there. The letter dropped from her hands. Her heart was thudding against her chest and she couldn't help but automatically shake her head. This was crazy. This was mad.

As the daughter of Peter Jenkins... Her father had died more than ten years ago. He'd never known who his own father was and had always been curious, but apparently his mother had never told him and refused to discuss the matter. Who on earth was Angus McLean? Was he the father he'd never known?

Because that was what this letter implied. What a way to find

out.

She felt her stomach clench a little. Angus McLean could have been her grandfather. Why hadn't he contacted her when he was alive? Why wait until he was dead? It almost seemed pointless. And it was certainly pointless for her father.

Her fingers flew over her keyboard, pulling up a search engine and typing frantically. He wasn't hard to find. Angus McLean, died aged ninety-seven, one month ago. Never married. And apparently no children.

She let out a stream of words into the air. Really?

She scanned the letter again. How many children did this guy have? And had any of the others actually been acknowledged?

The phone rang and she ignored it. Whatever it was it would have to wait. She typed again.

A picture appeared before her and she took a sharp breath, her head moving closer to the screen. Annick Castle. On the west coast of Scotland.

Only, it didn't really look like a castle. More like a beautiful stately home perched on a cliff above the sea with gorgeous surrounding gardens and a swan pond. It was stunning, made of sand-coloured stone, with drum towers at either end and complete with cannons on the walls overlooking the sea.

She looked at the photo credit. The picture was taken twenty years before. Did Annick Castle still look like that?

Her curiosity was definitely piqued. What kind of a man stayed in a place like that? And why would he have family that

he never made contact with?

She scanned the letter again. In her haste to read she'd missed the last paragraph.

You are invited to attend Annick Castle to take part in a Murder Mystery Weekend along with eleven other identified family members in accordance with Angus McLean's Last Will and Testament. The winner of the Murder Mystery Weekend shall inherit Annick Castle, familial claim shall be verified by DNA testing.

It didn't say that. It couldn't say that.

Lawyers all over the world would be throwing up their hands in horror.

She screwed up her eyes and pinched her nose, then looked from side to side. This was a joke. This was an elaborate hoax. Somewhere, in this room, there must be a hidden camera.

She stood up and walked around. First to the bookshelves on the wall, then to filing cabinets next to the door. She couldn't see anything. But weren't cameras so small now that they could be virtually invisible?

She opened her door and looked outside. Everyone was going about their business. No one was paying her the slightest bit of attention. It was a normal day at Bertram and Bain, one of the busiest solicitors' in London. Twenty partners with another thirty associates, specialising in employment law, partnership law and

discrimination law. The phones started ringing around seven in the morning and continued until after nine at night.

Organised chaos.

The tiny hairs on her arms stood on end as if a chilling breeze had just fluttered over her skin. She closed the door and leaned against it.

What if this wasn't a joke? Eleven other family members. Who were they?

She was an only child, and as far as she'd been aware her father had been an only child too. After he'd died, her mum hadn't coped too well and was now living in the sun in Portugal with a little help from Laurie.

She walked back to the desk and ran her finger over the thick paper of the letter.

Family.

She'd felt totally lost since her dad had died. She didn't have a million relatives scattered around the world. There was just her, and her mum.

And now this.

What if she did have relatives she'd never met?

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat as she sagged back down into her chair. Dad would have been so intrigued to receive something like this. He'd always been curious about his father. It made her miss him all the more. She was going to find out the things he'd never known. Who was Angus McLean? Why did he live in a castle? And why on earth hadn't he made contact with

his potential family members while he'd still been alive?

She was trying not to be angry. She really was.

She read the letter once more. Property law wasn't her forte, but could this even be legal? There were some differences between English and Scots law, but she wasn't sure if this was one of them.

A Murder Mystery Weekend to decide who inherited the castle?

There was no getting away from it: Angus McLean must have been stark raving mad.

She blinked. A bit like how she'd been feeling lately.

Maybe it was a family trait. The thought didn't really fill her with pleasure—only fear.

She watched as people marched past the glass in her office wall, all with a purpose, all with not a minute to spare.

Exactly as she felt.

How many holidays was she overdue now?

She straightened in her chair, the thick paper between her fingers.

Her father had been a grocer, her mother a shop assistant. No one had been more surprised than Laurie when she'd excelled at school. She liked learning. She liked finding out things. And she'd got swept along with the potential and expectations of her exam results. The careers advisor who'd pushed her towards university. The teachers who'd encouraged her to excel. Her father had cried the day she'd been accepted at Cambridge to

study law.

And it had only taken her two months to realise that she hated it.

But, by then it was too late. She couldn't disappoint her dad. Not when he'd spent every waking hour working to help her achieve what he thought was her 'goal'. And especially not when she could hear the pride in his voice every time he told someone his daughter was going to be a lawyer. Turning her back on law would be like trampling on his grave.

She'd been miserable here for months. Always smiling, always agreeing to do more, to work late, to help others out. Never mind the hours she put in at the office, there was never really time off at home. Aches and muscle pains, sleepless nights, tension headaches, all signs that her body needed a break.

And maybe this was a sign.

No matter how ridiculous it sounded.

Her fingers tapped out the email quickly—before she had a chance to think straight and change her mind. She picked up the files on her desk and carried them outside.

Alice was worried. Laurie could tell by the frown on her forehead and the way her pencil was banging on the desk.

Laurie took a deep breath and gave her a smile, lifting a pile of Post-its from her desk. She started slapping them on the files. 'I'm taking some time off. Pink for Frances, green for Paul and yellow for Hugo. After I've been at court this afternoon there's nothing they can't handle. Ask them just to pick up where I left

off.'

Alice nodded, her mouth gaping open as Laurie handed her the instructions from the letter. 'Can you book me a train ticket and sort out some accommodation for me?'

Alice put her pencil to good use and started scribbling. 'You're going to go? Really? When do you want to leave?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Several heads poked up at the surprise in Alice's voice from the pods around them.

Laurie nodded. 'I'm supposed to be there Friday through to Monday evening.'

Laurie Jenkins taking a holiday. It was unheard of.

Maybe it was time for change.

* * *

Callan stared at his watch for the twentieth time. This was his last pickup of the day.

