

STONE OF HER DESTINY



BY

JOANNA A. MCKETHAN

FROM CAPE FEAR TO KINTYRE

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Thank you for purchasing a book from an Indie author.

DEDICATION

To all my Scottish ancestors who came before...to Farquhard Campbell
And Isabella McAllister who are my direct ancestors and lived not far
from me. To Col. Alexander McAllister who lived nearby as well
and who is my husband's direct ancestor.

Thanks for suggestions and help to

THESE READERS

Sandra Warren Mowery

Wendy McLeod

K. A. M.

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Chapter 1:

The Ghosts of Lebanon

“Of all ghosts, the ghosts of our old loves are the worst.—A. Conan Doyle,

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

‘Kissing kin’ should refer to cousins at a wedding, not gravestones at a funeral.

Gravel crunched as we passed through double wrought iron gates driving past a tall memorial, ‘Colonel Alexander McAllister from Argyll, Scotland, from Tarbert of Balinakill.’ Patriarch to North Carolina Scots, but not me; I descended instead from his sister, Isabella. Cemetery markers in granite and marble displayed ‘kissing kin’ of numerous ancestors.

It was either Isabella I had to thank for red hair, green eyes, and freckles, or her husband, Farquhard Campbell, I didn’t know which. I pushed damp, tight curls into my hat.

“Kenna, I’m right behind you,” my brother Robert said.

“The Alford’s are duly represented.” I exited my car and squeezed his hand.

We waited in silence in front of the Greek Revival structure, Old Bluff—one of the first Presbyterian churches in North Carolina, set close to the River that brought the first Scots over, on the highest bluff overlooking the Cape Fear River for the cue to mount the steps. Low-hanging branches reached out from deep-shadowed alcoves to envelope us where I had played as a child. Unexpected chills ran down my back beneath my black suit this mid-August. The trees were ominous.

At the proper moment, car doors opened in synchronized fashion, and family emerged as one, fanning, gathering near the funeral director. We ascended steps in designated order—I was behind Douglas in line. She was Uncle’s daughter, after all. I was adopted niece, theirs ever since my parents died. Robert followed.

Bagpipes pumped hymns loudly as we entered. Kidney-shaped pipes covered by dark green Campbell plaids or red McAllister ones added color to plain white walls, stood out in

relief against white painted windows and dark brown pews. After the powerful lungs collapsed came the funeral service for Uncle. I resisted my Scottish Presbyterian heritage, plain, stiff, mostly silent. Today, clean lines spelled consolation.

Uncle was everywhere beloved—from Godwin, Wade, Erwin, Dunn, and even Fayetteville, they came, along with my boyfriend of three years.

Graveyard greetings brought hugs and tears. Then the procession reversed. We lined up in cars to leave scenic Bluff in the family hearse, turning left off the dirt drive onto the old Fayetteville-Raleigh stagecoach road, continuing for some miles until we turned into Uncle's ante-bellum acreage bounded by the grove. How I loved his two-story house, the columns surrounded by ivy, the rails, Victorian bric-a-brac, and a few ghosts I had grown used to over the years. We credited their identities to Civil War casualties.

Exiting slowly, I walked the path up onto the porch crying, avoiding the swing. I joined the crowd in the left of an identical pair of drawing rooms, divided by foyer and inside staircase. Soon as I entered, my boyfriend Tom patted me on the shoulder. I turned, crying in full measure, falling onto his suit.

"It will be all right," he said, patted me twice, stepped back, and straightened his tie.

"No, it won't. It will never be right again," I said. "Why do people say that?"

He brushed a hair off his suit. "Kenna, I'm sorry, but I have to go, now."

"Why?" I frowned. He didn't sound sorry.

"I'll talk to you later."

"Talk now," I said, never the 'later' person.

"I don't want to add to your bad day."

"Oh, go ahead, Tom. Let's walk to your car." We left the house, passing by the venerable chestnut oak.

At his car, he turned to me, eyes averted, and said, “It’s just that—well, it’s over, Kenna. I didn’t want to tell you today. But I couldn’t drag out a lie.”

Speechless, I stared at him, finally whispering, “Is it the funeral?”

“No. My momma says you’re old-fashioned, ‘different,’ and I have to agree. You scare me with your Scottish ‘fits.’ I love family, but you guys have too much. I don’t square with any of you. Really, Kenna, it boils down to me being a modern kind of guy, living in the now. Not in love with you anymore.”

I flinched. “Ouch,” I said. “Don’t hold back. No time like now to dump me.”

He drew back. “I still care. Call and talk about your uncle, if you need to.”

I stepped further back. “No thanks, I won’t inflict family on you. Call for your stuff. Give me a couple of weeks to gather it.”

“Sorry, Kenna, but you really need to shake those freaky fits, or something bad is going to happen to you; take it from someone concerned...” He pecked me on the forehead, and climbed into his red sports car.

“Have a good life.” I waved him off and faced Lebanon, giving him my back.

“You’ll get over me soon, Kenna,” I heard him call out before his car crunched down gravel road. At that moment I didn’t know how right his words would prove. Frankly, I was amazed our dating had continued past college at Queens in Charlotte. Wheels whirred; a vacuum opened. Tears gushed out, but within seconds I knew they weren’t for him.

Back in the living room, Douglas pulled me aside. “What was that about?” she asked.

“That was a ‘dear-Tom’ good-bye.”

“Bastard!”

“Why Douglas, how unrefined, un-Christian, and un-Southern-lady-like of you,” I said, cheered enough to actually smile. “He called me old-fashioned, strange, and family-centered.” I didn’t mention fits; our shared ghostly visitations were enough.

“He should have waited. Good riddance. You know, I have a favor I wanted to ask of you before Ron and I take off to Santa Fe. Now seems about right. Come upstairs with me?”

“Gladly,” I said. “I can pull myself together before seeing anyone.”

In her room, she opened the top dresser drawer and pulled out a thick packet.

“Here,” she said, thrusting it at me. “This arrived in the mail from genealogical researchers in Scotland who’ve been tracing our lineage to relatives there. I don’t have time to follow up, and I know how much you like this sort of thing. Strikes me as just the project you need. Plus letters I found revamping the storage room. Extremely old—you’ll be amazed.”

“You trust me with these?” I asked, pulling out letters in a dark ecru color.

“Of course I trust you with the letters.”

“I don’t remember anyone talking about them.”

“Dad was tight-lipped.”

“Hmm, but I am family.”

“Of course you are. That’s why you’ll defend our reputation. You’ll understand once you read them.” She patted the hand that held the letters.

“Oh, I think I do remember Uncle going on about some scandal.” I slipped the letters safely back into the envelope and gave her a neck hug. “Thanks, Douglas. You mean the world. One day I’ll combine family, love, art, writing, faith, and Scottish past, you’ll see.”

“I have no doubts,” she said, the drawer closing with a thud.

I smiled.

“Bring answers. Oh, I’ll foot the bill for further research. Now let’s greet Dad’s sympathy-givers.”

A crash came from the plunder room.

We looked at each other, ran to the room, but could not identify the source.

“Sometimes I hate this place,” she said, shocking me with the ferocity in her voice that gave an inside view to a part of her I had never seen, as we stood at the top of the stairs.

Today I grieved multiple losses—Uncle like a father, my own parents, my boyfriend of three whole years, and my cousin like a sister who was moving away. I deposited the envelope safely in my pocketbook. *An envelope was key to my past—and perhaps my future.*

* * *

Sunday afternoon I headed to Charlotte, driving into the sun. My usual excitement on returning to my job at the upscale *South!* Inc. magazine paled. I had nailed the job after graduating right here in Charlotte with a degree in English. Photo-journalism was fun, but today was different. *Blasted sun.* The drive took forever, on back roads lined by decaying businesses. *Depressing.* The thought of work--writing, editing, cropping photographs and forcing lines to wrap around them, bored and saddened me to tears. Uncle’s death devastated me. It changed everything.

I pulled into my driveway, unloaded suitcase, took it in to my bedroom and changed. I watered my one living plant left, aloe vera, and sat down to watch TV before turning in. A travel program took me to the British Isles and still intact happy families.

* * *

Next morning I left, pulled into the same paid parking lot I always used. *Off-kilter, half-formed thoughts nibbled around the edges of my mind...I wanted to take the day off.*

Inside the suite, I opened the office door, spoke to reception and sat down.

The receptionist appeared at my door. “You have an assignment, Kenna. Gaynelle wants you to do a special on the Stone of Scone’s return to Scotland.”

“Sounds intriguing.” I perked up.

“Yep. Here are a few references. By the way, I’m sorry about your uncle,” she said chirpily. She left papers and returned to from whence she’d come.

I fingered the articles while I fired up my computer. If I had to work, at least the assignment was worth it. Soon, I was reading about high-brow Scottish thieves making off with Scotland's coronation stone from its English location. In November, British Royals were returning the stone to Scotland—close to the area from where my ancestors hailed. What a coinkidink, I thought, using Uncle's made-up word. *Such a sweetheart he had been.*

Then it hit me like a bullet: Douglas's research for our ancestors, the Stone article requested by my editor, expanding my professional scope to an international level, couldn't this be done better in Scotland, on site? Life as I knew it was over. I could take a year's sabbatical. Suddenly, I wanted to move to Scotland for a year more than anything I'd ever wanted. Just think, kilted men, Highland games, bagpipes playing piedrocks, wandering on hill and in glen, somehow spiritually connecting to my past while remedying the family reputation for Uncle. Scotland whispered, *hope*. Scotland screamed, *we are waiting for you.*

* * *

Searching on-line supplemented by telephoning built solid info on tour and flight prices from travel agencies. Castle packages, long-term plans accumulated. Why not stay in the land of my forebears. Why not search out a castle in Tarbert, like the country house of Balinakall? It wasn't too far from Edinburgh. Daydreaming produced copy for my employer while simultaneously crunching numbers for preliminary planning. No friendly tornado like Dorothy's would pick me up and set me down intact. Considering the state of my ex-chequer, it would take one.

Inheritance money from my parents I'd saved would help. Maybe I could hire on as a stringer to *South!* Inc. Magazines had those. Add a monthly feature from Scotland. Scots had poured into Charlotte and North Carolina and settled. *Make a proposal to Gaynelle. Soon. They fire slackers.*

Gaynelle appeared at my door. "Speak of an angel," I made the saying positive.

“You doin’ all right, Kenna?” she asked, leaning against the door frame.

I looked for her cigarette, but she didn’t smoke. She looked naturally like she held a cigarette.

She towered over me in a dark suit and camisole, her creamy coffee complexion perfection itself, studying me.

I swiveled in my chair as she neared.

“So-so, Gaynelle. I’m as lost as a kitten in a snow storm,” I said. “You have time for a one-on-one tomorrow?” I was already devising layout copy in my mind.

“What about?” She looked me steadily in the eye.

“Tell you then,” I countered, turning my computer so she couldn’t read it.

“Just one significant subject word?” she persisted.

“A proposal. I want to make a proposal I need time to develop. Pretty, please?”

“All right, Kenna. Hope it explains what’s happened to you.”

“At 3 p.m.?”

“Make it 3:30p.m., Kenna. Give my 2:30p.m. person time to leave.”

“I’m writing it down,” I said, scribbling in my calendar.

“Now show me what you have for the story I gave you.”

I patted the chair next to me. “Have a seat. I’ll spread it out.” I pulled out pages ready to show and explain my work.

She sat, sharp-eyeing my layouts.

“Hone your copy more,” she said and suggested improvements. I agreed. “Good,” she said. She left. I stuffed it in a briefcase and headed off.

That night at home I worked on my own proposal, typing possible scenarios on my laptop, imagining Gaynelle’s response. I had done a phenomenal amount of research heavy on sending me to Scotland to stay. I perused it to figure her tipping point.

I devised a budget which included airfare, accommodations and food, subtracted my inheritance sum and another sum I could withdraw from my current balance. I figured I needed three thousand dollars monthly for which I would produce at least two articles for *South!* Inc. each month, two less than I did currently. I knew I couldn't book Scotland time so tightly I couldn't do my own research while there.

* * *

Next morning I raced around, dotting every "i" for Gaynelle's assignment. At lunch, I ate a sandwich brought by the gal up front and made a photo-journalistic mockup of my proposal—a picture of the Stone of Destiny under Edward's chair, a stunning castle, a flag, tartans, kilts, bagpipes, and copy tying it to things Southern; hot button, "heritage."

I didn't want a grant; my art-and-writing self was not a charity. I wanted to survive, earn enough to make it, even if I had to sell flowers on the street.

My lunch hour spent, I resumed duties, filled in dead spots studying *South!* Inc.'s ads, news, features, editor's comments, and angles within the stated parameters.

Ads—of course! We would curry favor with tour operators and in travel agencies using the Stone of Scone's return. I called around. One agency actually bought. On the basis of my article, I sold to a top manager and transferred her to our ad person for particulars. At 2:25 p.m., Gaynelle's appointment wandered by my door, so I escorted her to Gaynelle's office. Gaynelle's look was like, 'I know what you're up to.' I threw up my arms.

At my desk, I breathed deeply, grateful this exercise took my mind off losing Uncle. I sneaked a look at his picture and choked back rising tears. *I will do this for you, I promise.*

I honed my written work to the bone, used active buzz words to replace the hackneyed. My watch showed 3, so I inserted her project in one folder and my proposal in the other. At 3:30p.m., no one emerged from her office. I fretted, straightened papers, red-lined a novice's work Gaynelle wanted me to check. Magazine printers made enough errors.

Now it was 3:40p.m. *Gaynelle*, I fumed to her closed door. Finally at 3:47p.m., Gaynelle popped out of her office with said person in tow taking her sweet time leaving.

However, yours truly managed a full Southern farewell.

Finally.

“Okay, Kenna, what’s on your mind? I don’t have long,” she said.

“You want me in your office?” I suggested sweetly.

“Yes. Come on in.” She sounded tired.

I picked up my folders and followed her to her room. “Gaynelle, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” I acknowledged, sitting in the warm, previously occupied, chair.

“Kenna, you can’t brown-nose me that way. I know all shades of brown. What in the world is so all-fired important it turns you into a *kiss-up*?” She pushed her piles to the side.

“Interesting you say, ‘what in the world,’ Gaynelle. It’s ‘where in the world’ I want you to consider.”

“I’m listening.” She planted red stilettos onto the desk, leaning back in her chair.

“You know how hard losing Uncle was,” I began.

She smiled what I interpreted as, ‘Lay one on me, amuse me.’

“Yes, I do.”

Sympathy, ah, what I had hoped.

“Did you know Tom ended our relationship on funeral day?”

“No! But you’re better off. Tom was so...*small town*.”

“You mean country. I’ll have to do a frog leap. Gaynelle,” I rushed in on sympathy’s red carpet. “Make me a stringer—an overseas correspondent—let me cover Scotland for a year.”

“What? Kenna, you’re out of your mind. We’re not that cosmopolitan.”

“I know, I know, Gaynelle, but the Stone’s return is big news, and I could cover that in person—a fascinating story to Charlotte Scots, the erudite world travelers. Why, it could ramp up the sale of *South!* Inc. Look at my promo.”

I spread it out. Her silence was deafening.

“Gaynelle, think. I could be your big break. I mean Scotland, Ireland, their islands. We’re the best market for travel in the world. I already got us an ad from Triple Travel about visiting Scotland to see the Stone of Destiny returned. They’re buying ads for September, October and November.”

“Kenna, I knew you were too good to be true. I’ve been watching you for awhile, barely functioning. I knew something was up. I was afraid you wanted to leave *South!* Inc.”

“Hmm, is that a positive response?”

“Yes and no, Kenna. I’ll have to hire a replacement. That’s money out of pocket.”

“You can train the new girl. She wanted more hours.”

“Possibly. But how much would you count on?”

“I was hoping in exchange for two full articles a month, maybe \$3000?”

“Steep, \$1500 per article.”

“Fair.”

“Well, it’s not up to me, you know. I’m answerable to a board of skeptical conservatives when it comes to currency.”

I felt sad. “But you’ll pitch them the idea?”

“I guess I’ll have to, since you have this bee in your bonnet, Child. Send you away from your old plantation that had slaves. I don’t need reparations from you, you poor white Child. Don’t go getting your hopes up, though. It’s a tough sell and a long way away from a slam dunk.”

“Need more from me?” I asked, pushing folders to her, thanking her for pitching it.

“Not for this,” she said, with a look of complicity. She clicked out gracefully.

“Thanks, Gaynelle,” I said, without a shred of hope once I thought about the Board. What other tree could I tap? Gaynelle was a first in the area as a fashionably forward black woman at the pinnacle of success, but Gaynelle did not sound hopeful.

* * *

“Need to see you in my office,” Gaynelle’s voice boomed over the intercom.

“Right there, Boss,” I said back.

I walked in. Gaynelle and the Board President were looking over my promo.

“Hi,” I said.

“Gaynelle has been telling us about your idea on Scotland. I’m Bob Sorenson, you might remember me,” the big man said, holding out his hand.

I took it. His ring hurt.

“Kenna Alford,” I said. “Yes, Mr. Sorenson, I do.”

“I’m Bob. No need for formality with me. Well, we think your idea has merits.” He smiled, his fingers spread out in a way I imagined might cover a bagpipe.

“Oh?” My heart beat faster.

Gaynelle gave me a look as only Gaynelle could.

“We would consider the operation, but we need to run a preliminary pilot. We could do the studies for the next six months and then launch a project if the studies indicated. That’s the first scenario. Or we could send you to Scotland for three months. Travel’s on your own.”

My hope dipped. “If we wait for studies, we lose momentum. I mean, we’ll miss the lead launch story. How many times does a 700-year-old jewel of a story fall in your lap?”

“True, true, but this 700-year-old story is a little esoteric.”

“We have royal watchers everywhere.” *Slow down*, I told myself.

“True, but we are an up-scale magazine, not a tabloid.”

“And Charlotte is overflowing with intellectuals. I wouldn’t hint at lowering—” I said, right before Bob waved me silent. He knew all the possibilities.

“We could give you \$2000 per month for those two articles. Then if it proves financially feasible, and lifts our bottom line, we could extend the contract.”

“And raise the income?” I bartered.

“If it works, possibly.”

“So, a thousand less than I hoped, nine months shorter than I hoped, and the same amount of work.” Out of the blue I thought of the year’s lease with three months left on it, less money to cover more. “I take all the risks and cover all the expenses?” I asked for mercy.

“We could maybe up it to \$2200 a month and give you up to \$500 for expenses directly related to the stories. You could take one of our older laptops.”

I was floored. He might as well have knocked me down with Mama’s old iron skillet.

“You have a contract you want me to sign?” I asked, full of bluster.

“We’ll have one written up by Friday should you give me the go ahead,” he said, leaning back in his chair, twisting the pen cap, his bluster outstripping mine by a city mile.

“Let me sleep on it.” My punctured tires deflated to a level as low as at Tom’s curt sendoff. “Must return to my counting house,” I said, throwing Gaynelle an accusing glance.

Back at my place I worked on figures. They added up to knee-deep prayer.

* * *

Next morning the figures looked worse. A desperate woman, I talked to my brother. Robert was negative. At lunch I called my landlord for a release from my lease. He said ‘no.’

At work I looked so beaten up, Gaynelle looked worried. *Did she think I would flip out on her?*

At break, she caught me and motioned me into her room. “I’ve thought of a way to help you a little more, but it’s under the table each month,” Gaynelle confided.

“You know my scruples won’t let me accept that. But thanks,” I said, preparing to leave. “If Bob ever found out, he’d fire you on the spot. Then three months would turn to one. Guess I’m back to the pilot project.”

“And miss the Stone’s return?” she said, singing my song.

“True. I’m going begging. That rate means *South* gets no exclusives, though.” It was all moot, anyhow; it was totally untenable. “Tell Bob yes,” I said. “Mustn’t lose two days.”

“You’re on,” she said, smiling and standing in dismissal.

Back at my apartment, I called Douglas. Begging was not too low for me, it seemed.

“Go for it,” she told me. “You won’t get another opening in life like this one.”

“You’re right, but they’re so tight. I don’t know how I’ll make it. I could use my checking account to cover the flight over, but I wouldn’t have any reserves, and I don’t think I can live on what the magazine has offered. It’s crazy.”

“That’s your answer, Kenna. Crazy is the green light. Go ahead! It will fall into place. Where’s your faith?”

“Ouch,” I said. “You really think so?”

“It has the unmistakable marks of the best adventure of your life.”

“Or the worst, as my brother intimated. Heck, Tom-the-Ex actually put a curse on me. Thanks, Douglas. I just can’t see the money.” I shook my head into the phone.

“Never can at first. Remember saying you’d show me? Isn’t this the magic moment?”

“I guess so,” I said, realizing this was my tornado. “No fear, just leap?”

“You’ve never been timid.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m jealous, actually.”

“Love you, Douglas. Are you coming to grips with losing your dad?”

“Not really, but we’re all sharing sweet memories, letters, poems, and pictures.”

“And all his funny sayings,” I chimed in.

We hung up with me more energized than ever to go, but no promises of money, and new needs I hadn't thought of originally kept popping to mind.

* * *

Thursday evening I gave my landlord one month's notice. Friday morning I picked up the contract I needed to sign from Gaynelle who was wearing a red pants suit, and black stilettos. Really, she needed to be a fashion editor.

“So you're making it work, are you?” she asked, friendly. “We need to synchronize our plans before you go. Little details like your final day with us,” she remonstrated.

“I will, Gaynelle, I will.” I smiled at her, ready to cry. I couldn't tell her the plans were totally impossible, even though I pushed ahead as though they were. Staying grew more untenable by the moment.

In my office, I decided to set my flight plans. Suddenly I thought of Triple Tours. Why not try them to see if they would offer a special deal. The lady was real nice. She talked me into a one-way ticket which cut my cost in half, plus a discount. No savings for staying a year, so why a return ticket now? That done, I scheduled a truck to take my belongings to Lebanon, where Douglas said I could use a room in the old barn to store my things.

That night I went to church and shared my dreams and my plight with a trusted few, but everyone prayed for me and wished me well. They hugged me, and a few pressed some wadded bills into my hands. One lady gave me contact numbers for friends she had who lived in Edinburgh. The money didn't amount to much, and my time was giving out.

Saturday morning my landlord dropped by. He had had a change of heart and wouldn't charge me for the final two months in my lease. A letter arrived in the mail with a payout from a part of my father's estate I didn't know was left. This spoke hope to my heart, and

more, significance—as though the plan were (in Presbyterian terms)—predestined. Maybe this rope would thread a needle, after all.

I drove to the ABC store for boxes—found lots of boxes, all sizes. Back home, I packed things away. I pulled out my set of turquoise luggage, started doing washes, and packing everything in them—one suitcase for winter things, one of summer-winter-fall.

I'll send these ahead to the castle. It will make travel simpler. Books. What would I do with my lovely, precious books? How would I function without them for a year?

I pulled out my Scottish picture books and leafed through them, literally salivating at the ancient stone castles anchored in cold blue sea. Douglas would let me store these with my photographs in our house where they wouldn't be exposed to the elements. I separated out the few I would need for my work and boxed them up, ready to send.

Finally, progress made, I sat down with an old, warmed-over hamburger and fries and read the research and letters. The genealogy referred to McAllister and Campbell connections, inter-connections, and fights. The castle I had contacted and would be staying in was in Lasswade and had ties to both. My book of McAllister would accompany me. I would leave a photocopy in a safe deposit box when I got there.

Then I remembered that I had a rental account on our old home. I couldn't really gut it, in case it needed repairs or the government needed tax money. Still, I could dip from it from time to time.

Sunday morning I drove to a Presbyterian church of mostly strangers. Several people greeted me who knew Robert and “who I was.” He appeared, taking me out to dinner, and trying to argue me out of it. That worked; firmed my resolve like nothing else.

Monday at lunchtime I surprised myself by picking up my plane ticket. I could always find a way back home, couldn't I? Call me crazy, but when I made that momentous decision, the heavens opened to provide.

I turned in the contract to Gaynelle.

Monday night my brother called to yell at me again for foolishly de-railing my “up-and-coming” career as a photo-journalist. “Yes, Robert, I know, Robert, but I’ll still be working for *South! Inc.*,” I explained.

“Oh? Well, I guess that only just barely saves you from rampant stupidity,” he said.

“If I find our Scottish connections, I won’t mention you,” I said.

“Hearty-har-har,” he said, in comic book language. “You’re crazy to do this. Mark my words, nothing good will ever come of putting yourself in danger.”

I thrived on fights with my brother, but his prophecy unnerved. That made two negative prophecies I’d gotten lately.

“Count on you,” I said.

“I won’t pay to put you in harm’s way,” he said.

From that point on, things took a serious turn, and a vague uneasiness held my hand.

It seems that the family reputation that concerned Uncle had been a murder, and not just any old murder, but one within the family on one side of our Scottish heritage. I don’t know what others believe, but blood cries out from the grave, I think. I hoped I wasn’t walking straight into a family curse. My decision, however, had that feeling of inevitability about it that I have only experienced once before in my life.

Chapter 2: The Two Faces of Blackheart Heights

“Houses seem to remember. Some rooms oppress us with a sense of lives...lived in them.” –Emma Frances Dawson, *An Itinerant*

House, And Other Ghost Stories

Blackheart Heights beckoned me to come, but soon turned its malevolent backside as I walked past it into the glen. Glancing backwards, its gloomy presence pursued. Its plummet

vaulted imposing spires into the clouds. Darkness filled its windows. Either the castle or someone inside watched me. An eerie sense pervaded the atmosphere.

Before me, lavender-to-mauve heather bloomed. Silvery fog floated like film, achieved an effect of elegant ghosts in levitation. White had never looked so evil as when intertwining briars with murderous edges anchored the vision to the ground. Weeds turned landscape into legend. True to its fickle reputation, the Scottish weather fairy released jolts of electric blue before clouds closed.

Excitement filled the air this fall 1996—the year I, Kenna Eleanor Alford, arrived in the land of my ancestors—along with a noisy drove of Americans, Canadians, Europeans, and Asians. We Scottish descendants with our freckles and auburn hair gathered to celebrate England's war trophy, The Stone of Destiny, being returned to Scotland after 700 years away.

Blackheart Heights was a castle of Campbell lineage, situated in Tarbert along Loch Fyne. Campbell was my ancestry from 7 generations back, but no one knew from where, exactly, he hailed, or what his lineage was, but that he was connected to McAllister's, another name with ownership in the area. It was in fact the town my 7th back ancestor hailed from on the McAllister side. Scots encouraged the American connection, wooed their grandchildren back to events like the Stone's return—no matter how little proof remained to back ancestral claims. Records had sunk, waterlogged from wrecks at sea or been consumed by parish fires.

Shivers of uneasiness climbed my spine, prickled my neck. I looked behind me.

A bird skittered away. I shook to settle my nerves.

Spying a rock of rectangular proportion similar to the Stone of Destiny almost hidden among the hydrangeas, I cradled my camera in my left hand, squatted so tightening jeans lent support to the crouch. I framed the subject, angling in on a prominent tree branch behind the rock, panning left and right.

I framed the rock from all sides, assessed which angle highlighted the colors and rock

facets best in the forest half-light. How much it resembled the stone of renown mattered little. Photographing it was prep work for the upcoming shoot at Edinburgh Castle. I adjusted camera settings and set the tripod.

My trip to Scotland could yield a career windfall and a bumper crop of photographs. Maybe 1996 would prove Scottish history books' most significant year—and mine.

Amongst hundreds of jostling tourists, time to perform would be at a premium, so I speculated that a long camera lens and a press card might intimidate when time came. I leaned on my left hip, flung right leg out in balance near the tripod. Focus, adjust. Not quite right. Finally, the gallery look I wanted: displayed in viewfinder, a common stone immortalized.

I lowered the tripod, seated the camera, leaving the aperture open for a long exposure. The sun hid; darkness dropped.

It produced a half hour later. I fussed to set contrast on the corner, framed it in a lacework of thorns. Peace surged through me, countered fear. A twisted limb thrust forward, truncated by fog. I snapped it with fog thickening like supernatural smoke from behind.

“Done,” I said, sitting on the stone, snapping lens cap into place, reloading my gear.

A whole year in Scotland was a romantic notion. A single gal on the rebound could get lonely in a not-so-happening place.

Tom's words still stung, “You're old-fashioned. I'm modern. I don't love you, anymore.”

Douglas's invitation to save family reputation got me here, walking in Island fog.

Stunning flora and fauna marked a new beginning, forecast new adventures. An uphill battle with Gaynelle and *South!* Inc. had thrust grief aside. Thank goodness this path was well-marked. My life wasn't.

“Photograph the Stone of Destiny and British royals taking it home to Scotland.” I was on assignment to a coronation stone. “And look up Nicolette. She's a great singer of Nigerian

descent,” Gaynelle had said. “Born in Glasgow.”

John Bailiol was the last Scottish king crowned on it in 1296. King Edward had stolen it as spoil of war in 1296. Ebony, grey, gold, or red, limestone took on a red or gold sheen. Descriptions of the Stone abounded, giving rise to more questions than they answered.

The big uneasy returned. What danger possibly lurked here? Get a grip, I fussed with myself. No one knew my business, or what of worth I carried on me. How could they? I’d concealed letters and jewelry in my luggage. Besides, I had copies of the real stuff. The locket I wore was real; Grandmother gave it to me containing a faded picture of a baby she thought her mother. A cameo was in the trunk. I wore a signet ring concealed on a chain beneath my blouse which Robert had relinquished from his inheritance. My great aunt said nobody would wear something that ugly, but a ring with that many precious stones couldn’t be ugly.

Douglas’s family letters were tied with twine around a note saying, “found behind chimney in plunder room, inside wall with various letters.” A few love letters that escaped burning of Grandmother’s and Grandfather’s love correspondence and some from a century earlier that had real historical significance were there.

On assignment as a double agent or triple agent—call me an international cold case spy, solving personal issues on behalf of Douglas’s father, my Uncle and adopted father; this was a favor to disengage my mind from current losses and special issues for Gaynelle. I would photograph the return of a 700-year theft, clear up an unsavory family scandal of two and a half centuries ago. *No problem. I needed to know what sort of people we came from, genes, legacy, and letters.*

My brain whirred. *I felt an attack coming on.* I laid the camera down, massaged temples as a battle scene played out. “Scottish fits,” Tom had said, laughing. *Visions they were, and I hoped that’s all they were.*

Screams, barked orders, metal clashing...soldiers neared a fort on a steep, rocky crag.

Bodies plummeted to the sea. Just as suddenly as it came, it went, bequeathing a headache. Arteries pounding and throbbing, I saddled my equipment and strode on, disoriented.

“Eccentric, family bound,” Tom had said as though that were a bad thing.

“Are you lost?” a deep male voice intruded from the present right at my elbow. “May I guide you back to the castle?”

I shrieked, jumped, and tripped over onto him.

“My apologies,” he said, laughing, taking me by the shoulders and setting me straight.

He checked himself before he literally burst loose in a fit of laughter. “I’m not nearly as scary as all that. Thanks for thinking so, however.”

“Give warning when you approach someone in fog thick as a scene from Macbeth,” I said, laughing, and touching my chest where the ring hung. I studied him as I answered. His blond hair beamed in the darkness and his eyes, a piercing blue, studied me far too intently.

“This isn’t Cawdor Castle,” he said.

“I’m Kenna Alford,” I said, offering my hand.

He took my hand in his gloved one and stood still. “You have an unusual name for an American...it’s straight out of old Scotland.” His grip was softer than I expected.

“Yes, I’m Scottish American, like a lot of the Americans here. Your castle advertised for me and lured me in. “And your name?” I prompted, my hand still in his, thinking his comment a tad cheeky.

“Lane.” He dropped my hand and began walking again.

Impulsive sort.

“The garden is spectacular. We have rhododendron and mountain laurel on my acres at home, but I’ve never seen aqua hydrangea before. The tree bark and leaves have unusual colors, as well,” I said, contrasting the vegetation here to the hills behind my house in North Carolina.

“What were you doing out here?” he asked.

“I was exploring, catching flora and fauna on film.” I pointed to my camera in case he hadn’t seen it. “Am I in a no-trespass zone?”

“Technically, no, but it’s best not to wander too far in the fog,” he admonished me. “Many a good man, woman, and child have disappeared, never to return, in a fog like this.”

“Yig,” I shuddered. “‘Photographer Looking for Stone Lost in Scotland.’ I can see the headlines now.”

He turned in frank appraisal. “The Stone of Scone returns to Scotland, but not to Scone? Not much to see...only a rectangular piece of red rock.”

“What a story, though,” I said, warming to the subject. “A coronation stone returns to Scotland after 700 years, given back by the English who stole it to crown their own on. From Westminster Abbey to Edinburgh Castle comes a stone reputed to speak. No hype is unreasonable for a stone that speaks, I must say.”

“Lia Fáil, the Stone Speaks.” His voice, rich and rhythmic with Celtic tones, deepened as he imitated a drum roll. “Brrrum, brrrum, brrrum, pum, pum,” he said, shaking his head and striking an imaginary drum with imaginary sticks.

I clapped in appreciation of his performance. “Did ‘Jacob’s pillow,’ really speak?” I dangled research.

“So I’ve been told since a lad. The Jewish connection is a wee far-fetched. But ye niver know.” He closed his eyes and rubbed his hands together. “Jeremiah died somewhere—could ha’ been Ireland easily as anywhere. His only gravestone lies there.”

“I see,” I said, not seeing at all, but stealing a look at him. His skin was ruddy and suntanned for October, and his chin had a chiseled look.

“Tales abound on the Stone. Some say what they’re bringing home isn’t the real one. It was stolen from Edinburgh Castle in 1950, ye know, and earlier in the ‘30’s, but it was

retrieved by—well, would’n ye know, here I am walking with a pretty girl and borin’ her to tears,” he said, stopping the flow abruptly.

Warmth ran through my veins.

“Do you flirt with the girls as part of Blackheart Heights’ tourist package?”

“Only the girls who like it,” he said, with a wide grin.

Ooh. Patronizing, wasn’t he? Sure of himself, too. I glared at him.

“And here we are, at your entrance. I’ll be using the workman’s door,” he said, nodding to the right in vague indication of his direction, mockery in his eyes.

I wanted to slap him. Instead, I said nothing, but watched as he walked off.

As if he knew I was looking, he turned and called back, “Ye’ll be wanting to practice yer running more than yer snipping of pictures—the Lang Stairs at Edinburgh Castle and its surrounds are a solid mass of stone built with twists and turns, steps running up, down, going this way and that.”

Go on, you irritating personage, with your know-it-all insider’s tip. Nothing I said gave you permission to flirt with me.

###

Upstairs in my oversized and drafty room, I booted up my laptop. I pulled out a disc of research I had brought with me and loaded it. I brought out the copy of the handwritten letter from Alexander McAllister, whose sister Isabella was my 7th great grandmother, and first known Scottish ancestors to land on American soil, she of my direct McAllister line.

Written to a ‘Coll’ who must have been his father, he recounted his voyage and losing his wife at sea. The envelope showed no post cancellation so it must not have been sent. I wondered why. One similar had been. Maybe it was a rough draft. It bore only brick-red water stains which would make the centerpiece of a magnificent watercolor painting. Had they not renovated the fireplace at Lebanon, all this wonderful history that my cousin and I had had the

good fortune to live in would never have been found.

The dinner bell interrupted my reverie and I stuffed the letter back into its cubbyhole in my suitcase. I washed hands and put on lipstick.

Peering out my door, others from our group approached, so I locked up, and mingled in. Doors closed up and down the hall. The magic flutter of dinner excitement had arrived.

“Hello, Kenna. I saw you catching Scotland on film.” Sally grabbed the banister rail on the right, and I followed her.

“Guilty as charged.”

“There must be sun behind all that fog,” she said, pointing to my face. “Your freckles are quite visible.”

“Really? It is said the leopard cannot change her spots.”

“Nor should she. Freckles go great with auburn hair.”

By now we were downstairs in a grand foyer, looking into a dining room the size of a house. Many congregated in a buffet line that wound into the foyer. We were a compatible group containing a honeymooning couple, a professor working on a paper, Canadian and Asian tourists. A few were young people, a few vintage. I fell in right behind Sally and Bryan, who pushed me in front of them.

“Photographer, are you, Kenna?” Bryan asked. “Saw you with tripod earlier.”

It seems everyone had hidden in the heather.

“Yes, I’m on assignment from a magazine, *South!* Inc., where I work,” I said. “I paint stuff on walls, too.”

“I have no experience with your world, I fear,” he said. “But it sounds as though you work a lot.” Bryan was plain-looking, but pleasant.

“Work is right. No sipping wine and eating cheese,” I said. “What do you do?”

“I have a software company.”

“What drew you to Scotland’s festivities?”

“Heritage and history,” he said. “There are a lot of us scattered in countries abroad, but I’ve yet to see a school teach the history. Did you study Scottish happenings in the school you came from?”

“No. I’m from outside Fayetteville in North Carolina, near where the first Scottish settlers landed. You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But not a drop,” I said, shaking my head.

Bryan balanced his notebooks.

“Go find a place and we’ll all sit together,” Sally said. “You’ll never make it through the line with those, Bryan. Hurry up, I smell food.”

He acknowledged her and found a spot, falling in behind me.

I pointed to the walls. “I’d like to reproduce those colors intermingled, the old look,” I said, “in my spare time.”

Bryan pointed toward the eight-foot portraits lining the inner castle walls. “Aren’t they amazing? That is one fierce gentleman.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” Sally broke in. “He looks like our host.”

I checked out her observation. “You’re right!”

We laughed.

Soon the three of us emerged with full plates. Bryan sat down first. *Not from the South. That would be bad manners.* As if reading my mind, Bryan jumped back up to pull out the massive chair for me. He got Sally’s, as well. I judged him too quickly.

Servants circled the tables bearing hot tea or cold beverages. I took hot tea with cream, like the natives.

“I assume you’ll travel to Edinburgh for St. Andrews Day?”

“That’s why I came,” he said. His smile drooped to one side. He looked sad.

“Greetings, greetings,” a booming voice halted the buzz.

“Please continue eating while I say a few words in welcome,” the owner said, rolling the ‘r’ in ‘word.’ My name is Farquhard Campbell, the owner of Blackheart Heights. You are seated in an original room of the castle, built with native stone and pitch. The gentleman hanging behind me is my great-great grandfather. You are welcome to travel throughout the castle to any spots not roped off. Please respect the roped-off areas as no-traffic zones for your own safety. Likewise, the grounds are marked for your walking pleasure. Do observe the marked areas, however, and take a little time to identify them when it isn’t foggy. You might miss them when it is. We don’t want our guests falling off a precipice into the sea.”

We all laughed.

I poked Sally. “He has my ancestor’s name who emigrated from Scotland to NC in the 1700’s.”

She nodded, and I ate bits of haggis bathed with dark brown gravy, small potatoes covered with it, cooked with aromatic herbs. Sally was moving her food around her plate, nibbling. Bryan ate heartily. To me, Scottish food was tasty.

“The weather is unseasonably warm this October, and we hope that trend will continue through to the end of November. God knows we Scots don’t like to spend money on heat. You’ll be noticing your rooms have no heat after 9 p.m. Often the castle is closed in winter. By the way, the name of our castle—Blackheart Heights—is due to the grief of the one who built it in the 1830’s, not as some say, due to Campbell mischief.”

“I thought the castle was older than that.”

“Well, it was built atop the ruins of another castle, but—”

I had looked up ‘blackheart’ before I came, and the explanation was an expression of sadness or grief on losing a loved one, so that darkness covered everything, hid the sad person and trapped him where he was unable to express emotions. It fit my current persona.

“Why is England returning the stone?” someone asked, interrupting the private thread.

“Good question. Trying to buy good will, I suppose,” he said.

“I’ve heard that you must return it when England wants to crown a royal,” I said.

“True indeed, Daughter. We are a subjugated people. And the English must put their heels to our necks, we are such a rebellious breed,” he said, pausing to take a swig of ale.

Good-humored laughter rippled across the room.

“But to put a finer point on it, Lassie, probably because Robbie the Pict stirred them up with all his legal badgering about who owned the Stone, the Queen or the state.”

“Tell us more,” I said.

“Yes, well, at present day, on the spot on Moot Hill where the kings of Scotland were crowned, there stands a clump of trees minus the stone ‘reverently kept for the kings of Alba,’ an old text goes. Called ‘Lia Fail,’ ‘the speaking stone,’ it supposedly named the kings who would be enthroned. It is called many names, Stone of Scone (pronounced skoon fer ye foreigners) and Stone of Destiny,” he said, pausing.

His spiky eyebrows furrowed, and in a second, looking from him to the portrait, I pinpointed an ancestral spirit of fierceness. Not knowing then how recent plaids were, I pictured him with his plaid flying, loosened scabbard swinging by its hilt.

“King Edward I stole our rock 700 years ago. Now they return it, divested of its power to bless Scotland, having stolen our peerage permanently,” he said.

“Strong sentiment, sir. Does the stone have real power, Mr. Campbell?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. Real or imagined...all the same to some. And that is the point: our stone was kept under the seat of England’s throne chair. What makes it powerful? That it spoke the name of the rightful monarch? That it was Jacob’s pillow when he slept and saw angels descend the ladder? That it made a pilgrimage?”

“All of the above,” I said.

“Correct answer,” he said. “Or, just the story that it did.”

Now I understood Lane's babbling on about Jeremiah's Irish tombstone. Suddenly, the hum of voices filled the dining room. I wanted to know everything about the Stone of Destiny, but I supposed I would have to wait. So I dipped into caramelized carrots relishing every bite that I scooped into my mouth with a flourish.

"I knew you Scots were superstitious, but—," the old Brit across from me said.

"You Brits must be as well, since you stole it, and now must order it back for royal coronations in England," our host countered. He took a large gulp of his ale and clanked his tankard down on the table.

"Nonsense," the Brit continued. "It's all psychological. Since you lay such importance on it, we took it to assure your submission to our government, and to peace."

"Oh, that old saw, the war-mongering Scots." His mouth twitched upward one-sidedly and his eyes twinkled. Was this a show planned for the tourists? If so, then, well-played.

"I understand the Royals will converge in Edinburgh," a new voice, one of the servants, said, perhaps in order to abort the confrontation in progress.

"Yes, indeed, whatever royalty will come. I'll wager we'll get no Queen, nor any Princess Diana. And do not forget, the Scottish Bards will be playing and there'll be dancing in the Great Ball Room in just over thirty-three hours, what's a lot more important for now. You will surely want to see it. I hope all my guests will attend...if ye haven't bought your ticket, there's still time," he said, holding our attention with an upraised spoon.

"Tomorrow, there are many activities to choose from—you can join a castle tour in the morning where we'll lock ye in the dungeon—" he paused for effect with a wicked smile, "or you can do archery, use the shooting range, go range riding, falconing, golfing, whatever suits yer fancy. No dungeon was built in 1890, by the way."

The engineer I knew as Lane interjected, "The falconing I'll be leading."

"Yes, avail yourselves of all opportunities. Here's to Scotland for aye," our host said,

as he lifted his glass, “and to England, of course,” he added, acknowledging the Brit across from me, with his glass lifted to a lower spot than the toast to Scotland. We all toasted with our ale glasses and emptied them. As the people drifted out, I followed.

Lane, who sat close to Mr. Farquhard, rested a hand on Mr. Farquhard’s shoulder. “We’ve had a setback on the East Wall,” I heard him say as I walked by.

“Of what sort?” I heard the castle laird ask, or so I called him in ignorance at the time.

I was not within earshot, which only piqued my curiosity all the more. Where was the East Wall? And to what sort of setback could he be referring?

Chapter 3:

Food and Games on the Grounds

“Every house is in a dark wood, every house has a wicked witch in it, doesn't matter if she looks like a fairy godmother...”—Jane Smiley

I stood beside the portrait of a Campbell wife, a 20-foot oil framed in oversized gold gilding, only half listening to the tour remarks, but thought I picked up that it was a Raeburn.

From the elegant lady, whose presence was supposed to fill the castle, and did, we moved on to the men, children, and family crests. Sally and Bryan and I walked around with them to learn the beginning and renovations of one room after another, formal to casual. We finished first floor, and then second. In the middle of the lecture, a wraith-like creature ran past us and up to the next floor, I assumed. No one called her down or singled her out, so I assumed she had the run of the place.