Thank goodness. So far, there had been the loud Canadians, the over-excited Americans, the bad-tempered Irishman with the very sweet Irishwoman, and several others from around Scotland. Once the hoity-toity lawyer arrived from London he was all done.

He must have been mad. Why on earth was he agreeing to be part of this ridiculous debacle?

He sighed. What was the bet that Ms Lawyer was extra tired and extra crabbit? By his estimations she'd have travelled four and a half hours from London to Glasgow, another four hours from Glasgow to Fort William, and the last part of the journey

on the steam locomotive.

He leaned back against the stone wall of the old station. He could see the steam in the distance. She could have stayed on the train from Glasgow—it did come on to Mallaig—but like any good tourist she must have preferred to take the Harry Potter train and cross the viaduct.

It wasn't really a problem. He couldn't blame her desire to see the stunning Scottish countryside. It just meant she was a later arrival than everyone else.

The train pulled into the station and the tourists piled out. Most of them would be staying overnight in Mallaig—a coach was parked outside the station to transport them to their accommodation.

It took a few moments for the steam and chattering crowds to completely clear.

Wow! That was Mary Jenkins? So, not what he was expecting. Instead of an iron-faced middle-aged woman the smoke cleared around a long-haired brunette, with slim pink Capri pants, a white loose tunic and a simple holdall in one hand. Far from looking tired, she was fresh-faced and brimming with excitement.

Callan was used to beautiful women—he'd dated enough of them—but this was a shock to the system. Her clothes highlighted her curves, the swell of her breasts beneath the thin tunic and her Capri pants showing a hint of lightly tanned skin.

She walked over quickly. 'Callan McGregor? Thank you so

much for meeting me.’ She reached over and grasped his hand firmly between both of hers.

Zing. What was that? A wave of tiny electric shocks shot up his arm.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you.’ She waved her hands around. ‘What an absolutely gorgeous setting. I’ve had an absolute ball on that train.’ She pointed to the camera around her neck, nestled next to a gold locket. ‘I must have taken around a hundred pictures.’

He was trying to remain calm. He was trying not to let the corners of his mouth turn upwards in surprise. It wasn’t just that she was pretty—she was gorgeous. Warm brown eyes, clear skin, curls bouncing around her shoulders and full pink lips. ‘Mary Jenkins?’ he queried. The name just didn’t suit her at all.

She let out a laugh. Nothing quiet and polite, but a deep, hearty laugh that came all the way up from her painted pink toes. ‘What? No one has ever called me that! It’s Laurie. Laurie Jenkins. My father called me after his elderly aunt Mary, but I’ve always been known by my middle name Laurie.’

He nodded. The Mary Jenkins he’d pictured in his head had looked nothing like the Laurie Jenkins standing on the platform before him. Around twenty years of nothing.

Was she really old enough to be a lawyer?

She shuffled some papers in the front pocket of her holdall. ‘Let me take that for you,’ he said as he reached down and swung it up onto his shoulder. It was light. It was surprisingly light.

Maybe Laurie Jenkins wasn't planning on staying long? Unlike the Canadians, who appeared to have brought the entire contents of their house with them.

He ushered her along the platform towards his car, trying not to watch the swing of her hips and shape of her curved backside. Focus. That zing was still bothering him. Callan McGregor didn't do 'zings'.

He waited for the comment—there weren't many people with a pristine James Bond DB5 in this world. One of the few over-the-top purchases since he'd made his fortune. But she just happily climbed in the front seat and pulled on her seat belt. 'Do you know much about Angus McLean?'

He was thrown. He was totally thrown.

Not only had every other single person made a passing comment on the car, every other single person's first question had been about the castle—leaving him in no doubt why they were there. They could recognise money at a glance.

He should have walked away. After the reading of the will he should have left the solicitor's office and just kept on walking. Walked away from the madness of all this.

But something deep inside wouldn't let him. Whether it was a burning curiosity of what would happen next. Whether it was some bizarre desire to actually meet some of Angus McLean's relatives. Or whether it was some deep-rooted loyalty to the old guy, and some misplaced desire to try and maintain the integrity of the castle.

He waited until she was settled and then he pulled out of the car park.

‘Well?’ She was obviously determined to find out a little more. Her fingers were clenched tightly in her lap, her index fingers rotating around each other over and over. It was the first sign she wasn’t quite as relaxed as she seemed.

‘Angus was a good friend.’

She raised her eyebrows. The sixty-five-year age difference was completely apparent and must be sparking questions in her brain.

‘So, you’re not one of his relatives?’ She hesitated. ‘I mean, you’re not one of...my relatives?’ Her voice tailed off and she shook her head with a little half-smile. ‘I can’t get used to the thought of any of this. It was only ever me, my mum and my dad. My dad died ten years ago. I never imagined anything like this would happen. It all seems so unreal—like I’m caught in a dream.’

‘Oh, it’s real all right,’ he muttered under his breath. Then he shook his head and gave a woeful smile. This woman really didn’t have a clue how he felt about any of this. ‘I guess the Harry Potter train will do that to you.’

Her face broke into a wide, dreamy grin. ‘It was fantastic. My secretary booked it for me. I haven’t had a holiday in a while and she obviously knew I would like it.’

He tried not to let his ears prick straight up. She hadn’t had a holiday in a while. What did that mean? Did she work for some

hotshot company that made their employees work one hundred hours a week? Or did she just not have anyone to go home to? His eyes went automatically to her hand, but she'd moved it, jamming her left hand under her thigh and out of his sight.

'How did you meet?' Her voice cut through his thoughts. Boy, she was persistent. She still hadn't even mentioned the castle.

A shadow passed across his face and his lips tightened. 'I met Angus when I was a small boy. I spent quite a bit of time at Annick Castle.'

Something flickered across her face—doubtless another question—but something obviously told her to change tack and she let it go.

'So, what's going to happen this weekend? Are you organising things?' Did she think he was an employee? Even though he was offended, it was a reasonable assumption. After all, he had picked her up from the station.

He signalled and turned off the main road, passing some stone columns and an extravagant set of entry gates, and heading down a long, sweeping driveway.

He shook his head and his words were spoken through gritted teeth. 'The Murder Mystery Weekend is nothing to do with me. It's being organised by some outside company.'

She shook her head. 'It's the most bizarre thing I've ever heard. Is it even legal? Inheritance law isn't my field of expertise, but I've never heard of anything like this in my life.'