We listened to stories about the famous artists who had painted them, which inhabitant had bought or given them to the estate and when, after the fire had destroyed the first castle. Campbell’s and McAllister’s had lived here, a fact which meant a lot to me, indicating that I was hot on the trail of fulfilling my destiny as a spy for family internal affairs of my own.

Most of us found the stairs sturdy enough. The railing was carved in magnificence. I did not remember the names of architects or carvers.

On the third floor, minus a few followers, we went into several chambers, one the bedroom of the woman in the 20-foot portrait. There, playing on the floor was the little girl with her coloring book and crayons. No one minded her, and no interactions were made.

The guide pointed to the rich bedcovers and beautiful drapes, but for one, which was tattered. No matter what they did to replace or fix it, the guide said, the next day it would once again be shredded in long strips. Now this was creepiness of the worst sort to me, but for them, merely an added attraction to Blackheart Heights.

I walked close to the girl and asked her what she was coloring, but she ignored me without shame, so I left it alone.

Next we went back downstairs, and took a trip to the cellar. “Down below, the newly constructed basement actually connects to the former dungeon from the first castle. You can see the black on the timbers, if you choose to descend one more floor to that. Naturally, I continued to the old section, getting a good feel for it, once my eyes adjusted to the dark and turned on their own lights. Yes, the dungeon had been used with fetters, chains, and the lot. Not a history to form the most pleasant castle personality, I thought. I hadn’t realized I’d signed in to one of Scotland’s haunted abodes.

The tour guide took tips and I left with Bryan and Sally for the activities taking place on the grounds. Music was playing, dancers were dancing, and drums beating in the nippy fall air. We walked from booth to booth. Target practice caught and held me, so I monopolized one station getting a good upper arm workout, lifting the heavy bow and arrow and letting her rip. The event coordinator posed me for a photo which she snapped so I could send it to my editor, Gaynelle.

Sally and I wandered over to the falconing setup. Wonderful taupe and black feathers showed off the falcons. I love birds, I thought, snapping a few of my own shots. I wanted to try this sport of falconing out, but was reluctant to show my ignorance with Lane chairing this event. He caught me observing him. I averted my gaze and continued to another booth. His ego did not need any contributions from me.

“Come on over and try it, Kenna,” Lane called out.

“Later!” I said, turning and waving.

“Ooh, look, the disc throwing,” Sally said. “Let’s watch!”

We watched hulky-bulky, hurly-burley men throw discs, until a fight broke out between the competitors and Mr. Farquhard came to break it up.

We passed food booths and I bought a meat pie and Scottish shortbread.

Sally and Bryan compared the Highland games to those at home. Both had attended major events, some of which compared rather favorably in the States.

“Sounds wonderful, I just never did them,” I said. “I thought the families doing that were all posturing, making themselves out to be more important than they were.”

“That’s odd,” Bryan said. “I mean an odd way to think about heritage.”

“I guess it is. Part of my family claimed their Scottish blood with great pride, but they had a double dose from both sides. You know, their Scottish blood was thicker than ours. And the Presbyterian Church called Scottish ‘munisters’ who could roll their ‘r’s.”

“That’s funny, Kenna,” Sally said. “My clan, the Stuarts, enjoyed good Scotch. But mostly we just hung out.”

“I hung out at historical tents,” Bryan said. “Found some amazing materials—letters in their families for close to a century. I traveled to Boone, to Highland Games every year. The call of the clans was awesome. From nearby came the sound of drums and bagpipes playing, and suddenly, a kilted warrior appeared up on a far hill at its crest. After a short wait, drums

rolled, pipes blared, and then the next appeared on a horse beside him. And on and on it went in good Scottish melodrama. Oh, Scots know how to pump the adrenalin.”

“Awesome,” I said, “my heart is already pounding. And here we are, at the real thing.”

“You’re too easy to hook,” Sally said.

The silent Patrick now spoke up. “Do you know the official animal of Scotland?”

“No,” we each chimed in.

“Give up?” he asked.

“Yes, Patrick, we all give up,” I said.

“The unicorn!”

“No!” I said. “What a whimsical people. The unicorn is a favorite beast of my own. The one of a kind thing, you know.”

Patrick prattled on, proud of what his research had turned up. “Yes, first the unicorn and second, a red lion. But the unicorn won out!”

Right next to that was the booth for collecting money for banquet tickets. Most of us paid up and received our tickets to attend the medieval banquet the following night.

“I’m headed to the historical tents to find my clan. See you later, Sally and Kenna,” Bryan said.

“Okay, Bryan, Sally, Patrick—I’m leaving to take some more pictures,” I announced, heading in the opposite direction. I jogged toward the front entrance, down the gently sloped hill; the extra camera weight making me realize how out of shape I was. I played tourist, walking toward the castle in zig-zags, lying on the ground at odd angles.

I took close-ups of the front entrance, the huge door with its stone steps, wrought iron hinges, massive lock and door handle. Finished for the day, I went inside and up to my room to leave my camera safely on the desk.

Refreshed after lying down ten minutes, I emerged, picking up my camera as I left.

Downstairs in the kitchen I scared up the Russian lady from the cooking crew.

“Where is the East Wall?” I asked.

“Oh, you don’t know that? It starts just outside here.”

When I looked puzzled, she pointed out the window. “Go out the dining room door and you are at East Wall.”

“Thanks, I will,” I said, striking out on my own.

“Wait up!” I heard a voice call, and Lane trotted up to me.

“Hi!” I said. “Have your falcons gone home to roost?”

“Indeed, they have. They were quite tired of it, y’know.”

“No, I don’t know much about falcons.”

“Come by their house, and I’ll teach ye to recognize the different birds.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“Ye’ll be needing to allow a couple of hours.”

“All right. I will, then. Tell me about the different walls to the Castle. Which one are we walking along now?”

“This’d be the East Wall. It stretches on for a bit. North, south, now you have it.”

“It’s a pretty wall. Is it as old as the castle?”

“Older, it’s part of the first castle—oh, some parts are new—it needs upkeep. There’s one section we’ll have to fix again, or replace.”

“Oh,” I said, pausing, hoping for more information.

“Yes. Seems some idiots have vandalized it. I’ll show you; it looks like they took sledgehammers to it in one spot.”

“Whatever for?”

“For drunken fun, most likely.”

We walked on awhile before coming upon it.

“Here ye are.”

We stopped.

“Tops my list of things to keep up with. If I were at all paranoid, I’d say it was to put me in a bad light in me engineering and stone masonry.”

“Are you a stone mason, too?”

“No, not really. Just have to get it done. Castles cost a mint to fix, though.”

“Scumbags.”

“My sentiments, exactly.”

I photographed the breach.

“Hey, I might need a copy of that for insurance, so they’ll be sure to pay.”

“No problem, Lane. I’ll get two prints.”

Everything I had photographed had rocks in it. My brother and I had been rock collectors, each one of us thinking we would find treasure. We fought over our rocks until Mother would shake her head in despair.

“Why would anybody fight over rocks? They’re free.”

Gemologists had been staking their claims and guarding rocks, forever. Two countries held a 700-year fight over just one rock. And burly men had thrown them around all afternoon. Oh, yes, and a fight broke out over the competition.

Lane was suffering what vandals had done to rocks. And I, odd woman out, stood in the middle watching. We wound our way back to the public side, the West Wall.

“Thanks for the tour,” I said.

He cocked his head and gave a half smile.

Chapter 4:

Celtic Pomp and Pageantry

“O Nights and banquets of the gods!”—Horace, *Satires*, Book II

This evening I would wear a satin teal gown, teal to the green side more than the blue that went not just with my red hair but my green eyes. A memory of my mother’s beaded dress I had tried on as a teen floated to the surface. I looked too good in it to wear it. “Too mature,” Mom had said, under her breath. I loved Mother, but she was stern. *Mom, I’m mature enough to wear teal satin.*

Looking in the mirror, I re-positioned red strands that fell into my eyes and sprayed them in place. I added the cameo to the dress my Grandmother had given me. I fastened on a gold anklet someone had convinced me was sexy before slipping into golden heels. Antique gold earrings, a pat of iridescent powder on my eyelids, and voilà, a new person emerged.

As I opened the door, I became aware of a cacophony of sounds and intermingled smells weaving up the stone passageways, wafting out the windows, luring invited guests lingering outside into the castle’s inner sanctum, the dining hall. I walked to the window, checked out arriving guests, and listened to names called out in greeting.

Whenever there is action, I must run in, satisfy curiosity. Tonight *I had to look.*

Camera held securely, I ran downstairs. Tartan colors clashed in wonderful playoff of pattern and color. Tin whistles piped high and oboes throbbed low. Musicians played mandolins and tuned fiddles, punctuated by hard shoe soles tapping stone.

“You look pretty, miss,” a young man called out.

“Thank you,” I said.

Banquet tables abounded, filling two long lines on the far sides of the room.

A cutout area was staged near center for musicians. Remaining tables were set at perpendicular odds to those long tables on the right. Candlesticks were wound with ivy; large bowls displayed centerpieces on ice. It was like a medieval banquet in 1996. Up went the camera, meant to immortalize tartans and plaids, crests and heraldry.

Discordant notes of practicing musicians set up a medley that sounded like a Scottish Stravinsky. High heels clacked in staccato outbursts. I made two musicians pose for me and wrote down their particulars for my magazine, *South! Inc.*

Testing wires and strings against frets, one or another listened for their individual sound. Every now and then a golden chord sounded from harp to cascade over scales. Now, however, bagpipes drowned out softer instruments. A dance troop practiced. Drums rolled over bagpipes. I used a chair as a tripod and clicked away.

Hunger aroused by aroma, I strode past the bar area, carts filled with fine wines and an array of Scotch brewed by the masters. I guessed steak for sure, a side, perhaps of haggis, catching the defining scent of haggis, sweet carrots, potatoes simmered in rich, brown gravy.

Enough of that. I exited, relieved I could now enjoy the evening. I wondered if I would see Lane and what mood he would display, if maybe a flirting mood.

Entirely unconnected to the thought of Lane, my emotions skyrocketed and my pulse quickened. An electric pulse ran through with the banner announcement, *this is the moment and place for which you were born.*

I walked back to the stone banister leading upstairs and paused halfway up, turning around to savor the moment that Scottish lords and ladies—or would-be's—arrived for Tarbert's grand annual gala at Blackheart Heights, dressed to the nine's and ten's, none of whom I knew.

Back in my room, I waited, paced, walked back and forth to the window, tapped my fingers on the windowsill, straightened dust, stared in the mirror for the umpteenth time, and pulled curls back into my eyes for sophistication. *Why won't they come? I'm missing out.*

In answer, a knock sounded. Quicker than a flash, I burst open the door.

Brian jumped back. "Who is this?" he said.

Everyone laughed.

“Thanks for the compliment, Bryan. I was so impatient, I could scream.”

“You look lovely,” he said, “as long as you don’t scream.”

Oh dear, was this kilted man flirting with me?

Sally wore a golden taffeta gown. “Love your dress, Sally,” I said.

“Thanks—look at your shiny satin!”

We gals told the men in ecstatic tones how handsome kilts made them, leading naturally to the clichéd question, “what do they wear underneath?”

Curious minds bound us ladies together.

We floated down the majestic marble stairs, my hand caressing a centuries-old bannister rail. *Teal green warms white marble.* “I hope we can sit near the middle, close to the aisle,” I said.

“Strategic,” the lady from Vancouver said.

“Ladies and gentleman.” A cute Scot under the archways to the banquet room offered me his arm.

“Castle guests, you have a fine table for the evening. All of you follow us, please.”

He must have heard my wish, as he released me at a table opposite the band near an aisle. He held my chair for me, and I sat. Bryan sat beside me to my right, the lady from Vancouver across from him, Sally on his other side; the rest filled in.

Printed on the program was a picture of Robert Burns with one of his poems.

“We have a statue of Burns in Vancouver,” the lady said.

“Burns was about all the Scottish history I was taught,” I said. “We were practically all Scottish Highlanders populating Fayetteville, North Carolina, before it was called that, and its surrounds. You’d think they would have taught our immediate history, since our ancestors settled there.”

“Oh? My ancestors were forced to leave after Culloden.”

“And mine came way before, in the 1730’s from the Highlands.”

We tried unsuccessfully to converse, but the deafening noise level fragmented talk. I hummed along with Scottish songs I knew, nodded to table peers, admired well-turned out musicians and artsy figures, noting dress and hair styles. One man with blond dreadlocks stood out in his white tunic. An old Celtic look, I surmised.

Lost in observations, it took my companions awhile to grab my attention and refocus it. I felt the body heat of someone standing close.

“Kenna, Lane has been speaking to you for some time. Wake up!” Sally said.

“Oh, hello, Lane! Sorry.” I flashed him a smile. “My, such distinguished pins.”

“We Scots specialize in pins. Are you enjoying yourself?” He looked down at me.

“Oh, yes,” I said, sure his smile meant he was pleased I noticed. “This is the event to end all events, isn’t it? I can’t get enough. Fulfills my dreams. I think I lived here before, *déjà vu*.” I babbled.

“Scots specially love creating pageantry with food.” His eyes swept the group, landing a smile on me. This engineer and construction worker practiced an easy charm.

Everyone stopped talking to us. Lane leaned closer. “I have to sit at the head table, but would enjoy sharing coffee and desert, and perhaps a dance, later,” he said.

“As long as you find me,” I said, “I’ll look forward to ‘later.’”

“Until later.”

He nodded, stood tall, straightened his kilt and marched off. I couldn’t stop stealing glimpses of him. I kicked myself for admiring him. Sally gave me one of those looks women give. I picked up the menu with a smile and pretended not to notice.

Drinks & Canapés

Prosecco (2 glasses)

Mini scotch egg, mayo & pea shoots

Orkney black pudding, pork belly & toffee apple on toast

Rumbledethumps in crisp breadcrumbs

Smoked haddock & parsley cake tartare sauce

Dinner Menu

Lentil and carrot soup

Haggis, neeps & tatties, served with a traditional Dram

Filet of Scottish beef, glazed carrots, parsley potatoes and a wild mushroom gravy

Lemon posset with rhubarb, Scottish raspberries and shortbread

Tea & coffee served with an after dinner liqueur of your choice

½ bottle of wine per person

Iced Water served throughout dinner

Servers began bringing the courses.

Conversation, though absorbing, and the program entertaining, left me thinking about talking to Lane later and wondering if the moment would never come. We chatted among ourselves about history, music, the meal. We differed on the Scottish delicacies, and dessert choice.

A mournful tune sounded.

In soulful tones he proclaimed himself “a grandchild of Scotland.” I distinguished tin whistles, cellos, violins, and an odd moment of bones. I think there was a military snare drum and more. Meg McClanahan sang sad songs to the accompaniment of the harp. I thought my heart would rip from my chest as lyrics about leaving the Highlands, separations, loved ones lost in battle filled the air, songs about landlords “rack-renting,” raising rent to force people off their land.

But then, of course, the fiddlers would switch from dirges or piedrocks to livelier Scottish jigs, do dances like the Highland fling to liven us up again.

This was beginning to feel like home. Nagging grief over losing my parents, my uncle, the rejection of my boyfriend, washed over my mind and then, evaporated. I imagined I saw my uncle's blue-eyed smile. A peace new to me settled. Purpose formed, inchoate, but real. I had my bearings.

“May I join you?” a deep voice repeated a second time.

By now, he was pulling out Bryan's chair and sitting. Bryan was off dancing with Sally. Lane had brought his cup of coffee.

“Certainly, if the head table can spare you,” I said, sparring.

“Probably had enough of me by now. So, Kenna, tell me about yourself and your Scottish connections.”

“My, sure you're up for all that?” I straightened my chair and turned toward him.

His eyes expressed real interest.

Encouraged, I began. “My forebears were Highlanders. Col. Alexander McAllister was a tacksman who emigrated with his younger protégé Farquhard Campbell to find more land in 1736, returning in 1740. People differ on the dates. He was not the head of a clan, but he brought McAllister's, Campbell's, McNeill's, and servants with him. Our family received a 4000-acre tract of land and bought more from an original land grant, through a sale. They were all Presbyterians and settled up and down the Cape Fear River in what is now Cumberland, Bladen, and Harnett County.”

“So! Farquhard Campbell in yer family—what a coincidence. You're his descendant?”

“I am. Farquhard married Col. Alexander's sister Isabella seven generations back.”

“That is amazing. I may have gone to the pictures to see ‘Cape Fear.’ That the river?” he said, leaning close, touching my shoulder.

“One and the same, although I think they used another river in the film. My uncle took us on walks up the tributaries of the Cape Fear right behind our house, all the way to the River. Its mouth is at Wilmington and it was a busy thoroughfare in the day.”

“Is that where your ancestors arrived?”

“The port wasn’t finished in 1736. They traveled up from Southport, maybe.”

“We aren’t taught much about the emigrations in history courses in Scotland. What surprises me most, is that after all this time, you still care. America, the land of boundless opportunity and all, seems you’d be thinking future, not past.”

He smiled. His honesty crashed through my reserve into my soul, jolting me.

Silent pauses with eye contacts like that can be dangerous. I looked away from the extremely good-looking man with shocks of blond straw and saw several sets of eyes upon us. We didn’t let them in on the conversation

“Americans of Scottish descent are quite proud of their heritage. Scot and Presbyterian are synonyms. Every year, Scots converge in the mountains to celebrate Highland games.”

“You make the South alluring.”

“Well, I was lured into genealogical pursuits by my uncle, an expert. He donated his papers to the State Archives in North Carolina’s capital city, Raleigh. He and a distant cousin made findings they donated to Methodist College in Fayetteville, North Carolina.” I choked up suddenly, a trickle of tears unexpectedly showing.

“Did your uncle die recently?” Lane asked. “I had nae clue,” he said softly, patting the top of my hand.

I nodded a yes and composed myself.

“Several months ago, actually. He was a substitute daddy. When my parents died, he raised me. I grew up a sister to cousins.”

“So what does North Carolina look like?” Lane asked. “I live half years in the U.S., but my business takes me primarily to Boston.”

“It’s different from Boston, for sure. And we sound better,” I said, cheered up, taking a bite of shortbread, raspberries, and cream.

“Sounding better than they do would not be hard,” he said, smiling back.

“It doesn’t look like Sally is coming back,” I said, pointing to the place where she sat, “if you would like her dessert.” He took a bite. A waiter brought us coffee re-fills.

“We have wonderful highways. The area is flat—although behind the houses to the river one sees cliff tops. They were lifted out by tributaries which dug out clay ravines, with mountainous vegetation of heart leaf and pine. Rhododendron and mountain laurel bloom there in May...like they do here at Blackheart. My classmates hiked and camped behind our house.”

“North Carolina—next up for travel agenda.”

“A new influx of Scots,” I laughed and then took a sip of coffee.

“We are not a large country; a wave leaving us would show.”

“True, as it probably did long ago. I hear Scots have peopled the world, since.”

We sat in pleasant silence. I thought maybe I had judged him too hastily. He was nice, and not too horrendous a flirt.

“I promised you a dance.”

“Will it be the Highland fling?”

“Maybe, but we’ll start out with a slow dance. We are almost modern, here, and don’t just do ethnic dances.” He pulled me to my feet and led me onto the dance floor. Lane’s abrupt changes in mood took getting used to. He looked at me, and then put his arm on my shoulder as we danced slowly.

That dance lead into another one and another. A faster dance was called for, and Lane showed me how it was done.

“You catch on quick,” he said, with no smile.

I grew increasingly conscious of a calloused hand on my back, one finger off the teal-green dress and lightly on my bare skin. That alarm bell of danger I had always relied on sounded. My main question was, is the alarm sounding against him or against the shivers that registered on my shoulder?

We danced once more before the Scottish master of ceremonies spoke into the microphone that the evening’s entertainment was over and we would end the festivities with a round of Auld Lang Syne. We lifted a wee dram first, and then belted out with gusto, ‘Should auld acquaintance be forgot...’

“I’ll walk you to your room,” Lane said.

“All right.” I avoided eye contact. Lane didn’t ask. He told.

“Watch out; they’re pulling up cords,” he said, pushing away a cord in the aisle with his foot as we passed musicians disconnecting their wiring.

Outside the banquet hall we turned and ascended the massive staircase. He was quiet. As we rounded the hall to my room, a man I did not recognize stopped him.

“Lane!” he called.

Lane turned around, placing a hand on my shoulder. I was not released.

“Lane, I need to talk to you about your building outside. Your father wants a special lock put on the storage room, but I’ll show you tomorrow.”

“Ma’am,” he said, touching his hand to his head in salute.

“Will do,” Lane said.

Your father, your father. This man was annoying. He had deliberately hidden his relationship to the castle owner to me. Trying to be nice was hard now.

“You never told me you were Farquhard’s son,” I said, sounding ticked.

“No,” he said. His eyes twinkled with mischief.

“You let me believe you were a hired engineer.”

“And indeed, I am. I just happen to be his son as well. And upsetting your preconceptions is something I dinnae want to do,” he said, a smile growing on his face.

Growing to obnoxious proportions, I thought. Deliberately baiting me, was he? He humiliated and embarrassed me. It was unfriendly; maybe even the mark of a bully.

“Well, now you’ve had your fun with Miss Naïve American, I will thank you for the evening and say goodnight,” I said, gracefully flicking the edge of my satin gown so I wouldn’t fall.

He clutched my hand and pulled me to him. “You’re even more beautiful, angry,” he said, planting his lips solidly on mine before tipping the corner of an imaginary hat as he left.

I opened my door and slammed it back closed. *Man, his kiss was warm.* Was I angrier at his nerve, or myself, for responding?

“Just had to have the last word, didn’t he?” I muttered, kicking a chair.

I pictured myself following Queen Boudicea, woman warrior into battle leading a 20,000-person Celtic army, destroying London for raping her daughters. Where did that strange idea come from? History, yes, but also from scrapping genes my warring tribe of Scots had bred into my bones as surely as music or art talent.

Released, her daughters returned to her, but Boudicea assumed no passive victim’s role. Instead, she whipped up support from neighboring tribes, spared no one, but burned city, temples, and annihilated a Roman infantry of 5000 to the last man, systematically sacking London and surrounding Roman settlements.

Was I that mad? Yes. I had just been insulted.

I slung off shoes, slid out of my shiny teal satin and fell on the bed in my underwear, sobbing, shamed by that kiss, picturing dark plaid until night finished and daylight dawned.

Chapter 5: Sinister Forces within the SNP

“By oppressions woes and pains
By your sons in servile chains
We will drain our dearest veins

But they shall be free.” --Robert Burns

Next morning I woke up still angry. First kisses should be sweet. He had stolen that kiss from me, and its memory and his scent haunted me. Now I understood his lord-of-the-castle attitude. He *was* one. I felt silly at my response, embarrassed, even, stating my opinion that he was required to identify himself to me in the past or future.

Well, I would just pursue my goals and ignore him.

When Mother called me the most Scottish member of my family, she had not meant it as a compliment. Substitute stubborn for Scottish to know her intended message. If Mom said stubborn, well, then, *look out, Lane. You will not dangle me or toy with my feelings. If you think so, you have another think coming.*

Stubborn is a good trait.

Staying in Scotland on a dime exercised my Scottish genes. I would not let myself be deterred from the Stone's, or my, destiny.

I locked my door and headed for the breakfast bar where I encountered a large spread on the sideboard. Food, with the place to myself, I thought, patting the Scottish history book.

“Kenna! May I join you for breakfast?” Bryan called from behind.

There went that hope. I blanked the ‘oh, no’ look off my face.

“Why, yes,” I said, turning to greet him as he came alongside. “I’m hungry as a bear.”

We walked into the dining room and found a place to sit, getting the schedule of daily events, a plate of good china which accepted fried chicken, seafood, eggs, and bread.

“Brunch,” I said, smiling, as he stared at the mounds on my plate. “I’ll leave some.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Your eyes said a lot.” I started eating, leaving the burden of conversation to Bryan.

“I’ve been reading up on the Stone,” he began, sitting next to me.

“What did you learn?” I doubted his answer would interest me, but the question was open-ended and might keep him busy.

“For one thing, some Scots do not believe this is the real stone.”

“Oh? And where *is* the real stone?” I avoided expressing any opinion.

“They don’t know. The Scots’ earliest history on it begins in the ninth century, and the period before that is covered by a mixed history and legend. The English begin their history with Edward’s theft, of course.”

“Well aren’t you a walking encyclopedia?” I said. Why was he so knowledgeable? My interest was proprietary, I thought, feeling jealous, even while acknowledging screen plays and films abounded on the subject.

“It could be in a cave near Perth. There was a sighting by two young men caught in a storm when the side of a hill literally opened up, and they saw a stone on pedestals. They didn’t realize the significance until years later. When they checked for it again, the earth had closed and swallowed the stone, so to speak. It was never found,” Bryan said, returning to eating.

“And why did anyone believe that story?” I asked, ever willing to play devil’s advocate. I looked around for Sally and others in our group to save me.

“Because they don’t believe the monks would have let Edward steal something so important spiritually for the future of their nation. They believe it was so sacred that the monks

commissioned a duplicate and hid the original. It would have been kept in a hiding place like that. That area would have been perfect for it.”

“That was in 1296, if I’m not mistaken.” I couldn’t resist weighing in.

“Yes, it was,” Bryan said, warming to me as I quoted history.

“Hmm,” I said, chewing a wonderful piece of bacon big as a ham slice. “And I wonder how many kings had been crowned on it in Scotland to that point?”

“I know Fergus, son of Ferchar, first king of the Scots, was said to have been crowned on it in 840A.D. Then Kenneth McAlpin or Kenneth I was in 850A.D. I’m sure I have a chart of the Scottish kings. But in 1707, the Scots and Brits were ruled by one king, by law, which the old prophecy declares, “wherever the Rock shall be, there shall Scotland reign.” Bryan was an efficient eater as well as researcher. He had almost emptied his plate.

“I thought the English reigned in England from 1296 on. So that takes us right up to the clearances that ran Highlanders out of Scotland.” At this point I was too full, so I laid my silverware on my plate.

“You know your history.”

“After a fashion,” I said. “Dazed and confused; facts elusive.”

“You’re right about the last part. Well, I have books you could borrow during the day. At night I use them,” Bryan said.

“Tomorrow I’ve signed up for falconry. So maybe I will afterwards, thanks.” I pushed my plate back.

Bryan grimaced. “I don’t like spiky talons digging into my arm,” he said.

“Oh, but I’ll be wearing an arm band, a gauntlet. Their beaks are what intimidate me. I want goggles. But fear...I shall overcome.”

He looked at me as if waiting for an answer to a question. “Would you like to meet Gordon Seton and a couple of other Scottish Nationalists? I’ve been in email contact with them,

and they wanted to meet me when I came to Scotland,” he said, folding his napkin neatly and laying it parallel to his plate.

“I’m in, where and what?”

“Oh, it’s less than an hour from here at Inverary Castle. It’s a little weekend retreat for the independent Scottish party.”

“Why yes, I wouldn’t mind that at all,” I said, eager to hear whatever I could. *Bryan has contacts.* Cold, I reprimanded myself. “That’s another Campbell Castle, home of the Duke of Argyll.”

“They’re gathering tonight. I’ll see if they are game for adding you to the invitation, if you’re free,” he said.

“Yes, I’m available.”

We both got up from the table.

“I’ll call them.”

“That sounds great. My editor wants me to send her stories. Do you think they would mind me as a publicist? I have to fill quotas before the Stone returns.”

“Probably they wouldn’t mind. I’ll let you know shortly. Later.” He exited fast.

“Right.”

I nodded at air, left my plate at the drop-off, and ran upstairs. *Bryan couldn’t help not being Lane. Tonight might prove interesting.*

Upstairs, I bathed and got ready. When my need to leave the U.S. to trace lineage coincided with a hot assignment, I had begged, bartered, and trumped up creative reasons to get assigned to Scotland.

Now, an inside scoop on the Scottish National Party had dropped into my lap at the famed Inverary, one of two articles I needed to turn in this month. The one about the banquet

was the other. I would need two more stories for October, and one for November besides the returning Stone. The story mill was a real grinder. I could probably make two out of the one.

My editor reminded me of my mother; both gave in to highly persuasive arguments. Yet the lack I had felt in Mom's presence I didn't in Gaynelle's.

My mom at one time mentioned our family may have descended from Mary, Queen of Scots. She was not one to give 'airs,' and since Mary was Catholic, not Presbyterian, and not the most endearing of the monarchs, it was a puzzle.

Uncle had hired genealogical researchers from England, dots waiting to connect.

As for Lane, cute as he was, he was a diversion. *He's testing his power by messing with me. Just remember that he is not playing fair.* I mothered myself in a voice that sounded just like my cousin Douglas, oblivious to just how right my perceptions were.

Write her a card. As though synchronized, a note passed under my door.

"We're on! Be ready at 6:00p.m.in the lobby. I'll drive us to their house. Bryan."

Good. This will at least keep my mind off Lane.

* * *

"Are you with SNP?" asked a receptionist at the door. Bryan handed her an invitation. "I'll take you to the Saloon, then, where they are convening." We had the good fortune to be led straight to our host past such a feast for the eyes it was daunting.

"When Bryan told us you were a photographer with a magazine in the U.S., we were delighted," Mr. Seton said, ushering me in their spacious living room. "We are all about renewing ties with Scots gone abroad."

"Even if that's a bit like Scots gone amok? So I may take pictures?" I asked, patting my camera which hung from my shoulder.

"Of course, you may, Ms. Alford."

"Call me Kenna."

He indicated that I should follow him and introduced me around. Bryan and I parted ways and half an hour later, I ran into Bryan making the rounds from another direction and flashed a smile at him.

Bryan rose in my estimation. This was truly a professional break for me.

While my host talked intensively to another guest, a middle-aged woman of elegance, I sought out the tall, amazing man who had badgered the English legals and regals until the Stone was returned to Scotland without reference to him. At least, I and his fan club gave him credit. He, however, had never received the meagerest of confirmations from the royal house that his efforts were appreciated.

“Congratulations, Mr. Robbie, for getting the Stone returned to Scotland. I’m Kenna, a photographer for *South!* Inc., a magazine in Charlotte, North Carolina. May I take your photograph with an eye to publishing it?” I asked. We shook hands.

“Why, certainly, Ms. Kenna. I look like myself, though.” He affected a pose while I set up my tripod with Mr. Coltrane framed by a gigantic Campbell portrait behind him. Soon I had a couple of shots, and asked Bryan to take a photograph of me with the famous and somewhat controversial man.

“Someone mentioned that you petitioned the Queen directly...and Princess Di.”

“I did indeed. You’ll have to go to my website to trace the route of all my letters,” he said, laughing. “I won’t bore you with the stories now, although they do make good telling.”

“I’ll bet they do. As well, the stories about the new country you have established of the Picts. Well, I will check out your website,” I promised him. “Is it all right to steal a couple of examples from your material?”

“Indeed, indeed.”

I wrote down his name and the spelling and handed it to him to check.

He wrote “permission granted to use from my website for an article.”

I thanked him profusely.

“You’re welcome!”

The mix changed.

In another group I met a nice-looking, large, middle-aged man named Angus, a member of Scottish Legal Action Group, SCOLAG for short.

“So you are part of the Scottish diaspora, are you, Ms. Alford? We’re positive on reclaiming our statehood and independence,” he said. “Not all at once, mind you, but we are enthusiastic about it, and we are positioning ourselves in that direction.”

“Is that a policy statement that I may quote?” I asked him.

“Of course,” he said. “We want our movement to have positive backing around the world. What better move than to be quoted and photographed by a Scottish American?”

I began taking pictures.

“How will you be able to pull away from the United Kingdom?” I asked him.

“Our oil interests will ultimately fund us. England won’t have to finance us much longer, but we have a lot of obstacles to maneuver along the way. Some of those obstacles are the people opposed to our doing so. National interests are not the going concern internationally anymore, y’know. We’re salmons pushing upstream, against the tides.”

“I understand,” I said, maneuvering my camera to jot down a note. A member of *Scotland Today* took advantage of my setup and the couple made their own photographs.

Friendly couple, this; we chatted as fellow professionals. They told me they would photograph the Stone’s arrival. “You should, too,” she said. Then I owned my plans to do so.

“It’s all for the good of the people in Scotland,” the SCOLAG man said to us. SNP’s party slogan was, ‘It’s Scotland’s oil.’” We both wrote it down, faithful parrots and propagandists that we were. At least we admitted it.

After a few more shots of the group, including Bryan, and sometimes to include myself, I paused to enjoy refreshments of good wine, snacks of liver pâté with crackers and cheeses, small cucumber sandwiches.

“What’s their angle?” I overheard someone say as I snacked.

“Perhaps to butter up the opposition to Scotland’s split from England,” the other person responded in reference to the question about England’s finally releasing the Stone.

Politicians and statesmen polished and accessible were painted with the rose-colored paint brush of my camera with backgrounds of velvets, oil portrait gallery and thick two-story high moldings.

Bryan approached, the hostess in tow. I was expansive about the invitation and the opportunity. She responded, gracious, and then moved on to the next group.

“Not everyone is who they seem.” Bryan whispered.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I follow these names from the States. I’ve been in correspondence with Gordon Seton for some time. Seton admonished me not to share with—” he interrupted himself.

“Yes?” I prompted him.

He nudged me and I saw a 30-ish young man, nice-looking, dark hair. I stopped and we introduced ourselves.

“Oh, you’re from the U.S. Are you both from the same town?” the man asked politely.

“No,” I answered. “We just met in Scotland, taking the same tour.”

“I see,” he said.

“And you are from Edinburgh?” I asked him.

“What, me? Oh no, I’m vacationing myself. I was at another SNP conference that just ended. Great conference.”

“I should have known to go there for news and photography,” I said, laughing.

“Yes. Lots of photo ops.” He was determined to say nothing.

“Yes,” I said, although I was not being totally truthful. Covering a conference was of no interest to my magazine. Feature stories with an editorial slant were.

“I heard you graduated from Edinburgh University,” Bryan interjected.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” he said.

“Are you connected to the SNP?” Bryan asked.

“No. Just a friend of an SNP officer.”

“Well good to meet you,” I spoke for Bryan and myself, ending the little meeting.

“Have a good stay,” he said, moving away.

“So, Bryan, have you touched all bases yet? Are you ready to leave?” I finished the last swallow of my wine and set my plate down.

“No, let’s go meet that young man in the corner. I believe we have a royal representative, read spy, talking to a UFO researcher.”

“Is this info for public consumption?”

“No.”

We sidled up to them, and they redirected the conversation to let us in.

“We were just talking about the latest UFO sighting. My friend here chases them, in a manner of speaking.” He laughed.

“For research purposes.”

“Have you ever seen one, or its driver?” I asked, my curiosity at full bore.

“Yes, in several phases. Here, I’ll write down an address where you can look up what I’ve published.”

They continued their private conversation.

“Let’s thank our host and hostess,” Bryan said.

We did and waved friendly good-byes all around, exiting gracefully for American strangers. Outside I asked Bryan to take a picture of me in front of the lit castle by night.

Once in the car, I gave Bryan a look. “You are much more than you seem, kind sir. Care to enlighten me on your mission abroad? Are you alone or do you work for an agency?”

Bryan smiled, but never answered.

This high level contact whetted my appetite for digging.

“There’s more to this Stone of Destiny than legend and magical stone, isn’t there? I mean its history makes a difference, whether or not it’s the real thing. Its influence goes beyond Brits stroking a Scottish national whim.”

“A liberation agenda needs its object, Kenna. The Stone is that object. And to rally the crowd, it must be real. You’ve heard of the ‘*vera cruz*’ and all of the ‘true’ this’s or that’s. They are types of the Holy Grail. It is like provenance of an art piece—makes all the difference between two thousand dollars and two million.”

“All this hype. What you say explains why the Scots want it back, but not why the Brits are giving it back. Something isn’t right about that, something more than obligating Scotland not to sever ties to England. Something dark,” I said.

“Which is why dark individuals with fake names were hanging around,” Bryan said. “And why probably every one of those officials has ties we know nothing about.”

“Yes. Even the Queen is a member of the Garter Society, which sounds harmless—until you know its origins.”

“I overheard several private conversations tonight. I bet you didn’t know MI-5 was there.”

I jerked around. “No, I did not.”

“Situational awareness,” Bryan said.

“I guess I was too myopic tending to my articles, although it was fruitful, for ‘a’ that.’
This show of reciprocity, though. Will it affect anyone outside of the two countries?”

“Now that’s the million dollar question. We’re back. Thanks for going with me.”

“Thanks for including me, Bryan.” I gave him a significant look, knowing he was holding out on me,

A spider’s web. A conflagration of societies. An important union of two countries, I definitely sensed multiple levels of intrigue, government, and more. Arriving back at the castle, we entered the foyer of Blackheart.

Naturally we bumped into Lane, who gave me a positively evil look as I walked in with Bryan. That was all the reaction I needed to know I was in a safe place with Lane. It gave me the luxury of a moment’s cockiness. I’m always running up against reminders in the form of old sayings I should have been aware of, like *pride goeth before a fall*. My original thought was *one kiss and he owns me already*.

Chapter 6:

Dark Origins, Dark Destiny

“Unless the fates be faithless grown,

And Prophet's voice be vain,

Where'er is found this Sacred Stone

The Wanderer's Race shall reign.”--Sir Walter Scott

Stones, the stuff of the ages—significant due to God, man, alien or chance heavenly fall of a meteorite; markers or memorials, battlements and fortresses; buildings or cisterns. Lifeless, blessed, or empowered, they register the life near them. Some vibrate with life. The Stone of Destiny, the only sacred stone for the only sacred monarchy left in the world ruling over kirk and state speaks when the rightful king sits on it, so Scots say.

It is scientific fact that sound or P waves travel through solid rock, around the earth and back, in twenty minutes.

I had heard specialty groups taught lessons on how to talk to rocks. Ministries used God's admonition to Moses to 'speak to the rock.' Instead, Moses yelled at it and was punished for it. Those esoteric folks who are into talking to rocks claim that rocks can get mad with you if you are too demanding, and then they won't talk to you. Maybe the Stone of Destiny was purposely hiding and sulking, according to that theory.

Christ said, "Let the children speak. I tell you if you silence them, the very rocks will cry out." For years, this has been read as purely symbolic. Evangelicals de-power such statements, it seems to me. Where's the power in the metaphor if it doesn't really occur?

I met Sally for lunch. Bryan did not show up, and so we girls had a long talk. I told her about the SNP party, and I could tell she was a bit miffed not to have been included.

"It was so spur-of-the minute, Sally, I didn't even think. I think he was doing me a favor, knowing I write these articles."

"Oh, I don't know what I would have done. It's just we usually all go together."

"Now I feel worse than ever, Sally."

"Oh, don't. I'm being crazy."

"We talked a lot about the Stone. Salmond had speculated that the stonemason, Baillie Robert Gray, made copies of the Stone when he was given it by the four thieves to repair after it broke into two pieces during the raid when it was stolen in the fifties. He suspects Gray or another may have kept the real one.

"Interesting chit-chat," Sally said.

"Salmond said there was no question that Bertie Gray made copies."

"It's a fascinating subject all by itself."

"Others commented that the Stone had been stolen before."

“I wonder how many times.”

“When I talked to Robbie the Pict—and he is picturesque—he admitted to an ongoing charge of relentless letter writing on behalf of the Scottish people to regain their stone. He formed a group called the Scottish People’s Mission which offered cash, first 250,000 pounds, and then 500,000 pounds for its return.”

“Dedicated personage.”

“My research revealed his letters. I laughed all the way through them. He shows great wit and a relentlessly sharp intelligence. He petitioned every conceivable authority, including the Queen, the head of State, the Princess, starting at the local Scone police office as to who owned it. He furnished stories to any press that would publish them.”

“So he got England to send back the Stone singlehandedly.”

“Not that they’ll admit. His requests were denied in March, April, May, June, right up to July of 1996, this very year. He said they finally told him unofficially that the Queen had decided to return the stone in November, and that it would be delivered by the Queen’s emissary, on the date of its previous capture 700 years before.

“That’s on the Scottish holiday, St. Andrew’s Day.”

“Yes, St. Andrew was Scotland’s patron saint, his namesake, Prince Andrew, the delivery boy. I wonder. Was this coincidence, an innocent conceit, or some deep, dark, Arthurian symbol of the occult? I wonder who the Queen will send, or what occulted Arthurian symbol she will send with it?”

“Now you’re reaching, Kenna.”

“Yes, Sally, but think about it. Why would they suddenly be moved to share their purloined war trophy?”

“One is so used to accepting everything in a good-natured way.”

“I haven’t told anyone, Sally, but my ancestor hinted at a large conspiracy and a big discrepancy in one of the letters he wrote, about something large and intrigue-filled they brought to America from Scotland. I mean, what if they took the real stone to America? I don’t know how it could be true or, if it’s so easy to duplicate a stone, how anyone could ever know for sure which was the actual one, how they would know authoritatively.”

“You can’t be serious, Kenna. Why—that’s jolting. That’s mind-boggling.”

“Yes, and to most people, laughable.”

“First response, really? Then a laugh—“

“Going to the gathering with Bryan was fruitful. It personalized the Stone while fitting it into context. My reasons for coming to Scotland are spot-on. This focused me like a laser.”

“So, you made this Scotland thing happen. It didn’t just fall in your lap.”

I looked at her.

“You understand. Last night Lane saw me returning with Bryan, and barely spoke to me.” I couldn’t tell Sally that I had thought Bryan was attracted to me. I was beginning to think she might like him.

“Isn’t this afternoon your falconing session with Lane? You better dress for the cool weather out. A jacket is required.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s going to be hard to face him after the banquet.”

“Why? Did something happen?”

“Yes, he grabbed me and kissed me, because I was mad he had led me to believe he was the hired engineer, when he was really Mr. Farquhard’s son.”

“Oh, Miss. Kenna. And the beat goes on.” She smiled wickedly.

“Maybe. A first kiss should be sweet.”

“However it comes, it comes.”

“Well, back to Bryan. I’m beginning to wonder who Mr. Bryan is. I mean, he was asked to an SNP party’s private gathering, and him an American outsider.”

“Yes, I’ve picked up from him that his father is big into politics and promoting Scottish Independence. So, his father must have exerted some pull.”

“Well, it was quite a motley crew.”

“In what way?”

“Royal spies, UFO researchers, other unidentified spies trying to figure out who we were and why we were there.”

“How did you know?”

“Oh, Bryan identified them. And Robbie the Pict, basking in the return of the Stone for which he worked so hard—powerhouse women.”

“What are you getting into, Girl?”

“Good question. Bryan overheard conversations, still, strange that he knew.”

“I’ve heard the British royals have occult ties in their bloodline.”

“Tell me more.”

“That El in the name Elizabeth stands for the snake goddess with mysterious origins.”

“So tell me what stake do they have in ‘lending’ Scotland back their Stone, if they don’t recognize ownership?”

“Go figure. They’re up to something.”

“Yes.”

“What could it be?” she tapped her plate with her fork.

“Do they know by now it isn’t the real Stone?”

“If so, they don’t need it back.”

“No, except as a sign of subjugation and control.”

“Right. And to keep up the façade that they think it is the real one.”

“So they can what?”

“Hmmm. I don’t know. So they can hide the fact that they have a notion where the real one is and might be actively trying to procure it.”

“Oh! That’s good. Quite good, in fact. The British government bears watching.”

“And if they want the real Stone, they are going to use it for something. But what?”

“There are more secret societies and occult trappings in Britain than anywhere in the world. They had some of the cruelest practices in history, and their dungeons are unrivaled in the brutality they meted out.”

“And there I was, coasting along with the notion of the soft-spoken, unaggressive Brit, good-natured and pious.”

“Maybe they are both true. I don’t want to stop the conversation, but it’s getting close to time for your falconing lesson, with *Lane*.” She grinned from ear to ear.

“Yes, I guess I had better *zip*.”

“You had. Have fun,” Sally said.

“Come join us,” I said, leaving to drop off my plate and go upstairs.

Random thoughts surfaced about how irate the Scots were that the Stone would not be returned to Scone Palace, its cultural, 500-year home, but rather to Edinburgh, where it was judged by unspecified authorities as safer and more adequately policed.