'Neither have I.' The words almost fell out of his mouth. He

wasn't embarrassed to say he'd spent the last week locked in a bitter war of words with Frank. But the solicitor had been unrepentant. He'd tried to talk Angus out of it. He'd talked him through all the legal implications, the challenges that might be brought against the decision. They'd even brought a doctor in to give a statement that Angus was of sound mind as he wrote the will.

But Angus McLean had been as determined as he always was in life. This was the way he wanted to do things, and nothing, and no one, could change his mind.

Callan could see Laurie looking around, taking in the impossibly long sweeping road to the castle, and the huge gardens. The car followed the bend in the road and she let out a little gasp, her hand going to her face.

'Oh. Wow.' Annick Castle was now clearly visible. Rebuilt in the seventeen-hundreds, the impressive building had over sixty rooms and a large drum tower at either side. It was clear the first glimpse of the castle took her breath away.

But instead of feeling secretly happy and proud, Callan could barely disguise his displeasure. Was she thinking that the castle might be hers after the weekend? The last guests from Canada had immediately asked what rooms were the best and whipped out a portfolio with extensive notes on the property. He'd almost ejected them from the car on the spot.

But Laurie wasn't quite so brazen. Or maybe she was just better at hiding it?

She shook her head, her eyes open in wonder. 'I just didn't expect it to be so big.' She pointed over at the sea wall. 'I knew it was supposed to be on a cliff top. I guess I just hadn't really realised how impressive it would be.' She fumbled in her bag and produced a tissue, dabbing at her eyes. 'My dad wouldn't have believed this. He would have thought he was in a dream.'

For the tiniest second Callan almost felt sorry for her. He knew that three of Angus's children had died: Laurie's father, another woman from England and a son who'd lived in Canada. Laurie was an only child, but the son in Canada had three sons and two daughters, and the woman in England had had three children. It took the total number of possible inheritors to twelve. All of whom were now here.

They pulled up outside the main entrance and Laurie jumped out automatically. 'I'll show you to your room and introduce you to the staff,' Callan said gruffly.

'My room?' She looked shocked, and then shook her head. 'Oh, no, I'm not staying here.' She started to fumble in her bag for her paperwork. 'My secretary will have booked me in somewhere.'

Callan was starting to run out of patience. 'She has—here.'

Laurie's chin practically bounced off the driveway. 'But I thought you'd just brought me here to show me where the castle was.'

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. 'It's part of the stipulation of the weekend.' Nothing he had any control over.

He waited until she'd extricated the crumpled paperwork from her bag and stared at it a few times as if she was still taking all of this in.

'Like I said, come and I'll introduce you to the staff.'

Her eyes widened. 'There's staff?'

He frowned. 'Of course there's staff. A place like this doesn't look after itself.'

That was the trouble with all these people. None of them knew or understood a thing about Annick Castle. None of them appreciated the people who'd spent their life working here. It didn't matter most of the staff had been left bequests, it was the actual castle that mattered to them—just as it mattered to Callan.

Laurie was still standing in amazement outside. The sun was starting to set over the horizon, leaving her bathed in a warm glow of pink, orange and lilac. With the beautiful sea in the background she could have been starring in a movie. With her dark eyes, long chestnut curls about her shoulders and her curves highlighted in her white tunic, Laurie Jenkins could prove quite a distraction.

She was the youngest relative here by far. And for a second he almost forgot that: the fact she was a relative—a potential inheritor. A complete stranger who would probably sell Annick Castle to the highest bidder as soon as she could.

It made the hackles rise at the back of his neck.

All day he'd picked people up and dropped them off. And there was no getting away from it. Some of them he already

hated. They'd asked the value of the property, its potential price on the open market and how soon the inheritance would take to sort out.

So it didn't matter how Laurie looked, or how she acted.

The truth was—she was the same as all the rest.

* * *

What was wrong with this guy? Ever since he'd picked her up at the train station he'd acted as if she'd jabbed him with a hot poker.

She had no idea what his role was here. It was a shame, because if he could actually wipe the permanent frown off his face, he would be attractive. And not just a little attractive. The kind of guy you spotted at the other side of a room and made your heart beat faster kind of attractive.

When she'd spotted him at the station she'd almost turned around to look for the film camera. Were they shooting a new film, and he'd been brought in as the resident hunk?

She smiled to herself. His hands had been firm. Was the rest of him? It certainly looked that way—his shirt did nothing to hide the wide planes of his chest.

Mr Silent and Brooding was obviously not planning on telling her much. She was trying to push aside the fact he was impossibly tall, dark and handsome. And she was especially trying to push away the fact he'd fixed on her face with the most incredible pair of green eyes she'd ever seen. Ones that sent a little shiver down her spine.

But nothing he'd said had exactly been an answer, and now she'd finally met someone who knew Angus McLean her brain was just bursting with questions. It was her duty to her dad to find out as much as she possibly could. She followed him inside and tried to stifle the gasp in her throat.

It was the biggest entrance hall she'd ever seen, with a huge curved staircase running up either side around the oval-shaped room. These were the kind of stairs a little girl would dream of in her imaginary castle. Dream that she was walking down to meet her Prince Charming. If only.

Callan dropped his car keys into a wooden dish with a clatter. Fat chance of that happening here.

She shook hands with a grey-haired woman with a forehead knotted in a permanent frown just like Callan's. Maybe they were related?

'This is Marion. She's the housekeeper. If you need anything you'll generally find her around the kitchen area.'

Laurie couldn't imagine a single occasion she'd want to seek out the fearful Marion but she nodded dutifully and followed him up the stairs.

There was an old full-length portrait at the top of the stairs of a young woman in a long red dress. Something about it seemed a little odd and she stopped mid-step. Callan gave her a few seconds, then finally smiled in amusement. It was the first time today he'd looked even remotely friendly.

'You're the first person that's noticed,' he said quietly.

‘But that’s just it. I know I’ve noticed something—’ she shook her head ‘—but I don’t know what it is.’

He pointed at the portrait’s serious face. ‘It’s an optical illusion. She’s an optical illusion.’

‘But, what...how?’ She was even more confused now.

Callum pointed to the stairs. ‘It doesn’t matter which side you walk up. It always seems as if she’s looking at you.’

‘Impossible!’ She couldn’t even make sense of the words.

He folded his arms across his chest and nodded to the other flight of stairs. His face had softened slightly. He was much more handsome without the permanent frown. ‘Go on, then, I’ll wait.’

She hesitated for a second but the temptation was just too great. She could only pray he wasn’t playing some kind of joke on her. She raced down one side and halfway up the other.

Her arm rested on the ornate banister, her eyes widening. The serene young woman was staring right at her—just as she’d been on the other staircase. She lifted up her hands in exasperation. ‘But that’s impossible. How old is that painting? Did optical illusions even exist back then?’

A cheeky grin flashed across his face. ‘Did rainbows?’

She felt the colour flood into her cheeks and a flare of annoyance. Of course. Nature’s greatest optical illusion. Now she felt like a prize idiot. Something tightened in her stomach.

She hated anyone thinking she was dumb. The only real joy in being a lawyer was the recognition that most people assumed you had to be smart to do the job in the first place.

But Callan didn't seem to notice her embarrassment. He was looking at the painting again. 'Angus liked to have fun. Once he discovered the painting he was determined to own it. It's nearly two hundred years old. He put it there as a talking point.' There was obvious affection in his voice and it irritated her even more.

Who was this guy? He'd already told her he'd spent some time living here. But why?

Why would Angus McLean take in a stranger, but ignore the six children that he had? It didn't make sense.

All of a sudden she was tired and hungry. The long hours of work and travelling had caught up with her and all she wanted to do was lie down—preferably in her bed in London, not in some strange castle in Scotland.

'Nice to know he had a sense of humour,' she muttered under her breath as she brushed past him.

'What's that supposed to mean?' snapped Callan.

She took a deep breath and turned to face him. 'It means I'm tired, Callan. I've been travelling for hours.' She lifted her hands in exasperation. 'And it also means I've just found out about a family that's apparently mine.' She cringed as some of the relatives walked past downstairs, talking at the tops of their voices about the value of the antiques.

She looked Callan square in the eye. If she weren't so tired she might have been unnerved. Up close, Callan's eyes were even more mesmerising than she'd first suspected and she could see the tiny lines around the corners. He was tired too.

She took a deep breath. ‘I didn’t know Angus McLean, but, just so you know, you might have him up on some sort of pedestal—but I don’t. I’m not impressed by a man who lived in this—’ she spun around ‘—and spent his life ignoring his six children.’ She folded her arms across her chest. ‘Nice to see he got his priorities in order.’

CHAPTER TWO

JUST WHEN, FOR the tiniest second, he thought one of Angus’s relatives might not be quite as bad as the rest, she came out with something like that.

Callan felt a chill course over his body as he swept past her and along the corridor. ‘You’re right. You didn’t know Angus. And you have absolutely no right to comment.’ His blood was boiling as he flung open the door to her room. ‘Here’s your room.’ He stopped as she stepped through the doorway. Her head was facing his chest, only inches away from his. All it would take was one little step to close the distance between them.

It didn’t matter to him how attractive she was. It didn’t matter that he’d noticed her curves at the railway station, or the way she kept flicking back her long shiny brown curls. All that mattered to him was the fact she’d said something he didn’t like about the old man that he loved.

But Laurie Jenkins was having none of it. She folded her arms across her chest again. ‘That’s just the thing, Callan. I do have a right to comment—because, apparently, I’m family.’ She let the words hang in the air as she walked past him into the room.

Callan's blood was about to reach the point of eruption.

The very thing that knotted his stomach. Family. And the fact he wasn't.

He still hadn't got over the fact Angus McLean had six children he'd never once mentioned. The reality was he was still hoping it wasn't true—that someone would give him a nudge and he'd wake up from this nightmare.

Nothing about this seemed right. Angus had been the perennial bachelor, even in old age. Why on earth would he have children and never acknowledge them? It seemed bizarre.

Angus had had the biggest heart he'd ever known.

But then, he'd only known Angus for the last twenty-five years. Maybe in his youth he'd been a completely different person?

It bothered him. It bothered him so much he hadn't slept the last few nights.

And now that he'd met some of the relatives it bothered him a whole lot more.

One of these money-grabbers was going to inherit Annick Castle. A place full of history and rich with antiques. A place full of memories that not a single one of them would care about.

Why hadn't Angus let him buy it? He'd known that Callan loved it every bit as much as he did. It just didn't make sense.

The family stuff. It enraged him more than he could ever have imagined.

Laurie was standing looking out of the window across the sea.

Some of these bedrooms had the most spectacular views. He knew—his was just above.

And this complete stranger had just put him perfectly in his place.

She was right—she was family. The one thing he wasn't.

He dumped her bag on the bed. 'Dinner is at seven.'

He didn't even wait for a response. The sooner he got away from Ms Jenkins, the better.

* * *

Laurie breathed out slowly, releasing the tight feeling that had spread across her chest.

What on earth was wrong with her? And why had she just offloaded to the one person who could actually tell her something about her grandfather?

Common sense told her it wasn't wise to alienate Callan McGregor. He could probably tell her everything she could ever want to know—and a whole lot more besides.

She sagged down onto the bed. The bedroom was big, with panoramic views over the sea. How many people throughout the ages had stood at her window and looked out at this view? The sun had set rapidly leaving the sea looking dark, haunting and cold. Was it possible that the sea looked angry—just like Callan McGregor?

The history of this place intrigued her. It would be fascinating. If only she could take the time to learn it.

Her hand smoothed the coverings on the bed, taking in the

carpet, curtains and other soft furnishings. At one time these must have been brand new and the height of fashion. But that time had clearly passed. How did you update a castle? She didn't have a clue.

It wasn't that anything was shabby. It was just—tired. A little dated maybe. And obviously in need of some TLC.

Angus had been ninety-seven when he'd died. How often had he looked around the castle to see what needed replacing and updating? And how much would all that cost?

She shifted uncomfortably on the bed. She'd heard some of the conversation of the other relatives downstairs. They'd virtually had measuring tapes and calculators out, deciding how much everything was worth and where they could sell it.

It made her blood run cold.

This castle was their heritage. How could people immediately think like that?

She walked over to her bag and shook out her clothes. She was only here for a few days and had travelled light. One dress for evenings, some clean underwear, another pair of Capri pants, some light T-shirts and another shirt. What else could she possibly need?