Why Edinburgh? What part did important people with important plans play in the scheme of things?

So it is to Edinburgh Castle I will go with however many thousands of tourists may show up. That will be its home, they say, until England’s next coronation, when it will be “borrowed” back for their ceremony and returned once more to Scotland.

The prospect of seeing the Stone of Destiny excited me almost as much as making the Scottish connection. Somehow, I felt I would instantly recognize the real stone.

Chapter 7:

Birds of Prey

“When its time has come, the prey goes to the hunter.”--Persian proverb

Back in my room I pulled on a long-sleeved, gold jersey so my arm had better padding. Stretch pants allowed for quick movement. So would canvas shoes. I slipped a long tailed, short-sleeved shirt over the tights and belted it for a layered look.

Now off to Lane’s falconing class, the long session.

On the second story walk-out balcony—a spacious stone patio—I joined the informal gathering. I immediately wished I had brought my camera because the view was spectacular, but had wisely left it upstairs so I could fully participate and not worry over expensive equipment left around to be stolen or damaged.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach when I anticipated a falcon perching on my arm—oh, who was I kidding, the flutters were due to the Lane bird. Several cages lined the side and weighted posts with ties held large, beautiful birds which were still able to hop around by the legs.

Busy workers hustled through with posts with extended arm, and various paraphernalia. Busy setting up, Lane didn’t notice me. He had a sack hooked to his belt from which he pulled a piece of raw meat and fed it to one bird. I was close enough to hear him call the bird “Bonnie Blue.”

Birds of prey.

He caught me watching him and hailed me over.

I lifted my hand to my ear as though I didn’t understand. He spoke to his helper. Next thing I knew, I was being escorted to the wall. One look beyond the precipice showed the

water cascading down craggy rocks to the sea. The evil side of Blackheart Heights that I sensed that first day I walked out from it. I drew a sharp intake of breath.

“That is some drop,” I said, nonchalant as possible, maintaining coolness as though nothing had transpired between us.

My uncle had counseled me well about males, “don’t do a darn thing...their egos will do it all for them.”

“Yes, it is.” He smiled. “You’ve done this before?” he asked, pointing to the birds.

“Falconing? No, I’m a total newbie. I was hoping you could teach me,” I said, challenging him.

“Aye, that I can,” he said. “But you mustn’t get all nervy on me.”

He pulled a gauntlet out of one of the bags and said, “left hand, please,” and gloved me. His fingers glanced off mine in the transaction. Then he found another piece of raw meat, pulled my gloved hand in front of me and past my body, and stuck the meat where the thumb joined my hand. He kept my hand in position and said, “Always lead with your hand stretched out from your face. If anything happens, they’ll fly on past you, and you won’t get hurt.” He held my shoulder down while he directed my arm. Then he demonstrated the position himself.

“All right,” I said, smiling, holding the meat out on my hand and extending my arm at its longest angle from my body. He hadn’t missed a chance to touch me.

“Now, meet Bonnie Blue,” he said, holding onto the falcon.

When he loosened his hold on Bonnie Blue, she took her time, but then hopped over onto my arm. I barely saw her sharp beak move, she was so fast. Two or three head jerks and the morsel was history.

“There now, ye see? He’s all yours. He’ll love you forever. Don’t mistake him for a pet, all lovey-dovey; they are always and still, birds of prey. But they will be faithful. Remember that.”

“Oh, I thought Bonnie Blue was a lady.”

“No, remember Bonnie Prince Charlie was a man,” he said, teasing. “Now Maid Marion takes a little longer to befriend...that is, as close a friend as birds of prey will ever be. Fuss over her awhile. I’ll get everything positioned and have everyone draw closer so they can hear. The wind has whipped up a little. Much more and we’ll have to call it off. I don’t want to be chasing them all night.”

“So it’s that easy, is it? You’re quite a salesman,” I said, turning from Lane to look at the slim bird and talking to him. “Are you still hungry? Promise you won’t bite?” I said, as Bonnie bounced from me back to Lane.

He caught his leg restraint and held him a minute, turned to look at me, reading my mind again. I felt the ripple of wind riffling my files. My cheeks burned. Durn him.

Lane motioned me forward and spoke to the audience. “I think the young lady here will go first. Now she has never done this before. Come on up, Kenna,” he said, and I responded, choking back the rising bile of fear. This side of the castle did not like me.

“Here I am, the morning sacrifice,” I said.

Everyone laughed.

Lane indicated he wore hand guards as well, “for extra safety,” he explained.

He sat Bonnie Blue, the bird with the characteristic blue feathers around his face, on his arm. He put a face mitt on me, “since you’ll be showing the others how it’s done.”

That bird knows exactly where my eyes are, I thought. You’re not fooling him.

“Here’s the meat,” Lane said, looking at me while a slow grin consumed his face. He was enjoying my discomfort too much.

Mean, I thought, taking the meat from him and touching his hand in the exchange. He released Bonnie Blue to fly to the tree. “Here, Bonnie Blue,” I called, putting the meat in the crook of my thumb and index finger, holding it out from me, and pointing to the meat. A low

blur from far trees crisped into close, flapping feathers. Bonnie's heavy landing nearly toppled me. He positioned himself like a cat, kneading, purring, and retracting its paws. Then he was still, talons gripping the gauntlet.

"Gorgeous bird," I said. "Bonnie, your blue feathers and bright blue tips are lapis lazuli."

So I stayed up front as Lane began his lecture, and released Bonnie Blue to zoom to the large tree at the beginning of the woods. When he was situated, Lane pulled out another piece of raw chicken, and placed it on my upheld hand, and I waited.

"The falcon has sharp eyes that magnify the meat," he told the people.

Sure enough, he was first a speed blur, then a sound, and then a heavy weight. You could hear the wind in the nearing of wide, flapping wings as he landed right on my wrist, nearly forcefully toppling me. He ate his treat. When he faced away from me, he was seeing me. He rested before he flew back to his tree. This we repeated five or six times before Lane explained that Bonnie Blue would take longer to return, the fuller he got.

That moment arrived, and he decided to try the next bird out and retire Bonnie Blue.

So first he rewarded Bonnie with a large piece of raw chicken, then returned him to his cage, and gathered Maid Marion, a different type of falcon colored a rich burnt sienna, and we continued the process.

Although my interest in falconing was high, my mind wandered during Lane's talk. Not that he was a dull teacher, in fact, he was quite good, but standing that close was distracting. What in the world was I thinking, allowing myself to be sucked in by his overwhelming masculinity, those able hands that held the birds, the beams, drew the plans, wielded the saw, and found acceptable ways to touch me? *A man who made his own reasons.*

There was no future in this. I was a Southerner; he was a Scot. I couldn't leave my beloved South to move to Scotland. And I bet he wouldn't leave his beloved Scotland to move

to the South. Nor was I about to consider a Highland fling. *Check your imaginations at the door. Stop admiring him.* I tore my eyes away from his open shirt and wide shoulders.

After the falcons, he brought out two different breeds of owls, a white Siberian owl and a small, cuddly one who was soft to the touch and enjoyed being stroked. He detailed the types of birds of prey and reactions to be expected, which escape me, now.

By the time he reached the last bird and called for eager bird of prey initiates, I had whipped myself into shape. *Such a vaulted castle ledge. Don't be having a Scottish vision up here.*

Lane put a small sample of meat on the young girl's gauntlet and Maid Marion hopped over to her. In less than a minute, she flew off.

Lane pulled a larger piece of meat out and said, "Are you ready?" as he faced me, the audience, and the young lady, in turn. We strained to locate the bird. He lifted his arm and threw the meat as far as he could. King Lear, the owl, was flying high when he saw it, circled and b-lined, plummeting for the meat and then, snatched it up before it landed. Frightening, how he tore at the meat while we watched.

He turned to me. "Now hold your hand up level with your chest again."

He was full of commands today, but I complied. Within seconds King Lear had returned to my arm.

"May I pat him?" I asked.

"Under his left wing. He likes that." He smiled, wicked with innuendo.

I did, all the while cooing at this meat-eating machine, telling him how lovely he was. The young gal patted him, too.

The crowd clapped and Lane took a bow before putting out his arm for King Lear who immediately returned. He pointed to me, and they clapped again. Then he pulled out a larger

treat to end King Lear's performance. He devoured it, and Lane lovingly placed him on the leg stand. The young men were waiting, ready to carry the stands back to the truck.

Was I right in sensing we had bonded? Oh yes, I told myself. Don't doubt your instincts, not for a minute. Especially when dealing with birds of prey.

* * *

I left while he was still teaching the others and a few had stepped up to the plate. My questions I filed under "later" and hurried back to my room to retrieve the camera for a few shots of the view, the birds, and the falconer.

As I returned to the scene on the balcony, I noticed changes. There was a startlingly beautiful addition to the crowd of strange birds—a raven-haired beauty of the human female species who smiled at Lane in the most obsequious fashion. *A tourist?*

I clicked photographs of the birds and got one shot of the white and golden owl taking flight off of Lane's upheld hand. He was definitely a crowd pleaser. I added a shot of the woman.

With the crowd breaking up, I felt uncomfortable. Lane hadn't looked at me once. Had he even noticed my absence? Why did I keep getting sucked in? Why would he? I was just a part of his act and the kiss had been an impulse, nothing more. Forget it. "All right, Uncle," I voiced, amazed at feeling hurt.

I had to walk close by them and seat myself so I could tighten the camera bag and heard the woman saying, "Mom and Dad are expecting you tonight. Will you come?"

The noise cranked up, and I made moves to pack up my camera and leave. I sensed someone behind me and saw Lane, burdened with the cages.

"Where did you go?" he asked. "I was going to recognize your excellent beginning in the art of falconry."

"To get my camera—guess I missed my chance."

“But there will be other chances,” he promised. “Thank you for being my model for the class. You were great.”

The raven hair appeared. “Lane, shall I wait for you in the game room?”

“Yes, Tara,” he said, looking at Tara, then me, and then walking off, giving directions to the attendants.

Don't worry, Lane. I hadn't got my hopes up. Men like you don't crawl out from under rocks unattached. I would have wondered if you weren't already taken. So; just remember it as a lark and focus on professional excitement and personal freedom. I had my vacation interlude kiss. At least I know he's attracted to me.

I promised myself a garden tour, photographing. That occupied my mind with something more concrete than uncertainties of past and future.

This Scottish Endeavor, I dubbed my experience affectionately, I would savor to the max. I ran upstairs to get my plans moving along and ran into the maid who was exiting my room with a bag. She scurried away. Suspicious, once inside the room, I checked all my treasures to make sure nothing was missing.

I pulled out Blackheart Height's area map and earmarked a good trail route for walking. I checked my watch. Lunch was an hour away. I had time for meandering and taking garden pictures.

The whole time I did so, I felt as though I were being watched. There was a lot of open space out here. Sometimes, like now, I forgot how Goth the castle was, how unfriendly, and how willing she, because I firmly identified Blackheart Heights as a she, was when I was all alone, to show me her backside. *She had purposes of her own, and nobody knew her purposes.*

Chapter 8: Falcons and Flirtations

“At the ground of all these noble races, the beast of prey, the splendid, blond beast, lustfully roving in search of spoils and victory,...”--Friedrich Nietzsche

After lunch I followed the map farther along than before. I was taking a long walk to the overhanging cliff and around it. I heard hammering in the distance. Curious about what was being built on as bright a day as one could hope for in Scotland, I quickened my pace for a detour. The fall yellows were golden; the reds like wine.

Past the spot where Lane had come upon me so abruptly my first day at the castle, I walked down a side path to outlying buildings, obviously buildings connected to the castle and its business I had not yet seen. It looked much friendlier in the daytime.

I proceeded toward the noise, delighted to find multiple stone buildings in various states of repair. I was surprised at how large the work site's footprint was. Several trucks were pulled up to one building. As one who never anticipated rejection or entertained the thought that she was intruding, I wandered blithely into the middle of it. My uncle nicknamed me 'littlest angel', because like the angel in the story, I inquired into everything. He always welcomed me in friendly fashion before and after my parents died.

As I neared, I identified workers, and strode forward to look up to my left at none other than Lane. He stood there on the roof, looking down at me, his hair back-lit by sun—spiked, transparent, and disheveled. The almost-white hair, a fire-lit straw, surrounded his head like flames, like some ancient Celtic god, poised and ready to race into battle. A larger-than-life human, his physical beauty enhanced to magnificent proportions. The rugged redness of his face, sweat pouring off his forehead, spoke energy, immediacy. He was, I believe, the most exciting man I had ever seen. My eyes widened to take him in.

He seemed unaware of his good looks, or so used to them he didn't care a whit about them. But he was not unaware of the effect he was having on me. His appraisal pilfered my

files again. This was not a man to trifle with, but one who had manifested the serious goal of entrapping me. I knew this intuitively. This increased my excitement and my curiosity.

Danger increased appeal. Forget wondering who Bryan was. I wondered who Lane *was* really, and what he was capable of. He surely seemed to eye me.

I will not be an easy target. I pulled my safety net tightly around me. If he wants to know me, he will have to chase me harder than I bet he ever has had to chase any woman before. I stole another look up at him. He wore a loose-hanging, deep red shirt that he peeled off, smiling at me as he did so. I turned away.

Hmmm. I was tempted to take another peek at his hairy, muscular chest. I lifted my head up high and walked off.

“Hello, Lovely Lady,” he called after me. “Bring me some water, would ye?”

I turned back. “Where is it?” I asked.

“Over by the truck. The cooler’s on the ground,” Lane said, smiling broadly.

“Oh, all right. It isn’t hot by my standards, but I suppose the work is.”

“And the workers are,” he said, with another smile. My eyes widened at his implied or my inferred meaning. I had blundered into that one.

I found cups and leaned down to get ice and water, and walked it back to him.

He held onto the scaffolding with both arms and swung over slowly, causing his muscles to ripple. He was obviously showing himself off. I had not expected those tendencies in Lane. Why, I don’t know. I handed him the cup which he took, wrapping his hand over mine.

“So now you know where I work,” he said.

“Yes. These are beautiful buildings. What will they be?”

“We have no clue. They are long shots at expanding the tourist horizons of the castle business. Any ideas?”

“Oh, you shouldn’t be asking me, I just arrived. What do Scots like to do?” I asked.

“You mean when they aren’t eating, sleeping, mating, praying or drinking?”

“Whatever,” I said, realizing I was walking around in mud, and every new answer I gave him sunk me deeper into his quicksand.

“One more cup?” he asked, handing it back all smudged.

“Sure,” I said, repeating the process.

“Either you are quite beautiful, Kenna, or I’ve been on the roof too long today.” He crushed the cup and handed it back to me to throw away.

“Well, don’t give me a compliment; it might go to my head. It must be the roof. See you back at Blackheart Heights,” was my best answer, all flummoxed. *If I stay around any longer, I might fall into his sweaty arms.* I kept walking away. I couldn’t believe he was so brazen with me, telling me how beautiful he might think I was. He had put the compliment on a string so he could retract it, were it not accepted. I felt a rush like I never felt with my boyfriend, but then he was just a boy, while Lane was a man. I kept hearing him speak, remembering his words and seeing him move his body, the fiery crown on his head glowing. I was drowning in fantasy.

“Oh, I’d better get back. I’m signed on to demonstrate my extensive falconing knowledge in less than an hour.”

“Good thing you reminded me,” he said.

When I returned to the castle, Sally met me at the door.

“What’s up?”

“Just ran into Lane. I was going to walk to the top of the cliff, but I’m supposed to officially demonstrate falconing this afternoon, and I wasted time talking to Lane and fetching him water. Come go with me and take some pictures of other preening birds.”

“And one bird in particular, I am thinking,” Sally said.

I laughed. "Yes, the blond bird."

"It's probably lunch time. Want to eat?" she asked.

"Sure do. He told me either I was beautiful or he'd been on the roof too long."

"Flirting, is he? In his complicated fashion."

"He wants me to tend the birds and free him for explanations and lecture."

"Heck you say. Just wants you there for eye candy. Let's go on in."

I followed her into the dining room. Over lunch, Sally quizzed me.

"He was messing with me," I said, laughing.

"Obviously," she said. We collected our food and she made me tell her everything that had just happened, every word he had just uttered, in the right order. You couldn't get anything by on Sally.

"He has a leg restraint on me like his birds, doesn't he?"

"Not yet, but he's working at it," she said.

"And I'm not protesting one bit, silly me."

We finished our lunch before Bryan and the rest appeared. We pulled away to go to our respective rooms to freshen up. Then Sally came so we could walk to the session together. I got my camera and showed her where all the buttons were.

We arrived right at 2:30 p.m., on the terrace where busy workers and the loud commotion of birds pumping wings and jumping around on stone could be heard.

Surprise, surprise, Lane was there.

Lane saw and acknowledged me. I introduced Sally to him. "Do you mind if she takes pictures of me with you and the birds, Lane?"

"Of course not," he said. "That's one of the main reasons for the event." This time I posed with Lane and the birds while Sally shot again and again, using the castle and grounds as background. The busy motions stirred up the birds. They ruffled their feathers, screeching.

“Now Kenna, do exactly what I tell you, and everything will be fine.” Lane leaned over me and spoke near my ear. “Nice vest,” he said, so only I heard him.

“Thanks. Do you say that to all the girls who help you?”

“No need.” He lifted both hands and turned to his other helpers.

I looked around to see Tara of the raven locks approach, glaring at me.

“I’m Tara,” she said, walking straight up to me. “Who are you?”

“I’m Kenna...a Blackheart Heights house guest.”

“Well, for your information, Lane and I are engaged to be engaged,” she said.

No easing into it. “Oh. How does that work?” I pulled my own sword.

“It works through families of status and standing. Agreements are made by people who have lived in the area for ages. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Which part? Status, standing, or family lineage? I might understand more than you think,” I said and smiled. “I’m wondering why Lane didn’t mention that to me.”

I turned away from her, showing her my backside in a bold and potentially dangerous move, except for the fact that we were in public.

“What in the world?” Sally was close enough to know something happened.

“She just informed me that she was about to become engaged to Lane, and demanded to know who I was. Evidently what she saw threatened her.”

Tara stomped off to Lane. I watched him lean over to hear her. I saw his jaw clench and he turned away from her. Then he patted her shoulder. She hadn’t gotten what she wanted, because she looked sour. Decidedly sour, but she had an access to him I didn’t. She had gotten a public pat.

“Her hair is cute, cut in wisps that way,” Sally said, “like a witch.”

“You’re trying to make me feel good, Sally.”

“Yes, but she does. Look at her.”

“I see what you’re saying. Who knows? Maybe she is. I don’t know if he’s playing me or her or both of us. A kiss is just a kiss.” I told Sally. “I’m going on over.” Tara’s aggression, instead of angering me, brought relief. Were she not worried; she would not have taken the offensive.

Sally nodded toward the bench. “Don’t forget your camera. See you later.” With a wave and a smile she walked away.

Lane must have had misgivings about his status, if the pre-engagement engagement was a status, and she told the truth. No matter. I straightened my blouse and pulled my vest to the best angle and returned to my post next to Lane, innocent as you please. I blanked out all expression. As he saw me approach, I skirted around Tara, and when Lane dipped down to the bird, I whispered in his ear, “Ready when you are.”

He turned beet red.

I congratulated myself on my good move.

“Bonnie Blue, do you remember me?” I dipped to talk to him, but held out no finger, as I had no raw meat to offer.

The bird shook his feathers and settled into himself, which I took for a ‘yes.’

Lane handed me the gauntlet to put on by myself. Last time he had done it for me. *Ah, because Tara is here.* Out came the raw meat, and he did put that on my hand. We went through the routine seamlessly, Lane, Bonnie Blue, Maid Mary, and me.

The group clapped, and the individual trial sessions began.

“Thanks,” Lane said to me. I saw a guarded, quick smile flicker across his face.

“It was a lot of fun,” I answered, giving him a big smile before I walked off as sassily as I could swing it. I was on top of the world.

I walked back in by the dining room where they were decorating. Sally and Bryan were back from whatever.

“So what’s the deal with the decorations?” I asked them.

“I heard Lane’s intended and her parents are meeting Mr. Farquhard and Lane for dinner this evening,” Bryan said. “If we stick around, we’ll run into them. The Montfort family fortune, I’ve heard, is needed to help the Campbell’s pay for annual castle upkeep and improvements.”

“How did you hear that, Bryan?” I asked.

“Oh dear, a marriage of convenience,” Sally interrupted.” I never knew such customs still existed. Not in Europe or in the British Isles or Ireland, at least,” She successfully stopped Bryan from talking.

“Why do you assume that?” I asked. “She’s beautiful.”

“Well, he doesn’t seem attracted to her,” Sally said.

“Scotland is a part of the British Isles. How can you tell?” I said.

“I overhear things,” Bryan said.

That moment the Montfort’s chose to walk in with Tara, their beautiful daughter, dressed in slinky black.

“She’s a knockout...beats the competition, by a country mile,” I said reluctantly.

“Not if he isn’t attracted,” said Sally.

“She’s right, of course,” Bryan surprised me by saying.

“Should I irritate her more?” I asked, and surprised them by walking towards her.

“Why Tara,” I said, walking up to her in my casual clothes. “You look stunning. Is this your mother and father? Please introduce me to them.”

I didn’t wait for her to reply, however. “Mr. and Mrs. Montfort, I’m Kenna Alford, a visitor from North Carolina.”

“Pleased to meet you. How do you know Tara?” they asked.

“We met earlier today,” I said. “This must be a special occasion.”

Tara looked at me smugly and answered, “Yes. It is.”

Lane popped out of the dining room dressed in a dark suit and a starched white shirt.

Didn't he dress up nicely?

“Hi there,” I said, and walked off looking up just in time to see his raised eyebrow which conjured a fleeting impression of embarrassment at running into me. I watched him shake hands with Mr. Montfort. He gave a cheek to either side of Tara’s mother. And shamelessly, I watched him take Tara’s gloved hand and put it over his arm as they walked into the dining room together. *How wrong can one person be? Looks like real affection to me. Win some, lose some. Easy come, easy go.* All the world’s trite sayings bubbled in my head and hardened to shield my heart, a heart dangerously close to the flames.

Bryan, Sally, and I went to our smaller dining room. Tomorrow I would leave for an overnight to Iona, thank God, wonderful Iona, land of new spiritual beginnings. I would immerse myself in tombstones and Gaelic prophecies and read what was left from the Scriptorium that had returned to Ireland. As we arrived at the door to our little dining room, I brushed something wet off my upper cheek.

“Well, here we are together,” I said upon entering. The food was laid out on a sideboard, so I placed my pocketbook over the hook on the corner of the table to save a spot. I found my place in line, picked up a plate and collected food again.

Bryan sat next to me on the right and Sally on the left and the conversation was distributed enough so I could withdraw into my humiliated, sad and depressed zone. I had been slammed. It had been going so well, I thought. Do not cry, I ordered myself. The Big Evening could only mean one of two things, that Lane preferred Tara and was fond of her, or that Mr. Farquhard had prevailed upon Lane to marry for the sake of the family name and for the castle. If it were the first, then he had only toyed with me.

It seemed then that Tara held Lane in a vise grip.

All I had was a memory of one brief, hot kiss. I was desolate.

Sally reached over and patted my hand.

Chapter 9:

Pilgrimage to Iona

“Alas, how easily things go wrong!

A sigh too much, a kiss too long

And there follows a mist and a weeping rain

And life is never the same again.”— George MacDonald, *Phantastes*

“Get a good night’s sleep,” Sally told me. “You can’t loll about on the trip to Iona. I won’t allow it.”

So here I was, getting ready. *Strategy begins in the closet, alone.* My first line of action was to torch the memory of a kiss. I promised myself something akin to fighting fire with fire, or driving off the highway looking at the billboard sign.

Choose your second line of defense, I told myself, and renew your purpose for coming. Forget love. My luck with men was abysmal.

I pulled out jewelry, letters, and list of places I had to go in my search for the Stone’s provenance (actual history). Iona was on it.

I turned anger into intensity.

Some historians thought the real Stone of Destiny was hidden on the island of Iona. I needed to study the gravestones to see if they connected somehow with my family. The mystery of the Stone of Destiny began here. Iona was certainly a mystical and spooky place.

I packed writing gear to make notes. This was a working trip, and must result in an article to send Gaynelle. Getting Bob to increase my salary was top goal. I would entice Charlotteans to buy more ads for *South!* Inc. Sally was traveling with me tomorrow.

I stopped compiling war strategies to put together a toiletries bag of makeup and a petite carryon for overnight. I checked to be certain all letters and jewelry were hidden in the suitcase.

What lunch would I take? I looked at the menu beside the phone and called in my order to the kitchen. Tourist boats had shut down for the season. We would hop a ferry with commuters. The ferry might have food on it, but I wasn't taking a chance.

I'm thirsty.

Pulling change from my pocketbook, I left and locked the door behind me.

Downstairs in the snack room, I got a dark carbonated drink and took it to the game room for a couple of rounds of solitaire.

I forgot just how dark the castle was at night. I switched on the desk light and pulled out the cards. And not just dark, but sullen; I was happy to leave it tomorrow. I played several games, winning only one, and leaned back in the chair. Why was I so creeped out tonight? I hadn't been before.

Someone or something brushed up against my hair. I screamed, turned to face the enemy and saw no one, even less consoling. I walked across the library, turned on overhead lights, and opened the far door. I peeked out. No one was there. I canvassed the library, looking here and there, around, and under things. At the back, a door closed right before my eyes. I hadn't realized the library had a back door. I strode over to it, grabbed the handle, and jerked it open.

It was just a closet.

Now someone or something was toying with my sanity. I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in what I see. I looked again. No secret panel, no sliding walls I could detect, and no one crouching in the closet, but there on the chair next to the round sitting table, sat a doll which, quite frankly, sent me running back to the safety of my room.

I left the game room, throwing the cards back in the drawer, and exited into the hall, racing up the stairs like a crazy person, hoping I wouldn't run into an elegant Montfort.

The only receptionist looked up in alarm.

"Kenna, you look like you've seen a ghost."

"Worse," I said, without stopping, slopping the innards of my drink can all over the stairs. Safe behind my own door, I sank into a comfy chair with a book set in Italy about secret crypts, societies, and things that go bump in the night.

No further incidents occurred and no one came to my door.

I bedded early, but could not sleep. My mind was racing

* * *

My alarm went off at 5:30 a.m., and I jumped up, bathed, and dressed, fussing just enough to reassure myself. If I didn't look good, I fooled myself. I loaded my pack on my back, grabbed my traveling pocketbook, and went downstairs to the kitchen. I looked over the table and grabbed the sack lunch with my name on it. The cook was actually up, fussing around. I took my bags and backpack to the door to wait for Sally and the bus.

To get to Iona, we had to take the ferry from Oban over to the Isle of Mull, then another bus to the top of Mull. From there, it was another short ferry ride on to Iona. I was early, so I wandered outside where workers were fixing a corner of the rock wall. One of the workmen whistled. Really, I thought, looking over to the site and seeing one wave.

Lane.

I waved back

He motioned me over.

Stupidly, I responded, walking up to him.

"You leaving?" he asked.

"Spending a couple of days on Iona looking round," I told him.

“Oh. Well I thought you might bring me some water today. I’m working outside.”

“No. But maybe Tara will bring you water.”

“You two have met,” he said, handsome in his work clothes. He had clinched his jaw as he stated the obvious.

“I have been properly warned off, more like,” I said.

“She has that way about her,” he said, cautiously.

I saw him scan my face preparing to answer him.

“Yes, that way as if she has a prior claim on you.”

“She told you that?” He looked ticked.

“Yes, she did. A claim more or less supported by your escorting her into the dining hall with her parents for some important event last night. You owe me no explanations, Lane, but if you are committed, you need to explain yourself to someone. I would be mad, too, if I were her. Girls must be wary of charmers.” I tried to smile.

“I’m not like that, Kenna. I can’t say anything, but...I like ye a lot.” His eyes bored into mine.

“I like you, too,” I said, simply, wondering if these were hellos or good-byes.

“So have fun on Iona, then. When is the Stone returning?” he asked.

“St. Andrews Day, November 30th.”

“Would ye like it if I drove ye through the Royal Mile to the Lang Stairs?”

“Yes, that would be nice.” Now I was cautious. “Won’t Tara be upset, even if it is just a friendly gesture?”

“Oh, bother Tara. I don’t care. I’ve been married before, ye know.”

“No. I wouldn’t, though,” I said, fidgeting.

“No, you wouldn’t. She died a few years back of cancer.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yes, it was. She was a sweet thing,” he said, looking sad.

I studied Lane, memorizing face and blue eyes for good or ill.

“Your mini-bus is here, heading for Oban,” he said.

I started, guiltily, and looked over the median to the station. Sally was already there, waiting for me. “So it is. Have a good day, Lane.” I couldn’t resist saying his name.

“And ye,” he said softly, mushily, knowing exactly what he was doing to me as he flung the net out and tangled me in the hopeless hope of its webbed ropes, string loops and holes, while the web foreman hung free. Nor had he denied a thing.

* * *

Pushing the cobwebs from my senses, I ran to the bus and told Sally to make the driver wait while I returned for my suitcase and backpack, meeting Lane rolling it to me.

“Ye forget something?” he said, teasing.

I glared at him. He was impossible. “Thanks,” I had to say, but I was mad at his teasing which demonstrated his insufferable insensitivity.

When I hit his hand taking the handlebar from him, I was so angry, I felt nothing.

I ran to the bus and climbed on.

To my amazement, Bryan ran right behind me and into the bus.

“What in the world, Bryan. We didn’t know you were coming.”

“I couldn’t resist once I’d read up on it,” he said.

“Hey, Sally,” I said, finding my seat next to her. “This is great. I’m excited about a trip to Iona, and leaving the cold castle for a day.”

“You’d be more excited about it if you were accompanied by Mr. Lane, of course,” she nodded back toward where he stood. He was still there, and evidently I had been under observation. “He looks a little bit like Liam Neeson.”

“Yes, Liam’s Irish Celtic. One of my favorite film stars.”

“Cousins,” she said.

By then, Bryan had paid for his ticket and had found a seat near us.

“Let’s forget him and decide what to see on the island.”

“If you can,” she countered, and gave me that knowing look females get.

“Well, I can. He’s just flirting, anyhow,” I whispered.

“Watch out.”

“I know you are right, but it’s too late for that. He managed to trap me again without giving any clarity at all.”

“How? What did he tell you?”

“That he couldn’t say anything, but liked me a lot and he’d lost his wife to cancer.”

“Oh...he’s sharing things with you. That’s serious, Kenna. What else?”

“I accused him of flirting with me and he said, ‘it isn’t like that.’”

“When of course, it’s exactly like that. But he’s flirting with you because he can’t help himself. He likes you. That’s why he can lie without thinking he’s lying.”

“He asked me if I wanted him to take me to the Stone’s return at Edinburgh Castle.”

“Oh, my, my, I thought you said he gave no clarity at all.”

“Well he didn’t.”

“That’s one step ahead clear,” she said. “He won’t give her up without knowing your feelings, you know.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“No, you’re waiting for the knee to the floor. Well, let’s plan our trip. Bryan is staring at us like a lost puppy. We’ll have to include him in everything. The bus takes us Iona. From there we take the ferry to the top of Mull. Then a smaller ferry takes us to Iona, and almost everything we want to see is in walking distance... except for bed, breakfast, and beyond.”

“You’re so funny, Sally,” I said, feeling a little lift to my depression.

“Yes, we’ll be all right today. Soon as we’re through wandering the abbey of Iona, and reading the gravestones, we’ll have the bed and breakfast send a bus. Maybe tomorrow we can search tombstones in yards elsewhere on Iona. Then get another bus to take us back to the ferry for our return connection at 5p.m. It should work out all right,” she said.

“So I can relax now and do what everyone else is doing?”

“Good idea. I think I’ll snooze,” Sally said.

“I’ll wake you when we’re there,” I said.

I pretended I was snoozing so I wouldn’t have to talk. Bryan was no consolation.

* * *

I woke first.

“Hey, the bus has stopped. We’re in Oban. Now we wait for the next ferry. Sally?”

“Oh, okay.”

We pulled our carry on gear with us and exited the bus, receiving instructions for the next day’s return, and getting our overnight luggage from the bus storage.

“Oh, wow,” Sally said, “Look at those mountain sheep, and the fish crates. They are so colorful.”

“Photos, photos,” I cried, getting first one and then another picture of the place.

We walked around together examining a yard full of parked or stranded boats. Bryan talked history. Finally the ferry pulled up, and we towed our personal items to the line of people forming, and we finally were able to climb on. As in most ferries, there was a wide space in the middle with tables and benches near the windows. We staked out our spot.

Each of us took turns going out on the deck to look across the water and feel the spray.

“Sally! We’re about to cross the Sound of Iona. Let’s take our stuff up, the approach is gorgeous.”

“Okay, let’s get our stuff and follow the pedestrian traffic. Coming, Bryan?”

We three pushed out onto the deck.

The day was dark and grey, the clouds soft and watery. A broad band of a rainbow sliced the cloud and made a straight banner down to the monastery buildings off in the distance. The closer we got to the island, the more intense the rainbow turned. A bird perched on a pole at the topmost point. The water was chopped up like ice. We passed more mountain sheep grazing on a high slope. The grey of the sky turned purple, and a light from somewhere spotlighted the mossy green patch before the Iona Monastery. Now you could count multiple buildings. Detail stood out. Multiple houses were on one part of the approach. We passed a sailboat without sails and a fishing boat. As we ferried, we saw the buildings from multiple angles.

“Doesn’t the wind feel great whipping at our necks?” Sally asked.

“Yes, and look, you can see the abbey from here,” I responded.

“Where?” asked Bryan. “Oh yes, I see.”

Softened by sea spray and rippling green water, we climbed off the ferry, our senses stretched and soothed. We rolled our luggage past the line of stone apartments and shops up the narrow road.

At the approach we looked at the wall of a ruin and the plan of the grounds we would be seeing. We left the luggage together and examined the ruins. Three rounded arcs and windows with stone facing the round arches. We spied the high hills out the upper windows, some open, some with broken panes between leading, some tall with glass panes restored between leading.

We picked up our luggage and entered through the gate. More walking past ancient trees, and we came upon the yard of graves and phenomenal crosses.

We walked around the ninth century St. Martin's Cross, MacLean's cross, and more. We saw a kinswoman's grave, Flora MacDonald. Famous Celtic crosses displayed in stone, the famous circle around the legs of the cross.

We went to the Iona Nunnery. We photographed the archways of the cloister, listened to guides tell about St. Columba. I felt as though ancient spirits followed us through the ruins. The Scriptorium's content of books had been sent to Ireland; one copy of the Book of Kells remained. The chapel housed stacked tombstones. We read inscriptions and wove in and out, intersecting paths occasionally with Bryan.

Worn out, we followed signs to a restaurant.

"I'm ready for this," Sally said.

"Yes, I'm cold as well as hungry."

"This is an exciting place. Let's get some gifts when we're through."

"Who would I buy a gift for? Everybody close to me is dead or moved away. Guess I could buy for my cousin and her daughter."

"Oh Lord, Kenna. I'm sorry. I forgot you lost your family. How insensitive of me."

"Not at all," I was saying when the waitress took our drink orders and left us a menu.

"I need to buy something for my nieces," Sally said as Bryan joined us.

"Bryan, come on, we haven't ordered, yet," I told him.

"Wave her down," Sally said. "Here!" she said, waving her hands in a silly flap.

"Sally, what are you having?"

"Salmon, I think, and an appetizer. You?"

"Steak and potatoes for me—I'll eat lighter tonight."

"Seafood sandwich for me," Bryan said. "Excuse me, I'll be right back."

When Bryan was out of earshot and the waitress had taken our orders away, Sally looked at me and asked, “What would you do, Kenna, if Lane decided he really liked you enough to marry you?”

“You mean, are my intentions honorable? A fair question, I guess, really. I could be toying with him just as easily, enjoying a vacation romance, that sort of thing.”

“Well, I mean, are you ready to move to Scotland to live?”

“I guess I could be. Do you realize Lane’s company works in the states half a year? He does work in Boston.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Man, you two have talked about all the important stuff. Have you talked with the old man, Mr. Farquhard, about the castle and its future?”

“No, I haven’t. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Well, why not?” The waitress brought us our orders and left.

“I’m not sure. I mean, he’s friendly enough. But wouldn’t that be brazen of me?”

“No. I rather think he’d like it.”

“Yes, he does like things stirred up a bit. I did hear he wanted to return to his surgeon’s practice in Glasgow.”

“Then you and Lane would have the castle.”

“Sally! I’m not thinking that way.”

“You should be,” she said, and dropped it just in time. Bryan sat down with us.

We stopped talking to dig into the delicious island fare. A shadow crossed my heart as I had the sinking feeling that my excursion to the island might mean losing ground to my competitor on the mainland.

Chapter 10: Prophecies

“Yet the Isle of St. Columba will swim

above the waves.”—Early prophecy over Iona

A hotel bus transported us to a bed and breakfast on Iona. We retired early. My night of restless tossing and turning had taken its toll. I couldn't escape it, I was smitten with Lane.

At breakfast, I bugged Sally again.

“Sally, tell me why you think Lane is interested in me, seriously. I mean, you saw him go into the big dining room with Tara and her parents, her hand over his arm. It looked pretty cozy and conclusive to me,” I said, taking a sip of hot, creamy tea, glum as I could be.

“My, but for a jealous girl, you give up easily. Let me eat a bite or two of my poached eggs and tatties before I answer you,” she said.

“All right, Sally, but don't make me wait too long. I can hardly concentrate on what I came to Scotland for...barely enjoy this beautiful island...or two bites of breakfast.”

“Believe me, I know.” She ate some of her egg and toast with tantalizing slowness.

She gave me a look.

I nibbled at my egg, poked at the tatties.

“You told me he kissed you. How soon was that after he met you?”

I thought back. “Less than a week.”

“You see?” she said, dismissing me and spreading honey on her toast slowly.

“Sally. Men kiss women all the time, and it doesn't mean anything.”

“Not like that. He hadn't planned on kissing you, but you showed your irritation at him for withholding information from you.”

“And?” I drummed my hand on the table impatiently.

“And you were too attractive to him. He had to make a mark on you. See if you responded.”

“Well, then, it's all over. I didn't respond. I left madder than ever.”

“Kenna, for a smart girl, you are so dumb.”

“Thanks, Sally.”

“Your anger gave a lot away. Maybe he’s too dumb to give it much credit, but instinctively he knew you felt something, just because you did get mad.”

“Oh, you’re right. I guess my caring is making me dumb,” I admitted.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then I gave too much away.”

“No, under the circumstances, it was probably just the right amount.”

“How do you know so much about male-female interactions?”

“Flattery. Listen, gal. Play it to the hilt when you return. That’s my wee bit of advice.”

Sally’s ‘wee bit of advice’ probably influenced me more than I knew; I would have her to thank once again.

Early the next morning, Sally and I went tombstone looking. Most of the inscriptions were so worn that few names could be discerned. However, I did find Smiths, McAllister’s, MacPhersons, Duncan’s, and Keith’s. I cited patronymics with the appropriate graveyard in my little notebook I always carried. Then I found it, a tombstone with the names of my ancestors on it, Hector McAlester, Alexander, and Godfrey McAlester. There was even a black marble statue of Godfrey McAlester. I had made a connection, at least a possible one.

“Let’s take a sailboat ride after lunch,” Sally said.

“I bet no one is available this late in the season,” I answered. “Soon as we finish outside, we’ll look around the cloister arches again and the ruins of the nunnery. Then we can look for those presents you were talking about. I’d love to pick up some Celtic music on compact discs.”

“Yes. Let’s keep walking. Check out this building, Kenna.”

I stepped in and saw a collection of gravestones and headstones.

A man was reading the inscription on one exquisitely aged stone:

“Seachd bliadhna ‘n bir’ath
 Thig muir air Eirinn re aon tr’ath
 ‘Sthar Ile ghuirm ghlais
 Ach sn’amhaidh I Choluim Chl’eirich.”—translation,
 “Seven years before the day of judgment
 the ocean will sweep over both Ireland and Islay.
 Yet the Isle of St. Columba will swim about the waves.”

What a small island to carry such a weighty prophecy.

My ear was tuned to hear the guttural Gaelic and I made plans to learn Scots Gaelic.

“Ireland is bigger and higher, yet Iona will rise and not Ireland?” I said.

“Aye, so it will,” the man said. “Rise from the oldest rock in the world, an area once filled with stone circles, long lost megalithic structures, a Druid center. So even pagan, this was always a holy island. Since Columba, it’s a Christian one.”

“And that’s the reason?” Sally asked.

“Columba the missionary left Ireland at 42. He provoked a battle and rashly killed hundreds of Irish, defending his right to keep a copy of a psalter he had made which had belonged to the scriptorium of St. Finian. As penance, he was banished from his beloved Ireland--so far, in fact, as to be unable to even glimpse Ireland on the horizon.”

“Sad,” I said.

“You can read more, here,” he said.

The brochure described how thirteen had accompanied him and built a church and monastery with kitchen, kiln, stables, mill, and guesthouse. It pictured a defensive embankment that excluded cattle and women.

“It’s known that the community prospered, attracted followers, that Columba travelled to the Scottish mainland and engaged in battle with the king’s druid to convert the King of the Picts.”

“And how would that be known?” I asked.

“So the guidebooks say,” Sally said.

“My folks visited Iona,” Bryan said. “They talked about its aura of holiness.”

“Books call it one of the world’s holy places. It has drawn monastics of every order.”

“Few people live here now, only a hundred or so. In Columba’s day, it bustled with activity. People from everywhere came and went. Well, I’ll be leaving you to it.” The odd Scott walked off.

“Kings were crowned and buried here,” Sally said.

“Sally, I have a camera full of pictures and a head about to explode. Let’s take a break and go to the gift shop.”

At the shop we separated, and I found good Celtic music CD’s for my continued romancing of Scotland and the Stone. Bags full of crafts and memorabilia, plus a few architectural pieces, a banister rail, a fence post, an iron key. I wrapped the bag around my suitcase handle to take home.

“Let’s find a sailboat ride.”

A good soul at the dock made our wish reality. We pulled our sweaters tight as we rode.

“There’s good folk music up at the Martyr’s Bay tonight,” the captain said.

“Thank you so much,” we told him when he indicated there was no cover charge.

We decided to make an easy evening of it. Sally and I dressed, rounded Bryan up, and entered the restaurant to the sounds of local music. We were the only tourists left to impress. People stared at us, but were pleasant enough.

We were seated at a table near a window. We ordered light seafood fare and Oban ale. My seat faced the bar, and I was taking a bite of my lobster tail when I noticed a man in a trench coat take a seat at the bar. He looked a wee bit too fine for the rest of the customers. Out of place, even, sinister. He kept glancing over at our table. Something stirred in my memory. *Look-alikes are common, Kenna. You just can't leave creepy at the castle; you've got to drag it with you. Why would anybody follow you here, anyhow? You are delusional.*

“Sally, Bryan, not immediately, but check out the man at the bar. Does he look familiar to you?”

They took turns and shook their heads in the negative.

We talked about Iona again, the three of us, and when I looked back, he was gone. My sense of knowing I had spotted someone I knew, however, remained.

For no apparent reason, the image of my dad sprang to the fore. I missed Dad, and teared up for the second time in 24 hours. He had been a good parent. I couldn't fathom now why I had hated him as a teenager, probably due to my fierce loyalty to my Mother.

My Dad's background was English, no Scottish roots to our knowledge, but he had always demonstrated interest in Mom's Scottish line. I guess 'leave and cleave' figured into his blood. He would have approved of my trip. Uncle certainly would have. My genealogical searches honored them both, if not my methods, unorthodox as they were.

“Church records, court records, bars and tombstones, first,” Uncle had said, “before libraries,” and the National Archives of Scotland with whom I had already made an appointment for early December.

Both Dad and Uncle would have told me to forget the romance; he wasn't worth it.

Trace your connections; exonerate our name. Not so easy, finding if a link connected my forebears to the Stone of Destiny.

Columba, the giant, reputed to have saved a man's life by ordering the Loch Ness monster to depart. Columba, the evangelizer and spreader of Christianity. Columba the leader of the monks who produced the famous illuminated text, Book of Kells. I had hoped it would be here on Iona, but this exhibit said it had been sent to Ireland. Columba, who had raised the island of Iona to such renown that Royals were buried here—4 Irish, 8 Norwegian, and 48 Scottish kings, including Macbeth of Shakespearian fame.