An envelope on the mantelpiece caught her attention. Ms Mary Laurie Jenkins was written in calligraphy. She opened it and slid the thick card invitation out from inside.

It was instructions for the Murder Mystery Weekend: where to report, who would be in charge and a list of rules for

participation.

Under normal circumstances something like this would have made her stomach fizz with fun.

But how could she even think like that when there was so much more at stake?

The whole heritage of this castle was dependent on the winner. And the weight of the responsibility was pressing on her shoulders. She fingered the curtains next to her. She knew nothing about Annick Castle. She had no connection to this place. She wouldn't even know where to begin with renovations or upkeep. Or the responsibility of having staff to manage.

Working as a solicitor was a world away from all this. Everything and everyone wasn't entirely dependent on her. There was a whole range of other bodies to share the responsibility. Thank goodness. She couldn't stand it otherwise.

All of a sudden she wanted to pick up her bag and make a run for it. She shouldn't have come here. She shouldn't have agreed to be any part of this.

This whole thing made her uncomfortable. She looked at the invitation again. Costumes supplied. What did that mean? There was another little envelope with a character profile included, telling her who she was, and what her actions should be.

1920s. Lucy Clark. Twenty-seven. Heiress to a fortune. Keen interest in pharmacy. In a relationship with Bartholomew Grant, but also seeing Philippe Deveraux on the side.

It was a sad day when the pretend character you had to portray had a more exciting love life than you had.

It could be worse. Her card could have told her she was the killer. But maybe that came later?

Then again what did 'keen interest in pharmacy' mean? Was she going to poison someone?

Under normal circumstances this might be fun.

But these weren't normal circumstances, and now she was here, and had actually seen Annick Castle, the whole thing made her very uncomfortable.

She glanced at the clock. There was still time before dinner to freshen up and get organised.

Maybe once she'd eaten that horrible little gnawing sensation at the pit of her stomach would disappear?

Or maybe that would take swallowing her pride and apologising to Callan.

Maybe, just maybe.

* * *

Callan had finally calmed down. He'd had to. Marion, the housekeeper, had flipped when one of the ovens had packed in and she'd thought dinner wouldn't be ready on time. It had taken him five minutes to sort out the fuse and replace it.

Dinner would be served on time.

Served to the twelve strangers who were roaming all over the castle.

Which was why he was currently standing in his favourite haunt—the bottom left-hand corner of the maze in the front garden.

Callan could find his way through this maze with his eyes shut—and he had done since he was a boy. It was one part of the garden that was kept in pristine condition with the hedges neatly trimmed.

Other things had kind of fallen by the wayside recently. Bert, the old gardener, couldn't manage the upkeep of the gardens any more. The truth was he probably needed another four staff to do everything that was required. Twenty years ago there had been a staff of around six to look after the grounds alone, but gradually they'd all retired or left. And the recession had hit. And Bert had become very set in his ways—not wanting others to interfere with 'his' garden. In the meantime the maze, the front garden and the rose garden were almost in pristine condition. As for the rest...

He was thankful for the peace and quiet. All of a sudden his safe haven seemed like a noisy hotel. Everyone seemed to talk at the tops of their voices, constantly asking questions. He'd tried to hide out in the library for a while, but even there he'd been disturbed by some of the relatives wondering if there were any valuable first editions.

If he'd had his way he would have locked some of the rooms to stop their prying eyes, not to mention their prying fingers. He'd caught one relative in his room earlier and had nearly blown a gasket.

A flash of red caught his eye, along with the sound of laughter and heels clipping on the concrete path. He took a few steps forward, crashing straight into Laurie as she rounded the corner of the maze.

‘Oh, sorry.’ She was out of breath and her eyes wide. ‘Isn’t this just fabulous?’

As much as he hated to admit it her enthusiasm was clearly genuine.

‘How long has the maze been here? I had no idea something like this existed. It’s amazing.’

He narrowed his gaze. He could barely focus on the question because his eyes and brain were immediately struck by the sight in front of him. The 1920s-style flapper dress skimmed her figure, hiding it beneath shimmering red glass beads. A feather was slightly askew on her head and he automatically reached up to straighten it. ‘What on earth are you wearing?’ Damn. There it was again—as soon as his hand touched the soft hair—the mysterious spark from earlier.

‘This?’ Her eyes widened again and she gave a little spin, sending a cascade of sparkling red lights scattering around them. She wrinkled her nose as she came to a halt. ‘Well, I hardly brought it with me, did I? I got it from the costume room. Haven’t you got into character yet?’ She held out her black-satin-gloved hand to shake his hand. ‘I’m Lucy Clark. Apparently an heiress and up to all things naughty with two different men.’

If he’d been anywhere else, at any other time, he would have

acted on the current of electricity that was sizzling between them. He thought he might have imagined it, but his palm was tingling. He rubbed it fiercely against his thigh.

The Murder Mystery Weekend. The last thing on his mind right now. He hadn't even opened the envelope that had been sitting above the fireplace in his room. And he had no idea what room in the castle had been deemed the 'costume' room. His fingers burrowed into his jacket pocket and he pulled out the crumpled envelope. 'Oops.' He shrugged.

She shook her head. 'Come on, Callan, get into the spirit of things.' She reached out to grab his envelope, then pulled her hand back. 'I better not.' She leaned forward and whispered, 'I don't want to find out you're secretly a mass murderer.'

He shook his head and pulled the card from the envelope. He must have been out of his crazy mind to have agreed to be part of this.

Then again, he hadn't really agreed. Frank, the solicitor, had informed him that Angus had expected Callan to make his guests feel welcome and help oversee the weekend's activities. He'd had half a mind to walk away.

But his loyalty to Angus ran deep. Too deep.

If he walked away then he'd never find out who inherited the castle, or their plans for it. A tiny seed started to sprout in his brain.

Maybe being here wasn't so crazy after all. Sure, inheriting a castle sounded good on paper, but once Angus's relatives realised

the implications, the upkeep, the financial commitments, he was pretty sure they would all run screaming for the hills. Maybe he could make them an offer? He'd always been prepared to pay a fair price, and if Angus wouldn't accept it, maybe one of his children would?

His eyes fixed on Laurie. She was young. She was a lawyer in London. She wouldn't want to be landed with a castle in the Highlands.

For the first time this weekend he actually paused to think. Maybe he should play nice?

He squinted at the name on his card. He hadn't paid attention to any of the instructions about the Murder Mystery Weekend. 'It appears I'm Bartholomew Grant, thirty-three, a stock-market trader.'

A cheeky smile appeared on her face along with the tiniest flush of red. 'Hmm...Bartholomew Grant. Well, whaddya know? I believe you're one of my two adoring men.' She gave a little wave of her hand. 'Here's hoping you can play the part, Callan.'

The feather was bobbing in the wind. The shimmering red glass beads picking up the soft lights from the open doors of the drawing room. She hadn't donned a short bob wig in keeping with the time; instead she'd left her long brown curls snaking around her shoulders.

She was watching him through her dark lashes with her big brown eyes. His eyes dropped automatically to her left hand. He couldn't see anything through the satin gloves. No telltale lumps

with giant diamonds. Surely a successful woman like Laurie must be attached?

She leaned forward again, this time the round neck of her dress gaping and giving a little glimpse of cleavage.

He blinked. What was he doing? Why was his brain even going there? He had far too much to think about this weekend. The last thing he needed was to get distracted by someone he'd never see again.

'Do you think you can play the part, Callan? Or is it all just too much for you?' Her voice was low and husky. She tilted her head to one side. 'Do you even know how to play nice?'

The words made him start. In another world Laurie Jenkins could be quite mesmerising. But he wasn't the kind of guy to fall for a coy smile and the flutter of some eyelashes.

'Maybe I just like to pick my play friends carefully,' he shot back.

She folded her arms across her chest. 'Well, that's a shame. You're the only person around here who looked as if they might be capable of holding a normal conversation. I couldn't get a word in edgeways with the Americans, the Canadians were too busy Googling antiques, and—' she flung her hands up '—the two people that I think are my aunt and uncle from other parts of England have spent the last hour dozing on one of the sofas in the drawing room.'

He couldn't help but smile. He'd already figured out she wanted to meet her family, but it seemed nothing was going to

plan. He reached out his hand and grabbed hers, leading her over to a bench near the entrance to the maze and pulling her down next to him.

‘What did you think was going to happen this weekend, Laurie?’

He could see her take a deep breath as she glanced around them. The splendour of the castle was behind them and even though the grounds weren’t officially lit, the smooth front lawn, maze and rose garden were impressive to say the least. And she had no idea that just beyond that copse of trees lay a swan pond with slightly untrimmed foliage. She really had no idea about this place at all. She shrugged her shoulders, ‘I thought this would be a chance to meet some family. There’s only me and my mum now, and she lives in Portugal.’ She gave a little shake of her head. ‘She really couldn’t cope when my dad died.’ Her eyes had lowered and he resisted the temptation to reach over and squeeze her hand. But her fingers had already moved, automatically going to her throat and catching the gold locket around her neck.

He might not know her, but the pain on her face was real. She’d clearly adored her father.

She lifted her head, turned and stared up at the castle. ‘I have no idea what my dad would have made of all this.’ Her eyes were shimmering now with unshed tears. ‘He so wanted to know about his father. His mum just wouldn’t tell him anything.’ She lifted her hand and held it out. ‘This would have fascinated him, and the thought that he had other brothers and sisters scattered around

the world...' She let out a sigh and shook her head. 'That would have blown his mind.'

Callan shifted uncomfortably on the seat. All of a sudden his reaction earlier seemed a bit snappy.

Now he understood a little of what she'd said. It seemed odd to him that Angus had never acknowledged the fact he had children. How must it seem to the newly acquired relatives? To know that Angus had provided for them in his will, but never acknowledged their existence?

He'd been so wound up with how he was feeling he hadn't given much thought to anyone else.

'I had no idea that Angus had children. He never mentioned it. Never mentioned it at all.' He pressed his lips together. 'It just doesn't seem like him at all. The Angus McLean I knew had the biggest heart in the world.'

'How did you know Angus? You seem a bit young to have been friends.' Her brow was furrowed, as if she was trying to sort out in her head where Callan fitted into all this.

He chose his words carefully. Her question wasn't unexpected. 'Angus helped me out when I was younger. And friends—that's exactly what we were. He was one of the best friends I had.'

'And you stay here—in the castle?' He could almost see the questions spinning around in her head.

'Not exactly. I live in Edinburgh most of the time. I have a house there. But I've always had a room here with Angus. He needed a bit more help in the last few years.'

There was so much more she clearly wanted to ask. He could almost sense her biting her tongue. Instead her eyes fixed on the maze and gardens in front of them.

‘Do you know much about the estate?’

The words sent his hackles up. He tried not to let it show, but every question he’d more or less been asked by the relatives in the last twelve hours had revolved around money. He found it impossible not to grit his teeth. ‘I know every field, every tree, every fence and every stream. I’ve been in and around Annick Castle since I was a young boy.’

But Laurie hadn’t noticed his tension; she was lost in a world of her own. ‘Lucky you.’ There was a wistful tone in her voice as she leaned back on the bench and looked up at the elegant façade of the castle. She sighed. ‘This would have been my dream when I was a little girl, living in a place like this.’ She held out her hand. ‘I can only imagine what it must be like to play in a maze like this every day or to run up and down those fairy-princess stairs.’ She gave him a mischievous smile. ‘Go on, tell me. Did you ever slide down those banisters?’

He could feel his natural protective instincts kick in. Did he really want to tell her that he and Angus had regularly had competitions to see who was the fastest sliding down either side?

All of a sudden this was personal. These were his personal memories of his time here with Angus McLean. And he didn’t want to share them.

He didn’t want any of these people staying here. He really

just wanted them all to leave. The piece of paper in his hand crumpled under his grip.

She was puzzling him. She wasn't talking about money. She was talking about people and family. But maybe she was just cleverer than the rest? And what was more she was persistent. 'Or did Angus forbid you from doing things like that?'

The words jolted him. Jolted him from a whole host of memories that flooded his brain. Diving in the swan pond, trying to build a raft to sail across it, swinging from the rope swings that he'd made amongst the trees. Angus wasn't the kind to forbid him anything. He lifted his heavy eyelids and caught her staring at him with those big brown eyes. 'Only if he caught me,' he said quietly.

The moment passed just as quickly as it appeared. 'Shouldn't we be going?' He stood up. 'You've got a Murder Mystery to solve.'