One of my main purposes in coming was that The Stone of Destiny, Stone of Scone, or Coronation Stone, said to have been brought here by Columba as a travelling altar on his missionary activities to the Scottish mainland, might be the real stone.

We had a wonderful time talking and relaxing, and finally wound down with good music.

As I paid for my meal, I mentioned Columba's pillow to the cashier.

"Yes, the Stone. Did you know that in the 8th century, the island was raided by Vikings, and that Kenneth McAlpine, 1st king of the Scots, took the Stone to Dunstaffnage for safekeeping? From there it went to Scone where it was used in coronations."

"No, I didn't. So I need to go to Dunstaffnage and to Scone," I said.

"I would. Before he died in 597, Columba prophesied, 'In Iona of my heart, Iona of my love, instead of the chanting of monks shall be the lowing of cattle...before the world ends, Iona shall be as it was.'"

"So another possible lineage or provenance for part of the Stone's journey," I said.

"Yes. Did you know that in 806, the Vikings slaughtered 68 monks and 20 years later the community disbanded? Or that in 1098, the island fell under Norwegian rule until 1156? Or that in 1204, St Ronan established a Benedictine abbey and monastery where Columba's church once stood, or that his sister Beathag established a nunnery nearby?"

"No, I didn't," I said. "You're knowledgeable."

“He banished women to a small island in the sound known to this day as the Isle of Women. Mounds of pebbles on the island were created in penance by monks who had succumbed to the temptations of wicked women. Today, women can worship on Iona.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yes, and did you know there’s another prophecy about the second coming of Christ, reinforced by the legend that Mary the mother of Jesus visited here? It was given by the author William Sharp, writing as Fiona Macleod in 1910, ‘Christ shall come again upon Iona.’ Another prophet said, ‘now as the Bride of Christ, now as the Daughter of God, now as the Divine Spirit embodied through mortal birth in a Woman, as once through mortal birth in a man, the coming of a new Presence and Power: a dream that this may be upon Iona, so that the little Gaelic island may become as the little Syrian Bethlehem.’”

“You’re wasted in here. You’d make a better librarian.”

“A young Hebridean priest once said that their forefathers and elders believed, and still believe, that the Holy Spirit shall come again...that the one mortally born among us as the Son of God shall come then as the Daughter of God, the Divine Spirit come as a woman, and then the world will know peace for the first time. Funny, I work at the library.”

“I knew it!” I said. “Well, that surely is an upset of Columba’s belief that women bring trouble.”

I took my change and we smiled at one another.

We walked out of Martyr’s Bay and strolled near the water back to our inn.

“Iona was admired by Dr. Samuel Johnson when he spent the night in a barn in 1773, and by Felix Mendelssohn, who captured the atmospherics of the region in his Hebrides Overture, composed between 1830 and 1832,” Bryan said.

“The Stone of Destiny symbolizes the survival of a fierce people, the Scots,” I said.

“I may be wrong, but doesn’t Columba’s pillow vie for status of *vera* stone?” Sally said.

“Yes, and the power it was supposed to have, to speak when the real king sat on it. You know the Knights Templar were keen on the supernatural. The Stone and its power were more associated with Christian than Druidic beliefs, as attested to by naming it Jacob’s pillow.”

We talked a bit more, but I continued to think about its history as a part of Scotland prior to the making of Presbyterians as we separated for our rooms.

The main Scottish Protestants who emerged after Luther’s proclamation, in the years his works were banned (1500’s). Presbyterians emerged in the mid-1500’s, while Edward was dying and Mary, Queen of Scots, was coming in for the Catholics.

All that was way before the Scottish exodus to America began in the 1700’s. And with their newly propounded aversion to all things remotely superstitious or relic-oriented, the idea of a transatlantic voyage of a large speaking rock immigrating with rabid Presbyterians taking their faith further was close to preposterous.

Or was it? I dared not risk ridicule from another human except for Sally. I unlocked my door and went in.

I mean, could a man in a certain locale where the real Stone had stayed hidden for centuries, say a Catholic priest, not befriend another man in the same area, say a fiery Presbyterian who was leaving his home country for America, and strike up a deal for custodianship of the Stone? McAlpin had saved the stone by transporting it to Scone.

As preposterous as the whole scenario sounded, dates lined up explaining the letters.

My heart pounded in my chest.

Just how often does preposterous prove true?

Our trip seemed uneventful, and next morning, we headed off early for the ferry.

Back at the landing, we waited.

My stomach pitched sickly on the way home, more due to not knowing what I would face upon my return than to the toppling waves.

I remembered something about sound or P waves—they travel at lightning speed through rock, but when they hit water, they can't travel through it, so they must return the way they came. P waves. The sound at Fingal's Cave, An Uaimh Bhinn, Gaelic for melodic cave, nature's cathedral. Acoustics were due to the size of the cave, the natural arch to the roof. The eerie sounds from the bouncing might match the echoing sound of returning waves. So that was what had inspired Mendelssohn. For some reason I did not now and might never know, Iona seemed a turnaround point of history, even my own.

Chapter 11:

After the Storm

“Ghosts have a way of misleading you; they can make your thoughts as heavy as branches after a storm.”—Rebecca Maizel, *Infinite Days*

I arrived home, or it seemed home, since even the castle ghosts were similar to those of Lebanon. I dismounted the bus directly into the presence of one I'd been thinking of.

“I missed you,” Lane said.

“But I've only been gone two days. You're surprising me.”

“Are you tired of me? Do you want me to back off?”

“No, Lane, don't back off.” I pulled his face to mine and kissed him in front of everybody. Sally and Bryan walked on in front.

Lane turned beet red. “Damn, Kenna, you make it hard for a guy to be good.” He encircled me with his arms and pulled me close. We charged the night air with electrical currents. Sparks flew. I didn't want to leave him.

He helped me get my stuff and pulled us away from the group, around to the garden area. He took off his jacket and laid it in the grass, and told me to sit on it. He sat beside me. Then he dipped beside me on the ground, and kissed me over and over.

“Lane,” I said, kissing him back more.

He pulled my shirt at the shoulder and kissed me there.

“Lane, stop.”

I was weak as pulp.

“Why?” he said, caressing me.

“God, Lane, I can’t stand it. You have to stop.”

“You don’t fancy me?”

“You know that’s not true. You know you have to. We’ve got to go inside. Someone is going to see what’s going on. There’s too much unsettled, Lane.”

“All right, then, let’s go in. What was I thinking? I have a big day coming up.”

I pulled myself together as well as I could, and we walked in together.

I gave him my hand. “Good night, Lane.”

“Good night, Kenna. Sleep well.”

“You, too,” I said in the same spirit.

It was late. Tired, I was ready to sleep deeply.

When I arrived at my room, I saw white sticking out of my door. Picking up the envelope, I saw “Kenna Alford” written on it. Who would write me? I opened the door, threw loose things on the bed, and then opened the letter. I pulled my roll case and my backpack in and locked the door behind me. I sank into the easy chair. Letter opened, I pulled out a neatly folded letter. I skipped down to the bottom and saw the lord of the castle’s signature.

“Miss Kenna Ma’am, would ye spare half an hour of your time tomorrow at 10 a.m. in my study? Thanking you in advance, Mr. Farquhard Campbell, Blackheart Castle.”

Oh, dear, audience with the old man himself. And Blackheart Heights combined with his name made me think of the alternative definition for blackheart, not grief but coldness. Whatever in the world did the old man want? Sally had asked me if I'd talked to him. Well, I was about to, now. *I wondered if he were kicking me out of his castle or telling me to leave his son alone.*

Had I known the purpose of my meeting I could have marshaled my responses for when we met, but he gave no indication. He held all the cards tight to his chest. I didn't think I had offended him in any way.

Maybe he wondered about my ancestor who had his same name, Farquhard Campbell. That made no sense. Nothing did. As I put the envelope down, a heavy quiet descended. The room turned dark and forbidding. As I bathed, I kept eyeing the door. I was antsy, lying in bed on the fluffed-up feather pillow. Worried I wouldn't sleep a wink, when my head hit the pillow, I remembered nothing more.

* * *

Next morning I woke up early with a knot in my stomach, full of foreboding over my meeting with Mr. Farquhard. I read and re-read his letter.

I followed delicious smells down to breakfast, Sally and Brian were already seated and waved to me. Sally and I exchanged conspiratorial looks, based on the kiss she had seen. I wished I felt as sure as they did. Last night's rush of confidence had worn off. Prevailing forces were set against us. No serious overtures were forthcoming, no mention of the future.

No permanence. Billing me as castle mistress was premature. I was the American tourist returning home; Tara, the wife intended.

The earth cannot stand Tara as mistress of Blackheart Heights.

With a sparse plate, I sat down beside Bryan. I wore deep burnt sienna to accentuate my red hair.

“Iona was great, yesterday,” I said, leading out.

“It was. I had seventh sense experiences,” Bryan said.

“Whatever do you mean, Bryan?” Sally piped in.

“I’m not sure, Sally, I only know that, with no verbal processing, I knew what I was supposed to do with the rest of my life. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“Yes,” I volunteered. “I had that when my uncle returned from a trip to Scotland right before he died, like I knew one day I would come here. I had forgotten.”

“You know it’s only two days until St. Andrews’ Day.”

“Bring home the Coronation Stone used 27 times,” Bryan said.

Lane had not followed up on his invite to take me to Edinburgh Castle. I stressed.

Nothing was sure except that we were radically attracted, unattached, and I, at least, was dangerously susceptible. What if in some unguarded moment I yielded to his advance?

No. I could not allow that to happen. No flings, I tightened my resolve.

“Something’s bugging you, Kenna. ‘Fess up,” Sally said.

I skipped from Lane not following up on taking me to the Stone’s return to another.

“You know that idea you had of my talking to the owner of Blackheart?”

“Yes.”

“He’s summoned me to appear before the high court.”

“No, he didn’t,” Bryan said.

“And what’s more, I don’t have a good feeling about it. And I have to wait.”

“I wonder what he wants,” Sally said.

After breakfast, I walked up to the buildings alone, but the noise of hammering failed, and no trucks sat on the hill.

Why, his father has told Lane to have his way with me to get me out of his system. Oh, God, that was possible, wasn’t it? That wasn’t honorable, however.

“Please, God, no,” I prayed desperately in a moment of revelatory paranoia.

An eternity of time passed before Mr. Farquhard’s door.

“Audience with His Nibs?” Bryan asked. Of all people, he passed by me that second in time.

I prepared to beard the laird in his castle fiddling with his letter. I feared his ferocious bushy eyebrows. I cowered like a naughty school girl outside the principal’s office.

“Yes.”

He looked at me standing by the door and said, “Catch you later, Kenna.”

It was 10 a.m. I rapped with my knuckles just as the old man opened the door.

“Come in, Miss Alford,” he said in a gravelly voice, “the big day’s almost upon us.”

As I walked in, he returned to his desk *to pick up his quill pen*, I thought, irreverently. He seated me. “Have a seat, have a seat, Miss Kenna. I hope I don’t look too menacing. I’ve been told I do. My son tells me you are of Scottish descent.”

“Aye, that I am,” I said, smiling.

He clapped his hands. “What is your clan name and from where do ye hail?”

“Would you believe, from Clan McAllister and Clan Campbell.”

“Where in the States do you come from?” he asked, eyes clear as crystal.

“From here, my family resided in the Tarbert area, near Campbeltown. In the States, our ancestors landed inland at the mouth of the Cape Fear River...Campbellton, North Carolina. My family immigrated in the first wave of Highlanders around 1732.”

“My, my, who would hae thought?” he shook his head slowly back and forth.

“Where we lived comprises one of the largest concentrations of Scottish Highlanders who settled up and down the Cape Fear River, which runs right behind my house.”

“Ye wouldnae believe.”

“No, but you were saying ‘the big day is almost here.’ It’s exciting, isn’t it? I’ve just been listening to spins on the Stone’s story—an interview with Robbie the Pict, for instance.”

He studied me quizzically.

“I dinnae mean the Stone, Miss Alford, I meant my son’s wedding.”

I stopped cold.

“I thought I should tell you.”

“Oh, and when might that take place?”

“Two months from now. Not enough time to move a whale into water, but Blackheart Heights is likely up to it.” He stared at me from under his bushy eyebrows and looked away.

“When will the announcement go public?”

“We’ll make it next week. Then maybe I’ll get back to me surgeon’s post, hang up the laird’s position.” He picked at the food he’d taken into his study with him.

“So, Mr, Farquhard, was there another reason for calling me in, other than telling me about Lane’s wedding?”

“No, that was it. I thought you’d be wanting to know.”

“Hardly,” I said, standing.

“No?” he twitched as he stood.

“You’ve done your duty, then,” I said, extending my hand, forcing him to shake it.

Then I turned my back to him and left with all the dignity I could muster.

I raced out, running toward my room, slamming directly into ubiquitous Bryan.

“Sorry.” I said, looking down to hide my tears.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Wait a minute. I’ll go get Sally.”

He left as I ran upstairs. Amazingly perceptive for a man. *I should have fallen for him.*

I opened my door, slammed it behind me and threw myself on my bed, sobbing. My heart was ripped out. I knew Lane loved me even if he hadn't told me. Maybe he would marry out of duty, anyhow. Not unusual for old world families.

Tears rolled relentlessly, and no amount of effort could stem the tide. I heard Sally's knock at the door.

"Kenna, may I come in?"

"It's not locked."

She walked in and looked at me.

"Oh, no, what happened?"

"Mr. Farquhard told me he's announcing his son's wedding next week...in two months!"

"No, he didn't," she said in a gasp. She stood still, her eyes widening. This was outside her plan.

"Yes, he did, that mean ass of a man. I hate him."

"There, there," she said, patting me on the back, consoling me, "you believe him?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"When did you last see Lane?"

"Last night. He met me at the bus. When I told him I was surprised to see him, he asked if I wanted him to back off, was I tired of him, and I said, no—and—well, I thought you saw me kiss him. That set off some fireworks."

"I bet it did. And then?"

"Well, he held me close like he was afraid of losing me."

"And then?"

"Oh, Sally, that's it. He had come to tell me good-bye and I thought it was hello. I started things back up when he was pulling out. Oh, God, I can't stand it."

“That’s not what he said, though. And if he didn’t love you, he wouldn’t be drawn back in. He wouldn’t even have bothered coming to tell you.”

“I don’t know. Mr. Farquhard said they were announcing it next week.”

“Hmmm. I’m thinking, I’m thinking.” She drummed her fingers on the desk.

“And he was taking me to see the Stone returned tomorrow morning,”

“Oh, well that’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t. He hasn’t set a time to meet. He was taking me a special route ahead of everybody else so I would get the best pictures. I bet he’s not taking me. I’ll have to scramble to make plans.” I put both hands over my eyes and sobbed again.

“Let’s think, Kenna. Does Lane know you know? Maybe his father has his own little game a-foot and made his pre-emptive strike. Maybe Lane asked his father to give him a week to make his decision, and Mr. Farquhard decides ensure the outcome is his planned-for one.”

“Then he’s evil and I hate him.”

“Well, aren’t all in-laws, even in-laws-to-be?”

I laughed. “Thanks, Sally, for breaking through my sludge of self-pity.”

“We have to find Lane. We have to know if he’s taking you tomorrow. Otherwise, you can go with me and the tour group, by gosh. Or just with me. I have a rental car. Yes, we have to find Lane, and keep him.”

“Why are you in my corner, Sally? I understand you’re nice, but you are making sure I win. Nobody does that for anybody anymore.”

She smiled and went all silent.

“Sally?”

“Oh, just say it’s in the interest of true love winning out.”

“So, how do we find Lane?”

I was back in control of myself for the moment.

“You don’t; I do.”

When she left, I forced myself to study the photographs of Edinburgh castle, the diagrams of traffic patterns, the pictures and names of different rooms. I checked out pictures of the Stone. Amazing how much work a plan took. I pulled all my rolls of film together.

#

I went to our designated reading room to spread out my research. My heavy heart found disconnect in work. I was more determined than ever to connect dots from my ancestors to events unfolding in Scotland.

When I was nicely ensconced with a cup of hot tea, a few pieces of Scottish shortbread, and had separated my research into ordered piles, I poured over it until new connections popped to the forefront of my mind. A couple of hours later I emerged with excitement. This was not farfetched at all.

I pressed a moist finger on the shortbread crumbs and ate them and drank the last sip of tea, now tepid, and began to pull the units back together. Looking up, I made eye contact with an unknown young male.

Put it all away, I told myself, rising from my chair and depositing it into the rolling suitcase I had brought for this purpose, maintaining my order.

I silently gathered my plates, cups, napkins, and wadded napkins.

“I’ll take that for ye,” the stocky young boy said, appearing suddenly from behind.

“Scared me,” I said, “but thanks. Please take it before I break it. My hands are shaky.”

We laughed.

“I’m Iain.” He offered his free hand.

“I’m Kenna,” I said, letting go of my cart to shake his.

“Mr. Farquhard is my granddaddy. And Lane is my dad.”

“Well, this has taken too long! I’ve heard about you, of course. Nothing is true unless I hear it first from you,” I surprised myself by saying.

He laughed. “I can live with that.”

His comment revealed his personality.

At that moment, as we reached the kitchen entrance, another strange male emerged.

“Hello, I’m David, Lane’s brother,” he said, offering his hand. “I’ve seen you in the tour group, and I believe you’re staying on after they leave...which isn’t long. I was just an administrator, before. Now I’m introducing myself as family. The boy here is Lane’s son, Iain.”

“And I’m Kenna. I guess you know that from the records.” Yes, Lane mentioned right before Iona that his wife had died of cancer...but he hadn’t mentioned his son.

“You are Scottish?”

“Extract. I’m American.”

“I see.”

“Are you the brother who cared for the castle first?”

“Yes. I love the castle. But you don’t own a castle; it owns you.”

“Yes. My family said the same about our antebellum house.”

“I hear everyone will go to see the Stone that Speaks, but was dumb for 700 years! I’ll be taking care of the castle tomorrow while everyone else attends.”

“That’s terrible. Don’t you want to go?”

“I have little interest. ‘A stone’s a stone, for a’ that.”

I laughed, and relaxed.

“Well, take that suitcase of yours upstairs and come back down in quarter of an hour, and I’ll tell you all the family secrets, and dish the dirt on everyone.”

“Ooh, I wouldn’t miss an opportunity like that for the world. Back at four, right?”

“Right you’d be.”

Iain smiled shyly and muttered, “Nice to meet you.”

“And you, too, Iain. See you soon,” I said.

Not a lot of resemblance between the brothers. But Lane’s older brother was cute, too. He was slimmer than Lane and his son. He must have taken after their mother.

Depositing my papers, I freshened up and changed my clothes knowing I would stay down for the evening meal, and the short gathering taking place afterwards to give last-minute information on the Stone of Destiny. The diversion was welcomed, as I still had not heard from Lane or Sally, and was uneasy about the whole reason for arriving in Scotland before my employer—seeing the Stone, photographing the Stone, getting the drop on other photographers for the sake of the magazine. I don’t know what I envisioned, but a devouring horde of some kind.

Mostly, I hated not knowing.

I put on a skirt with flounce at the bottom and a lacy blouse. With makeup, scent, and a little blush, I was empowered.

I timed my appearance exactly.

I heard voices on my way down and checked the source. It was Sally and Lane. Well, I wasn’t one to interfere. He had some explaining to do. Kissing me, engaged to another. Not that I was sorry, yet. Not unless he planned to marry Tara. David walked into the dining room with wine glasses and a bottle of Bordeaux. “Come in, Kenna. Iain will bring us cheese.”

I smiled and walked into the dining room just as Lane passed by.

Good that he is seeing me with David. He hasn’t promised me anything.

“Kenna!”

“Yes, Lane?” I stopped near him.

“We still on for tomorrow? Going to the festivities at the crack of dawn?”

“Sure, Lane. I’m looking forward to it. Can you get me there in time?”

“Let’s make it 6a.m.”

“Done,” I said, going into the dining room. He gave me a strange look.

Rule Number Five or Six, Don’t make me worry.

“So, David, who was Momma’s favorite?”

He laughed. “Why, Lane, of course.” His dark brown eyes sparkled with mischief. “I brought some photographs. Just look at them and you will see the evidence.”

We plowed through a box of pictures showing three little boys in various guises, as full of mischief as any three boys could be, cute and resembling each other closely.

“Edwin was the quiet one.”

“Your family has the same names as ours...which is a little scary.”

Before long, David fulfilled his promise. He told me Lane’s secret, one which I was sure Lane himself would never have told me. The only thing I couldn’t quite understand was why David had done that. Did he have personal agenda? I might never know, but then, I had a way of ferreting out the truth in any given situation.

Supper was light and uneventful. I thanked David for having invited me and stood on the outskirts of a group answering questions on the Stone. It was all stuff I knew.

Besides, my peace was assured for one day at least, as my ride with Lane tomorrow was settled. *Don’t count on it.* I heard a voice say, promptly dismissing it. I was spending the day with Lane. *Nothing could possibly go wrong.*

Chapter 12: Stonewalled

“I grasped a lovely masked procession,

And caught things from a horror show...”— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Preparing for a day with Lane gave a lilt to busy preparation. I nearly forgot my session with his father. I was quick to brush his announcement to the side.

My necessities I packed in my backpack. My fancy camera and lens were separated lying in foam in a box on rollers. In the backpack was a change of clothes, an umbrella, and a cloth aluminum reflector. The bumpy pack slid over a set of green khakis with a camisole under a deep red shirt, yielding photographer warrior and slightly sexy.

Rolling one case and carrying the other downstairs to the lobby, I hesitated. Lights shone under the door into the kitchen. A tug at my sleeve revealed Lane inches from my face.

“Our lunches,” he said, a glow of success emanating from him, a big smile on his face.

“Great—my gear and a water bottle!” I said, wishing the rising warmth would calm.

“Off we go, then.”

He lifted the hand holding bag lunches and maneuvered his arm over my left shoulder, steering me out the door in front of him, holding the heavy door with his right hand until I was out and well ahead of him. This reassured me as a person with a professional assignment necessary to fulfill, one of those all-important articles that paid my way.

“Over there,” he said, motioning with his head to a small blue Fiat. I hadn’t noticed what car he drove until today.

“All right.” I loosened the knapsack from my back and waited.

“It’s not locked—this is Scotland, not America.”

“Well, that is the truth,” I said, thinking about customs and moral fiber.

I opened the door, collapsing the seat to place camera bag and backpack in the rear.

“Should I put something under these?”

“No, you’re good.”

I slipped into a warm, golden-brown leather car seat on the left side, noting Lane’s obvious immaculate care of his car.

He entered on the right, buckling his seat belt. I followed suit.

“Ready for take-off?” he asked, in his most teasing, jovial mood, and put his arm behind my seat to check for traffic, then pulled out. “We might take time for a quick stop. I know one place.”

“That’s good. You think of everything.”

“Not quite, but I try.”

Well, would you break your vow of silence, then, not to mention breaking your engagement with the illustrious Tara? No, enough of that. I could feel sparks--that meant the electricity still worked between us--a good sign. I settled into my seat, wishing I felt frisky enough to ask why Tara hadn’t tagged along, just to watch his reaction. He would have clammed up with coldness then, for sure.

Don’t get desperate. Wait for him to speak.

“You met my brother last night. And me son.”

The more emotional he was, the more he lapsed into brogue.

“Yes. You have a great family.”

“What did you and David talk about?”

My, my, was a green-eyed monster arriving on the scene?

“What we talked about—well, he showed me family pictures, in particular of you when you were little, and of him, and your other brother. Why?”

“I never know what he’s up to.”

“Meaning—” I left my voice significantly in the air and cocked my head to look at him to see what he would say.

“Meaning, was he flirting with you?”

“Well,” I slowed down and went for my Southern drawl, “I don’t rightly know. I’ve never judged that well. Would it bother ye, now?” Southern drawl met Scottish sing-song. I cut a side glance at him.

Target hit.

“Don’t be messing with me. I do not take kindly to that.”

“A two-edged knife, that,” I said.

“Why, I’ve not—” Realization cut him short only for a second. “Playing a little game, then?”

“I don’t think anyone is playing a game. I joined your brother over a glass of wine. He enlightened me on your family. Harmless enough. And quite useless, I might add.”

“I see.” His brows furrowed, and a hard look played over his features. “We do need to talk, but I think it best we wait until today’s festivities and your job duties have ended.”

“Oh, ye do, now?” I said, not done teasing. “Or do ye not know what ye’ll be saying?” I went too far, but he wasn’t playing fair, either. Did he have serious intentions toward me? I was not some stupid school girl. I could rein all these feelings back in and stomp on them and ridicule him in my mind and kill those tender plants. I didn’t want to, but I could. He had not reckoned with Kenna Alford, if he thought her a piece of putty in his hands.

“Has someone said something to you?”

“Who hasn’t said something to me? But I’ll tell you later when we ‘talk.’ I’m surprised I wasn’t met by Tara telling me not to ride with you, or allowing me to do so.”

“Allowing? Allowing? Oh, so that’s what’s wrong. Little Miss Tara has talked to you. Is that all?”

“That is all, and your fancy dinner with her and her parents, her arm hanging on your arm. Or didn’t you notice I was there and spoke, since you never responded?”

“Kenna, stop. Please don’t go there. You really want to wait. We’re too close to the Stone and the Honours of Scotland. Can’t you believe in me that long?”

“Of course I can. And as for you, Mr. Lane—can’t you believe in me that long?”

He swerved the car.

“Of course I can,” he said, his voice softening. His expression was to die for, and he just had to grab my hand and squeeze it.

I looked at him, his khakis, his shirt stretched across ripped muscles from hard carpentry. Yeah, I can rein my feelings in...even though shivers ran over my arms like electric current gone wild, as if an army of chill bumps marched over my skin. I’m sure I could, dead sure. I could marshal my emotions at any minute and rein them back in.

* * *

Signs for Edinburgh increased in frequency.

Traffic became congested, even this early in the morning. We sat in line in one of the concentric roads tied to the roundabout, and I tried to locate signs on buildings.

“About to come close to the Royal Mile,” Lane said. “We’re cheating. We’re parking as close to Edinburgh Castle as we can. Then we’ll skitter uphill like rabbits. It’s early enough.”

“I really have to get fantastic shots.”

I reached for my camera, thinking how the uphill climb would increase its weight.

“Stick close,” he said. “I’ll help carry the camera. Do you have an extra press pass?”

“I do,” I said, smiling.

“Then I’m your cameraman.”

“Right on.” Everything with Lane was right on, and I knew it would be. In spite of which, every nerve I had stood to attention. I prayed I wouldn’t trip on uneven pavement or upturned castle stone. I must nab a scoop for my magazine, and if I did, that would extend my

stay and secure my dreams for a few more months. This fatal stone, as the ancients called it, could win me a rock-solid destiny.

Lane double-parked on the left side of one of the side streets a couple of blocks from the castle. Glad not to be driving on the wrong side of the road, I knew I could never have accomplished this simple parking feat.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asked.

I pulled all my material together and shouldered my backpack.

“Yes. I can manage if you’re toting my camera. I’ll need a few shots along the way. What will I do when I need it?”

“Ask. I’m quick. Instant transfer—your aircraft,” he said. He demonstrated.

“Engineer, builder, castle owner, and now—pilot.”

“Or Jack of all trades, master of one.”

I laughed.

“You hide your talents, well, Mr. Campbell.”

“Let’s see. They’re gathering already, it seems. We must fight through the crowd like Boadicea, queen of the Iceni. Ready?”

“You bet. I have my armor on.”

He laughed.

I ran to keep up, thinking professional thoughts to dull my awareness of him. We worked well together. He absorbed my purpose as though his own.

We pushed through the crowds until we reached official territory, the large commons area in front of the castle.

“I think this is where the royals’ limousines will convene, Kenna.” He handed me my camera.

I pulled my tripod out and set it up for the shots. Soon I had them, and transferred my camera back to him.

“Now I’ll add ‘press’ to me list.” He smiled.

I followed him quickly, much better than puzzling out maps with old street names printed on them in script.

“I was afraid you might miss the limousines. Where I’m taking you, you’ll be situated for their bringing in the Stone to set in place. It’s a narrow alley where they are setting it up.”

I walked so fast my thighs ached.

“Now I really must photograph you as well, if you’ll allow it,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Why, thank you,” I said, bowing and spreading my hands like a subject entering his kingdom. I posed him in front of the castle wall. Quite an authoritative posture, actually, with the air of a castle laird of another day and age.

“That’s it. You’ll be getting calls from singles in North Carolina, I suppose. I’ll keep the goods for a bit,” I said, walking briskly over rough walkways. We reached his suggested spot where I could temporarily lean. I was gasping for air.

“If the angle changes,” Lane said, “be ready to bolt and take up a new position.”

I acknowledged his serious look.

“One more shot of you looking toward St. Margaret’s Chapel.”

What a looker. The photo was sure to be phenomenal. Hot waves flooded me.

“You’ll have to sign a release.”

“Aye.”

“Take the camera back?”

“Of course.”

When he took the camera, he touched me in the exchange, his eyes catching mine. I stood, immobilized by a sticky silken web, nice and wet, extrication impossible, contrary to my avowals of bravado before.

We waited, timeless, lingering moments, written in eternity—they could have been minutes or years. I didn't recognize them. I'd never known time like this before. I could have built a house on that mound and stayed forever like Peter.

Forever exudes peace. Yet nerves abounded. Were my nerves about the upcoming conversation, about whether or not Lane wanted me beside him or Tara? I don't know; I don't know what we said, or what he thought. The blinds were up. Yet brushing me was not accidental. Men avoided touching people they don't like. Mr. Yes-No he was, for sure, with me sinking into him more yes than ever. I tried to banish the curse of insecurity and ignore the elephant sitting between us.

"They are here!" his deep male voice broke my reverie.

I jumped into running position, balancing my pack.

"We're off, again. Poke me when you need your camera."

"All right."

I raced to keep up. Eventually we stood between the Great Hall, the Royal Palace, and the War Memorial.

"Your aircraft." He passed me the camera.

I fell to my knees aiming it in front of the car, between it and the building. Prince Andrew had been sent by the Queen as her representative, and they had kept it quiet until now. He dismounted. Two men emerged from back right and went to the back of the limousine. As though lifting some coffin from a hearse, the Stone emerged, weighted between them. Police officers lined up along the sides. Quick, quick, I told myself, and clicked the

armed police guard, the walk, Prince Andrew, and the Stone, showcased in what I supposed to be acrylic.

“Now!” Lane cried.

I clicked. Twice more, until I was sure I had connected at just the right moment.

“Let me try from overhead,” he said, taking the camera.

“All right,” I said, reluctant to turn loose. He was successful.

Then I had my camera back, bumping into bodies right and left. We were swept into the wave of what looked to be 10,000 people and simply played out events. We followed the Stone, Prince Andrew, the castle officials. Exhausted, I walked, clicked, re-postured, and clicked again. Once I called, “Prince Andrew!” I got the most fantastic shot of him, turning.

I was so into the moment I couldn't recall all the details later, or even their proper order. Suddenly, we were just running through the castle which, in spite of all my studies and map memorizing, was unfamiliar to me. I had the sense of having been enclosed in a massive and solid structure of stone built with twists and turns, steps going up and down and passages turning this way and that. I can't say that what I felt was supernatural—perhaps a moment here or there, like a window giving a slit of light off and on during a dark day—and I was continually confused by the passages leading this way and that.

But Lane kept me on track.

What did happen made me fear I would have a Scottish fit, because I felt rather than saw all the ordinary folks who had run, walked, limped, or sauntered along these halls and down these passageways, was conscious of ghosts of real people in days past stopping to talk with each other, some just standing there, lonely, some on sentry duty, bored out of their minds and tired enough to fall.

Hosts of uniformed men flitted through my mind—soldiers quick-marching, scrunched up between the narrow, grey-green walls. I saw people whisper to one another,

chat; some laughed with their peers. I was conscious of all the clouds of witnesses, so to speak, who had long since passed through the rooms and corridors of this stone complex set into a ginormous and unbelievable rock under the castle.

Yet, after all that buildup and hype, the stone looked modest, small even. It was in a way anticlimactic.

My pictures were priceless. Though I knew they were, I proceeded on principle and kept setting up and clicking until I thought my arms would fall from their sockets.

Soon Lane and I would be dining at Queen Victoria's. What a relief for the hungry, tired, and exasperated woman that I was. Those bag lunches would make snacks for later.

We struggled through the rest of the ceremony. We listened to their stories of why the Stone would reside here, at Edinburgh, rather than at Scone Palace, where it had always stayed. Many Scots thought Scone Palace should by all rights have regained it. The formal part of the presentation was good, and we were allowed a certain number of additional photographs before Prince Andrew left with his entourage.

Finally, we left and showed up at the restaurant. The receptionist seated us at the back at Lane's request. I went to the ladies' powder room and repaired the damage to my face.

When I sat back down at our table, I noticed how Lane's hair fell forward as he studied his menu. His shoulders—oh, my gosh, those shoulders—how they stretched his shirt. And those piercing blue eyes looked up and bore down on me again.

He handed me the menu. "What would ye be liking?"

"Anything but haggis."

"You'll get used to it."

"I've never gotten used to liver pudding, but I will try a bite of your haggis."

"That's the spirit. I'll have potato-leek soup, I think, and the veal."

"I'll have the acorn squash soup, steak and dessert."

“Oh—with tea,” I said, “that’ll warm me up again.”

“Well, if ye need more help—” Lane began.

“Lane, you are such a flirt.”

“I know, but you gave the invitation. See? You’re turning red—and now, warm.”

He grabbed my hand, covering it with his large one. “We need to talk. I just don’t know how to start.”

I stayed quiet.

“Help me out, Kenna,” he begged, squirming in his seat.

“Talk. Tell me you’re already engaged to Tara, like your father said.”

“He said that?”

“Well, yes. He summoned me in to tell me. Said the wedding would be in two months. I figured it, anyhow, having seen you and Tara and her parents dressed to kill, meeting for dinner. If that’s the case, you’d better stop touching me.”

“I can’t, Kenna.”

“Talk.”

“We’ve had an expectation with the Montfort’s since my first wife died that Tara and I would marry and take on the castle.”

“Are you and Tara seeing each other?”

“Until recently.”

“How recently, exactly?”

“A week ago.”

“Lane, I refuse to keep pulling little bits of information from you. If you don’t start talking, I will finish my meal, return to Blackheart Heights, pack my bags, and find another place. I refuse to get involved with a man who is toying with me. I might be young and dumb, but not that dumb. Wasn’t that your engagement party the other night? Tell me, darn it.”

“Yes.”

“Then, what are you thinking, Lane?” I shook my head at him, and jerked my hand out from under his. Tears alternated with angry sparks.

“Thinking is not the right word. I’ve been falling in love with you.”

“While you pledged yourself to someone else, and I bet, sealed it with a kiss. Some way to start a relationship—interrogating an engaged man!” My cheeks burned.

“Oh, God, I’ve made a hopeless mess. My life didn’t matter before, so I accepted the terms dictated. Who would have thought an American would consider a trans-Atlantic marriage?”

“Yes, who would have thought?” I felt my life blood draining out. “So before the marriage, a fling with the tourist might be intriguing.” I was angry, captured, and hopeless.

Lane turned his knobby knees in his seat. “Kenna, stop.”

The receptionist bringing the food looked embarrassed. I was no longer hungry.

“Kenna, are you interested in me? I mean, I would have to know—”

“I don’t do flings, Lane.”

“Would you reduce your life to living with me in Scotland?”

“Lane, you’re doing this backwards. If, if, if. Aren’t you Mr. Cautious?”

“Ouch! It was so simple. Tara and I were suited; our families knew each other. My dad wanted us to maintain the castle so he could return to a surgeon’s practice before it’s too late.”

“And what would an American know about running a castle; right?”

“Oh, God.” Lane covered his eyes with his hands and ran fingers through his hair.

“Yes, God, save this stupid woman.”

“Don’t say that, Kenna.”

“Probably the sanest thing I have said. Now I’ll be getting my moorings back and leaving Blackheart Heights forever.”

“I cannot bear never kissing you again.”

“You pay your nickel and you make your choice. Live your Scottish-Tara dream.” I ate furiously in silence. Dream timbers crashed all around me.

Lane didn’t talk either, proof enough to me of how shallow his attraction had been. He had come clean and expurgated his conscience. His goal was on track and I was pushed back to the sidelines. Soon as I returned to the castle, I would find a new place to stay. I would cry myself numb. In time, the pain would dull, memories weaken.

I spoke no further word. Instead, I concentrated on making it home, getting over this man sitting in front of me who filled every waking thought, and all my senses. Why this had happened was a mystery. Thank God, I hadn’t given in on one of those hot, steamy nights.

I let out a deep sigh. I would have given anything to retract it, but there it lay, heavy punctuation of the air, end to what I dubbed our forever moment. Eternity lost. Illusion had dissolved in a puff of fairy dust. We finished eating. I salvaged what little dignity I had left—exposed while he waffled and hid.

The ride home was still as death.

We pulled up and I gathered all my belongings, exited, and stood tall at the car door.

“A pleasure knowing you, Master Lane,” I said, and walked away deliberately into the castle, up stone stairs, and into my Sea Room like washed up flotsam on the shore.

Once in my room, I found no tears. Weeping is for those who hope. I was cold as stone...my destiny, so it seemed. Dead as stone, the stone of grief as proclaimed in the Blackheart Heights’ name. Stone would mask my heart until I left.

“If you are who you say you are, then turn this stone into bread.”—The Devil to Jesus, Temptations in the Wilderness

At breakfast next day, we were chatting about yesterday’s festive day for the Scots, receiving back their 700-year purloined Stone. The air of jubilation was in direct apposition to my own spirits, in spite of which, I joined in sharing stories about the Stone of Destiny. I forced myself to stay in the company of my peers and revel in the victory, even while crushed by my own defeat. It was a little like levitating, but not nearly as easy.

My gaze flashed by Lane. I smiled and looked past him, letting him go. His father nodded to me. I nodded back and stretched taller. *You won’t steamroll me.* Maybe I would buy my own castle and stay here in Scotland; it would be a great place for a creative arts center of photography, painting, and writing, with its unending sources of moody scenes for photographs and paintings. On one side lay craggy hills and mountains, on the other craggy, winding seacoast, somewhere near Tarbert, close enough. Maybe I was more in love with Scotland than with Lane. If that was a lie, I could live it true.

As for finding that ‘other place to stay’ I’d promised myself, that day’s calls affirmed that nothing was available, except upscale, pricey, chains. I decided I could handle it here, so I started writing my story. I shared meals with my group and planned to order room service as often as I could. At times the tears would flow that I vowed to keep in check, but then it would pass. I would settle back down.

The next evening I passed David in the hall as I was leaving for a walk.

“Hi, haven’t seen you around much,” he said.

“No. I’ve been buried in writing deadlines for the magazine.”

“We’ll put up a sign here once you’re famous, ‘Kenna slept here.’”

“Please!” I laughed. “I see lots of work going into the castle and grounds.”

“We are, or rather, my brother is, getting it ready for the next season.”

“Right...for the upcoming wedding.”

“What wedding would ye be meaning?”

“Why, Lane’s and Tara’s.”

“Oh, well, that’s a funny thing, now. There’s to be no wedding.”

“What happened?”

“Seems Lane told her he could not forget his first wife.”

“I see. And was Miss Tara upset?” I tried to prevent the information from making me happy. It meant nothing for me.

“Aye, that she was. They had a pow-wow and the family made Lane let Tara refuse him, to save her reputation.”

“That the Scottish custom?”

“It was this time. Yes, Lane’s going back to a contract in Florida in the U.S. in a few months. The two of you haven’t talked, I gather.”

“No, I haven’t bumped into Lane.”

“No? For a while, I thought something might be up between you two. But I suppose not. I might have asked you out, had I thought he didn’t mind.”

“Oh, David, thanks for the compliment. Right now, I’m not up to dating. I’d be miserable company, I fear.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

I smiled, and who should I see but Lane, of course.

“Hello. The castle and ground look really great,” I said to him.

“Yes, we’ve been working on it.”

“I’ve got some sheep to fleece,” David said, exiting.

“Take a wee walk with me?”

“Sure, Lane.”

“Let’s walk toward the River Esk.”

“Toward your outlying projects?”

“Aye. So David told you about the wedding cancellation?”

“Yes. I suppose getting over the loss of a spouse takes years. I’m still suffering the loss of my uncle, more like a father, and a three-year relationship.”

“Yes.”

I waited my turn out.

“Kenna, I have to apologize and beg your forgiveness. What I did was unpardonable.”

“I suppose it all began lightheartedly enough.”

“Aye. Wonderful fun. I’m really not the sort of guy to do a girl that way—I’m no player, Kenna.”

He stopped and stared at me.

I laughed. “Oh, all right. I’ll let it go, for the sake of Scottish-American relationship.”

“You were so beautiful and vulnerable. I took advantage.”

“Well, that’s a compliment you’re paying me...of sorts.”

“But do you forgive me?”

“Let me think. You know you hurt me rather badly.”

His countenance fell. He looked so glum, I reached out to touch him on the arm.

“Please, Kenna.”

“You mean it, don’t you? Can I find it in my heart to forgive you?”

“Yes, Kenna, can you?”

“Lane—“ I paused. “Yes, I really do.”

His head straightened. “Thank you. I suppose I’ve killed any chance for you to feel anything for me, haven’t I?” His eyes searched my files.

I kept the blinds shut.

“Lane, I’m not being mean, but there you go fishing for me to reveal my feelings. Don’t like to commit; do you? Why are you so afraid to share your own? You drew me out once already—you wanted a yes from me when it was a no for you, since you were otherwise committed. You just apologized, but now you’re doing the same thing again—”

“You can’t trust me.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘You don’t say what *you* feel.’ You first.”

“Oh, well, besides telling you I could never stand not kissing you again, I’m telling you I must keep on kissing you.”

“And there you go again. That’s lovely, but—”

“But what? Woman, you want to pin me to a wall!”

“No, you need to stop pinning me to a wall.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to stick your own neck out.”

“You mean so you can see me dangling?”

“Do you really not get it? You are so dense, Lane. I’m a for-keeps woman. You can’t kiss me like that just because you want to, and especially not just because you know I’d like it--no stone, no throne, to use current events as an analogy.”

“Like this one?” Lane asked, pulling out a little box and handing it to me, brushing my hand again.

I took it from his upturned hand and opened it. “It’s gorgeous! Don’t be mad, but is this a re-purposed ring?”

“My God, you’re killing me!”

“You are so crazy, Lane.”

“I am shocked you would say such a thing...but somehow, I knew you would.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here’s a receipt, to show you I bought it today.”

“You surely did take a chance, Mr. Lane—or you’re mighty sure of yourself, or your jeweler has a good exchange plan. Hmmm, you paid a lot of money for it, too.” If he could tease me while proposing, I would sure tease him before I answered.

Lane took the box and pulled the engagement ring from it, pocketing the box. He took both my hands in his.

“Kenna, please tell me you haven’t thrown me to the curb, and that you can’t bear me anymore. Tell me you’ll make this poor sap the happiest man in the world and be me ain true love, forever.” He kept the ring poised before my finger.

“And yet, you still haven’t said the three magic words.”

“What? You mean, I love you? Isn’t it obvious? I love you,” he said.

“So complicated,” I said.

“Lane, you precious dummy, if you love me, of course I will. There’s nothing more I want than to be your ain true love. Say it all in Gaelic, please,” I said, taking his face in my hands, the ring glowing in the waning of the afternoon sun, and gave him a hug so all-consuming it threatened to leave scorch marks on both of us. I held him back and looked at him.

“Lane? What are you thinking?”

“What I am thinking cannot be told you. You are beyond beautiful. I am thinking what I would like to do to you. And, I’m thinking, why waste a good wedding and a refurbished castle and grounds?”

“You’ll change the date by at least two days, won’t you?”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t stand our wedding to be on a day you planned with her.”

“Oh, I knew why. I had to harass you a wee tad. Even with a week lost we still can get through Christmas and have almost two months to plan and pull it off.”

“That’s no time at all.”