'Oh, that.' She stood up, her dress catching the light again. 'I'd almost forgotten about that.'

How could she forget about that? It was the key to owning this castle. Surely it should be the first thing on her mind.

He led her towards the open doors to the drawing room. 'Let's get this over with.' She sighed, then turned around. Her hand reached up and rested on his chest. 'Callan, tomorrow, will you show me around the grounds of Annick Castle? I'm only here for the weekend and I'd like to see as much as I can.'

His immediate response caught in his throat, because his

immediate response was to say no.

The last thing he wanted was to be the genial host, showing everyone around the castle he considered a home.

But Laurie seemed a little more measured than the rest. A little more interested in the history of the castle as a whole.

Her hand was still resting on his chest, almost burning a hole through the thin cotton of his shirt. She bit her lip. 'I was also wondering if I could see some pictures of Angus. See what he looked like.' Her eyes drifted off... 'I kind of wonder if my dad looked like him at all...' then came back to meet his '...or if I do.'

The hairs were standing up at the back of his neck—and it wasn't the cool evening breeze. It was her. And the effect she was having on him.

Had anyone else asked to see pictures of Angus? He couldn't remember, but they must have—surely? If someone told him he'd a long-lost relative the first thing he'd want to do would be see what they looked like.

He gave a little nod. 'I know where some of the family pictures are kept. Leave it with me. I'll let you see them tomorrow.'

She gave a nervous kind of smile. 'Thank you, Callan. That will be nice. And the tour?'

Her big brown eyes were fixed right on him. She obviously wasn't going to let this go.

He wanted to say no. He really did. But how could he?

He could almost hear Angus's voice in his ear. Show them around, make them fall in love with the place as much as we did.

‘Fine. I’ll meet you just after breakfast.’

She gave a little nod of her head. ‘Thanks.’

He gestured towards the dining room. ‘You better go on. I’ll be a few minutes getting changed.’ He turned and walked off along the corridor.

Dinner with the twelve potential inheritors of Annick Castle. He really couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do less.

CHAPTER THREE

BY THE TIME Laurie reached the dining room most of the other guests were already seated. It seemed there was no opportunity to pick your own seat. The calligraphy from the character envelopes had been carried on to the name cards on the table.

She gave a little sigh as she sat down. Her character was between both men she was apparently seeing, which meant that Callan would be next to her again.

A man around twenty years older than her sat down on her right at the Philippe Deveraux card. She tried not to smile. In real life he wasn’t exactly her taste, but she held out her hand politely. ‘Pleased to meet you.’ She nodded at her card. ‘I’m Lucy Clark, but I’m really Laurie from London. My father was one of Angus McLean’s children.’

Her companion smiled. ‘Then that makes you my niece. I’m Craig Fulton. From what I can gather, I think I am the youngest of Angus McLean’s children.’ He leaned forward conspiratorially. ‘And I’m not sure that I’m comfortable with

dating my niece.'

Laurie felt a wave of relief rush over her. Thank goodness. This could have been awkward.

'What do you do in London, Laurie?'

'I'm a lawyer.'

His eyebrows rose. 'Well, that will come in handy with all these shenanigans. Is this even legal?'

She shook her head. 'Scottish law and English law can differ. I'm just as in the dark as you are.'

The chair next to her was pulled out and Callan sat down beside her. He'd changed into a hunting-style jacket, obviously in keeping with the style of the evening.

But Craig persisted. 'But you must know something?'

He was making her uncomfortable. 'Actually, I don't. This isn't my area of expertise. I practise employment, partnership and discrimination law.'

Craig threw up his hands. 'What use is that to anyone?'

Now he'd really annoyed her. And it was clear that Callan was about to intervene, but she lifted her hand and laid it on his jacket sleeve to stop him. She smiled sweetly at Craig and spoke quietly. 'Why don't you ask my last client? I won him an award of half a million pounds.'

Craig choked on the wine he was currently necking down at a rate of knots. Leaving his neighbour on the other side sharply hitting his back for him.

Callan shot her a smile. 'Touché,' he whispered.

She smiled. 'I'm nobody's shrinking violet...' she leaned forward to whisper in his ear '...and I hate anyone implying otherwise.'

Callan lifted his glass. 'I'll remember that.'

The food appeared moments later, all served by a harassed-looking Marion and a young girl who looked too terrified to speak.

Everything was beautiful. From the chicken liver pâté, to the chicken breast stuffed with haggis. All accompanied by copious amounts of free-flowing wine.

After such a long journey Laurie could feel the wine go straight to her head and stopped after the second glass.

The doors to the garden had been left wide open, and, instead of feeling cold, Laurie found herself appreciating the clean sea air that circulated around them. It was the first time in for ever she could remember having a clear head. Sure, if she'd drunk much more wine it could have made her wobbly, but for the first time in months she didn't feel at her muggiest, with a persistent headache thumping in the background.

She tried to remember when the headache had actually left her. It had been there so frequently she couldn't recall. She really should get out of the city more. Was it on the steam railway that she'd finally felt her head clear? Maybe there was a lot to be said about highland views and sea breezes.

It didn't matter that the air in the room was fraught with tension. It didn't matter that she was lost amongst a sea of

relatives, some of whom she wasn't sure she even liked. It didn't even matter to her that Callan was constantly prickly around her.

This was the first time, in a long time, she finally felt relaxed. Her body almost didn't recognise the signs. What she really wanted to do right now was climb the curved staircase, open her bedroom window to the sea air and slip under the covers of that comfortable-looking double bed.

She almost didn't care about the inheritance aspect of the journey.

Almost.

Because from the moment she'd set foot in this place she'd loved it.

It made her toes tingle. It made her breath catch in her throat. It made the tiny little hairs on her arms stand on end.

She couldn't even begin to imagine the fabulous history of a place like this. And all she wanted to do was drink it in.

And if that meant having to play nice with Mr Callan McGregor, then she would. Because he seemed to be the only person who could tell her what she wanted to know.

The dinner passed by in a flash, then Frank the solicitor appeared again and ushered them all into the drawing room.

Laurie almost let out a sigh. It was after nine o'clock at night and after a long day's travel she really just wanted to go to sleep.