“It’s forever. They’ll have to tie me up. Then we can honeymoon and go to my job in Charlotte, your home state of North Carolina. In America.”

“Charlotte? David said Florida.”

“He doesn’t know everything. But can you stand all that moving around?”

“Stand it? I’d love it! I might have worn something nice if I’d known it was our proposal day.”

“My son really likes you.”

He reverently touched my face, followed my forehead over my nose and kissed me again. “A week of pure torture, not knowing if I’d lost you.”

Chill bumps returned. I was marrying an all-consuming fire. Could I keep him happy and at the same time, maintain professional interests on track?

He read my mind.

“I want all of you, Kenna—your body, your love, your talents, your family, past—the whole custom package. We’ll make it work.”

“We will, won’t we, Lane?” I picked up his lyrics and tune. I couldn’t imagine anything challenging such a love as ours. “What about your dad?”

“Here’s the answer I’m giving Dad.” He handed me a letter.

I opened it.

“Dear Dad, I know you had my best in mind when you wanted me to promise myself to your best friend’s daughter. But my heart has found its own love, and I cannot live without

her. Please bless our marriage, and let me go. I'm sure there'll be returns for you. And Kenna Alford can run a castle. Did you know she was kissing kin? Your Son, Lane"

"It's great," I said. "Do you think he'll bless it?"

But Lane stayed quiet on that one. For answer, he handed me a folded paper, and told me, "Hide it in your papers. You're always carrying papers. That should be no difficult request." And wait 'til I be on me way to read it." He gave me a sweet kiss.

"Now, go. When you're through reading it, hide it. Change into your best, and I'll come get ye."

"Yes, sir," I said to his disappearing form.

As I walked upstairs, I unfolded it, and read, "Dear Daddy,

It is not a sign of disloyalty to differ with your father. Although many sons train under their father's wishes for years, when it comes to the choosing of a mate, the times in which next-generation choices were made for sons and daughters have come and gone—for all time, I think—and fervently hope. This recent movement in which overlings told their disciples who to marry caused the worst of marital discords and ended in record divorces. I have honored my father in every way I can think.

But, Daddy, I am questioning the decision you have called on me to make.

I haven't caroused. I helped you out by becoming an engineer to structurally design and keep up with the castle. I honored you with my first wife and a strong son. I'm honoring you currently by renewing the building on the castle. I even agreed to marry your closest friends' daughter, Tara, a real beauty, in order to keep our line pure, the castle safe. Don't get me wrong, Tara is gorgeous, but try as I have—and as I did in the last weeks since Kenna came on the scene—Tara leaves me cold. She *is* cold.

But she's certainly committed to marrying me, and for that reason, I couldn't quite pull away. I have to make a decision, however, between the women. When I see Kenna, I

can't keep my hands off her. I am discovering, Daddy, that it is your approval and your expectation that binds me the most. Of course, the certainty of a chosen lifestyle is part of it.

The Campbell-Montfort connection is old and stable.

Which reminds me—I didn't honor your wishes one other time. That was when Lord Montfort wanted to sponsor my membership in the Masonic rites. I went to a couple of meetings with him, but I couldn't bring myself to agree to rites and passages I had to commit to in some unknowing state.

I told you I would give you my decision in the coming week. My soul is in some agony, as I feel I am choosing between you and the woman I am growing to love more than life itself. I must remind you that the Biblical principle to which we Presbyterians adhere is 'leave and cleave.'

My final answer has to be Kenna. I cannot imagine life without her--or life with Tara. It is just untenable. I will leave if that is your wish.

Ever your loving son,

Lane"

I couldn't believe he had given me this in writing. That seemed unlike him in many ways. It was certainly a contract he had put into my hands. I hid it in with my important papers.

I slipped on a more photogenic top and went back down.

Chapter 14: Wedding Bells

"One flesh."—Garden of Eden

"I'm here," I said, racing up to Lane in the hallway, putting my hand on his shoulder.

"Never ye mind. Before our faces give the news away, I'm shouting so whole castle hears when we pass the entryway. Ye ready to wiggle yer ring finger and show off a ring?"

“I’m ready,” I said, laughing, demonstrating my ring finger wiggle. *This man will swallow me whole.* Would I have a minute to myself, not to mention a life of my own? When I felt love stirring to boiling point all over my body, I decided I would have to risk it.

“Hold me, Lane, before we go down. Hold me tight.”

Instead he enfolded me so tenderly the whole stone castle rotated before my eyes and I nestled into his huge, hairy chest and smelled his delicious manly smell and wanted, no, desperately needed, to absorb every ounce of him in case tomorrow never came. Lane was all I had in the whole wide world. Delightful sensations rippled over me, and a tremor of terror arose, lodged in my throat. Lane held me beyond the passing moment, as if he knew.

“So, Kenna, come home with me,” Lane said as he grabbed my hand and pulled me. We ran down the stairs like children, he careful not to let me fall.

“I can’t keep pace,” I said, breathless.

We crashed through the dining room doors, breathless. He opened his dad’s door which still held dread and the memory of a horrible meeting I wanted to expunge from replay.

“Dad, David, Iain, staff, everyone, come in. I want to make an announcement. Where are you? Come out, Everybody, *now!*”

Once people appeared, Lane said, “You are looking at the future master and mistress of Blackheart Heights. Kenna accepted my proposal and we are to be wed in one month and a half.” He lifted my hand to show off the ring, so I dangled it, giddy with delight.

“Hear, hear,” David said. “I guess we won’t get our date, now.”

For answer, Lane glared at him.

“Champagne,” Mr. Farquhard barked, going to the kitchen to tell servers, but he never took my hand or welcomed me.

Out came the bubbly, poured into glasses.

“You need to tell Iain, Lane.”

“I already have; he knows. You underestimate me.”

“Aren’t you something?” I said.

News spread like wildfire. Fellow tour partner and Love Advisor, Sally, came in.

“Congratulations, Lane.”

I told you, Kenna,” she whispered.

“Thanks for meddling; otherwise, I would’ve died.”

“You would have.” She laughed. “Now I can go home with the group in peace.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I said. You must stay here for my wedding.”

Bryan said, “I guess this means you won’t complete the tour with us?”

I stared at him, stunned.

“He’s joking, Kenna.”

“Congratulations,” he said to me.

“Best wishes,” he said, with the barest flicker of a smile.

“Oh! You were teasing.”

Iain walked up to me and hugged me. A wordless bear hug was good.

“We’ll be seeing a lot of each other, now, Iain.”

David clapped Lane on the back.

“Party—is this weekend too soon?”

“No, it’s too late,” Lane said.

“Why so fast, Bro?”

“You’re kidding me. Have you looked at her? Why lose a minute? Besides my contract begins two weeks after the wedding date. Believe me, Big Brother, a month and a half is just right. That leaves us two weeks for a honeymoon.”

“I get the drift. You want a stag party?”

“Without accompanying crap.”

“I’m on it. About the wedding, should we invite your former wife’s brother and dad, your classmates, the preacher, the baker, the candle-stick-maker, and your would-have been mother- and father-in-law...and Tara?”

“Throw ‘em all in the crab pot.”

“If you ask me, Dad’s acting a wee bit strange.”

“Yeah, well, he’ll get over it. She’s American. He doesn’t know how Scottish her lineage is. And he liked Tara, thought she’d take me places. Her parents have government and international connections.”

“Right. He’ll get over it...warm up to it.”

“He’d better—I’m taking the castle on as primary responsibility upon my return—helping you, of course, David. You take over while I’m in Charlotte, and then I see no reason he can’t proceed with his own plans to return to his surgery. For God’s sake, he can’t require me to marry someone who leaves me blood cold. Tara has a heart of ice. I require fire.”

What a wonderful conversation to overhear, but I didn’t have to eavesdrop. One new thing I learned about my intended—his broadcast voice would carry over Jesus speaking to the 5,000.

That strange feeling returned. I looked up, caught Mr. Farquhard boring holes in me. *He thinks I’m calculating his worth, thinking I’m getting castle and contents, the voice of revelation spoke. Skunk, how dare you judge me? You are lucky to get a daughter-in-law as unattached to material things as I am.*

David and Lane walked over to me. Lane folded his arms around me. Still a little shy, I looked up at him. He pulled me close and kissed me, cupped my shoulder with one hand, my body tucked into his side.

“I’m a fifth thumb,” David said. “Don’t mind me.”

“We will have bagpipes playing at the wedding, will we not?” I asked both of them.

“I’m asking people from America—boss, cousin, brother. They’ll expect bagpipes.”

“In fact, we insist,” said David. “How many are coming from the States?”

“Get that list made soon!” Lane interrupted David to order me. “You have a maximum of three days. And yes to bagpipes, kilts, and ye will have a tartan on your white, d’ye hear?”

“Which one shall I wear—the Campbell or the McAlister plaid?”

“Dang, I’m marrying kin. Make it McAllister, it’s less incestuous. Red is brighter.”

David’s eyes bulged. He had not realized the Scottish connection until this moment.

Then the little girl walked in, ignored us, and marched straight upstairs, a book in her hand. Nobody stopped her, talked to her, and she spoke to no one, which I thought strange.

“How do you know your ancestry, Kenna?” David asked.

“Tombstone reading in graveyards up and down the Cape Fear River,” I said, laughing, “is a family pastime. I trace back to Isabella McAlister, sister of Col. Alexander McAllister who was later a Colonel in the army; that’s seven generations from the first Scot that came to Old Bluff on the Cape Fear. He came over on the Thistle in 1736 and returned in 1740. His first wife died.”

“Really?”

“Seriously. I’m surprised I don’t speak Scots Gaelic. We did into the New Colony.”

“I had no idea,” David said.

“Scots preferred their own kind.” I winked at Lane.

“If this is any proof,” he said, his eyes bright with mischief.

“Put on bagpipe music, Daddy,” Lane said, “the mood should not be somber. I’ll be betting me ain true love can do the Highland fling, even though she said she didn’t do those.” He looked back at me with mischief intended, and winked.

“Just sound the music,” I said, getting into position, beginning with a curtsy.

“Wait for me,” Lane said.

We bowed to one another, and then began to demonstrate our prowess.

Claps accompanied our dancing and burst out at the end.

“Not bad for being out of practice,” I said, breath short.

“By the way, Kenna, I’m wearing a kilt. You have no objection to marrying a man in a skirt, d’ye?”

“It’s the man I’m marrying, not the skirt,” I said.

“Ha-ha, and witty to boot,” he said bragging on me to David.

“By golly, we must get that McAllister tartan even if it is a pile of crock, historically speaking. We’ll shop tomorrow.”

“I can’t try on the dress in front of you.”

“Right, but Edinburgh tomorrow, it is.”

“What time?”

“Early, Bonnie Lassie.”

“Let’s!”

Bryan acted miffed at me, as if I had deliberately led him on. Oh, he’d get over it.

“It will be bloody awkward, but we must invite the Montfort’s,” Mr. Farquhard said. .

“If we must,” Lane said. “They probably won’t come, but if they do—if Tara does, just for spite, it might be bloody nasty.”

“Not spite, revenge. You did her wrong. Blood-letting might drain it from her system.”

“Not Kenna’s or my blood. Determined to play it out, are you, Daddy?”

“Old customs, old families—alliances shouldn’t be broken.”

He’s sore he’s lost his son to me. If Lane were wrapped up in Tara, he’d still belong to Daddy.

“I agree,” I surprised us all by saying.

“It’s our wedding and it *won’t* be our funeral,” Lane said.

Pride was a man’s standby. Mr. Farquhard so far got nothing from the deal, not name, castle, or exploits—what it was all about to a man. *He should be glad to have a happy son. Lane has no intentions of losing me. Nothing can separate us, now.*

Don’t say that, the voice warned. Cold chills crept up my back. A dark shadow passed. *Too much going on. A child roams our castle. What is that about? I must ask Lane who she is.*

“Enough partying!” Mr. Farquhard announced. “There’s too much to be done to get this castle and chapel ready. I’m doing phoning. Lane, we’ll talk budgets later.”

Budgets, fiscal reality came crashing down on the party. Reality rained on the festive mood. Remember the McAllister clan motto, Fortiter: Boldly.

“There’s a hen’s night same time as the stag party,” Bryan said. “I’ve read about it.” He turned red.

“No, what do they do?” I asked.

“Tie tin cans on the bride-to-be and lead her through the streets with soot daubed on to ward off evil spirits.”

“No! Soot might not disappear by wedding day! I don’t mind warding off evil spirits.”

“You’ll do it?” David asked.

“Maybe.”

Spirits were lifting as plans proceeded for our future together. Everybody knew; soon the wind and a bird would deliver the news to Tara. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t fill me with malicious glee—she had been haughtily superior to me. Would she lick her wounds privately? I doubted it. *Any counter action she might engage in could boomerang on her.*

Never mind her.

Mr. Farquhard would be opening up his surgery in Edinburgh in March.

I was higher than a kite. *Careful the wind doesn’t tear the cord from your hand.*

I ignored the voice.

Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, Lord and Lady, unofficially, of course. Titles didn't matter—they could be Pooh and Pooh Bear, and I wouldn't care. We were about to merge into one entity. I was in love with a man and his country. I was excited at crossing destinies. I was head over heels in love. Would I sleep tonight? Probably not.

Lane wanted to take me out to eat, so I ran back to my room to get my pocket book. There was an inn somewhere near we could eat and talk.

Re-entering the sitting area, Lane popped up behind me. "You look stunning!"

"You're looking handsome yourself, Big Man."

"Kenna, you—well, you make me look twice—no, way more than twice; we may need a chaperone." He wrapped himself around me so close I pushed him off.

"Lane! Slow down! Everybody's watching."

He half-stepped backwards. "They're only seeing what they expect to. All right, darling. I'm Mr. Slow."

"Good-night, one and all!" His voice boomed out as we left and walked to his car.

He held the door open; I slipped in the car.

"Mighty quiet the last time we were in here together."

"Don't, Kenna."

"Okay, but what changed your mind?"

"You, your scent, and your closeness."

"What else?"

"The kisses in the garden, how you grabbed my face when I met you at the bus. I irritated your nemesis because I was always 'somewhere else,' and that was off with you."

"What was the point of no-return?"

"Eating with her one night in an upscale restaurant and all her friends showed up."

“Oh?”

“She was more interested in them than me. She bored me, talking about re-doing the castle, inviting close friends in all the time. There was no ‘we’ to it like with us. Suddenly, I pictured us in the middle of our marriage, and the future matched the beginning. I couldn’t stand it. With you, no two days will ever be the same.”

“Thank God,” I said.

“We’re about adventure,” Lane said, “and touch, and sex. I can tell.”

“How can you tell?”

“When I touch you, I see sparks.”

“No, you don’t.”

He smiled smugly.

“You are a first degree con man, with your pretty words and your hunky physique. Don’t stop courting me, Lane. Keep composing pretty lines.”

“Say you, say me,” he sang, rolling his finger over my hand.

I wanted to be in his arms. We drove into the restaurant’s parking area, and got out.

“Lane.”

“Kenna.”

We reached for each other and he pressed himself against me on the car.

“Stop, Lane. You know I love you fiercely. You don’t have to prove anything. Don’t tempt us beyond resistance.”

“Sorry, Kenna.” He pulled back. “For a while, not knowing you would possibly stay with me were the brakes. Now you’re about to be mine and I can’t stop. I’m a car careening out of control. I’ve waited so long.”

“Chaperone is a good idea.”

“Or marrying tomorrow.”

“Don’t you even try to keep me from seeing you in full-kilted glory. With the sporran circling your waist—“

“—and you in white silk, red tartan wrapped over a shoulder, floating airborne—”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me into “Sweet Thistle.” The waiter knew Lane, and ushered us to good seats. Lane introduced me as bride-to-be, to him. He bragged on the ring. He left with an order and returned with water. Lane gave him the camera to take a few shots.

Lane’s eyes went all misty. He turned quiet, as we perused the menu. “It’s been a long time since my wife died and I was a happy man. I was not about to lose you.”

His urgency took new meaning.

“I’m yours, Lane.”

“Let’s drive to a priest somewhere and get married tonight.”

“Let’s wait. I’m not giving up my castle wedding.”

“Stubborn Scot.”

“I have no mother or father or much family. This orphan would like a big community celebrating her marriage, your family and friends, as well as mine.”

“I will make a supreme effort to tame my hands until our wedding night, but don’t be going all insecure on me and thinking I don’t love you.”

“You love me?” I pulled his hand to my face.

“Did and still do.”

“So let’s make plans.” I let his hand go as the waiter brought our food.

“Lovebirds; I’m jealous,” the waiter said. “It’s written all over your faces.”

We started eating and planning. In between bites, we planned and took notes on paper.

“Wedding in the chapel, check; dance in the great room, check; reception in the dining room, check,” Lane said.

“Bagpipes blaring the way I dreamed. I’ve seen Scotland since right after my uncle died, since I was given those letters hidden in the wall next to the fireplace, even back to when I’d traced my lineage back here. I haven’t yet made the trek my ancestors did from Tarbert to Campbeltown, where they sailed off for America, but I want to, badly.”

“Aye, we’ll do it. Ye’re keener on your Scottish connections than I am.”

“I doubt that, but I do have a lot to share with you. My home place is awesome.”

“Our joint life is shaping up. I’m going to like being attached to you, Woman.”

“That’s a brave statement for a man to make.”

We laughed.

Our relationship had entered a new phase of discovery, where who we were and what we were all about broadened our attraction. We bookmarked our planning, finished our meal, and arrived back at the castle safely. I needed to monitor my own behavior in coming days.

Next morning, we set off to locate a classic McAllister tartan in Edinburgh.

Planning for the pipers elicited more emotional conversation.

“My heart beats ferociously when I hear the pipes.”

“But not as hard as it beats for me, right, Luv?”

“Right!” We were settling into our relationship. *No one ever settles into anything with Lane. Probably they didn’t with me, either. All aboard the roller coaster ride!* I heard the carnival caller.

“Looks like rain,” Lane broke into my thoughts. “We need to wrap up the tartan order and the invites, and we can probably do it at the same place. I’m happy we’ll use the Chapel.”

“I love that part,” I said.

“And me faith is Presbyterian, like yours.”

“With a Scottish burr—‘will ye be taking this woman to be ‘ye-r-r-r’ lawful wedded wife?’”

“Ha ha. One more question ere we tie the knot and enter the store, Luv.”

He cupped that big hand under my chin, cradled it forlornly so I feared for the skeleton he was about to reveal. ”Ye do want children, d’ye not?”

“If they’re yours.”

“And we will love making them,” he said, nearly crushing me before he put me back on my own two feet. “I worried ye might not want them.”

“What about your father?” I asked, giving his chest a caress.

“He’ll come around. He likes you. He just hoped I would love the lady whose name shall never pass my lips. He thought you were a passing distraction. And if you don’t stop touching me that way, I shall devour you here and now,” he said, grabbing my hand, pulling me all flushed into the store where eventually I found just the right dress which was hidden in a dress bag, and then he helped find the right tartan, and invitations.

All this, and heaven, too. Who had said that? I feared for the clock to move even one degree backward or forward, maybe with good reason. *The little girl*—had she gone home? I needed to ask Lane about her, but he was closed off on the trip back and I didn’t want to break our mood. I’d ask him tomorrow. I needed to look into the ancestor’s bedroom where I had seen her coloring, where the shredded curtain hung. I shivered. Instantly I knew I’d also find that creepy doll.

Chapter 15: Serpent in the Garden

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of us all?—Witch, Snow White

“Lane, I want to learn Gaelic,” I told my husband-to-be as we sat over a glass of wine.

“And ye shall, Luv, ye shall. That reminds me, one of our customs is to exchange rings with ‘I love you’ written on them in Gaelic. We must add that to the ‘to-do’ list so they’ll be ready in time.”

“How does that go?”

“*Tha gaol agam ort cuideachd.*”

“That’s ‘I love you in Scots Gaelic?’”

“Yes. You must reply, ‘*Tha gaol agam ort-fhèin,*’ which means, ‘I love you, too.’”

“‘*Tha gaol agam ort-fhèin,* Lane.’”

“Then I crush you in my arms, but I’m abstaining.”

“Words are the next best thing.” I flirted.

“Tomorrow morning I must check on the workers in the chapel. Light a fire under them, give them two days to finish.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, if it isn’t two days, it’s two months. You know builders.”

“Like my list of invitees. I’ll get it to you tomorrow, too, if I can get my cellphone to work enough to get that information off it.”

“Don’t bother. Call somebody over there to fax you the names.”

“Your father won’t growl?”

“I’ll smooth the way.” He smiled. “I’m the go-to person. Have you forgotten? By the way, you need to look at my bedroom to see how to make it into *our* bedroom.” He gave me a positively wicked look.

“Lane, you are incorrigible. You’re right, of course, but tomorrow—not tonight.” I jumped up and away from him.

“Why do you say it with such spirit?”

His eyebrows furrowed like his father’s.

“You know why, You Rascal. I won’t make many changes to *our* room.”

“I’ll bet.”

“I’ll get Sally to give me ideas. I can’t trust you alone, even in daytime.”

He grinned from ear to ear. “Nor should you. Collect your bodyguards and knock on m’ door at noon tomorrow. Sharp,” he belted out.

“Yes, *sir!*”

We parted ways. Loud workers pounding, nailing and muddy boots trampling could mar these moments, if they didn’t finish in time.

I focused on the job at hand—getting Iain to yield a current list of family members’ addresses, and Gaynelle a list of business ones. Robert would fax me our family list. One call and his wife covered that base. That should do it. The call-back for the details would not ring up quite the same amount as calling everyone individually would.

Can’t wait to show off my Highlander hunk.

Next day Sally appeared at 8:45a.m. We hugged, and I rushed her up to second floor. We chatted about our plans, hers and mine, in Scotland and the U.S. outside his Lane’s room. Lane opened the door and ushered us in.

“Now can I hug you?” he asked. “You’re safe, now.”

He used all those huge arms and massive shoulders to encase me until I could barely breathe, until a trigger release said, ‘heck no, I’m not safe.’ I pulled back, shaking.

“Now, what were ye saying?”

“Lane, you beast.”

He grinned, mocking me.

“Sorry, Sally. Where’s Bryan?”

“I put him on an early plane,” she said, “so he won’t be here.”

“They’re building a new closet over there,” Lane said, “while we’re gone.”

“You need to change that little chest out for a good-sized chest of drawers. There’s room for a double one, I think. Once Lane finishes enlarging the closet, looks like you’ll be fine for storage space.”

“We need some heavy drapes installed over the door. Drapes muffle sound.”

“Ha!” Lane said. He only slightly concealed the gleam in his eye.

“Lane, behave.”

“Yes, the heavier, the better,” Sally said. “Check fire retardant codes.”

“All right.”

“You need to pile some Persian carpets on the cold stone.”

“What color?” he asked.

“Maybe use a wine-colored array of shades, dark on the bedroom floor with deep eggplant or plum to tie in to them in a beautiful bedcover, sham, bed skirt, and pillows.”

“Add a light sea-foam green and gold for an accent,” I said.

We plotted a bit more until Sally indicated we had accomplished our goal.

“Well, you all have it under control, and I really must be off,” Sally said, laughing.

“May I keep my swords and the painting of my falcon?” Lane pointed to them.

“Let’s put the swords outside in the hallway. I don’t relish weapons of war in the bedroom. Keep the falcon painting.”

“I’m glad you like him. He was a favorite.”

“As long as it’s just the falcon, I’m fine.”

“We’ll walk down with you, Sally,” Lane said.

I was remiss in not asking Sally what her plans were, assuming she was staying in Scotland for my wedding.

My life had just begun. I grieved for the loved ones who could not attend. I was sorry for anyone right now who wasn’t me.

###

Our day finally arrived. My cousin Douglas came from Boise, Idaho, delighted for an excuse to visit Scotland to see a Scottish wedding. She stayed next to me so she could slip in to help me out.

“I am so excited for you, *Cuz*,” Douglas said, and we hugged.

I’d had my hair done in Tarbert the day before.

“Look, Douglas. This tiara belonged to Lane’s mother. He’d like it in my hair.”

“You don’t mind that?” she asked.

“No. it’s an honor, wearing his mother’s tiara. His first wife wouldn’t. It’s white gold. Let me get it. So the stylist pulled my hair up to let curls fall down around it. Help make my hair flow softly around the tiara and down around my cheek-bones.”

I handed the tiara to Douglas.

She placed it carefully on my head and pulled curls to cascade down my cheek, and one or two curls and wisps down my neck.

“Oh, Kenna, you’re the most beautiful bride I have ever seen.”

“Oh, Douglas. Don’t make me cry.”

“It looks stately and old,” she said, fixing it in place with hair pins. “So have you had time to look into ‘things,’ or have you been too busy?” she asked me, smiling accusingly.

“I have, Douglas. My hunches are taking me into areas I wouldn’t have dreamed. I have dates set up to visit the National Records Archives. Something came between.”

“Well, then, go ahead and get married! Your hair’s fine. We’ll get the veil later. Let’s don this gorgeous white gown!”

We pulled the silk-inlaid gown over my head and situated it.

“Now let’s add the plaid. Do we need to call in counsel?”

“Maybe we do; it’s an old custom. And why did you pick McAllister over Campbell?”

“Technically, McAllister’s are too old for plaids. That started later. Our people were McAllister’s of the Loup. Many left Scotland before plaids began in earnest. But since Lane is Campbell, he preferred it not be Campbell. I identify with McAllister and red is prettier. It attaches at the shoulder, hangs to the floor on one side, stops at arm’s length on the other.”

“Oh, here are the snaps. I’ll just match them up and we won’t need outside help.”

“Were you thinking it’s because of our embarrassing history that I’m investigating? Being descended from Farquhard Campbell is fine in the South. In Scotland, there are so many, he’s hard to research. He’s a man with no connections, like Melchizedek. Some say he may have been an illegitimate child. No one can find his records or his kinsmen, except for one egocentric aunt who immigrated with him and Alexander McAllister to America. And it’s startling that Lane’s father’s name is Farquhard, but his set of Campbell’s doesn’t know about our progenitor, either, or if they’re connected to our set. Is that new information?”

“Yes, it is. I knew something was up.”

“Yes, and there’s so much more. Two generations of Campbells before Farquhard have portraits on the wall.”

“Well, that’s worth it already. Now let me concentrate on our hooking up this tartan right. I love the silk white side, and the red in fine silk, unlike the wool tartans common in the U.S. My, you will look smashing out there against curvy stone walls. Remember to lift your arm so the shawl will fly in the wind for photographers. Give it a little drama. I always thought you were the dramatic one. And since you usually are the one who takes pictures, you need orders on how to pose.”

“All right, Douglas, give me some orders.”

“I will.”

“You’ve met Lane?”

“Well, only just.”

“Isn’t he a hunk?”

“My first impression is that he certainly outclasses anything in Harnett County.”

“You are funny.”

“Anyhow, I’m not the one who has to live with him.”

“No.

“Now let me define your eyes.”

She rummaged amongst my pencils and did the job. Then she got the veil and pinned it to the tiara. ‘I almost became a hairdresser,’ as Grandma said.”

I laughed again. A knock sounded at the door.

Douglas opened the door, let Sally in. I introduced them.

“Oh, you look beautiful! Well done, Douglas; that’s a good job. It’s time!”

“Glad you got to come back, Sally. Wish Bryan were here,” I said, “he was with our tour group, Douglas.”

My heart pounded like a hammer on an anvil.

Douglas hugged me. They followed me down the stairs. Women hovered nearby.

“Lane’s in there,” one said.

“Shoo him away,” Sally said.

They had been wrong. He was already in the chapel positioned near preacher and Mr. Farquhard. A photographer snapped pictures of me as I descended—first dramatically poised at the top like some starlet—then they asked the girls to close in over my shoulders and snapped again. We continued toward the chapel. I waited in a little ante-room outside.

Soon the piper piped my cue. Sally opened the door and released me to march down the aisle—on Brother Robert’s arm. He had made it in time.

Bagpipes skirled as “Highland Cathedral” trilled over our heads and engulfed us in wedding music. With each stride forward my train drifted gracefully behind me, veil fluttered,

held in place by the wedding tiara. My tartan flowed in and out on the right side, as I walked over rose petals that two little girls on Lane's side had strewn, concentrating on not slipping.

I thought I heard gasps around me. How wonderful. Female whispers like shouts conjured a picture of rustling dresses when they were really soft voices cascading through the chapel which acted like an echo chamber or a contrapuntal evening chorus.

Douglas and Sally followed in beautiful dresses, each carrying a Saltire.

A wedding ring of intertwining Celtic knots lay on the ring bearer's pillow, pure silk.

In front of me stood the most gorgeous man I had ever seen, my loving groom in his kilt and plaid. As he looked at me, a grin spread over his whole face. I smiled my joyous secret smile. My brother gave me a parting pat, smiled, and left me at the altar. A gorgeous pair of legs joined me—male legs with red socks under a man's kilt.

I glanced over at Douglas who gave the barest nod so that I stopped rocking back and forth. A tear formed that never saw the light of day. My heart pounded in time to the pipes.

We looked toward the minister and fumbled through our vows, which Lane mixed up into "good times and bad, sickness and health, so long as you both shall live."

"You may kiss the bride," the minister said.

I pushed back the veil. I may have missed a couple of lines, but who cares when receiving the warmest kiss in the universe? A flame rose red as lipstick.

"Finally," he said under his breath.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. and Mrs. Lane Campbell."

We exited together down the aisle.

Pipers amped up the volume to ear-splitting levels of jubilation. We emerged onto the lawn for photographs.

We posed in every conceivable configuration, except lying on the grass. Then someone pulled out a blanket, and we reclined on the ground. He, however, lay down on the grass. God, he was beautiful.

Photographs completed outside, we re-entered the castle in the great room designated as dance hall. I gave my tiara and cloak to Sally, pulled long skirt up to my knees to make the moves and began a modified Highland fling. Then we did slower, traditional dances. Iain danced with me once, but not Mr. Farquhard.

I looked across at my husband's fine muscular legs. Lane and I stole the show.

I'm dancing with my husband. I go home with this man tonight. Oh, God, I am at home. I can flirt outrageously and never mind the consequences.

Glancing into the crowd, I spotted familiar black hair. Tara.

"Lane," I said impishly, as we danced. "Do you have anything on under your kilt?"

He blushed, and leaned down to me. "No."

I blew on his ear and kissed him, and he turned all shades of red. I hoped she noticed.

In the next slow dance, his fingers worked my waist under my tartan. He just grinned at the effect he had on me.

Finally, Mr. Farquhard asked me to dance. Then David wanted a dance. Lane didn't like that, but we bridged it.

By banquet time, I collapsed.

Lane seated me at the head table, the chief spots of honor.

"You look tired, Love. Rest up; you're going to need it."

I laughed. "When do I change out of my wedding dress?"

"Why not now?" he said.

I caught Douglas and enlisted her help. When we returned I was wearing a light aqua blue suit with a dipping lace camisole.

Everyone was seated. I returned to my seat in the grand dining room where I placed my red plaid pocketbook monogrammed K.A. C.

Lane pulled out my chair covered in dark, blue-green plaid of the Campbell's. I sat down, my legs pushing aside long folds of white linen tablecloth. I touched gold utensils, gold-edged white chinaware, and crystal glasses, likewise gold-edged. I gazed up at him from my seat in adoration, laughing over and over again. We fed each other for photographers' pictures. We toasted cross-armed, European style.

The menu was topped with a ribbon, half Campbell, half McAllister plaid, a gold trellis down the sides and "Lane and Kenna" in bronze, with the date. The menu was definitely upscale from haggis, tatties, and neeps. *No turnips for my wedding day.* No, only Lewis Island Salmon au Beurre and Fresh Crab Salad, both with toast, Select Organic Lamb with Blackheart Gravy (a dark brown gravy containing blueberry jam), fresh asparagus, Herbed Pearl Potatoes, and Macaroni Tart in a pastry pie crust in little custard bakeware, a Scottish specialty. Flared Salad featured flared lettuce leaves topped by nuts and raspberries with a thickened oil vinaigrette dressing, and delicate bread rolls. The dessert was a Duet of Crème Brulée lying next to toffee ice cream, and a choice of French press coffee or ginger-mint tea. The guests' take-home favor was a net of Scottish Tablet, a caramel fudge treat shaped like a heart.

After consuming a decent amount, Mr. Farquhard was calling the shots as the master of ceremonies of Blackheart Heights. He welcomed the mayor, the Montfort's, the minister, the doctor, the librarian. I couldn't rattle off the whole list.

Then he lifted his glass of Viognier. "To Kenna and Lane, I propose a toast, a mix of several Scottish toasts: "God bless this house from foundation to attic, from stem to stern, may the roof never cave in, and may the Lord keep ye in His hand, and never close His fist too tight on ye. May ye always be just as happy as ye are right now! Toast!"

What a beautiful array of sentiments.

“I pass the gavel to you, Son.”

Lane stood to give his speech and toast. As he stood, I looked across the tables straight into Tara’s eyes and we locked eyes like horns. *Trouble. She wants revenge. Her nose high, she frosted the air.* Beside her sat the lovely Montfort’s, as grim as a Scottish Gothic.

This should have been my moment sat over Tara’s head like a thought bubble.

“Welcome family, long-standing friends and new, Earl and Lady Montfort and our long-time friend, their daughter Tara, Mr. Mayor, may you have the time of your lives, just as my wife, Kenna, and I, are today. I propose a toast to the lovely Kenna Alford Campbell.”

He raised me to my feet to receive the toast.

“To my most beautiful bride who assures me she loves nothing more than glens, coast, and Scottish bagpipes. Lovely bride Kenna, thanks for taking a chance on me. Welcome to Clan Campbell, to Blackheart Heights, may ye flourish here in Blackheart Heights as first love and co-captain of the ship, and may God pity the one who lifts a finger to harm ye.”

He paused. Then his voice turned into a lion’s roar. “Now me son will have a mother figure around to give him some relief from his dad,” he said. “Iain—stand up, Son. He raised his glass of Viognier and said, “To Iain, a finer son a father never had. May ye flourish all yer days, marry, and bring me back a grandson and a granddaughter.” We toasted Iain.

We crossed arms, sipped, put glasses down, and kissed. He kept me standing.

“Dad, my thanks, may yer life be long and useful,” he said, lifting his glass once again in toast. We ended holding glasses toward each other, sipped, and I sat.

Then David proposed a toast as best man before Lane continued.

“My bride from America is of Scottish descent from Clan McAllister through Isabella McAllister, sister of Alexander McAllister, and descended from McAllister’s of the Loup who hailed from Tarbert. These Scottish brethren escaped us in the 1700’s by emigrating to the

Cape Fear River area in North Carolina in one of the densest and most influential Scottish settlements in America. But, folks, she's a Campbell, too, so it appears I'm marrying a cousin. Seven generations removed is probably all right," he said.

Everyone laughed.

Lane was a protector who meant every word of what he said. Had someone told me a challenge to his toast would be made, I would never have believed them. As the nerviest villain alive, I wouldn't have dared.

He talked about the memory of his dear mother and alluded to his former wife. "Now, I want a word from the head of the whole operation, my Daddy, Mr. Farquhard Campbell."

Mr. Farquhard rose and joined his son in welcoming me into their lives and extended his clan's protection over my head.

"As you know, I will be opening a surgery in Edinburgh, but will commute as long as master and mistress permit," he said, glass lifted in our direction. "Lane Farquhard Campbell, I am proud of ye, Son, and see ye like a pretty woman. To ye both."

I looked at Tara, saw blood and ice-ometer rise in her eyes, calculator's wheel turn. Above it all, the Montfort's had been forced into coming.

"So, on to the wedding cake," Lane said, took my hand and led me over to the table where the cake towered, all five layers, almond with vanilla bean icing, topped with blueberries and blue thistle. Dreamier, you could not get. On top a ribbon of dark Campbell plaid twisted with the red McAllister one diagonally down the tiers, so that it showed from all sides. We took the cake knife to the base, covered in gold filigree look, stenciled over the bottom layer all round, on alternating layers. Hands together, we cut two slices.

After placing them on plates, we lifted a piece to feed our mate—and made a jolly mess which brought laughter and camera flashes all round.

Lane turned to me at that moment and said, “We stay our first wedding night at another castle, return tomorrow to pack for Bali and close on its heels, for the States.”

“Good plan,” I said, leaning forward and brushing crumbs off my face so cake wouldn't ruin my dress.

“Two days. Two weeks. Nothing needful except loving,” he said, pushing cake at me.

“You are a sneaky man and I should be afraid.” I pushed a bite back at him.

“No way,” he said, bouncing back.

He kissed my ear in a movement so intimate I forgot we were surrounded by people.

Then I saw Tara had noted the transaction. I rubbed it in...cupped my hand over my mouth while licking his listening ear.

“God, Kenna, let's go. I can't stand it any longer.”

We broke away from the photographers with our cake, pausing only a minute before we took off. Time was called on eating, talking, and chatting with guests. In no time, Lane had pulled the car up to the front door. He asked if all my things were at the front, and I said, “yes, but I forgot something upstairs.” I turned to see Lane open the door and just stand there, observing, no ogling me.

“Close the door, Lane!”

“Is that an invitation? It's our castle, our room, our kingdom.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Lane.”

“Only two in here—already married—soon to become one.”

“Lane, don't you come one step further. I warn you.”

“Here I come,” he said in a husky voice.

“Lane!” I pushed him backwards. “I don't want to be rushed.”

He pulled me close, kissing me tenderly. He cupped my head in his hands and moved with such lightning speed, I could barely resist him. Lord, he felt good! He caressed my shoulder and kissed my neck. When he pinned me against the door, I stopped him.

“Lane.”

“Kenna, let’s, we are husband and wife,” he said.

“Yes, but I don’t want to be so long everybody is privy to our moment. I want to be really all alone with you. I want us to take our time and enjoy each other. Okay?”

“I’ll tie myself down. And I will find you in every room in the castle.”

My eyes widened.

“You look like you did when you passed by my job site,” he said.

We left. He laid his arm on my shoulder. As we emerged into the lobby, guests had gathered, waiting to follow our car now replete with tin cans and lettering. Tables were set up in the hallway with gifts on them. In between two packages I saw the creepy doll which had been upstairs in the lady of the house’s room.

Who put that there among our presents?

I shuddered, but had no time to wonder.

We left in a blur for the Unknown Castle and its bridal suite, where the bellman followed with our luggage. Finally we were alone, with a full bucket of ice and a bottle of champagne.

“Hello, Mrs. Campbell. We finally get our leisure to complete what we’ve wanted for so long. Now it’s even better. Which, speaking for myself, was almost the first day we met.”

“Really? You mean the day you made fun of me.”

He slipped off his jacket, hanging it up. He unbuttoned his shirt and let it flap open.

I threw off my shoes.

He popped the cork off the bottle of champagne.

I took off my fancy shirt slowly. My undies were fine, but I slipped a lacy see-through top on as I headed toward him.

He looked me over, up and down, and made me sit with him on the bed.

He poured us each a small glass of champagne.

“Last chance to call it off,” he said.

“Probably not thinking that way,” I said, my glass sloshing.

“Look at me. I could look at you forever and it wouldn’t be enough. Words fail before your beauty! Hmm, I mean *my* beauty.”

I shed my skirt.

He discarded shoes and long socks.

He emptied his champagne glass and set it on the chest, took my shoulders and held me out away from him. “God, I’m smart.”

He caressed my shoulders, my face, my forehead, brushed my cheeks. He kissed me lightly on the nose, on the mouth, on my neck. He pulled me slowly to him, and I threw both arms around his neck and kissed his face over and over and slid down and put my face in his hairy chest, scrubbing my face back and forth against him.

Slowly he seeped into every pore in fullness I only imagined. I possessed and was possessed, was struck by lightning and only wished, exhausted, that there was more.

That’s as far into my life as I will allow anyone, but I will let you in on this secret: the films have never filmed better. I was the happiest woman in the universe. I could not fathom my good fortune; I touched him again.

“Ye’re not weary of me, yet?”

I smiled the smile of a Cheshire cat.

###

“Smart man—glad I prevailed on you to stay longer.”

“Smart woman, Mrs. Campbell, ma’am—have I told you how delicious breakfast is?”

“No, of course not. That’ll always be my answer.”

“Listen, then: You are an exotic flower, Mrs. Campbell, wafting an exotic fragrance.

You are an exotic meal—”

“And would you like to hear how gorgeous you are?”

“That doesn’t hurt me feelings at all.”

For three days we did what we liked and stayed in our lovely room.

“I knew we needed to begin our life together before we started traveling. And now, maybe we can return to the castle for clothes for our second leg of the honeymoon.”

“Give me chill bumps and wear your kilt.”

“Who did I marry? Yes, I’d say I was the smartest man in the universe; certainly, the happiest. Only problem is, sedation wears off, and then—well—you’re just destined to be an itch I keep scratching a hungering, I must keep feeding...the sweetest addiction in the world.”

A world covered in kisses.

I wrote travel features, not romances. And even if I did, they would not be filled with gratuitous events for the sake of competition, like some writers and people seem to like. No need to prove myself with the tastelessness of a voyeur. Tension, sparks, lighter fluid, fire, and we are all the tinder required.

I dreaded returning to Blackheart Heights. It seemed the wrong direction.

Chapter 16: Trouble in Paradise

“Me ain true love”—Robert Burns

That Scots like to travel abroad is a well-known fact. Warmer exotic climes filled the bill nicely, especially in dead of winter. Scotland claimed its share of beauty yet to be mined. Its scenic effect was mesmerizing, but fell short only because it was home. Less than a year

here, and I had never been locked into tumultuous weather, bound by centuries of tradition, or constrained by mountainous heights and tight, curvy roads like Lane had. I had lived in a dark, gloomy castle, full of ghosts, mysterious presences that at times bordered on malevolent. Enough excuses: we both craved exotic.

The island of Bali in Indonesia beckoned, offering all that and more.

We left Scotland for sun, beach, surf, and surprises galore. Or thought we had. We kept running into Scottish invaders like ourselves.

Top all-time irony that we would run into the most Scottish-sounding singing group I had ever heard, in Bali. Lane nor I could believe it, but I'm getting ahead of myself. We flew into an airport in Bali, "Island of the Gods," 21 miles away from Uluwatu, our selected destination for two weeks. Uluwatu was on the southwestern tip of the Bukit Peninsula of Bali, the Number Four pick for surfers of all skill levels...since its discovery in 1972 as a surfing destination due to the film, *Morning of the Earth*, a classic surf film. A fifteen-year-old surfer's acting created the buzz that drew surfers from all over the world.

Bali boasts seaside temples amongst its thousand or more temples. They say everywhere you go, you see a temple, so many that the government fails to number them. Monkeys guard the temples, the rain forest. Even bats inhabit cave temples. Naturally, being the professional photographer but non-surfer that I was, I was ecstatic I could photograph waves with the waterproof camera Lane gave me as a honeymoon gift.

Good thing that they had built roads since 1972 since cliffs in this archipelago were formidable. One showcased our deluxe hotel overlooking the sea in all its moods within a terrain of volcanic landscapes, terraced rice paddies, and pristine beaches.

Yes, I sound like a travel brochure. I was on honeymooner high.

"Lane, I'm so excited."

"Awesome, what? Look at the blue of those skies."

“And the open vistas.”

“Imagine underwater temples, and seeing cliffs and mountains near the sea from underneath.”

“Let’s find our spot,” I said.

“Chivy, chivy,” he answered. “I will not be rushed by the likes of any lass.”

“Not even on your honeymoon.” I teased him with a pinch.

He returned the favor with a pinch in an indecent place. We got our rental car and stashed our bags, problem-free.

“I don’t know what to do first--see monkeys, waterfall, surf, or black sand beach.”

Lane laughed. “I’m going to bed, first.”

“You are incorrigible.”

“And you love it.”

We drove through stunning countryside to our apartment overlooking the sea from the cliff, found our room, clean and modern with a balcony, and set up our temporary stations. We did take a nap, and took dinner that evening in the restaurant on site where we caught a live performance of the Scottish musicians, Cliffhangers. As we ordered drinks and waited for the menu, we listened to songs about the Stone of Scone.

“Lane, see if we can chat with them after their gig.” He waited until he had his island special drink, Mai Tai, sauntered over to them, managed to sneak in our request between songs, and got a ‘yes’ from them. He held up a thumb and forefinger in success.

So we soaked in mystical Celtic tones, primitive like some Pied Piper who lured three girls up Hanging Rock in Australia, never to be seen again.

On a break, the lead singer stopped by our table.

“Honeymooners, I see.”

“Guilty as charged,” Lane said, unrepentant.

For my part, I squirmed, knowing people were imagining what we were doing, which I considered intrusive and embarrassing. Like broadcasting to the world, “Hey, everybody, we’re having sex!” I know young people brag that way, but I found it crude.

I had no agenda in talking to them. They had obviously done a lot of research on the Stone, one could tell listening to the lyrics. So hearing if they had turned up any new stone, pun intended, would be fun.

“Did you hear any peculiar tales in interviewing Scots about the Stone?” I asked.

“Yeah, one in particular, that it was saved by the Knights Templar, along with the Holy Rood and other pieces—like a duplicate architectural plan of Solomon’s Temple.”

“What?” Lane and I said in unison.

“Marked ‘Cornerstone,’ size annotated. And something else.”

“Tell us.”

“The dimensions noted were consistent with the size of our Stone. For a while the Knights Templar planned to build the third temple in Scotland.”

“No! That’s wild!” I said.

“Was it a Masonic plan to rebuild the temple?” Lane asked.

“Could be...I’m no authority,” James said.

“I just had a thought. If the Stone proved to be Jacob’s pillow, would the Jews demand it back as their country’s stone?” Lane said.

“Funny, Lane,” I said.

“Interesting,” James said. “I feel a song coming on, but first I must sing one. Talk to you folks later.”

When the program concluded, we were ushered to the musician’s table to chat and revel. We raved repeatedly over their music, ending by signing their subscription list.

“Scots need to lose the “*kent yer faither*” syndrome and be proud of diaspora Scots...not disparage th” James said.

We all had Scottish connections.

“As a Scot, I receive the admonition. Sorry, Honey,” Lane said to me.

“Aye, for too long native Scots have criticized their more entrepreneurial Scottish cousins,” said Will.

“While envying and following them,” said Lane, “which is easy to do. Stay put and envy.”

“I came to Scotland to cover the event of the millennia—and saw Prince Andrew return the stolen Stone to Scotland. I work for a magazine out of North Carolina.”

“Ah, now there’s a story itself,” James said.

“Have any of you read the novel, *Stone of Destiny*?” I asked.

“No,” James said.

“Two women wrote in some detail on arcane knowledge connected to it.”

Jan, the lead vocalist, said, “The British Israelites say Scots are descended from Jews. And claim Queen Elizabeth as prophesied extension of David’s throne, God’s promise.”

“Is anybody up for genetic testing?” I asked. “I doubt Queen Elizabeth would subject herself to that, but she’d have the money. Maybe one day it will be required.”

“Some groups followed that rabbit trail awhile. But that takes you back to the 1296 theft of the stone and whether or not they made a duplicate, and whether or not the one in Edinburgh Castle is real or fake. You could be testing the wrong stone.”

Lane said, “Nested stories, like Russian nesting dolls.”

“Does having the real Stone matter?” I asked.

“Trophies are important,” James said.

“It’s a sign of power,” Will said.

“Yes, to normal people. But give a megalomaniac a Stone which speaks supernaturally, and you create a following. A sect, a secret society. Control by Big Money.”

“That seems far-fetched,” Lane said.

“It is,” James said. “Fetched from a-far, that is. We are always surprised when something we never expected happens. Do you remember how everyone scoffed at the notion of Jews returning to Israel and making it a national state again? Nobody remembers now that the unexpected happened. Adamantly opposed, could never happen. Astounded when it did, but now it has, it is discredited. Expectations have been re-set.”

“You’re right,” Lane said.

“I wonder if anyone has heard of Robbie the Pict.”

“Not me.”

“For years he hounded British authorities, wrote letters asking who legally owned the Stone, to the Queen, to Lady Diana and other dignitaries. He never received an answer until one day, mysteriously, it was announced that the Stone would be graciously returned to the Scottish people. Until England needs it back to crown the next royal.”

Neither singers nor Lane had heard.

“Robbie the Pict had legal background he used with creatively, using strategy to force admission of ownership. He was technical yet funny. I met him at an SNP party.”

“Kenna, you are full of surprises,” Lane said, laughing. “Was that with Bryan?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Well, we wish you all a wonderful honeymoon,” James said. “We got to get our show on the road. Let you know when we’re appearing in Scotland.”

“Please do,” Lane said. “Do a gig at the Castle. We live in the States, too, now.”

“Oh!” Jan said.

“I forgot,” Will said. “There were a couple of films about the Stone of Destiny. Fell kind of flat. But another film concluded it was left on a golf course.”

“Another said it’s still in a quarry yard,” Lane said.

“Another said it’s in a graveyard,” I said.

“No better place to hide a stone than in a graveyard.” Jan quipped. We left laughing.

“An American descended from Scots has her own theory. Uh oh, I’ve said too much.”

Nobody heard me.

Lane invited them to the castle and then turned to me.

“Now you’ll have to spend the day tomorrow letting me in on this theory.” He grabbed my hand. “Yeah, I got me a beautiful bride, but she’s a wee bit too smart for her own good—or maybe even mine. Let’s jostle those ideas around tomorrow. The music’s playing again.”

He invited me to the dance floor. “Don’t expect me to do this after the honeymoon.”

Evening talk time with Lane outside on the terrace away from obligations was magic. As we returned to our table and prepared to pay, my peace was toppled by registering a large man sitting near us I’d caught watching us frequently.

“Have you noticed that man staring at us, Lane?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said.

“How long has he been there?”

“Most of the evening.”

“He attached himself to us?”

“Sure looks and feels like it. What we could have that he wants is beyond me.”

“I’m uneasy. Let’s hightail it out of here.”

He picked up his credit card, left the required papers and we zipped up and out as briskly as we could. “Grab your wrap.”

I picked it up on our way to the door, took the elevator, and in short order, hid safe behind doors of our room, but safe from what—our own imaginations?

We enjoyed our evening into the wee hours.

###

Next evening, we returned from photographing surf and monkeys in a temple, and were about to enter the hotel from our taxi when a stretch limousine pulled up beside us.

A gentleman opened a door, while another came up from behind and swept us into the available seats behind the driver. Hoods were slipped over our heads, and we were instructed to leave them as they were.

“You are in no danger,” the voice said. “Do not talk.”

Lane reached for my hand and squeezed in reassurance, if that were possible. We traveled between fifteen minutes and an hour. Without sensory details, I couldn’t be sure.

Eventually the limo stopped, the engine turned off.

Both doors opened. “You may exit the limo, now. Wait where you are.”

That was the most fearful moment of the trip. We had no idea where we stood, except outside a limo on a strange island.

Hoods were lifted off our heads and we faced a tall, nondescript fellow who greeted us as coldly as someone from the house of the Borgia’s. Wrong country.

“Mr. Bill would like to see you.”

‘Mr. Bill,’ now there was an innocuous-sounding name for an Indonesian island. Its good-old-boy American flavor added to rising terror. Fear of the unknown, fear of losing our identities, of being wiped off the face of the earth rose like bile in my throat. Lost, with no clue how to get away or where to go if we were able to, we waited for the powerful stranger’s next command.

Chapter 17: Invitation or Else

“There is nothing we like to communicate to others as much as the seal of secrecy together with what lies under it.”--Friedrich Nietzsche

Outside the stretch limo, we acclimated to hills and greenery.

Lane gave me a correcting look. I guessed he worried I might yield to histrionics or extremes.

Day needed no stars, but night paraded them and competed in display over the splendor of interior lights. Rolling hills, a lake; we were on a hill surrounded by nature. I could not discern if we were closer to coast or mountains. We hadn't driven long, and Bali was an island. Like Scotland, the coast was never far away.

The tall, grey-haired man motioned us forward and indicated we should go ahead of him into the side entrance of a house. Once inside, we were taken into a small library and told to sit. Once seated, we were informed “Mr. Bill” would arrive shortly, and left to ourselves.

Lane directed me again with his eyes and a furtive shake of his head. He nonchalantly surveyed the room. I watched him first, before allowing myself to absorb details of the room.

He obviously thought someone was listening, watching or both.

I focused on book titles in the bookcase, *Le Conte du Graal*, written by Chrétien de Troyes. I began to notice an outstanding number of books with Knights Templar in the title. I saw the books, *The Holy Bible: The Great Light in Masonry, King James Version, Temple Illustrated Edition* and *A New and Revised Edition: An Encyclopaedia(sic) of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* by Albert Mackey.

Whoever owned this costly place had an interesting hobby or affiliation with the Masons. I continued looking. I mean, whoever brought us into this room would expect us to look, would he not? I tried to remember everything I had heard about the group. Basically, they were a secret fraternity. Men took oaths. One could rise to different levels—was it 32 or

33 degrees? I couldn't remember if I had ever known a Mason. Many practiced in small towns, attended meetings. Plenty of gravestones displayed a measuring tool for engineers.

Quite frankly, I knew nothing more. I could only call to memory a blur for the symbol's appearance. Even as I thought this, my eyes riveted to an emblem with the upside down drawing tool used by stone masons. *It was crazy, being kidnapped.* I'd never heard of Masons coming out of cover for any reason, *or of a member hosting a view of his home.*

Just then an older gentleman came in wearing a Merlot-colored satin robe over pants.

"I apologize for the hood, and for disrupting your schedule by bringing you here," the man who was the obvious owner said.

We did not answer. The tall, grey-haired man stood behind his chair.

"Forgive me," the owner said, "I am Mr. Bill and I have brought you here to ask a huge favor. You see how much I have studied the Knights Templar and the Masonic order," he said, relaxing into a large, upholstered chair and putting his feet up on a brocaded ottoman. "I myself am descended from a Templar Knight. My family proclaimed the fact."

Was he saying he was not a member of the order of Freemasonry?

We said nothing.

"You are waiting for me to speak, I see. Yes, you would be an excellent candidate if you decided to help me," he said, talking more toward Lane than me. "Would you like a tea? Stanley, bring us a round of tea." Stanley left.

For the first time, I shivered. And what if we did not help him?

"I heard about your wedding. A Scot weds an American of Scottish descent. Quite romantic, I think. I know a good deal about you both...even your kinship prior to marriage."

"How do you know that?" I blurted out.

He seemed pleased. "Like people share like minds."

I would not be baited. Or play cat and mouse. I smiled quietly.

“What I am about to do is most unusual, I think you will agree. I have brought you here to invite your husband to join the ranks of the Masons,” he said, smiling at me. “My apologies, but we do not ask ladies.”

Lane stirred. “To what or whom do I owe this honor?” he asked, his face like flint.

“That would be me. You would start at a lodge near your castle, and proceed up the ranks normally, but you would have a special assignment directly from me.”

Stanley returned with tea.

Once floated, our sugar cubes sank into English tea. We clinked with silver spoons.

“You would never see me again, know anything about me, but you would go to political meetings from time to time and send a report through someone I designate.”

“What implications and sacrifices does that mean for me and my family?” Lane asked, and flicked a look in my direction to keep me still.

“That question has no full answer, as I’m sure you know. It could bring you into danger. But no more than you’re up for as it is.”

“Sir, what philosophical tenets must I hold to be in agreement with your purposes?”

“That is an astute question. You would, Mr. Campbell, be aligning yourself with God’s people and purposes yet to unfold in the final hour before our Lord comes.”

“And without which, I cannot?”

“Not effectively.”

“May I consider this and talk to my wife about it?”

“Yes, but not too long. I will send someone for your answer.”

“Are there negative repercussions should I not accept your gracious offer?”

“There are always negative results for not following the will of God. But will I or any of the organizations with which I may or may not be associated hunt you or your family down

and kill you? Of course we wouldn't. We are not barbarians, sir, despite the lies written and published about us."

"Your identity being—" Lane asked.

"A new order arisen from old roots that will spread across the earth...one without national boundaries and local smallness. Some privileged few will find a place in this order. Who knows how long this window will stay open—how quickly it will close? For a short time, the window is open to you. There accrue financial and influential benefits, like every fraternity extends to its members."

He took a sip of tea, unhindered by what I called his mask. His lips were thin and his mouth barely moved as he talked, almost as though a fire had melted his features into a unity. He smiled a most charming smile at me, but the photographer in me noticed that his eyes lacked the prerequisite highlights.

"Your wife knows when to be quiet, Mr. Campbell. That is admirable," he said, nodding his head in affirmation of me, probably to direct me, as well.

Still I said nothing. "The issue lies between you and my husband," I said, finally, trying not to even think during this interchange.

My mind gave consent to the highly sophisticated means of reading people being used even now as we sat in our chairs. Hiding my own reactions and thoughts was a most difficult exercise in self-control, no—I must correct words as a semanticist—it was an exercise in self-domination by my will against all reaction, one I had never practiced or felt the need for practicing, before.

"Thank you, Mr. Bill," Lane said, without offering his hand.

"I await your final answer," Mr. Bill said, standing. "Enjoy the rest of your vacation—ah, your honeymoon." He gave me a thin-lipped smile, cue that our meeting was over. We all stood. Stanley appeared without perceptible command given to escort us out.

I followed Stanley; Lane followed me. Mr. Bill exited to the right, disappearing immediately. We turned an abrupt left to the exterior door, where we picked up our coats. I combed memory for whether I had left anything in my coat pockets.

Once outside, we were shown where to wait, and hoods were slipped back over our eyes. I grabbed Lane's hand. We heard the stretch pull up. Within seconds the door opened and we were directed expertly back inside. They had this abducting thing down to a gentleman's science. Separation of physical contact terrified me until reunited on the back seat of the car. I clutched Lane's hand and keened my ears. Cleverly, classical music played, covering most sounds that might have imparted outside clues as to the locale.

Lane clutched my hand. We did not talk. In some indeterminate time frame of driving—I would guess 25 minutes—the Limousine pulled up and stopped. From inside, we were directed to take off our hoods, fold them, and pass them through a slot in a glass divider. We did. The door beside me opened. I dropped Lane's hand with great reluctance, slid out and stood until Lane joined me. We stood rigid as boards beside our rental car in the Bali hotel lot.

Sensing freedom, we moved quickly from limo to rented car.

Safe inside, I watched the limo leave.

Lane took his time. He put a finger to his lips, so I was out of luck, bursting to talk. I would explode soon, but knew he was right.

Lane drove us around for a good fifteen minutes before returning to our hotel. We walked in, took the elevator up, shed light jackets onto the coat rack. Lane deposited the car keys on the key rack.

I just looked at him, like, and we're not talking for the rest of our trip?

He laughed, and pulled me back out of our room and downstairs into what looked to be a conference room. He asked hotel staff to bring us a sandwich; it was before 10p.m. and the hotel bar was still open. We pulled up chairs and he turned to me.

“Kenna, I brought us up here just in case something had been attached to our coats or my keys which they had access to.”

“What could have been attached?” I asked naïvely.

“Listening devices, trackers—one never knows how far the industry has advanced.”

“All right, I get it. I wondered about that while we were in Mr. Bill’s house.” I shuffled in the chair and brought a leg up under me to sit on. I had worn a beach skirt and top with long sleeves today.

“So, first of all, Kenna, this never happened. Okay?” Lane said. I looked at his chest, muscles filling the black shirt.

“You mean I don’t talk about it to anyone but you?” I looked him in the eye.

“Correct. To *nobody*,” he said with no smile at all.

“All right, I agree...not even a slip of the tongue.” I wanted to ask more, but I waited for him to download the full Campbell-Alford agenda.

“They will have to contact me again shortly. The man wants his answer.”

“Do you know how?” I reached out to stroke his forearm.

“No, but I have no doubt they will.”

“You aren’t considering it, are you, Lane?”

“Not because I believe in it. What about as a double agent?”

“You’re serious?” I asked as a knock sounded and Lane opened to staff bringing in cold drinks, sandwiches, and a butternut acorn squash soup. That should warm us up after a chilling experience. Lane waited to talk until the man left with tip in hand, assured we needed no further assistance.

“Yes, I am. Perhaps Scotland needs to know what they are up to. Historically, the Masons formed in Scotland just after Knights Templar was disbanded by a French king, and many Templars were burned at stake.”

“Okay, but why does that concern you personally?” I asked, confused by Lane’s answer, his seriousness.

“They were said to have brought with them plans for building the temple—Solomon’s third temple, you heard our Scottish friends—here in Scotland.”

“What’s the point?” I lifted a small bowl of soup and put it in front of me, and a sandwich.

“You heard the singer. They need the Stone of Destiny for their cornerstone, or coronation stone, whichever...if it’s the real one.”

“Yes, but have you heard any plans out there for re-building a temple?”

“Actually, I have.”

“Serious ones,” I said.

“Yes, I have,” Lane said. “They want it, according to their own tenets. The Jews want it, even if on the Temple Mount—”

“What do you mean?” I chewed a bite, half-heartedly.

“It means that they plan to build a temple not in Scotland, but Jerusalem, set up on the Temple Mount.”

“But this is all so *marginalized*, not part of the mainstream. Another structure sits on the Temple Mount. Have you any commitments to Masons?”

“Don’t you remember my note to my father?”

“Okay, well thank God for that.” If I could hang my security on any hook, I was glad.

“Slow down, Kenna, absorb a little information at a time. I learned some of this from talks with Lord Montfort when I was supposedly training under him as a recruit.”

“I feel sick to my stomach,” I said, pushing back the food scraps.

“We’re going to a library with online connections so you can read up—not on theories, but facts, historical meetings, but the man may require my answer before then.”

“Oh, Lane, I don’t want you going into it, especially as a double agent. They will push you to go public and then backing out will never be an option. Why do they want you?”

“I live near where the Stone was originally hidden, or that I’m an engineer with some expertise on the Temple, maybe, or something about Blackheart Heights.”

“Oh God, Lane, I couldn’t stand it. For six months, maybe, a few years. But to have you even thought to be a Mason. You would be ostracized by the total Christian community.”

“Most Christians don’t have a clue.”

“God’s laws run so counter to secrecy, Lane. It would end up being shouted from the rooftops before you even knew. This brings me to a ‘true confession’ about me. My family may know where the real stone rests.” I let it fall like a bomb.

“Okay, now you have my attention. What are you talking about? How is it possible—”

“I’ve been searching ever since coming to Scotland for any link to information about McAllister who may have brought it with him to America. I have his letter. Want to see it?”

“Of course I do, Kenna. Sounds like Mr. Bill knew about it.”

“I haven’t shown it to anyone. Do you think they are as laissez-faire as he indicated? Will they come after us, or harm us, Lane, or our children? And how much more would they if they knew you were a double agent? Frankly, I don’t think your life would be worth a penny. Don’t consider it,” I blurted out, and began to cry.

“Kenna, stop crying. I won’t. You’re right. They are everywhere, anyhow, and I’d have no country to run to, like spies can,” he said, leaning forward and holding me, drawing me into the circle of his warmth. We were like that when staff returned to take our plates.

“Can I bring you a thermos of coffee or a pot of tea?” he asked, noticing everything.

“Yes. Two teas, please,” Lane told him.

Just us two again. “But to answer your real questions, no, I don’t think we’ll be hunted down for saying no. Not this time. Not yet.”

“Not yet,” I repeated after him. “I could almost not breathe while we were in that room. I have never known such fear. And you were so calm and collected.”

“Correction, Kenna, I seemed collected,” Lane said, playing with my hair and smoothing it out of my face.

“Here’s tea,” I said, rallying, as the knock sounded and we let in the man with a steaming carafe. “Let’s drink it and then I’ll explain to you what I am talking about.”

“Well, let’s forget about it all, Kenna. We have a honeymoon to enjoy.”

“I want to go to lie on the beach, free my mind.”

“And go through the temple entrance to get there.”

“Take a nice walk on black sand.”

“There you go. We’ll do that, and visit the monkey forest.”

So we entered into our numbered days with gusto, forgot the Damocles sword hanging over us until the last day. Our time we packed into a capsule, sad but realistic truth for what lay ahead. Our final day we retrieved what we’d brought, tipped everyone and said our good-byes. We loaded our bags on a large carrier and took them to our rental car. That was when I began to worry about the treasures I’d left at home in the castle, safe only against random snoopers, not professionals who might actually want information. I had not thought of them since we left for Bali until now. International snoopers made me antsy. I began agitating to arrive to check. First thing in the morning we would board the plane in Bali. I bet they won’t find us until we return, I thought, but I was so wrong.

###

“Lane, I’m behind you!” I said, racing to keep pace so we could make our flight connection. Once on, we found our seats. I sat at the window, determined not to let strange societies throw a pall on our honeymoon. We held hands. I placed his hand on my face and dreamed beautiful places we had seen and the love we had deepened, before takeoff.

He patted me. I leaned against the side of the plane, pillow tucked between head and metal, Lane flanking me on the left. Safety brought on a snooze.

When I awoke he was pulling down his food tray, getting ready for arriving food. I straightened up and pulled mine down as well. I smiled at him, rubbing sleep from my eyes. He looked serious. I cocked my head and knitted my brows together. He held his hand up, with scrawled message on a torn piece of paper, “Well? Put answer on seat, go to lavatory.”

He pointed out the ladies filling the narrow passageway with drinks and snacks.

“Oh, they’ll let you by.” I lifted brows, showing what a fine specimen I thought him.

But I hated sitting there while he was away seeing a piece of paper with “NO” in big letters scrawled on it. I leaned back and tried not to observe it. What good would it do to see the person who picked it up? I left my eyelids half closed and rested. How would we know for sure the message was received?

By the time Lane returned, however, the paper was gone and I had seen no one. I was mad at anyone with enough gall to interrupt a honeymoon. I had already flipped over to thinking about packing for the States and how much I would carry and what season.

Lane interrupted. “Hey, you’re thinking deep thoughts and I’m not in them.”

“Oh yes you are. But not like you mean.” I snuggled into his huge shoulder. We were nearing my beloved Scotland and had gotten rid of the pesky secret fraternity.

He loosened his arm to hug me just as the pilot came on the intercom giving jovial particulars. Our return had not been delayed or bounded by snow or ice; happily, we had skirted that seasonal gift.

We adjusted packages, carry-on items, trays, and tightened our seatbelts. Somehow that symbol felt significant, tightening our seatbelts. A little prophetic, like, ‘tighten your seatbelts, you’re in for the ride of your life.’ Chills of fear, but also excitement arose. Hum-drum I hated; adventure I loved. Hopefully I wouldn’t regret that.

We landed.

We stood in line and grabbed our bags from the overhead.

We finally exited the plane, went downstairs where Lane grabbed checked luggage from the moving circle, and then hopped a bus to our car parked in the Edinburgh airport. Everything had wheels, and the faster they moved, the better I felt.

We glowed. I looked at Lane, thinking, I am the luckiest woman in the whole world.

We walked briskly to our car and deposited everything inside.

As Lane entered the right side of the car to drive us home, he jerked up a piece of paper and angrily crumpled and threw it in the trash bag.

“What was that, Lane?”

“A contact number for ‘if I changed my mind.’” He started the car and drove off.

“In our lives from here on out, like it or not.”

“I don’t think so. But something is implied I don’t like,” he said. When Lane got angry, he went inaccessible. I hated the feel of all business again.

“Will we have time to look at my letters when we get back?” I asked.

“Not tonight, Luv. I’ll have a lot of calls to get the work started up again while we have good weather.”

Driving home through beautiful hills; I would never get immured to the sights.

“What do you do in bad weather?” I asked, flinching at how close we came to a stone wall. Stone walls and curbs popped up suddenly in the countryside anywhere.

“We huddle in one room.” He looked over at me and laughed. “Or use generators and paraffin space heaters, me love. That’s kerosene to you Yanks. We are not totally primitive.”

I laughed, and then growled, “Don’t call me a Yank!”

“Understood, and still, I am interested in your letter, Luv.”

“I need your input.”

“It is hard for me to take the mission of these people seriously. I know they do, however. They take their mission dead serious. Heaven help us if we get in their way.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that. Dear God, Lane. A cloud descended on us during our honeymoon from these intrusive people. It’s not fair.”

Lane maneuvered us through a roundabout.

“Yes, but ya’ know, we are the more fortunate Christians. We recognize danger.”

“The danger and the plan. We must work faster, harder. All I can do is run with what I’ve been given. I can’t purposely make plans to circumvent theirs.”

“Nor should ye do anything of the kind. In fact, I expressly forbid it.” he looked fierce.

“You conjured up that oil painting in the dining room, just now.”

“All right, *You*.”

“Forbidding it, are ye?” I said softly just to let him know to whom he gave orders.

“Don’t go getting all independent on me, now,” he said, softer still.

“Keep sweet-talking me and ye’ll bypass my blackout circuits, for a while, at least.”

He put his hand over mine protectively.

“Almost home,” he said of the uneventful 3-hour trip I mostly slept through.

Blackheart Heights filled the landscape as I yawned.

“Sorry, Lane. You shouldn’t have let me sleep the whole way.”

“Hard night on the plane. I’ll make it up, later.

David and my new step-son Iain greeted us. Mr. Farquhard was outside working in his greenhouse, but he waved when he saw us. I managed to wave, but only just. He had nearly destroyed me and Lane. That was hard to forgive, however easily I seemed to have forgiven.

We took our luggage upstairs to our room. He opened the door and made me wait while he deposited luggage and returned to me. He picked me up and carried me across the threshold, kicking the door closed with his boot, and lowering me enough to lock it.

He took me over to the bed and laid me down on it.

“The way I wanted to when we were in the garden.”

“But everyone will know we’re up here, Lane. They’ll know what we’re doing.”

“They need to get used to it, ye know,” and he grinned from ear to ear as he kissed me helpless and almost made me forget that we had been chosen and targeted for heinous plans.

Chapter 18: Frozen Teardrops

“...and there follows a mist and a weeping rain...”—George MacDonald, *Phantastes*

Next day the gentleman’s kidnapping was my first thought, the return plane ride clouded over, the note passed and the “no” answer was merely a truth bound to accrue to the Blackheart effect down the road, like some principality setting up its dominion over us.

Even so I was happy to return to Blackheart. Over breakfast, I studied what Lane was showing of his building plan with projected additions to draw tourists.

“For one thing,” he said, “falconing needs to be more hands-on for the participants. We need to move that here.” He poked at a spot with his big finger.

“I’m lucky Gaynelle didn’t cut me loose after our marriage and gave a pay raise.”

“You’re right.”

Lane and I drank coffee and nibbled the last of a sweet bun.

“At the wedding Gaynelle didn’t discuss business, but she did tell me she had more to say. She said, ‘Once you’re back in your business frame of mind, call. We can renegotiate for a longer stint.’ That sounds really hopeful, doesn’t it, Lane?”

“It does indeed, Kenna, Luv.”

“You do realize that my working out a correspondent’s deal would require my having a room away from sleeping areas for a business study.”

“That should be no problem in a castle, Kenna. Go ahead and call her.”

I called Gaynelle and we hashed out a deal where we hovered after breakfast, while Lane tuned me out and then interacted, nodding and guiding my responses.

We washed dishes together quickly and headed out without seeing David or Iain.

“Iain likes to sleep late,” Lane said. “I’m gonna have to impose a little discipline.”

We walked to Lane’s worksite. He showed me how far they’d come on the future Blackheart Heights.

“For one thing, since falconing requires more personnel, I need to delegate the business side of it and the care of the birds. Iain is old enough to manage that part with an assistant.”

“Actually, I think he is eager for it.”

“I’m going to talk to him today about it, put him on a schedule with pay attached.”

“That will be good for him.”

“Yes. Also, I need to hire a restaurateur for the work involved in daily meals, food ordering, menu prep, and everything associated,” Lane said. “Once the spa center is up and running, I can maintain it with lighter staff, but its launch comes with expenses attached that aren’t trivial.”

Financial cares. Bye-bye honeymoon’s romantic meals, phthalocyanine blue seas framing a lover’s head.

“Hey, I’m right here, and you’re daydreaming.”

“About our honeymoon.”

He kissed me.

“Hmm. But tell me, Lane, however will we work all this out—what we do here, in the States, and when. My head is muddled without an overview.”

“Yes, you are right.”

“I need a plan.”

“I’m making one that spells out details like whether or not we will close down for off-season months, when to reduce staff, or close. We need to choose favorite airlines and travel bureaus for specials, here and the U.S. You could help some there. In short, the business side of our joint lives could take over with Daddy gone. Oh, I’m sure he’ll help on weekends.”

“He’d probably want to.”

“Then there’s engineering and building repairs. Usually, I’ve let that lie while abroad.”

“So I need to know how and when to work for us, the castle, for *South!* Inc., which requires open-ended research, or when to allow myself family research.”

“It will sort itself out.”

“That’s a good plan,” I said.

“Yeah, it will.”

Looking out the window, I saw a car drive up that I did not immediately recognize until it pulled near the parking spots. I stopped dead still. Witch Tara, as Sally had dubbed her, trespassed on mine and Lane’s property: We were a place of business, but she, no tourist.

“Lane, is that who I think it is?” I pointed to her heading for the door.

“Indeed, it is. What can she be a-wanting?”

“No telling.” My temperature was peaking. “Let’s go in right after her.”

We came up in time to overhear her ask the receptionist for Lane. I had to hand it to her for unmitigated gall, as we say in the South.

“What a surprise, Tara. What can *we* do for you?” Lane asked.

Good for Lane.

My posture improved. I showed my advantages and couldn’t help noticing the antique necklace she wore. Upside down shears: I recognized that symbol.

“Hallo, the both of you. Nice trip to Bali? Father wanted to know if we still planned to go forward with the Spring Festival...as always.” Tara said.

She cut eyes at me as she spoke ‘always,’ curiously well-informed about our honeymoon locale.

“I know it seems early, but a lot of planning is required, so my parents thought we should learn your intentions on the joint venture.” She dripped with confidence.

“Lane?” I said sweetly and turned away.

My mistake, thinking the wedding and honeymoon would deter a woman like her.

“I don’t see why not, Tara,” Lane said. “What do you think, Kenna?”

“Oh—I don’t know what all it involves, or even if we’ll be here. You figure it out, and tell me what I’m to do for it.”

“It’s an annual event, Kenna. We aren’t going anywhere until April, I don’t think.”

“So tell me more about it,” I said, willing my reactions to chill.

“No can do now; I have an appointment,” she said, “but Lane will fill you in. I just needed a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ from Lane to proceed with the published fliers. We didn’t want to assume everything was the same,” she said, a slow, calculating smile rising on her face. She had maneuvered me into outsider, newbie position, odd woman out, negative naysayer.

“So can I proceed with the fliers?” she asked, with the air of total reason.

“Yes, I don’t know why not,” said Lane.

Wrong answer. I would have to educate him as to what a husband should do in such cases. But we had gone in together, and he had asked me first. I’d give him about eighty percent on the new husband test, maybe eighty-five.

After Tara left, Lane looked at me.

“Why are you worried, Kenna? You know I love you.” He shook his head at the alien before him.

“Because I know her nature. She is still after you, Lane, maybe now more than ever. She thought she had you in the bag. My goodness, she is wearing it on her sleeve. And to concoct this little you-her thing, why, it’s so obvious.”

“Well, that won’t work. She’s deluded if she thinks I’d desert you.”

“But we haven’t finished our planning session to lay out our year.”

“And what does that change?”

And you’re going to commit to this before we juggle what we’ve planned together?”

“Kenna, you’re over-reacting.”

“Maybe I am; maybe I’m not.”

He leaned down and kissed me on the nose.

“What a little pout. Look at that lower lip. You have to admit, it’s a no-win situation.”

“I guess. She was flouting her Masonic necklace.”

“That’s no secret, except that women aren’t Masons and it means nothing. Let me go put a few things we talked about into action. We’ll reconvene for lunch.”

###

We had returned home not a day too early. I spoke right to it when I congratulated us on getting back to the castle before winter hit with a vengeance. That night, the weather forecast surprised us. Next day, snow and mixed precipitation started. Lane with Iain and Mr. Farquhard readied his buildings and birds, until he couldn’t see anymore and then came into the castle, calling for me, crusted over with white.

I ran to him, of course.

“You okay?” I pulled out the clothes brush and dusted him off.

“I am,” he said, “but we can’t let any staff that hasn’t left yet out on the road. It’s sticking badly on these curvy roads already, I heard from a report.”

I noticed his mounting sense of urgency.

“Round them up and give them the bad news that they have to sit this one out with us. If they work some, they can clock in and get overtime. Tell everyone to let their loved ones know, make arrangements for pets and whoever they are responsible for by phone before the phones go down. God help me, I hope no one has children they are supposed to pick up.”

So I ran back to find everyone, urgently talking to each in turn, advising them not to push home tonight. One woman did have a child, but the grandparents were able to get her.

Lane bustled around drawing water into large containers, and checking on the generator. He had a skeleton crew at the restaurant prepare teas. All the extra comforters were put out. The castle’s generator was commercial, but no one knew how long it would last.

“They’re reporting avalanches north of Inverary,” Lane said only 40 minutes later, returning to the reception area where I pitched in. “We were expecting arrivals tonight. I hope they have the good sense not to come. I can’t be running these roads with my truck not winterized.”

“No, you can’t.”

Lane gave the young attendant night duty in the entry hall on the outside chance someone did come through.

“Kenna, let’s you and me go upstairs. You go on up. I’ll stop by the restaurant to get food ordered.” He motioned me upstairs where I went happily.

I took a hot shower while we still had power and slipped on one of my prettiest, but warmest, nighties from my trousseau.

I felt better already. Lane slipped in and kissed me.

“I ordered a variety,” Lane said.

Lane answered the knock at our door and instructed the young man to set down warm food onto the round table ready with tall wineglasses.

The young man gave me a look sidelong where I had an afghan pulled around me.

He left. We sat down to appetizers, pork roast, peas and carrots, and roasted tatties.

“Look at that snow,” I said, watching white pile onto the window ledge.

“Yes.” Lane looked at news of slow traffic and snow drifts all the way to Glasgow and Edinburgh and finally clicked off the TV. “It’s beautiful from inside.”

“From inside with you.”

“You look lovely, by the way.” He reached over to touch my hair and shoulder.

“You look handsome.”

“A toast to marriage and love—may it last forever.”

“May our love last forever.” I lifted my glass to his.

We feasted on one another with looks of endearment.

Lane consolidated the rest of the dishes on the tray and set them outside the door. He re-filled our wine glasses and took them to the couch table, sat on the couch, and patted the seat for me to join him. The temperature in the room descended rapidly, the air cooling faster than furnace could accommodate. White coldness gathered at the window in picture book fashion. I shivered and tucked my feet under me and leaned into his shoulder. Lane immediately put his big arm around me and enveloped me until I sighed with happiness.

We alternated: sips of wine, sips of each other.

He stroked my face, gave me butterfly kisses, and toyed with my nose and ears. He told me how much he loved me; how he had fallen for me the first day he’d caught up to me in the fog. The temperature on the couch in front of a toasty fire ascended rapidly. You couldn’t order up a more ‘perfect storm.’

Lane got up and went to the cabinet.

He put out two tiny glasses and a fine single malt whiskey to celebrate our new home together. We only had a sip or two when other events eclipsed that one.

“I liked it so much on our honeymoon when you...,” he whispered in my ear and nothing else existed, but me and him hiding in the room from the cold world outside, and the present opportunity. We fell asleep exhausted in each other’s arms. I awoke at some noise, but not finding its source and needing my sleep, I helped myself to a few sips of single malt.

###

In the middle of the night, the white moon cast shadows like the sun and woke me up. I flicked on a light without response. That meant we had no electricity. I was the heavy sleeper. What woke me besides the polar brightness was discovering I was quite alone, freezing under feather comforters in king-sized bed framing us in on three sides. My mate had gone missing.

Groggy, I plumped pillows that hid bright light reflected off white snow showing from behind deeply cased windows. I tried to re-create darkness, call sleep back. After several futile attempts, I gave up. I felt under the covers in Lane’s spot. Quite cold. *Something is wrong*. He’d been gone for some time. That landed me on my feet, dressing to look for him.

I double dressed from underwear to outer clothes, a furry hat around my ears, and coat and gloves. I locked our door and pocketed the key. Blackheart was dark, cold, and clammy. I carried a small torch to see my way downstairs, conscious of the need to save batteries.

No one was stirring, not even a mouse.

All doors were shut, and I assumed, locked. I took the wrong turn and ended up at the spa. No life stirred there, either, so I retraced my steps to the reception area where the attendant was supposed to be on duty. I used my torch to locate him, asleep. The mystery deepened. As I traced the area to the door with my torch, puddles of water lay at the entry near the door. I walked to a locked door, so I did not open it to lose more heat.

I was worried sick about Lane.

I headed for the kitchen. I followed the faint noises I heard.

I barreled in, shoving open the kitchen door and saw light near the stove and someone stirring a pot. The generator had been fired up. I could feel heat emissions.

“Lane?” I asked. “Is that you, Lane?”

“Yes it is, Kenna. I couldnae sleep. I’m making myself a wee bit of hot chocolate. Would you like one, too?”

“You revved up the stove in the middle of night?” I asked, curious.

“Amazing, eh? I pressed my camp stove into service,” he said. “Shouldnae be taking long, now.”

“You lapse into Scots-Gaelic when you need comfort,” I said.

He jerked up to look at me, almost guiltily, looking back quickly when he realized I had intimate knowledge of him.

“What have you been up to, Lane Campbell?”

Lane stonewalled me, unsettling me. “You could have tapped on my shoulder and waked me up,” I said, half accusingly.

“Now why would I be doing that?” he slipped into his easy charm. “I had just gotten you all cozy and sleeping deep.”

My heart stirred when he spoke to me that way, mixing all my emotions together like the chocolate and milk he stirred in the large container. The milk bubbled. “The cups are over there—bring us the biggest mugs ye can find,” he said. “Well, ye are dressed for the day already. I might be going back to sleep. I’m still on me honeymoon, ye know.” He smiled big. Whatever worried him was swept away, and me with it, but I would learn that was the last thing I should ever let Lane do, sweep something under the rug.

###

The next day we stayed bundled up for a long time until electricity came back on. It was one of those primitive days, when all you get to do is live and be happy for it, which I am

lame at, until convinced it's quite inevitable. I mean I still had work to do, a photo-journalism article to finish. My good fortune on the retainer was also my editor's, as Gaynelle had told me that *South!* Inc. and its readership were eating up the Scottish series, rooted and grounded as they were in Scottish forebears. Scots single-mindedly obeyed the commission to go forth and multiply, and had quite happily filled the Southern U.S. part of the earth.

So today I couldn't do typing or sending photography—oh! Soon as I thought it, the impulse struck, Blackheart Heights in the snow—what a picture; this blizzard was history in the making, world-wide news.

So I raced around getting my camera and tripod, wrapping hat, coat, scarf and gloves around me, and went out in the cold blast to crunch through fallen accumulation over a thin crust of ice; white still eagerly accumulating. Outside I saw enough dark to define a worthy photograph. Pewter carvings punctuated the castle shape. Car wheels showed, and an overhead hawk dipped in time to give color contrast.

I finished, freezing wet, camera shutter too belligerent to budge. A few guests waiting out the storm wandered onto my set, and were photographed.

A man I hadn't seen coming wandered up to look through my viewfinder. That shouldn't irritate me, but it did. I struggled not to let it show.

"Nice hobby," said the tall mustachioed man in overcoat, white scarf at a jaunty angle.

"Hobby lobby. I'm a professional," I said, giving him a look.

"Nice view. See the deer over there?" he said, suddenly. "Get him before he bolts."

Tall people think they can order short people around. I'm leery of domineering types who walk up barking orders. I framed and clicked one shot, then turned to him. "I live here, and for the life of me, I can't remember seeing you before."

"Oh, I arrived late last night. Lucky the sign for Blackheart Heights showed just before a new blizzard blast. I knocked and knocked, but finally the young owner—oh, your

husband—or staff—came and checked me in. Amazing timing; he said you would put out sandwiches and hot tea at half past noon, today.”

“Where were you headed?”

“I was driving back to Glasgow from the coast. I’m part of a film that has leased George Square.”

“I see,” I said, wondering more about why Lane hadn’t told me than anything.

“Are you part of the film crew?” I asked. *Ah, he’s a photographer.*

“Actually, a little more than that: I’m the film director.”

“Aha, mind pointers from the film director. Yes, I’m a photo-journalist for *South!* Inc. in the U.S. Kenna McAllister,” I said, pulling off glove, offering a handshake.

“Elton Highsmith,” he said. “Pleased to meet you, Kenna, plus your husband and wonderful castle. Maybe we could patch a segment into our film. It’s quite scenic and one of the characters lived awhile in a castle. Plus, the name is simply astounding.”

“Life imitating Art.”

He laughed.

“Interesting prospect. I will refer ye to the lord of the castle for his verdict. Scottish opinions sometimes differ from American ones.”

“And men’s always from women’s. Bravo! What a performance in submission.”

In spite of himself, the man’s face dissolved into laughter, making him seem friendly and fun-loving, but I wasn’t at all sure if I liked him. Something about him unnerved. No, more than that. There seemed something sinister about the man. He was not what he seemed, or to quote his first words, he was “more than that.”

For one, he deliberately prodded to discover more, interviewing me.

What possible reason he could have, I didn’t know, but his answers weren’t spontaneous enough, their forced nature dovetailing with events taking more sinister turns.

Suddenly Lane stood before me and the stranger. “Mr. Highsmith, I see you have met me new bride, Kenna. She’s quite a beauty, what?”

“Oh, yes, classical Scots-Irish, I would say.”

“Thank you, but not an ounce of Irish more than what’s in all Scots,” I said.

We all laughed.

“Lane, Mr. Highsmith has been telling me about producing a film in Glasgow.”

“Has he, now? We must drive down one day to the set. Do ye give visitors’ passes?”

Lane was on the offensive, laying it on thick in a way I hadn’t seen him do.

“What’s the film title?” I asked.

“Armageddon Seven,” the man said. “We have a fine list of actors.”

“Armageddon you’re offering,” I said, “then I’m enlisted. Lane and I haven’t seen a film together yet. The one on the screen in the airplane doesn’t count.”

“We can work a trade,” Mr. Highsmith said, “day passes for filming in your castle.”

“Sure thing—a day’s filming for a day pass—long as ye don’t give me castle a bad reputation. Or put me wife in it. I can’t be losing her to talent scouts, independent as she is.”

I shot him a mock frown.

“You should have been here to film our wedding. Now that was big-screen material, fine kilts, bagpipes blaring, an American bride wearing her red clan plaid over white silk—”

Whatever the plot, we played our parts superbly, but not the way Mr. Film Director wanted, I suspected. Strange he seemed so invested, already. Lane didn’t like my speaking out; why, I would worry out of him, later.

“Let’s get lunch.”

Lane ended our chat, confirming suspicions. “Here, Luv, let me carry yer gear.”

Lane pumped out charm. Suddenly, the lights went on. Mr. Highsmith took his meal to his room. Lane went to his office, I to my new quarters to relish writing my Scottish series.

As I reached the door, my head began reeling. Soldiers appeared from everywhere, fighting right beside me. One was stabbed. I saw his blood spill. Another close on me jabbed and stabbed another. I was in a field littered with dead and dying bodies, long swords swinging, short daggers covered with blood, screams and shrieks blood-curdling. The stench of sweat and blood revolted me.

Before getting killed or passing out, I fumbled with the lock and key, then slammed the door behind me. The volume decreased. I put my briefcase down, fell into the chair in the experience which my old boyfriend had dubbed “Scottish visions.” All I could control was letting the scene subside, recede into distance and play to its finish. This one took forever. The final screen shot was a young man who stared me straight in the eye so intently he did not see the enemy sneaking up on him. I screamed, “Watch out behind you!” He turned away. I couldn’t tell if he had fallen to the spear or evaded the enemy; my vision fogged.

I sat there in shock until Lane’s face registered. Fear filled his eyes. I may as well be an alien from outer space, his eyes were big as flying saucers.

“Are you all right? I heard you screaming.”

“All the way from your office?”

I was dumbfounded at the loudness of my screams.

“Well it’s only half a floor away, around the corner.”

“Oh. Did everyone hear me?”

“Two or three on the other end of the castle didn’t.”

When I realized his stab at sarcasm, I chuckled, proceeded to a full giggle, then to laughter I couldn’t control. My manic fit left him more baffled than ever.