She'd tried to speak to Frank earlier but it had been very apparent he didn't want to be seen in discussion with her. Maybe he was worried he would get accused of showing her favour

because she was a fellow professional? All she'd wanted to ask him was a little about Angus McLean. But it wasn't to be.

Frank read out a list of rules about the Murder Mystery Weekend, about them staying in character and when they would be expected to meet. He also introduced some people from the company running the weekend's activities: Ashley, a blonde woman in a pale pink 1920s dress, Robin, a dark-haired man dressed in hunting regalia and John, who was dressed as a butler.

Tea and coffee were provided on a table at the side and Laurie made her way over to grab a cup. The rest of the guests were told to mingle and familiarise themselves with each other. As she poured the coffee into one of the pale blue china cups another one was slid alongside.

'Pour me one too, would you? I'm going to fall asleep in here. Playing nice doesn't agree with me.'

Laurie smiled at Callan's voice. 'You and me both. I had no idea I'd be so tired after the journey. All I want to do right now is go to bed.'

Should she have said that out loud? There was kind of an amused glint in Callan's eyes. For a second she felt a flare of panic. What did he think she meant? For a horrible moment she thought he might have taken it as an invitation. The colour started to flood into her cheeks, and she did what she always did when she was embarrassed—she babbled.

'It's such a long journey up by train. The steam locomotive was fabulous, I wouldn't have missed the gorgeous scenery for

anything, but when it gets to this time at night, and especially after that beautiful dinner, I just want to go and lie down. Alone—I mean,’ she added hastily.

But Callan was laughing and shaking his head. It was obvious he’d picked up on her anxiety.

She said the first thing that came into her head. ‘What about you, Callan? Is there a Mrs McGregor to go home to?’

Had she actually just said that out loud? Please let the ground open up and swallow her whole. Wine and tiredness obviously weren’t a good mix for her.

Callan shook his head, and was it her imagination or did he just glance at her left hand?

‘No. There’s no Mrs McGregor. I’ve been a bit of a workaholic these last few years.’

‘And any mini McGregors?’ In for a penny, in for a pound. It seemed prudent to ask, particularly after what had been learned about Angus McLean in the last few weeks.

There was no hesitation. He shook his head. ‘I can assure you, if I had any kids they would be permanently attached to my hip.’

There was no mistaking that answer. Callan McGregor would never do what Angus McLean had—whatever his reasons might have been.

‘What about you, Laurie? Are you like your character—do you have more than one attachment?’ There was a cheeky glint in his eyes as he asked the question.

Laurie rolled her eyes. ‘I should be so lucky. I don’t have

enough hours in the day for myself let alone anyone else. Do you know, I think this is the first time I haven't had a headache in months.'

He leaned forward. 'It's all this good Scots air. It does wonders for your health.' For a second, her breath was caught in her throat as the aroma of his woody aftershave invaded her senses. It was delicious.

She gathered herself and smiled. 'Yeah, but it's making me exceedingly tired.'

'You mean you don't want to go and play nice with the relatives?'

Laurie took a deep breath. She knew the correct answer to this question, but it just couldn't form on her lips. She gave a little shrug. 'Yes, yes, I do. But right now I'm just too tired to care.' She looked over to the middle of the room where they were all currently holding court, talking—no, shouting—at the tops of their voices.

She gestured over to the other side of the room. 'The person I'd really like to sit down with at some point is Mary from Ireland. She'll have been my father's half-sister. And she looks really like him. I'd like to get a chance to talk properly to her.'

The lights flickered out and the room was plunged into darkness, followed by a theatrical scream. And even though she should have half expected it, it really did make her jump.

Callan's arm slid around her waist. Even though she couldn't see a thing, she could sense him leaning closer to her. And

it was her natural instinct to move a little closer to him. ‘You okay, Laurie?’ His warm breath tickled her cheek. More of the aftershave. It was scrambling her senses and rapidly turning into her new favourite smell.

She clutched the cup in her hands. Her hands had started to tremble. The last thing she wanted to do was shatter some priceless china on the parquet flooring. ‘Yes, thanks,’ she whispered.

‘I’m sure this will all be over in a second...’ his voice was low, the curls around her ear vibrating with his tone ‘...and hopefully then we can all get off to bed.’

The words sent a shiver down her spine. Something she hadn’t felt in a long time. Something she hadn’t had time to feel in a long time.

The realisation was startling.

She’d only been here one evening and everything about this place was surprising her.

She’d yet to feel a connection to any of her relatives—the one thing she would actually have liked.

But she couldn’t get over the connection and tingle she’d felt to this place from the moment she’d stepped inside. She was under no illusion that Annick Castle would actually ever be hers. But she hadn’t expected the place to take her breath away. She hadn’t expected to get the tiniest sensation of belonging from just looking out of a window across an ocean.

None of that made any sense.

But what made even less sense was the man standing next to her, and the fact her skin was on fire beneath his fingertips. She didn't even know him. She wasn't sure if she even liked him. He was grumpy. He was prickly.

But something made her feel as if Callan McGregor was the one true person about here she could trust.

Then there was the fact she knew he was single. It seemed to have made her stomach do dangerous somersaults.

And he seemed fiercely loyal to a man she knew nothing about.

The lights flickered back on around them. It only took her eyes a few seconds to adjust. The blonde woman Ashley from earlier was now lying on the floor, with a blood stain on her dress. Thank goodness she could still see the woman's slight chest rising and falling, otherwise she might have been totally convinced.

Robin—the man in hunting clothes—immediately launched into his act. 'Call the police, there's been a murder! Everyone stay where you are—you'll all be questioned.'

Callan took a deep breath. 'Oh, joy. Let the mayhem begin.' He was shaking his head again and he moved his arm from her waist. She was surprised by how much she could feel the imprint of his hand on her side. She was even more surprised by how much she still wanted it to be there.

He took a few steps over to the door, looking back across the room. There was something in his eyes, and she couldn't tell what. Was it a memory? Happiness or sadness? No, it was

something else, a wistfulness.

‘Angus would have loved this,’ he said under his breath as he headed out of the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

LAURIE PUSHED OPEN the door to the kitchen. It was ridiculously early but there seemed to be a whole army of pigeons nestling outside her castle window. And the truth was she’d had the best night’s sleep in a long time. Whether it was the good Scottish clean air, or the immensely comfortably mattress, something had made her feel as if she were sleeping in a luxury hotel.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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