“Didn’t I warn you? I’m sorry. That’s the first in a long time.”

“Yes, well, I’m glad for that. What if they happen in the middle of rush-hour traffic, or in the middle of a staid, Presbyterian service? And you don’t enter into them, do you? I mean,

it sounded as if you were in the middle of a battle. You don't pick up a sword and go for it or anything, do ye? I need to know if I should be worried fer me life."

"Oh, Lane, I'm sorry. It's so funny, watching the expressions on your face. I'm not laughing at you. Please don't be mad."

He looked nonplussed.

I held my stomach in comic relief, laughing again.

"Well, I'm not yet, but if ye want to keep trying for it—" He let the thought hang. Standing around looking helpless was new for Lane.

I laughed again, the sheer ridiculousness of it flooding me with relief that temporarily returned a euphoric feeling. *Everything's ok.*

"Seriously, Lane—to my knowledge, one has never come upon me during life-threatening moments or gone about creating one. I think I can control it, but it's just easier not to, and let the film roll," I said. "I'll try not to embarrass you, and so far I have never been called on to enter the action as it occurs. This was the first time anyone in my flash has *seen* me. Or looked familiar."

I reached for Lane's hand to reassure him.

"Well, I think that's a relief." He gave me a weak smile.

"You never know who you've said your vows to, not really, do you?"

I held Lane's arm, wondering if his secrets from me were intentional, and why. "Do you still love me?"

He turned red.

"Aye, I loves you quite well, too."

I loved his speech when he was emotional.

"Now let me go back to work, ye vixen." Planting a kiss on my lips, he left.

I basked in happiness. The words of an old French ballad returned, and I began at my computer by singing, “My love loves me, and all of life’s wonders I see...”

A journeyman is allowed a few bars of euphoria before the score changes.

Chapter 19: White Nights

“My God, a moment of bliss. Why isn't that enough for a whole lifetime?”—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *White Nights*

No one ever told me white symbolized fear.

No one ever told me how stern a master a blizzard could be.

No one ever told me how deceptive white was. However, I had heard the sign of evil was not a black cat, but a white one.

Lane juggled a resident staff and stranded guests expertly. To the guests, he gave a two-day gift certificate for a return visit, a generous but savvy move securing return business.

We worked to keep people gratified, kept outer doors closed and candles lit when the electricity failed, plummeting us into darkness yet once more. Staff came up with meals primarily cold with a dash of hot, like soup or tea. We relied on tinned food, as they call it in the UK, dried reconstitutions, and potatoes that even a gas camp stove could cook. For the most part, everyone was helpful, and no one panicked, turned claustrophobic or abusive. Not always a given, I understood from Lane. Bad weather brought out bad behavior.

Mr. Highsmith blew in with the blizzard and left at the height of it. God knows, film directors do not number themselves among the human subject to frailties like us mere mortals—he decided he could not wait another minute to leave, and set out prematurely to Glasgow. I could have told him he wouldn't make it. Actually, I did tell him, but he obviously heard the voice of a higher power and calling. He was off and running from advice's constraint from a mere woman, American, at that.

His grumbling return exhausted us, put us more than a little out with the extra effort his hubris cost. It was the fourth white day, after a gap of an hour's time in which we had written him off, that his knock sounded at the door. He had managed to drive out of the driveway and less than a mile down the road.

"Hello, Mr. Highsmith, do come in," I said, smiling wide.

"Yes, well, it was a good try."

"Just a little precipitate, that frozen white stuff falling, and roads not yet cleared."

"It would make a great scene in my film. I think I will have to write that up while here. I'm thinking I would like to use your castle for long-term filming." he said, recovering face.

"I'm sure anything can be arranged for a price."

I ordered up a tea for him to take the chill off his humiliating walk back.

His head jerked up. "You mean more than the tickets?"

"Of course. You don't buy an investment with one set of tickets. Seriously."

His smile was not pleasant.

"Anything more, Mr. Highsmith?"

"No. Thank you."

By then his tea and scones appeared. I pulled a legal pad from behind the counter and handed it to him. "Here you go, oversized, thin-lined," I said. "Write your scene."

"Thank you. I'll describe the precipice I slid up to. Work a crash into the scene."

He quietly sipped tea, and began writing.

How to keep an oversized ego busy. Leave him alone with crayons and a pencil. I returned to my room. Life was slipping away, with secrets yet unshared with Lane. It worried me. And the snows of yesteryear kept accumulating over the crusty secrets beneath us.

Urgency emanating from a two centuries-old letter made no sense, yet that familiar drum roll had begun. Lane sensed it, too. We needed to wrest timely nuggets from them.

The chill penetrated skin to bones today. Letters were age-muffled words, weighted by white falling current events. These old letters were strangled by time's faded ribbon, sealed off by ancient context. Yet they pulsed with life like a time bomb retriggered, like a buried hand grenade, live and deadly. Why, a Presbyterian could believe the present situation had been planned that far back and these faded slashes of ink were predestined to propel me into the country of my forebears. A little uncanny giving these precious letters such power, to imbuing words not shared for generations as arrows meeting current fate.

Yet our connections—faith, lineage, timing, shared mission—were nothing short of unbelievable, spooky in a good way. Seventh generation cousins, a continent removed. Propelled flesh and blood, not programmed puppets.

Another blizzard benefit: Snow kept the Montfort's away, especially Tara.

I pulled out a pad and fountain pen, began a new writing project, "Blizzard of the Century," in parody of the 1993 cyclonic storm that formed over the Gulf of Mexico on March 12, 1993. *Pay dirt*. Magic snow dust blew on an international angle of an expatriate Southerner, replete with feelings, frustrations, and a Scottish film director. Guest quotes and staff photographs cut off from their families made inset pictures of local interest. I would commission Lane to photograph Mr. Highsmith by his car on the precipice when they went to recover it.

Perfect.

Add the photograph of Blackheart Heights, white mounding up the sides, edged by that old tree limb in front, and a natural bird of prey breaking its white menacing height.

Cold chills lowered my body temp.

Stirring my restlessness into action, I looked for my torch.

Torch in hand, I descended into the dungeon, aka wine cellar to rummage for a good bottle of red for the evening letter reading. When I reached the curving steps, I waved my

light around—unlike the films, no inch-thick cobwebs hung in the air around the rough-hewn, moist rock. The wine cellar actually comprised not just one room, but three, two totally new to me, from an older section, it seemed, as I wandered through each room in turn. Beams on the third room showed charred cinder black, *part of the old castle that had burned, patched in.*

I didn't hold the torch like in the movies, overhand. I held it normally, from underneath. The beam highlighted architectural differences and brought them into sharp relief. Having entered through cellar doors, I first picked out two wines, set them by the door, went back to the old section. I swung the torchlight around and in the arc of light, highlighted crevices and mounds beside the door. Behind it were indentations, carvings, shrunken filling escaping and underscoring inscribed words.

I held the torch at every possible angle to read. "For the rape of my little sister, my kinsman along with his whole family will pay." Letters followed I couldn't identify. Oh, my Lord! I was stunned. Blackheart was a Campbell castle. Had I stumbled onto the answer to one of the riddles asked in the letters? The reason my ancestors had perpetuated a horror unknown to Scots, killing their own kin while visiting them? Had I stumbled onto the reason for the castle's strange name?

King David's son had responded in rage when his sister had been raped by another brother—it certainly could explain the event. But this solution to my search was too easy.

Slow down. I knew the massacre of Glencoe happened in 1692 from research. I didn't know why it would be dug into the wall of the dungeon here. Dungeon wine cellars were famous all over Europe. A Campbell or Campbell sympathizer must have been incarcerated here. I had to see if Campbell's who perpetuated the massacre had been incarcerated at the first castle. I forgot its name. Another rabbit trail, a subterranean passage to research.

Get Lane to come photograph the writing. He would be pleased.

This could be the find of the century. I would have heard, had it been previously known. I retrieved the bottles, stowed them one in my arm, one in one hand, torch in other.

Heading for the stairs leading out, my torch blew. Blackness descended by a cord, as heavy as a velvet stage curtain or a deserved curse. Normal to abnormal is the province of a psychiatrist. This was not normal. I winched forward, feeling with my foot before stepping, maintaining balance. I couldn't remember which way the stairs curved. I had entered the thick soup of darkness where no light enters or swallows it up instantly.

Ultimately, it couldn't, of course, but in designated areas, darkness captured and ruled. Exactly that happens when evil enters country or home; black holes close without discernment threaten light.

"Lane!" I yelled.

I inched forward again, knowing a hole funneled down the spiral of descending stairs. I mustn't bear down on what seemed solid to slip on one thin edge, plummet to death.

With my left foot, I swept the floor by letting my toes feel the way forward in semi-circles, a blind persons seeing. Intelligence emerged. My left foot fell on rock hard surface. I took one giant step forward left, pulling right foot alongside. I repeated the pattern with my right foot, forged one step ahead.

"Lane!" I screamed it out this time, but no doors opened.

I had been gone a long time.

Surely Lane and Highsmith had not already left to get his car off the ledge.

My heart sunk. Surely he would wait for temperatures to rise tomorrow. I didn't have a good feeling. *They* might slide into icy oblivion.

Please, God. Please, I spoke.

Finally I reached what I hoped was the top stair landing, repeating my process. Common sense said I didn't need these wine bottles, but I was afraid to set them down. I stepped up surely on a new riser, tedious, ascending to entrance door and freedom.

I heard a noise up above me.

"Lane! LANE!!!" I screamed again, as I pushed forward.

Finally at what seemed the final flat surface stood a wall before me. I banged on the surface with my torch.

"Let me out—help!!!"

I felt around for a lever or latch or whatever hardware might open a door, found a latch, pulled, and it yielded. I pushed the door open, collapsed inward, exhausted in relief onto the floor. Blackheart's hole had not consumed me. My debacle concluded after the drama peaked, played out, without audience or witnesses. *What an ordeal! Lane must absolutely devise lighting for this dungeon cellar and stairwell.*

#

True thought: Lane had gone out with Highsmith and two others to save the car from certain doom and haul it to a safe site. Had I not been captured by the black hole and rendered useless to protest, I surely would have.

"Miz Kenna! You look like you've seen a ghost!" the desk help said.

"No, I just saw my life flash by while I was trapped in the dungeon."

"No! We need an alarm bell down there, or something," she said. "Mr. Campbell is out on the snowy ledge with Mr. Highsmith."

"How long have they been gone?"

"An hour, I'd say. Sit down on the couch. I'll bring you something strong."

So I did and she did, and there I sat in the little alcove off the living room hugging my legs, waiting. I didn't have long

The door burst open and four shivering men rushed forward into the space rubbing their hands together.

I hopped up. They demanded tea which the desk clerk took on herself to do, and they shook the snow off and took off their wet coats and outer wraps, all talking at once, in a state of high excitement, describing their tussle with the vehicle. Highsmith had his video camera in his hand, so I assumed he had footage.

Indeed that would be our night's entertainment. So, nothing for it, but to have the crew put together what looked like our last meal so we could eat and thaw out before a fire of salvaged wood in the fireplace. As it turned out, it was our last Blizzard meal. Next day the white ghost of winter slipped out as suddenly as it had come, releasing Blackheart Height's prisoners, including owners, into mutual freedom.

None of us saw or heard her go. None of us were weird that night. Food, camaraderie, and the video made this evening one to remember. I leaned on Lane, luxuriating on that wonderful shoulder and its brief freedom from fear.

Chapter 20: Entertaining Demons Unawares

“By showing hospitality, some have entertained angels unaware.”—Paraphrase of Hebrews 13:2

If showing hospitality to strangers can mean entertaining angels, it can also mean entertaining dark angels--devils, as it were, without knowing it. The women who helped Ted Bundy when he faked an injury would be an example: they paid with their lives. The devil is too vain to arrive *incognito*, but he has learned to lie low and disguise himself long enough to steal, kill, and destroy, at which point, he rips off finery for the big reveal.

With the exception of Tara, I marked Highsmith's arrival with the blizzard as the start of our troubles. Problem is, our successes began then, too.

I always wondered why Mr. Highsmith was driving that night. He never really told us where he'd come from, what took him from Glasgow past Tarbert and then back or why he was passing near the out-of-the-way locale of Tarbert.

Writing in my studio, I heard a familiar masculine voice singing, "by yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes," coming closer and louder. I looked up to see a jubilant Lane.

"Well, come dance with a rich man," he said. "It's my first and last invite to dance."

"What in the world?"

He held up papers for me to wonder about.

I stood up and went over to him. "Stop flapping them, so I can see what they are," I said, shaking my finger at him and reaching for them to have a look.

"Aren't you the curious one?" he teased, holding them above my reach.

"Yes, I'm always curious about my husband. Should I not be?" I poked my index finger into his chest. "Show me."

"Four invitations for us--Iain, and Father to attend a filming session in Glasgow as guests of the film director," Lane said. I have often been told I have uncanny abilities. Since I had just been musing on Highsmith, I believed it.

"And in exchange he gets to plunder our castle?" I teased back, reading the passes.

"You think your husband is that gullible, a pushover. I am greatly offended," he said.

"So, I'm obviously missing something. You're being cruel, Lane. Just tell me what you and our lovely Mr. Highsmith cooked up."

"Oh, I am cruel, am I? As it turns out, they are paying us a hefty sum to use the castle for filming. Before we made our little trade, I checked with Glasgow municipal authorities to get an idea of the going rates for leases. So I was ready when his financial gurus arrived."

"And he thought I gave it away with a smile," I said...smiling.

"You only do that for me," he said significantly, pulling me close to him.

“So this special shoot is on a Thursday afternoon, followed by a cocktail party.” I read the ticket. “A dress-up occasion...let me think if I have something nice enough from my trousseau.” I swayed in Lane’s arms toying with the passes.

“Who said we were going?” he stopped abruptly and looked at me seriously.

“Well, why did you lead me to believe?” I pushed him away, all guns blazing.

“Easy to pull one over on ye, Kenna.” He grabbed me.

“You are mean.” I slapped him playfully.

“What a fiery little thing ye are. I need to be careful, don’t I? Of course we’re going. Me father and son will take care of one another, and we will have each other. And you will take your camera and make photographs that we will develop, print, and frame to hang in the castle which will draw more tourists, wedding parties, and vacationers. Put us on the map.”

“And I will write captions to use as a photo-journalism piece in *South!* Inc. that will be picked up by other magazines, news media, syndicated presses not for free, but for an additional stipend. My, my, the gift that keeps on giving.”

“You didn’t look underneath the passes,” Lane said.

I pulled them out of his hand where he had hidden a folded check. I opened it. It spoke in five figures. I must have looked like I thought it was too sparse, because Lane quickly assured me, “That’s just the down payment. There will be weekly installments for at least six months, and probably longer.”

We were dancing around congratulating each other on our good fortunes and doing a little jig we made up when an unfamiliar personage waltzed in. “Mr. Campbell?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“I’m Allison,” he extended his hand which Lane shook. “I’ve come to check out the set for next week, Monday. This room would do quite nicely,” he said, looking around at the high ceilings with the ornate molding, the tall windows in deep-set alcoves, the chandeliers

hanging from the towering ceilings in tiers of crystal, the dozen or so oil portraits hanging between individually molded panels.

I glared at Lane, my mouth hanging open.

“My wife uses this for her studio,” he said. “She has a deadline. Come on with me, and let me show you some other rooms.”

“Take him to the great hall library.”

“To the library.”

“That has fluted columns and a twenty-five tier crystal chandelier,” I recovered my equilibrium in time to stay nice. “What time will you be arriving?” I asked a retreating figure.

“Lady Campbell, I’m sorry I didn’t take your leave. That was rude of me. We will be arriving at 7:00 a.m., if you please.” I was no lady, but I didn’t correct him. I was the castle owner’s consort, so were wives named on tombstones of Scottish settlers in the Cape Fear Region.

Seven in the morning we would open. We needed someone on the grounds early to protect it from being trampled by a swarm of actors. Honeymooners liked to sleep late. And they liked their privacy. I had a sinking feeling that privacy would be the first thing to go. I mean Lane and I might have been kissing in that room when the man walked in. I shuddered. I had found my husband only to lose him again to further intrusions closer at hand and further the delay in knowing my Scottish past.

* * *

That Sunday night we retired to our suite. Lane wanted to sleep, so I couldn’t raise any issues. I stayed up reading until reason prevailed. I knew the film crew would arrive early.

At 6:00 a.m. the alarm went off. Lane bounded out of bed, and I wasn’t far behind him. We talked while we dressed.

“I’m going out to the castle keep and down the hill where the stone wall joins the main building on the right side to wait for them,” he said, giving me a peck.

“Ok. We’ll have to set some money aside for remedial landscape work, Lane. They’ll be dragging cords and equipment,” I said.

“No worry,” he said, pressing big fingers on my forehead, ironing wrinkles out.

I grabbed his hand and kissed it.

“All right, Luv, off with you, now, or I’ll be forgetting me duties.” He patted my backside, and I pulled away, fearing our intimate moment was intercepted.

I walked downstairs with him. He nodded, leaving for the gate.

I loved the softly mounded hill where we were married. We had walked from that point up to the castle, ushered in by the most glorious set of bagpipes in all of Scotland. And back out after ceremony’s end to reception on grounds blanketed in wintery golden green.

The castle front was not symmetrical, but of exquisite balance, tower upper left, a recessed entrance, king-sized molding topping the towers, and other buildings spreading past the castle close in several tones of golden stone; renovations coordinated, not matched.

The stone walkway which Lane used connected the hill to entrance—a perfect causeway for photographing for weddings, parties, and filming.

“So now it all begins,” I said to our receptionist, watching Lane exit. “Where is the crew staying? Are they all here for the week’s shoots?”

“Several are, but not all. Enough, though,” she said, shuffling paper behind the reception desk. “And they pay out of their own pocketbooks.”

“A friendly invasion.” I joked, pausing at her station, leaning my hand on the wood.

She laughed. We agreed it meant more money in the coffer.

“Yes, castles require a small fortune for upkeep.”

“Right you are.”

“I’ll probably hang around and ask a lot of questions.”

“Good idea, Mrs. Kenna. The word around here is that they will bring an ‘unidentified flying object.’ Everybody wants to see it. The plot hypes new transportation technology, but they claim unidentified flying objects appeared in medieval times.”

“That’s crazy,” I said. “I wondered why they were using a castle for such a modern and destructive a film as ‘Armageddon 7’—to ‘close the circle of history.’”

“You are so funny, Mrs. Kenna.”

“When I’m not terrified.”

“Wonder when our UFO is arriving.”

“And I wonder how long the UFO will stay on castle grounds. Oh well. Guests will probably love it. We can position it so wedding shots don’t have to include it, I hope. I’ll go close some financial loopholes. See you later.”

Surely Lane had made them sign an accidental damage clause. I made a mental note to ask him later, if I hadn’t lost him to the film crew in the castle for good. Tara’s image came to mind. Such a sneaky woman she was, who Sally claimed looked like a witch. Sally, my how I missed her. For all I knew Tara would slink in with a printer’s proof for Lane. Come on, summer months and U.S.A., and distance from Blackheart’s ancient promises. David was all set to replace Lane fully, and I relished the relief.

I went into the restaurant and ordered a poached egg, toast, and tatties with hot tea.

Ties to the film industry started innocently enough. Mr. Highsmith had sent his financial advisors to hammer out the deal with Lane and Mr. Farquhard for using the castle for his film crew. Added income is always welcome, but no one counts the cost before they act sufficiently, not really knowing how. One could never guess the magnitude of interruptions filming in your home will make. *Our lives are on a collision course with Hollywood—or public broadcasting—we belong to the people, now.*

Without the blizzard, there would have been no Highsmith. Had I not talked to him on the lawn, Lane would not have joined us. We would have had no filming. Or so I believed.

He would have bypassed us altogether. We would never have solved our financial dilemmas this way. Had his first attempt at leaving Blackheart Heights worked, then he would never have gotten stranded and had to return. Then he would not have endured what suggested to him an evocative visual for a highly suspenseful scene. He would not have come back with money.

It seemed like destiny, ‘meant to be.’

“If I drove to the stop sign, turned right, not left, I couldn’t have done anything else.”

“No, Dad, what you are describing is not predestination; that’s pre-determinism. It determines results. Predestination means God has a plan and puts things in place to achieve results,” the flash memory intruded.

Refreshed by breakfast, I picked up the day’s paper, and read the lackluster news. I went page by page, lighting on the section which had a story pointing back to witnesses of Dunsinane Hill opening up and seeing a stone on a marble slab. They were staying at an inn in Edinburgh. The feature article didn’t add much substance, but recapped the original story.

I perused the personal ads. An ad jumped out because it had Stone of Destiny in all caps. “Descendants of original witnesses to storm in which the side of Dunsinane Hill opened seek meeting, anyone with knowledge of or interest in said Stone.” It listed a telephone number at that inn.

I certainly would love to talk to them, find out what they might have heard passed down through their families they might not have told reporters.

I returned to the reception desk. “Would you mind calling this number for me?” I asked our lady.

“Not at all,” she said, and dialed for me.

“Hello? Yes, I’m answering the ad in the paper that gave this number. Stone of Destiny, it said. Can you connect me?”

She transferred the phone to me. A man identifying himself with the article in the paper answered.

“Yes, I’d love to talk to you about what your ancestors saw.”

“Let’s meet at Dunsinane Hill where it’s said to have occurred.”

“That’s fine; I would like to see that, as well.”

“Let’s meet at the entrance about noon day after tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

“What is your name?”

“Mrs. Campbell. And yours?”

“Mr. Sampson “

I hung up and told about the confab coming up.

“These men might supply a piece of the puzzle of the Stone. Funny, it took a third generation to re-stoke interest in what their forebears saw.”

“It is. Leave the article here, M. Kenna, and I’ll read it.”

Fretting in spirit, I heard the noisy arrival of destiny, the cast of Armageddon 7 in frantic motion.

In contrast, as silently as a stealth craft, or a shade from Dante’s Inferno, Mr. Farquhard glided by readying his belongings for departure. I avoided him as much as I could, still wounded that he had tried to get rid of me. I could not forgive him that mean trick. Not that he would ask. One day maybe I wouldn’t care, but I couldn’t imagine the day arriving. I cherished the thought of Lane’s father’s absence, though the castle would be creepier.

My mind applauded the advent of the hosts of Armageddon. I wondered how many months or years actors and film crew would stay.

Lane had said six months or more. I just wished we had had time to enjoy breakfast together. I would have shown Lane the newspaper article on the descendants of the men who had a chance vision of the Stone at Dunsinane Hill.

Chapter 21: Dark Revelations at Dunsinane Hill

“The light and beautiful version doesn’t necessarily mean truth.”—

Sarah Galo, *Conspiracies of Faith*

Lane credited me with reuniting him with his son. The four of us were out at the car, map spread out on the hood. Lane and Iain stopped and tussled, while Mr. Farquhard was busily loading. Lane put an arm lock on Iain.

“You won’t be able to do that for long,” I said, weighting the map with my pocketbook. “Go help your dad. He’s got a lot of stuff and he’s loading it by himself.

Lane loosed his arm and slung it around Iain’s left shoulder. “Come on, let’s help Grampa out.” They piled Mr. Farquhard’s luggage in the back of his car. They fit a few small pieces of furniture in the trunk. Mr. Farquhard thanked them and hugged Iain.

I walked to his car and shook his hand.

“We’ll be expecting you weekends,” I said.

One day Lane’s and Iain’s roles will be reversed. I witnessed Lane train Iain intensively on the bird of prey operation. Iain did it just to be with his father; he was a good kid. Lane seemed oblivious to how much his son doted on him. Lane’s discipline, however, was slack, and I was glad he required Iain observe business hours, now.

“Okay, guys. Now *I’m* leaving and *I* need your help.”

They hustled over to the map and Lane gave me a couple of pointers. I wanted him to ride with me, but that would have spoiled their time. A 3-1/2 hour trip was grueling, but I was game.

Lane kissed me.

“Don’t forget and drive American.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t, and even if I did, signs are posted to remind me.”

“Ha-ha. But I will worry. Be back by 5 p.m., or I’ll come a-lookin’.”

“All right, Lane. Have fun, you two.”

I waved and watched them walk off toward the falconry. Soon the castle’s looming presence disappeared behind the trees as I rounded the bend onto the main road. I gunned it over the next miles.

Though I told Lane I’d called the two descendants of men who’d seen what they believed later was the Stone of Destiny in a storm, when the side of a hill opened up, I didn’t know how much he’d taken in.

Macbeth’s castle was in Perthshire, north of Edinburgh on Dunsinane Hill where I was headed, listening to Scottish DVD’s. Unlikely lead, but serendipity was exciting. The trip was uneventful and pleasant. I drove to Collace, on the backside of the Hill and pulled into the park entrance, I pulled up into the road near the castle ruins and parked.

I locked the doors and set off walking. I saw only a nondescript mound, a flat-topped hill that didn’t look too far away until the sign said 6 miles and more, up. I walked toward it, read the signage available, but a 6-mile walk was out of the question. A few cars were in the small parking lot. A few people milled about. How does a hill “open up,” I wondered. One account had workers carrying stones in Macbeth’s castle and falling into a vault and finding the stone. I studied light-dark patterns as a good artistic photographer does, for a cave opening, saw nothing suggestive of cracks or crevices from a distance. A forensic, crime-scene search would be a lifetime passion for which I certainly had no tools or experience except a small pair of binoculars.

A sense of alarm caused me to abort even the walk's short version. Maybe Lane and I could make a weekend retreat out of this. It was a tourist attraction. I returned to my car as a Volvo drove up and parked in the spot furthest away. Two men exited the silver car without appearing to notice me. These may be the men whose grandfathers saw earth open to reveal a stone sitting on two marble slabs surrounded by priests. I leaned back in my seat, music playing.

Dunsinane Hill had a nice ring to it, as well as Birnam Woods, appealing as a possible 96 A.D. hiding place of the Stone. I melted into the moment, surrounded by scrubby trees, staring at the famous Hill with its fort on top and imagining Macbeth's Castle and Lady Macbeth wringing blood-stained hands. I would stare at the hill and force the Stone to appear.

Clouds descended. I heard voices, like I did in all my Scottish visions. I saw robed priests and heard them speaking low, in muted whispers. In contrast to the intrusive vision where the soldier landed at my feet, in this one the action was far away, but I seemed to be out of my body and with them. One priest bowed low, and then held hands aloft in a praise song.

Some sat on stools. Friars with long robes walked around wielding rasps and sledge hammers and pounding on something. Hurried and anxious, they worked, while the main priest moved trance-like back and forth. He kneeled for several minutes, and then slowly rose from kneeling position. I saw a second rock, identical to the first which was up on a marble slab. The priest held out a cross toward the stool. Two friars picked up the second rock and carried it out, following the other men, single file. I saw a telescope flip around and frame the hillside opening, and a flash of lightning spotlighting the stone on the bench of thick, black marble, but as quickly as the storm had presented, it broke into pixels, disappearing.

The pounding, however, continued. I was coming to and there were only clear skies. This vision subsided, leaving me confused. I felt drugged. The pounding would not stop.

Rousing myself, I turned toward the noise and saw two men, one knocking on my car window, loud and persistent.

I rolled the window down a few inches.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, you didn’t look well. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m all right. Thanks for asking.”

A glance to their car showed a third male. On the car was a small, dove-like insignia—the measuring tool of the order of Freemasonry.

“Did you see something in the hill?” one asked.

“Who are you—Mr. Sampson? Are you the men who put the ad in the paper?”

The second man smiled.

“Yes, we were the ones.”

“But are you real descendants of the first travelers?”

They looked at each other.

“Does it matter?”

“In answer to your first question, ‘No I didn’t see anything in the hill, although I studied it for evidence of ruins. I must have fallen asleep. To answer your last question, yes, it matters to me.’”

“Oh? We searched for rifts, too.”

“Did you see anything?”

“Not really,” Mr. Sampson said.

“We are researchers of history, archaeologists following every lead ever heard that references the Stone of Scone. We hoped to see evidence of a cave opening.”

Something rang false. My fear detector alarm reloaded. I started the car.

“Well, I guess I’ll go, now.”

“Do you know anything? Or are you a seeker, like us?” the man held onto the car.

“I am. But I didn’t come to flush out other seekers.”

“Sometimes shared fragments help.”

“You first,” I said.

“Tell your husband to keep you safely at home.” *Oh. They think I know something. They came to find out what I knew. I refused to let fear overcome me. It had been a stupid move, coming alone. It had been negligent of Lane to let me.*

These men had a decidedly sinister mien.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Campbell. We are gentlemen.” A lipless slit replaced a smile.

Bile rose to my throat. I gunned my car out of there, refusing to talk a second longer. If they wanted to kill me, have at a moving target. Maybe there was a Scottish Mafia; maybe Masons killed, contrary to reputation. They didn’t crash my doors, shoot out my tires, or hop in their car and race out behind me. For the time being, the claim, ‘gentlemen’ held.

Dumb luck, angels, and the element of surprise kept me safe. These Masons knew all of Lane’s connections. And descendants, well, really. These were not. The ad had been placed to smoke new evidence out, to draw me personally out, and to warn me off. Where had I talked about this? Maybe I had, I remembered, when I was at the SNP social with Bryan. My interest in the Stone was studiously noted and followed by a Scottish Free-Mason.

Tell Lane. Tell Lane, now. Trace your ancestors’ journey and the allusion in the letter. This attempt to target me apart from Lane meant they knew something about that, as well, and they had hoped to surprise me into telling them about my letter.

The Stone told me things: The Stone at Edinburgh Castle is not the real McCoy. Does that mean the English royals’ coronations were all invalid? James I, at least, was Scottish and king of Scotland and England.

As long as I’m crazy after conspiracies and talking stones, I might as well speculate.

If a fake Stone at Edinburgh could keep two nations busy, the real one could ‘rock’ the world. It could become the cornerstone of a whole new entity, a unified world. The authentic Stone, one with provenance, could fill the spot saved for the one world government. If it were Jacob’s Stone, it would be sought after to add to the new Solomon’s Temple in Israel—to be unveiled at just the right moment. No need for warfare, wrangling, or diplomacy. Just let it speak supernaturally.

I raced home. Blackheart Heights welcomed me before my scheduled return hour. I went looking for Lane.

Reception told me he was at the worksite.

I ran up to him, and he met me.

“Lane, you won’t believe what happened! They were Masons, sent to warn us off!”

“Whoa, Nessie; Kenna, what are you talking about?”

“It was a trap, Lane. And I got out of my car and walked all over the entrance to the trail to go up Dunsinane Hill. I could have been killed. You shouldn’t have let me go alone.”

“Now, Kenna, you’re close on hysterical, me love. What happened?”

“Well, I walked around, returned to my car, and had a vision of the Stone. I was certifiable.”

“What in the name of all that’s holy d’ye mean? Was it for real or like the other day?”

“Yes, a vision, like the other day, except this one mixed time periods.”

“I’ve never heard of that!”

“No, nor I. I stared at the hill, got lost in it, saw soldiers battling, and was just coming out of it, when—”

“Coming out of what? Slow down, Kenna, if you want me to understand.”

“All right, but my brain is always a bowl of soup after one of those.”

“So what happened on terra firma?”

“Two men pounded on the window of my car.”

“And then?”

“I rolled down the window three inches and asked what they wanted. They said I looked sick and wondered if I needed help.”

“Was that it?”

“No! He called me by my name, told me you shouldn’t let me come out by myself, and told me they wouldn’t hurt me, ‘we are gentlemen, Mrs. Campbell.’”

“The same thing they said in Bali.”

“Okay, so I’m not crazy. Or you don’t think so, even better.”

“Come here.”

I went and he hugged me close while all the workers watched.

“I’m all right, now,” I said. “Thanks.” And at the moment, I was.

Chapter 22: Brick-Stained Letters

“Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.”—

William Wordsworth

I made a date with Lane for Friday evening to show him my letters.

I fingered these stained letters lovingly. They had been concealed at Lebanon, and bore the watery drip lines and aged textures as proof. I had color copies of a few, looking as though dipped in teabags and cadmium watercolor from the brick fireplace behind which they had languished unknown for a hundred years.

Some were love letters from grandmother to grandfather. Love letters brought tears. Some Southerners feel honor bound to destroy their ancestors’ love letters. I knew Uncle had destroyed some of our heritage as victim to this philosophy.

Some were letters from progenitors, newsy and affectionate, handwritten and stamped with their own personalities. The world began with a word. Acts did, too, like the words I saw chiseled in stone on the walls of the dungeon I hadn't yet told Lane about.

Perhaps they were hidden so Yankee soldiers would not get them in the Civil War.

This letter from Col. Alexander McAllister way before the war in the 1700's was written during tumult on the boat trip over from Scotland, a voyage begun full of hope for him and his wife. His wife died on the trip over—you could say the move cost him everything. The passage of time makes value accrue to his word. Some fluke of time, a warp, gave them current interest.

Letters from the educated Scots who had immigrated to America encouraged a steady influx of Scots into the new country. An early influx of my Highland ancestors came in search of land—McAllister's, Campbell's, Blue's, and McNeil's. Later immigrations cited new reasons: Culloden defeat and rack-renting—a practice of escalating prices to force renters from housing so landlords could earn higher revenues from sheep.

My ancestors came from the Tarbert area in Argyll, on the Kintyre Peninsula.

We would examine these letters the day Lane waited for a slate delivery for the roof, today called a strange convergence, when film crews added to the craziness around us. I stopped by the kitchen to order room service dinner for this evening. She gave me Claret and Riesling from the wine stash to take to the room.

At once I began gathering correspondence and documents, stringing them on the bed.

In ordering my papers, I walked by Lane's table and looked at it, thinking wonderful thoughts about my husband. Such a man! My eye ran lovingly across his objects, a piece of heather with the name Erika in it, framed, an old, ornate castle key, a leather pouch, well-used, his dagger, and his messy papers.

My eye fastened onto a neat set of papers by contrast, and I grabbed the stack without ever once thinking I should not. I spotted the name “Montfort.”

Instantly I realized I held a contract in my hands. Well, of course. The contract covered the castle loans made over the years, amounts of payments next to the debt. What a princely sum, that he, no, we, the truth sunk in—owed. Actually, I was legally liable. That reality had never punctured my poppy-induced stupor. Marriage brought co-liability. I felt sick to my stomach and stupid that I had not even considered such a thing.

Reading through the contract, one codicil spelled nerve n alert: “Of course, should you and Tara decide to marry, the debt will be immediately and automatically canceled and the two of you will become the owners,” and was signed by David, by Lane and Erika, Lane’s first wife, Farquhard Campbell, Jean and Gavin Montfort, and Tara Montfort.

Quickly adding sums in my head, it came to 40,000 Scottish pounds. A weight descended around my neck and shoulders as fearful as the black that fell in the dungeon. A surge of anger shot through me. *Lane had not bothered to tell me.* Then I saw temptation to marry for money—Lane’s and Mr. Farquhard’s. *Lane had chosen me over money and Tara combined.* A backwash of guilt hit me for having spied into his papers.

Lane would arrive late after working feverishly to catch up from melting snow.

Hearing noise outside the door, I replaced the contract in what I estimated was the correct spot, tucking it in place. I turned back to my desk to my letter cache I wanted to show Lane. Lane popped in and I jerked my head up, staring at him innocently. I hoped.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, yourself. “

“It was horrible.”

“Sorry you had the scare. To be honest, I was so into my projects that your meeting with two strange men got lost. I shouldn’t have let you go.”

“I had a premonition, but brushed it off and went ahead. When they walked up, I didn’t open my car door—not that that would have deterred an evil man, but they admitted they were not descendants. I knew the ad was a plant—a fishing expedition for yours truly.”

“Was anybody else at Macbeth’s castle?”

“A few, but not when I walked out to the hill.”

“Probably a dead end, Dunsinane Hill, anyhow.”

“They called me by name, Lane.”

“So the Masons are behind it, whatever that means. Why would they want you alone?”

He moved in on me, and I welcomed him, sweaty work clothes and all. I leaned into his chest and sighed with relief. The big bear hug put me back together.

“Thought without you they could wangle information from me.”

“Forget them. What is all this, Lady Kenna?” He pointed to my papers spread out.

“Trying to show you who my family is and why I came to Scotland, and why I wanted to see the Stone returned.”

“Well, I’m remiss for not having listened to your story before. That’s for tonight, right? I must bathe and de-stink, first, you Vixen, and if you don’t mind, I’d rather have a Sauvignon Blanc. Be a dear?”

“Of *course*.”

He kissed me hard on the lips, rubbed my hand, and disappeared into the bathroom.

I lifted our phone and place an order for the preferred wine to be sent up with the food. I had already freshened up. The knock came and I opened the door to staff, pulled the expedited food in along with the wine, and set it on our table.

Sitting, I was relaxed when Lane came back in, although still perturbed about the contract and my perception of the Montfort’s. They were taking advantage of Lane and Mr. Farquhard. Lane finally reappeared looking relaxed and clean.

“Food! That was fast. Man, do I run a great establishment! Let’s eat; I’m famished.”

He opened the wine. We toasted the progress of the day, and ate.

“Show me your treasures, now, before I get sleepy.”

“Here’s mom’s locket—I wore it the first day I ran into you.”

I pulled my chair closer to him and opened the gold locket, showing him a miniature photograph of a baby I assumed was my mother. I showed him cameos that were given me by my grandmother and her sister, a great aunt.

“Beautiful, Kenna.”

Then I opened up the packet holding the ship’s manifest in the colors of age.

“The Thistle! *My goodness*, look at that, would ye—1736—and 1740, the Gigha, or is it vice-versa. Two trips Alexander made in boats that took your ancestors away. And these letters eventually brought you to me!”

“This letter is from Alexander McAllister, brother to Isabella, my ancestor.”

“Okay—“

“McAlester, of the Loup, is descended in a direct line from Alester, or Alexander, oldest son of Angus Mor, Lord of the Isles and Kintyre, A.D., 1284. Alexander McAllister came from Loup, Islay, off Argyleshire, Scotland, to Wilmington, North Carolina in the US, in the year 1736. He stopped at Wilmington for some years, keeping a tavern there.”

“And he’s your ancestor?”

“No, his sister Isabella is. She must have come with him on his first trip over in 1736, or in 1740, I don’t know which. I assume, Farquhard Campbell came in one of them, too, as he was said to be Alexander’s ward. At least Alexander took care of him. His brother Hector came, too, and there were letters asking about him, but he returned to Scotland and got in trouble. Alexander returned to Scotland in 1740 again, married, but his wife died at sea on the voyage back to America, a tragedy. She was buried at sea.”

“Rough times.”

“Oh, yes. It seems Alexander got annoyed with a noisy baby aboard the ship, a Jean Colvin who was born on that voyage, and would become his third wife.”

“You surely do have the research down,” Lane picked up the document and read it.

“I’ll read you his letter. ‘My dear Family, In answer to yer letttr, the voyage is dull and dreary, with the occasional storm at sea to enliven, and a new-born brat who cries all the time. I spoke me mind to the mother, saying ‘Spank the little b—,’ who was quite impudent, and she responded, saying, ‘Niver ye mind sir, she’ll be the wife of ye yet.’”

“History records that that is exactly what happened; they married in 1763, when she turned 23. You can see it in the records.”

“But back to the letter. ‘Indeed. The boat is large enough to carry quite a few more people as they usually are filled to overflowing, like my first trip. I made an agreement with me Catholic priest friend to bring an important stone home with me for safekeeping. Might be the death of us if a storm brews like last night’s, an anchor to carry us to the sea’s floor. Please tell kith and kin that we will likely arrive in Southport, ‘safe and sound.’”

“You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“Why not? It’s as good an explanation as a golf course.”

“That’s crazy.”

“I agree there.”

“Wouldn’t someone have been suspicious?”

“Of what? The Stone was safely in England, so everyone thought. Did you realize that Scone is not far from Dunsinane Hill?”

“Connections, connections, real or fancied.”

“Like our kin people. Now you know why I thought it so strange your father’s name is Farquhard Campbell. We don’t know his forebears. You don’t know yours. There’s got to be connection somewhere. And so many other names are similar in your family and mine.”

“It’s an odd little trip we’re on together.” He stared at me. “Well, is there more?”

“Yes, there is the hint of a deed for a lot of land in America going to Alexander.”

“Something best searched in the U.S. You getting homesick? You want me to push our trip to the U.S. up on the schedule, don’t you?” He shook his head up and down.

“When are we scheduled to go?”

“Kenna, I haven’t a clue. The agency hasn’t placed me, yet.”

“Have you put in for Charlotte instead of Boston?”

“That was the first thing I did, Luv.”

“All right. Are you sorry you married me?”

“Sorry? Crazy woman—‘Twas the best day of me life.”

“Then maybe we can distance ourselves from hills crawling with Masons and kidnappers who know our name and past, and from close friends, like the Montfort’s.”

“So now, you think Lord Montfort was in on the abduction?”

“He probably knows about it. He’s on the top rung.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“No? Something is a-foot, and you need to smell the coffee before he owns your castle and you have to work for him as an indentured servant.”

“He’s not like that.”

“No?”

“Of course not.”

“Not normally, but tell me, if you ‘die to the individual so as to be born into the community’—I’ve been researching the Masons and the Temple—how important does that make the individual, Lane?”

“I don’t think the members take it *that* seriously.”

“He wouldn’t show his true colors until he owned you. Now Tara is out as a means of attaining that goal, he’ll have to use other tactics.”

“So the proposed wedding was a Masonic ploy?”

“Well, wasn’t that in the contract?” I bit my tongue as soon as I said it. Uh-oh.

“Where’d you get a copy of the contract? Tara? No, she wouldn’t—my dad?” He looked over onto his desk and saw where he had left the contract.

“Oh. You’ve been snooping.”

“Tara has one and you haven’t bothered to include me?”

“What of it? It was made before you and I married. I thought you had more class.”

That stung me to the quick. Tears sprang to my eyes. My hopes wilted like a slashed sail. Instead of unified against the enemy, I was further outside and more alone than ever. I hated my position right now. I refused to speak.

He stood up. “Silent, are you? Was this whole intimate dinner to ‘buy’ me? My God, Kenna, I don’t work that way. Thanks for dinner, I need air.” He went toward the door.

“Lane, don’t be hateful. Why would you side with them against me? Don’t I mean more than that to you? Were you *ever* going to show me the contract that, as you must realize, involved me, legally and financially—even if it was signed before I came along.” I was heart-broken, crying, and angry all at once.

“Don’t get all teary on me. I gave up more for you than you know.”

“Ooh! And you’re sorry.” I said, desperate to stem the tide.

“Yes.” He was at the door. “Don’t wait up for me.” He slammed the door in my face.

I stood until I could no longer absorb the blow upright and fell on our bed, sobbing. Sobs finally yielded to a chill of cold despair. I had chased my husband away, had driven him straight back into the arms of our enemy. *I can only pray to the dear Lord that he was moral enough not to be chased him into the bed of my nemesis.* Wouldn't she be all too ready to comfort? She was *entitled*.

What could I do? I paced. Hope's carcass littered my heart. Our love was compromised, unity shattered, marriage in jeopardy. My life hung in the balance. To whom would I run? If only Sally were nearby. Maybe Mr. Farquhard would talk to me. Maybe I could learn what sort of woman Erika was from David; no, too ticklish. I was out of options.

My heart was as hollow as a winter gourd rattling seeds.

I felt like slamming the dinner to the floor, but instead, deliberately, I put the takeout plates carefully, one by one, outside the door. I straightened and cleared away everything.

Stay calm. Where did Lane go? To the Montfort's for spite?

What if I went to them to confront or appease them? No, I had nothing to offer but my husband or my first-born.

Panic receded. I stopped beating myself up for the tack I took. He had deliberately concealed the contract from me, and he knew that, so he had taken the offensive. He had to know I was furious that he withheld important details that affected me, our future. *That doesn't excuse his hurtful comment.*

Breathe deep. I straightened and sorted, humiliated, hurt, and rejected by my first verbal slap. It would take a long time to forgive that. 'How much he gave up for me—*well*.

Charm reversal; a smart man would have said, "I left it where you could see it—I'm glad you read it. I was about to show it to you." A smart man would have said that. Something more was up. He didn't marry me like Prince Charles had Lady Diana to keep Tara mistress

on the side? I could pretend I had left jewelry downstairs to look for. That's what I would do. Pride fell servant to raw certainty: I must know where Lane was.

Rule Number Two: Never ever walk out on your wife in the middle of the night in the inn and not let her know where you have gone. This was the second time, and in a marriage, twice is 'always.' I was mad. When I found him, I'd let him know.

Men hate scenes. Oh, what a scene I had planned for him.

I changed out of my lounge clothes into casual pants, boots, a jacket. I took the red wine back to the pantry since Lane obviously didn't like it, anyhow.

The cheeks of this humiliated woman were hotter than toast.

In the hall, the receptionist spoke up and said, "Oh, are you looking for Lane? He went into his father's room."

"I was looking for an earring I lost. I'm forever losing them."

We checked around and saw nothing.

"Tell Lane I've gone for a walk when he appears," I said, smiling like a happy bride. I pulled the torch out of my pocket. As the door closed behind me, it grated.

I walked around in the lit open yard, viewing the castle spires from different vantage points. Beautiful castle, but dark sidled up to its surrounds, this evening's sky was creepy—blue-black, lumpy three-quarter moon, cold and white, the trees silhouetted. I sucked in deep, cold breaths; the air revived body and soul. A car pulled up to the parking space; a couple slowly unloaded. *A late arrival.* Tomorrow the film crew would come for a new scene. By now, my eyes were accustomed to night. I ventured out further; down the front drive of the castle entrance. Lane had no right telling his father, humiliating me before my father-in-law.

For the life of me, I couldn't come up with a single Southern parallel or proverb.

Home in Carolina, my childhood had been wonderful with my parents, as had been living with my uncle and aunt, and later, just my uncle and cousin. We caught fireflies early

evenings bright and cold as stars. We walked over gravel roads and mossy grass in the grove. I longed for Lebanon and my acres on the Cape Fear, walking my land, looking at family gravestones, reading old epitaphs. I had an old soul.

Had I been wrong to marry Lane? I loved my prince charming, but passionate and warm could turn cold and emotionally rejecting in an instant. I hated roller coaster ride crazy.

Most important of all was the safety factor. Dark forces vied for entrance or to expel me. Lane and Blackheart Heights were having second thoughts on rejecting its new mistress.

I sat on the stone bench.

Pulling my legs up for a cushion, I regrouped. Scotland pumped in my veins but turned suddenly hostile, like blood exposed turned black, coagulated; happy glens and ocean produced hemlock. Bagpipes and kilts courted gloomy castle. *Did you know Lane and Mr. Farquhard might lose you?* I spoke to Blackheart. You don't want Lane or his son—or a new one that might come along—to lose you, do you?

Despair lifted. Something broke.

Whatever happened, some part of me—love, trust, deep dependence on my partner's overwhelming passion was damaged or lost. Crumbled, it lay scattered at my feet.

I sensed a presence and jerked my head around to see a familiar shape approaching.

“You shouldn't be out here all by yourself,” Lane said.

“You said it was safe; there was nothing to worry about.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him.

I pushed him away.

Insistent, he enveloped me in strong shoulders that forced close contact. I tried to wriggle free, but his warmth overwhelmed, and my need betrayed. I yielded. He swayed back and forth, but the momentum was not as wild, not as passionate. He put his nose in my hair and whispered in my ear, “I've torn it, haven't I?”

“Can’t pretend,” I said, tears flowing. “You hurt deep.”

“I’m sorry. I want to fix it more than you know. I wanted to fix the contract issues before you knew about them.”

“When—six years from now? When they came to foreclose on us?”

“It wasn’t logical. You found my sore spot.”

“And made you sorry you married me.”

“No, it didn’t, Kenna. I couldn’t imagine life without you.”

“I’m not feeling it, Lane.”

“Please don’t leave, Kenna.”

“I’m a disappointment.”

“No, you’re not. I’m not up to your sharp standards. Can you forgive me?”

“For what—marrying me, or keeping secrets from me?”

“Come on, Kenna, let it go,” he said, nuzzling my hair that way he had that melted my resistance into a puddle. I was coming under his spell before we’d settled anything. I couldn’t help it. He sensed I was weakening and would not resist.

“Lane, play fair.”

“Never,” he said, folding me closer.

I knew *that* was one hundred percent God’s truth. I had my own secret I wouldn’t tell.

Chapter 23: A Necessary Confrontation

“...tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.”—Numbers 20:8-12

Early Saturday morning, I knocked on Mr. Farquhard’s door.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

“Your daughter-in-law,” I said, clipping the words distinctly in low volume.

Everybody didn’t have to know my business.

“Give me a minute.”

I stood before the only door to the downstairs suite.

“All right, come,” he said, opening the door, letting me in, and closing it behind us.

“Hello, m’Dear.” He patted me on the shoulder. “What do you want to know about yer Scottish family?” he said, pointing to the couch where I sat down.

“How is your work status progressing? Are you about to start? I saw you going out with a bunch of stuff the other day.”

“Not until later April do I actually open a practice. The setting up has been time consuming. Am I in the way?”

“Heavens, no! Blackheart is way too big for us. We need more people to offset dark dungeons, shadows, secrets, and our daily walk with the dead.”

“That pleases me to hear you say. I think.”

“We just hadn’t all eaten together in awhile and so I didn’t know where you were along the way. I thought you’d be living here, mostly.”

“During the weekends, for sure. Now tell me what you came for, Daughter.”

“Mr. Farquhard, can you tell me why the Montfort’s are hanging onto Lane still?”

“Oh, so the Montfort’s are what’s worrying ye. They had begun to think of him as their son-in-law. And then you came along and upset his marriage to Tara—sure until then.”

“His refusal to set a date should have been a clue. You wouldnae trade a son for a castle debt, I’m sure,” I said, baiting him.

“Of course not, but affairs of the heart tend to go and come, by my experience.”

“And so can be guided toward the more comfortable and lucrative partner.”

“Well—“

“Tell me, Mr. Farquhard, who are the Montfort’s? Is there some force joining them and Lane of which I remain unaware?” My resolve was strengthening.

“One might underestimate ye, Miz Kenna. Let’s just say Lord Montfort’s pull netted Lane engineering training, jobs with good income. A reason we are beholden to him.”

“Yet another way. So, I still must wonder what he hopes to gain, why he won’t let go.”

“Maybe he simply hasn’t given up. He vetted him as his protégé for the Masonic Lodge. Lane didn’t follow, but as an engineer and builder, he speaks to the heart of Scottish freemasonry; he’s a catch. Gavin Montfort is a 33rd degree Mason, respected, a highly placed government official. He wanted Lane to succeed and join him.”

“I joked about giving them our firstborn to settle castle debt. Maybe I’m not far off.”

“What do you mean—are you against the Masons?”

“Not in their fan club. For one, they are too powerful. For two, secrecy corrupts. What I was fishing for was to know whether or not there is something about this castle—some secret—that would make them vie to have it, maybe something hidden like a legend about the castle’s history, like an underground passageway from earlier. For our sake, we must know.”

“You are much exercised and out of kilter.”

“Maybe the Masons researched here, made carvings in the lintels, or an owner was a Mason. I’m racing to catch up with centuries of significance.”

“Lord Montfort has been friends with our family since the first year my lovely Kaillie and I were married. I’ve always thought he just wanted to help out.”

“And maybe he does. I don’t dismiss enlightened self-interest as valid.”

“I hope not.”

“I sabotaged their plans. They don’t like that about me. And would you believe, I’ve had Masons following and threatening me in the most genteel sort of way ever since I came.”

“No! So now ye’ll be separating me from friends!” he frowned and looked ferocious, briar-like hairs protruding from his eyebrows.

He didn’t scare me anymore; I liked him again.

“I wouldn’t think of it,” I said, and saw him visibly relax. “Not unless they aren’t real friends. And real friends wouldn’t want to throw you or me out.” I leveraged my full 100 pounds into the power struggle.

“Well, shiver me timbers, and other silly expressions. I do believe Lane has married himself a fireball and a little boss. God help the man who runs a-foul of ye, Missy.”

“Mr. Farquhard, I’m just saying Lord Montfort could win the debt war and collect your castle.”

I let that sink in.

“He wouldn’t do that!”

“Then why does the contract have those ‘if, then’ clauses?”

“Why, because, well—“

“You would be well-advised to have your own lawyer look at it and suggest revisions. Get rid of the clauses that might spell foreclosure or separating your son and your castle in any settlement.”

“And now ye’re a legal expert,” he continued after a pause. “Don’t get me wrong, Miz Kenna. I do appreciate your concern,” he said, patting the arm of his couch nervously.

I was sure he was thinking how to end our little chat.

“I know you don’t know me well enough to evaluate what I’m saying. You may have thought you were saving Lane by getting rid of me. But now, the save clause no longer works about marrying Tara, and you could stand to be checkmated in your own castle. I sense danger, and I know something funny is going on. Please, no matter how ridiculous you find it, if you discover Masonic or Knights Templar or some arcane connections, tell me. Do that much for me and your son.” I was near tears.

“Of course, I will,” Mr. Farquhard said. He actually patted my shoulder warmly again on the way out.

I had a good friend tell me once, if you have a hard agenda to get across to someone, start with fluff and get them on your side. Then go into the however facts, at which point they stiffen up again and become resistant. Then at the end leave them once more with some fluff, turn them back to your side. I thought maybe I had succeeded. We needed to be allies, all of us in lock-step. Now David needed winning over. I shook hands on the way out, smiling innocently at my father-in-law and making plans to schedule an occasion that included David.

Knowing my husband's wine preferences, I repeated last night's trip to the dungeon-cellar, and at the bottom of the stairs flicked on the light. The steps were hard to maneuver. I supposed if we lost the castle in the next five years, this expensive wine would or could be part of the recoup. *Right*. I couldn't believe Lane and Mr. Farquhard lit the Montfort's heads with such halos. Along with one wine bottle I found an aged Oban single malt whiskey. A basket hung on the side of a shelf which would hold two bottles, so I used it. What a room. Except for the low-watt overhead bulb, the stone opening would be wreathed in darkness.

I hadn't noticed last time all the wonderful architectural details in the room, but you wouldn't without light, would you? Angels carved from limestone, at least I guessed it was limestone, filled each corner. They should be brought upstairs and exhibited to view, I thought. I didn't have the same feeling of evil I had at my last entry, so I ventured into the second room and found the light switch. It had a small window with earth covering most of it. The room was filled with boxes and statuary. It was a treasure trove. Many of the items needed restoration. The dust on them was an inch thick. Outside I looked at the carved lettering again.

I retraced my steps.

Sunday was our 'vision sharing' dinner I had planned. It was moving smoothly. Back in my study, I worked on an article for Gaynelle about using Blackheart Heights for the film shoot. Of course I had to get permission from Mr. Farquhard and from Highsmith for anything

I used of their story line. I paused only to eat and to photograph the film crew itself in action, cringing at their boom mike for fear they would knock something over.

I had permission to take photographs of one of the sets for a new BBC television series, a contract which used only one room, the one with our castle antique bookcase which displayed such ornate detailing and the twenty-foot canvases of Campbell forebears in twenty-inch ornate gold moldings. My article embodied the elegance the Charlotte readers loved—along with ambience, the jet-setting, on-the-move feel to it, the up-to-the-minute dash that bespoke news, hot-yet-soft news. This resonated with the readers.

Trouble brings clarity.

After last night, I could share my deepest vision coherently. I could tell how important I thought the Stone was—maybe not that I thought the whole of history pivoted around it and its proper identification, maybe not that the coming world crisis would revolve around it and its discovery and re-introduction into current events. Not that.

I mean, the Stone of Destiny was all bedded down safe and sound in Edinburgh Castle under a bullet-and-shatter-proof glass, locked and keyed. If I said it lay in a graveyard in North Carolina, well, I was just some crazy Yank.

“Hello, my johnny, my jo!” a masculine voice sang as the door slammed.

“Lane! Good day, I hope.”

He kissed me.

“Is now.”

I reciprocated with a few of my own.

“I’ll go up with you. Go relax under the jets. I did,” I said, adding it to the growing list of financial follies.

We walked into our flat. He peeled his clothes off in layers, balling each one up and throwing it into what I hoped was the hamper. I heard water noises and singing. Then Lane

entered in drawstring lounge pants, tummy swell showing, toweling his air dry and smiling. He pulled on a 'T' and sat down.

"Where's the food?"

"The king is in his parlor, demanding bread and butter," I misquoted the nursery rhyme.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Right on cue," I said, and let the staffer in with our food.

Lane pulled the cake-pan-looking top off his meal, saying "hmmm," and used it to fan the aroma to his nostrils.

We proceeded to dive into the food. Lane uncorked the wine and left time for it to breathe. After a while, he poured us a glass, proposing a toast, "to the new couple and a new beginning after the bad one last night."

We clinked.

"So, Kenna. Talk to me while I eat."

"It all started when Uncle came upon a letter trove during a renovation project in the rumpus room, a project which opened a hidden passageway between the chimney and door."

"Big house?"

"Yes, that's why the Scots left here, to get large houses, land grants, tax waivers, and monetary grants. They brought their retinue with them. My family came in the first wave of Highlanders who settled on the Cape Fear in then Bladen County, now Cumberland, and the lower tip of present-day Harnett County. Our ancestors passed it down, and descendants held onto it, for the most part. We let some of ours go, and another let all of theirs go, to nearby farmers. In that same way, the acreage attrition continued due to bequests, division, and sales for cash that followed the Civil War. The Highlanders brought their black servants with them,

and everyone spoke Gaelic. That's why the Presbyterians got their minister from Scotland—so they would preach in Scots Gaelic.”

“Just another fact I had no clue about.”

“In that pile were ancient letters.”

“Older than the one you showed me?”

“Yes, and more exemplars. Plus a ship's manifest from the Gigha, which listed a spinning wheel, 20 trunks, and—drum roll—a stone.”

“There's that blasted Stone again.”

“A big rectangular stone, Lane. Greyish. With iron handles.”

“Did the bill of lading describe it?”

“No more than last night's letter. But, in another letter, Alexander—who hailed from Tarbert, in Argyll—mentioned that he was friends with a Jacobite priest, although he was a staunch Presbyterian.”

“What does that explain—it muddles the story further.”

“Yes, it does seem preposterous.”

“You said that right.”

“But Alexander was friends with the priest. He wrote that he agreed to take the stone with him to hide in his house in America until called for. That was the word in the letter, called the priest's story preposterous. What earlier priests told his priest friend was that friars had held onto it since 1296 where it had hid in a cave while they made another for King Edward. Edward had announced way ahead of time his intentions to take the Stone of Destiny home with him, together with the Holy Rood and the crown jewels, and he did. Generations passed. Each succeeding priest waited for some sign.”

“Wait; too much input; it's not making sense.”

“According to this book two ladies wrote, guarding the Stone was as secret as a Knight Templar’s duties.”

“How did you get this book, if y’ don’t mind saying?”

“Oh—through Gaynelle at *South!* Inc.”

“All right, so continue with this bit of science fiction. I’m listening.”

“Well, the Scottish priest, even that late in time since 1296 and Edward’s theft of the fake stone, it was still too dangerous, they felt, for the stone to stay in Scotland. Wait a minute, I just had a flash—maybe those Masons at the site think the real stone is still there, no that doesn’t explain why they wanted me there; they wanted the connective story from there on—oh, forget that, I’m not sure. So anyhow, the secret line of custodians of the Real Stone felt that they had divine directive that the proper time for its unveiling had not yet come. So the priest begged Alexander McAllister to take the stone with him and just say it was a sentimental piece of old Scotland. He made a Presbyterian swear an oath on the children of his children’s lives if he did not take precautions for its safety.” I ended my soliloquy, breathless.

Lane had me repeat myself to be sure he had it. I handed him the letter to study.

“Kenna, it hears like a fast-paced American novel.”

“You don’t believe a word of it.”

“Don’t be angry. It isn’t that I don’t believe it. I can’t believe what I don’t understand.”

“Well, in any case, although it’s not been that clear even for me until now, that’s still why I had to come to Scotland. To see the Stone, connect with ancestors and current kin, and find a McAllister-Campbell castle, if there were one, hear the stories...connect to Catholics who knew this priest. Unless they were all killed in the Jacobite Rising of 1715, or fled... then on to exonerate some kin folk...my, my, the list grows. What grand and pompous sounding

purposes I have, along with saving the Church from the rise of the anti-Christ!” I started laughing at myself.

“Oh, my Lord—I knew I was in deep the first time I met ye.”

“In the fog?”

“Aye, in the fog. Beautiful wee thing, but full of surprises.”

“Yes, well, the result of having that ‘flash’ in the car at Dunsinane Hill was that I am now convinced that some version of that story was true.”

Lane paused eating.

“In a sense it was the Stone speaking to me. And how many duplicates have been made, to date? Quite a few, from early to late. And for what purposes?”

“Which leads one to ask, does it matter? ‘A stone’s a stone, for a’ that,” he quipped.

“Yes, and I saw the English one returned. Still it’s a sign of power crumbling. Let them have it back for their next monarch’s crowning.”

“I know. I’d wager my good name on it that it wasn’t the real one, matter or not.”

“You’re wrestling with the question every collector and fraudster wrestles with, or once did. Why trace provenance at all—yet the worth of any piece of antique art is built upon that résumé, an unbroken chain of ownership. ‘Old’ should be good enough, but of course, it isn’t.”

So much work yet to do to prove what I ‘knew’ in my gut.

“Yes. I suppose this is by way of saying there is resident power in the Stone itself. But all of Evangelical Christendom, in as many countries as I know, unites against that—only the Catholics, the Orthodox, and maybe the Christian charismatic movement believe in the supernatural.”

“Proving a cold case a millennium old is interesting and nigh on impossible,” I said.

“You’re right. Smile,” he said, holding up a camera and snapping a picture of me.

“You’re impossible!” I said, hitting his arm with a balled-up fist. That produced some sparks.

“For *South!* Inc.’s ‘About the Author.’”

“Okay, funny boy. But back to the Stone—it matters, I think, as lineage. I know people want to de-bunk blood lines by talking about the stranger here and there. But it mattered for Scripture to trace the lineage of Jesus all the way down, and even carefully place a believing harlot in the list. So some day, at just the right day and hour, will come the grand reveal, and the Real Stone will rise up.”

“I’m cogitating.”

“For me, provenance is everything. Providence, too.”

“And what does that spell for you and me?”

“I’ve been researching these pesky Masons who follow us. They trace their own lineage back to the Knights Templar—now you talk about people into every phase of supernatural, arcane knowledge. And they saved The Stone to form the cornerstone of the New Temple. Or if not the cornerstone, the coronation Stone for inside the perfect temple—the other temples were faulty, you know.”

“No, nor how would I? Kenna, Kenna, this is an old, wacky conspiracy theory.”

“Ya, ya. But according to these two ladies, Scotland was first chosen for the temple. Then they switched to America. Now, they firmly believe, Jerusalem, on the same Temple Mount as the first temple. It’s as if their revelation was progressively updated as to where the new Christ must descend.”

“But Al-Aqsa Mosque stands there, now.”

“Indeed. I am not a Zionist, Lane, I’m just saying, it’s not just the Masons who want to restore the Temple on the Temple Mount. It’s the Zionists. It’s some fundamentalist Christians, even, who have held from the beginning to a “double line of blessing of God’s

people—as Christians and as the Jewish people”—and that double line of blessing will continue through history’s completion. They are totally behind the project. It includes a whole new element of Messianic Christian-Jews who unite over the same thing.”

“Yes, but you know that’s gonna be protected.”

“Sure I do. By all the forces of the world, united or not; it’s already a protected UNESCO site. The UN has its protecting tentacles there—it’s controversial enough to start WWII! My point, exactly. What sounds far-flung, like a little-known conspiracy theory held only by the stupid and fanatical is enough to bring on Armageddon 7 or beyond.”

“Let’s put a bookmark in it, Kenna. My head’s on fire.”

“Now think, Lane,” I pushed, “what does the Masons’ literature says? They quote the Scripture, ‘except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it.’”

“The return of Christ?”

“They hope to suck Christians in that way, but no, the entry of someone before that who *claims* to be The Christ, who must be there with them while they build the perfect temple, the Lord Maitreya, whoever. But make no mistake; plans for this grand happening are coming together for varied sectors all over the world. Can you imagine what an impact the Stone that Speaks would have as an addition?”

“Kenna, please promise me you won’t tell anyone what you’ve told me.”

“Don’t worry. I know all ‘conspiracy theorists’ are supposedly ‘nuts.’ Lots of propaganda goes into reinforcing that mind-set every year.”

“Yes. Long as you don’t go around babbling about it. I don’t want them putting you away. Or saying Lane has married him some crazy Yank to nettle me.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not interested in being on the lunatic fringe.”

“Crazy like a fox.”

“Yet in my experience, where there’s power, religion, money, conspiracy exists.”

“Point made. We’ll have to tread lightly.”

“And leave no footprints.”

Chapter 24: Rosslyn, Solomon’s Temple, and Armageddon 7

“From Rome, the nurse of science and arts

Lo! Architecture, all her power imparts

Steals from each temple every tempting form

And robs St. Peter’s, Roslin (sic) to Adorn.”--James Alves,

The Banks of the Esk, 1800

Scotland Today and Yesterday lay open in our sitting area.

I couldn’t resist. I was waiting on Lane, and opened to an article about a family that had suffered multiple deaths and catastrophes in their castle. The owners practiced Black Magic. Wearing the writing hat for *South!* Inc. justified my reading of horrible happenings.

Can’t they see what it gets them? Not punishment, but logically, darkness can’t yield sweetness and light.

Their opposing view would be, I didn’t use enough Black Magic. My sarcastic corollary of what they believed was, ‘God, if there is one, and if He is a good one, should protect those who fight him tooth and nail.’

Another article featured Rosslyn Chapel and Masonic symbology in its architecture.

Rosslyn Chapel was founded in 1446. Services were banned in 1592 all the way up to when the Chapel was re-dedicated as a place of worship in 1862 by the then Bishop of Edinburgh, with services held at Rosslyn since then until today, as part of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Countless legends attested to carvings of Masonic significance and mystery.

When Lane walked in, I was loaded for bear!

“Lane, we have to go to Rosslyn Chapel together! We have to!”

“What, what, what? All I want is a sandwich and a pint, and you’re screaming ‘Rosslyn Chapel’ at me.” He danced backward a step and looked at me.

“Well, you can’t expect me just to sit around watching the set of ‘Armageddon 7’ and tripping over camera wires all day.”

“Speaking of which, the party for ‘Armageddon 7’ set in Glasgow is coming up, next weekend. Got your glad rags ready? Let’s go eat. You can trap me there.”

“Hmmm, yes, I took up a pot of soup already—that a good enough trade?”

“Oh, Kenna, yes!”

Long story short, we made a date to visit the ghoulish Rosslyn just below the A720, the Edinburgh City Bypass on the way to Penicuik.

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We made an overnight of the trip and drove into Edinburgh. We parked our car in front of a hotel on the big square, the one we were staying in, to catch the bus. We checked into the hotel and returned to the bus stop on the street. Lane wanted to enjoy the ride, as well, and as anyone knows who has been there, Edinburgh is congested.

We didn’t have long to wait. The minute we entered the bus, we felt festive. I snapped photos from window openings of beautiful stone architecture at odd perspectives and angles, ever a tourist with by-product, photos. First Edinburgh, and then village houses flew by. Dusk fell in golden reds to dark reds during the 40-minute ride. Gaps between residences widened. Finally the driver called end station, named the final pickup time, place on the opposite side.

From the bus we debarked onto the street into the entrance road, a small pub across the way marking the spot where we needed to wait later. When we arrived, though dark, it was still viewing time.

Foreboding, creepy, the darkness was deep, palpable, evil. It compared to what I'd felt in Massachusetts on one brief trip there.

We crossed the threshold of the city sidewalk to a private drive, widened for welcoming us tourists. Dark windows in the house on the right looked as vacant as zombie eyes. We walked down the road holding hands with the dead in silence. We approached a beautiful light grey stone structure. Like a portico, the welcoming entrance was set off by columns left and right and a window cross above the rounded arc of the door.

"Lane, the architectural shadows make hiding places," I said, shuddering.

"The gargoyles are perched to devour us at the entrance."

"Lane!"

He grabbed me.

"Eek! Don't. Look at the sign, 'From Rome, the nurse of science and arts, Lo! Architecture, all her power imparts. Steals from each temple every tempting form and *The Banks of the Esk* robs St. Peter's, Roslin to Adorn,' written by James Alves, 1800."

"What a quote. Someone valued Rosslyn Chapel."

"I guess those are the twelve disciples, though I didn't count them."

Brick feet, chair rail extensions, the top section over the door and above the cross was ornately carved, a little double bell tower centered above that. My camera at the ready, I sneaked shots in. This would make a stunning article as follow-on to the one on Blackheart. I must insure Editor-Boss Gaynelle and Board Chairman Bob were happy with me.

Inside, we joined a group forming behind a slim, elderly docent.

"It's owned by the St. Clair's," I said. "I did a little looking. Because of the way it was mispronounced, the name morphed into Sinclair. There's a book out just published about the puzzle of the Stone Masons or Knights Templar, connects it to a spooky French chateau.

There's hype about hidden treasure. Treasure hunters from all over come to search for the Holy Grail or the head of Christ hidden on the premises."

"Ah, I think he had it on when he resurrected and ascended." Lane sounded shocked.

"Yeah, that's what I said. It's a little Solomon's temple."

"In what regard?"

"Its exquisite carvings, every inch ornate."

"Look, Kenna, there's a crypt and a dungeon in here. Wonder if we get to see them."

"We're starting," the guide interrupted. "I'll give you a tour first, and then you can ask questions." the docent announced in his best voice. "My stories will be short; your written materials add more."

Ornate figures stuck out on the sides of columns. We faced a baptismal font overhung by a candelabrum. The wooden side panels framed the tall windows behind it. To the right was a stained glass window.

Past this small anteroom we proceeded to the front of the chapel, pews on either side. Two gothic arches framed the front; ten sharp peaks ran down each side. Beyond the five arches, beside it a walk-around area with more window arches and in the second story space were organ pipes. The ceiling vied with the Sistine Chapel it was so ornately carved and overlaid in gold and silver.

"I'm glad we came, Kenna."

I took pictures as though allowed. Our guide would stop me if it were forbidden.

"William St. Clair was something else," Lane said, reading from material. A knight on horseback identified as William 'the Seemly,' was the first St. Clair to settle in Scotland, said to have escorted Queen Margaret, future wife of the first king of Scotland from Hungary to Scotland. Legend had it that the king, Malcolm Canmore, thanked William by giving him the

barony of Rosslyn. The figure behind the knight holds a cross symbolizing the part of the True Cross or 'Holy Rood' Queen Margaret owned.

"You knew all the owners of Rosslyn were Masons?" Lane asked.

The docent said, "The Masons of Scotland gave the charters to Sir William St. Clair, 16th Baron of Rosslyn, since the position of Grand Master Mason of Scotland had been hereditary in the St Clair family since first granted by James II in 1441. The original charters were destroyed in a fire. The next William perpetuated his father's work on the Castle, building over vaults to courtyard level until he died in 1650."

"With no male heir, he resigned his office as hereditary Grand Master Mason of Scotland to the Scottish Lodges at their foundation in 1736. The Lodges then appointed him as the first non-hereditary Grand Master Mason of Scotland at their meeting on St Andrew's day that year. Look at his epitaph, 'Descended from an illustrious house, whose heroes have often bled in their country's cause, he inherited their intrepid spirit, united with the milder virtue of humanity and polished manners of a gentleman who *non sibi sed societati vixit.*'"

"That means he lived for his community," Lane whispered.

"He held a piece of the True Cross or 'Holy Rood' he brought with him to Scotland," he said. I searched the pamphlet for which one this was. I was getting muddle headed, and a little tired, but I smiled.

I took a picture.

"Ma'am, would you kindly refrain from taking photographs? We don't allow taking photos in here."

"So sorry."

"He held a title, a 3000-acre estate in Fife worth 9,000 pounds in rents and coal-mining royalties. He was High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland four times, captain of the Corps of Gentleman at Arms. In 1870, he held a Grand

Masonic Fette at Rosslyn attended by over a thousand freemasons. The next year he was elected 69th Grand Master Mason of Scotland. They wouldn't let him retire. Over 7,000 petitioners of the Lodges made him reconsider.”

“All right, now let's go to the pillar. The faces of mason, apprentice, and his grieving mother are carved into the Chapel corners opposite the pillar.”

“Eight carved dragons wind around The Prentice Pillar's base due to Scandinavian mythology depicting eight dragons at the root of the Yggdrasil tree, an ash tree whose branches bind together heaven, earth, and hell. The St Clair's roots were Norse.”

“Here we see a puzzle in the carvings of maize or Indian corn.”

He went on to explain that the exotic plant from North America's likeness pre-dates America's discovery by Columbus in 1492. That was 50 years *after* Rosslyn Chapel was built.

“A carving of the fallen angel Lucifer, significant in the rites of Freemasonry, hangs upside down bound with rope, one of many angels in unusual positions in the Chapel.”

The docent pointed to their over 100 carvings of the pagan figure, 'Green Man.' The vines representing nature's growth and fertility sprouted from his mouth, thus unifying humans with nature.

“Carved angels played musical instruments, including bagpipes that celebrated Christ's birth with music in the Lady Chapel. This is one of the earliest depictions of bagpipes, which first appeared in Scotland in mid-1400.”

The docent continued.

“Musical cubes protruded from the arches of the Lady Chapel with symbols of lines and dots. Some say they are secret codes or musical notes.”

We looked at each other significantly.

“In the 'Dance of Death,' characters of all backgrounds danced with the skeleton. Death pushed and pulled other skeletons to meet him, triumphing over life.”

“Yeah, where did all the ‘green men,’ come from. Not Christian in origin at all.

“You are right,” Lane answered, “One green man inside another inside a mystery.”

“We’ve done a little advanced research,” the docent said. “Here’s the Hiram story, with its allusion to Masons, Knights Templar, and all.”

“I read that the St. Clair’s were Grandmasters of the Masons,” I said.

“Yes, well look at this column. This is the kingpin of the Chapel, The Apprentice Pillar. Hiram was the apprentice. See how the vine is done in one piece, but seems applied on top! In the legend, the workman Hiram was left here in charge while the master mason went to learn how to do the work. While gone, Hiram dreamed a vision of what it was to look like, and accomplished the work.

“When the master builder returned to see this beautiful pillar built, also called Prentice Pillar, he erupted in a fit of jealous rage, struck his apprentice Hiram a killing blow over the head with a hammer. This story is similar to a Solomon’s Temple story. The death theme is a rite of entrance into the brotherhood, the first of three phases of Masonic initiation—counter-intuitive to being master rung. Masons use Rosslyn Chapel for inductions.”

We walked around in admiration.

“Cain and Abel, Light and Dark fighting over true worship,” I whispered to Lane.

The docent continued his narrative downstairs past The Pillar to the dungeon.

“The St. Clair’s, you know, were buried upright.”

An underground tunnel led from under chapel to castle, the roof of same, twelve feet underground.

“Two new books were published this year that the Rosslyn Trust wasn’t happy about. But the author says he asked for permission.”

“Yes, they wouldn’t give him the go-ahead *and* seem to have forgotten he asked. Anyhow, controversy swirls about this place.”

“It’s dark and cold down here,” I said, rubbing my arms.

We entered a narrow room facing a crypt under a gothic arched window. Nearby were a fireplace, a barred-off room, and standing candelabra.

More gory stories followed. I picked up all the written material and talked to a nice lady, a visitor who wanted to tell me all she knew about the Masons.

“No one has been allowed in the basement all these hundreds of years,” she whispered.

I just nodded to her. After the formal presentation, Lane and I wandered on our own.

“I’ve seen all I can take in, for sure, and since they won’t allow photographs—” I hesitated and added, “I wonder if they allow sketching.”

“Good question,” Lane said.

Done inside, we exited and crunched the graveled perimeter around the chapel, seeing the top of the window we had just come from. Sharp window arches echoed the arches joining columns inside. The cordoned-off section looked like the holiest of the rooms.

Outside I set up my tripod for a night shot that would be evocative, perhaps a dramatic showstopper, if it turned out. The sculptures cast eerie shadows, creating an ambience that provoked chills like few places did, although I was highly suggestible. Arched windows were recessed into lacey stonework over the adjoining panes, carving out stones of a wing by casting its shadows.

“What’s wrong?” Lane asked.

“That,” I said, pointing to the wings, laughing. “I think I’ve had enough for tonight.”

“Is that on a timer? Soon as you’ve finished, we’d best skedaddle. That little pub looked cozy. Why don’t we stop in for something warm? We have an hour.”

“It won’t be long now. Look at those narrow spires, Lane, so beautiful, but somehow, menacing.”

“Odd. On the way, it seemed welcoming; cozy, even.”

“They resemble rockets, or skinny witches’ hats. I didn’t get the cozy.”

“All right, the time went off. The photo is made.”

We packed the camera and left, walking briskly past the empty house.

“Too creepy,” I said, pointing. “College Hill House, both it and the Chapel. I can’t shake the feeling I have of the whole design and atmosphere being evil. Even the Chapel’s ornate nature seems evil. Don’t you think so, Lane?”

“Leaving it, I’d say so. Definitely. The Montfort’s visit often Lord Montfort brought me here at least once.”

“Well, it’s certainly wacky enough,” I said, “with its secrecy, coding, all that.”

We went up the lane lit by the sole street lamp to the pub called The Original Rosslyn Hotel with Restaurant and Pub. As we walked in to take refuge among the locals, everyone paused to examine us before resuming their muted chatter

“Yes. I’ve always thought of the Masonic order as a dead thing, just one more useless ritual. But if people are being sent here—”

“Like that man that followed us in.”

He sat down catty-cornered from us.

“Don’t let him know you’ve notice him, Kenna. Just act like he’s your next door neighbor.”

“Might even be that; I’m ignoring him, Lane.”

In spite of him, I enjoyed the soup and sandwich at the pub. When we talked, I guarded my lips with my hands. Lane took mine in his, closed over the lip-reading area. “Stay alert when we walk out of here,” he said.

“So when Alexander McAllister was leaving Scotland for the New World, the Rosslyn Chapel was just starting to undergo its restoration.”

“May be secret, but, an open one, huh?”

“You forget that amongst the spooky, Luv, are hidden bugs and wire-taps, and people wanting to know what they think we know. Or what we find out.”

“There’s something going on here.”

“Lane, that man put his hand to his lapel the minute I said that.”

He looked at me.

“Yes, stereotypical spy fashion.”

“It’s no longer just a theory, Kenna. We now know what we needed to know. And now we must proceed with caution,” he said with much gravity.

“Duly noted.”

The man followed us there, but we ate and left to join the short queue. We definitely did not want to be left in this dark spot with some spy tailing us.

He did, however.

We hopped the last bus back to Edinburgh, and sat silently in the dark, having lost our tail. Or maybe he just grew tired of us or had another replace him we didn’t see.

“Who do you think took his place?” Lane finished my thought.

“You’re right.” Faces turned suspicious once again.

My viewpoint of Scotland shifted.

It was a land of fierce loyalties, fiercer still love, small in size with influence on the greater world—that described Scotland. It was at once rough and raw, originator of the oldest laws of independence in the world, of the largest earth moving equipment in the world, a disproportionate number of inventors, with more than its share of dungeons from the past, and a harbinger of outlandish schemes.

I blamed Rosslyn for stirring the pot, because now I was more worried than ever over secret societies, MI5, world governments, Masons, whatever sinister carriers lurked and

followed us to entangle us ever deeper in a web of deception. Call me paranoid and crazy, but Lane's talents were curiously similar to those favored for the next leg of their world plan. My engineer fought timber and rock, hewed wood like a master, chiseled stone like a temple mason. Destiny had selected us for some role in a new world order. Lane won't rise to the occasion; they will murder him like Hiram Abiff of Masonic extra-Biblical claims, or the murdered under-mason at Rosslyn.

Back at Blackheart David met us eager to hear about our trip.

"Tea? Pull up a chair, and let's talk."

So he served us tea, and Iain joined us. It was a relief to enter a normal creepy castle and curl up with tea.

"Ever heard of Trevor Ravenscroft?"

"No, I haven't. Who's he?" Lane said.

"He is a leading searcher for the Holy Grail."

"No, *really*?"

"*Really*," David answered. "He followed his hunch to Rosslyn in 1962, convinced that the grail was hidden in the Prentice Pillar. They used metal detectors and proved there *is* a metal object buried inside, but the then current Lord Rosslyn refused to let it be X-rayed."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Others said scrolls from Solomon's temple are hidden in the subterranean vaults located under Rosslyn Chapel—scrolls claiming to reveal Christ's 'true' identity."

"Which they knew before he was born, of course," Lane said.

"Lots more intrigue than that, even," David said. "During Rosslyn's history, the treasure vault was raided. They found a book which they took to store at the Vatican—something like 'from the beginning of time until 1535,' a Scottish history, *The Scotland Red Book*, or some such title."

“Think any of the Blackheart Heights carvings are Masonic? You have some nice ones in the dungeon,” I said.

“Now there’s a thought,” David said, stopping cold.

“Have they never been inventoried, history traced or written about?” I asked.

David and Lane looked at each other.

“Women!” Lane and David said together.

“Aren’t we the stupidest men alive--we might have a stash right here,” David said.

“You two making fun of me?” I asked.

“Not at all,” David said. “And then there’s Daddy. He never thought of it, either.”

“We have a book about Rosslyn Chapel,” Lane said, “somewhere—it seems Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, visited the chapel and somehow were let in. I remember a poem about it written on a stormy night. You know where it is, David?”

“Maybe. I’ll look.”

“I was thinking bed, but, all right, I’ll stay,” I said.

“Here it is!” Lane said, triumphantly. He read the whole thing:

““The wind is now thy organist;--a clank
 ... ministers for a bell
 ...in the Temple they a friendly niche...
 Copy their beauty more and more, and preach,
 Though mute, of all things blending into one.””

“Some nice Wordsworth pantheism,” I said.

“Yes. Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth—all three loved Rosslyn.”

“And all three were Masons,” David said.

My claustrophobia deepened.

“Bed is my only escape. Pray I won’t dream Masonic dreams. Night, All.” I turned and headed up the stairs.

#

Saturday morning, the four of us prepared to leave for Glasgow, excluding David.

The energy level in the castle had been pitched so much higher since the advent of the film crew, the heavy quiet in the castle with all of them busy outside was palpable. They were dismantling the flying saucer and some other prop to take to Glasgow for the set party on George Square and in the Hotel Reception Room that Saturday night. I did not know if the saucer would return.

We were staying the night at the Millennia, which was fun, and I needed fun after the extremely intense time over finances of late.

“Slinky dress all packed!” I yelled to nobody.

I was all packed and ready for the Armageddon 7 Set Party. I had approved of what Lane had brought to wear, and we were off, riding in caravan with Mr. Farquhard and Iain.

Lane in black and I in sparkles, we entered the Armageddon Set, registered, surrendered our passes, and ran into some of the crew we had seen recently on our grounds. We chatted on about the amount of work creative people had to do that others never noticed.

“Maybe they’re just jealous,” I said. “They think you are having too much fun.”

“And they are right, in a sense,” the woman named Jaime, said. “I love my work.”

“So if you enjoy your work, you shouldn’t get money for it, right?” Lane said.

“There’s definitely something in that,” Jaime’s evening side-kick said.

“What is your part?” Lane asked him.

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m one of the aliens. Talk about fun! And pay!”

We laughed, and others walked up to us to join in the chit-chat.

Before long, we were inside at a signup table, telling someone we were here. At that moment, Mr. Highsmith swept in to greet us.

“So glad to see you here,” he said to us, and turning to those at the table, introduced us as the Lords and Lady of the castle, Blackheart Heights which appears in the film. We didn’t argue with him, of course. He asked Lane, handsome in his Campbell tartan, to pose with him in front of the poster picturing the castle. Then he included Iain, me, and Mr. Farquhard.

He took us over to where refreshments were served and introduced us again. “Sorry to have to leave you to your devices, or our devices, ha, ha, ha, but I must mingle,” he said. “Go check out the robots. They are phenomenal.”

We shook hands and he left.

A man standing nearby said to his back in our hearing, “Now there’s more to that man than meets the eye.”

###

Two days later we were back at home it was a Monday, and I walked outside for my exercise. Lane drove up in his car.

“Where you been?” I asked.

“Oh, I stopped by the Montfort’s.”

“You *what*?” I was indignant.

“I took them by some produce from the field like I’ve always done.”

“You went into the house of that woman and that couple that hates my guts and everything I stand for? You have made a total mockery of me. I am beyond humiliation.”

“Kenna, she means nothing. The family friendship is old...I can’t throw it away.”

“Oh, yes, you can. And furthermore, you’d better.”

Having never seen this side of me, he physically recoiled before my anger.

“Now when I meet Tara at church or in town, she will smirk at me. She will directly challenge me that she can take you down.”

“All I did was take spring asparagus, and sign off on the event posters.”

“And next, all you’ll do is hand over our first-born baby.”

“Kenna, you are so dramatic. And I was right! You are beautiful mad.” He touched my cheek with a licked finger and said, “Szzzz.”

I slapped him. “Don’t you dare make fun of me.”

He caught my arm before I could re-sheathe it by my side.

“Don’t you ever slap me again, either,” He stared down at me coldly.

“And you treat me this way, why, because I dare to stand up for myself? Because I demand the public loyalty from my husband he promised at our wedding *and* our reception? You almost married her ladyship.” I stomped my foot.

“But I didn’t, I married you. You are acting childish.”

“So I must merge into one big, happy family with your former intended. I should have invited my former boyfriend to our wedding and let him hang around.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Good question.”

“If you’re trying to keep me from them, you sure use the wrong approach.”

“And you’ve found the perfect weapon to hold over my head.”

“Kenna, do you still know me so little? I don’t want to control or be controlled.”

“Wife control is low status. But Tara out there, and powerful, high-placed-government family pulling little marionette strings—now that’s high status control. And maybe not today, not tomorrow, but one day, she’ll make a move on you, sneering and daring me to do anything.” My breath caught in tears.

“For sure?” Lane took my hands and pulled me towards him. “I will not go near them or their house without you ever again.”

I looked up at him and let my tears flow, now I had won. As usual, I gave in too quickly. I hadn’t won anything at all.

When I turned around in the driveway, I saw Highsmith going into Blackheart.

Chapter 25: Face-off of the Titans

“Be the head and not the tail.”—Paraphrase, Deuteronomy, the Bible

“Don’t cry, Kenna,” Lane said, using a folded index finger to lift my chin, wiping away the tears with a knuckle, tenderly.

“I’m in a foreign country, a strange place, all alone except for you. I need you in my corner,” I said, sniffing.

“Oh, God, Kenna, I’m sorry I didn’t see it that way.” He pulled me to him and leaned down to my face and wrapped his huge shoulders around me and stroked my hair, rocked me left and right, then nuzzled his head all around my face until I thought I would melt into him with nothing left of me to resist.

“You’re forgiven, Lane,” I said.

“Thank you, Kenna. Now, hold my hands real tight. You’re not going to like this. The Montfort’s are coming over tonight,” he said.

I froze.

“You tricked me! You wouldn’t have told me if we hadn’t had that scene. Tara, too?”

He didn’t answer.

“Oh, Lord, Lane, what’s it about?”

“Kenna, this is our chance to show them a unified front.”

God, he was good. “And we do that...how?”

“With lots of eye contact and frequent smiles at each other, to begin with. We won’t go too over the top, or that will look insecure.”

He always won me over. “While we toast the Stone, of course.”

“Yes, that, too. They have an interest in the castle, you know.”

I froze. “And how would I know that?”

“I forgot to tell you. But hey, you read the contract. Didn’t you see it there?”

“Lane, you’re impossible.”

“Cut me some slack, Kenna.”

“I can’t trust you. You’re forever outing some humongous secret just on the cusp of its discovery. That doesn’t build trust.”

“Ouch.”

“So they own controlling interest?”

“Not yet, but they’d like to. They want to lend us the amount we need to finish repairing the castle—for 51 percent interest in it.”

“They want controlling interest into castle, lives, business, and future. I wasn’t far off in mentioning our first-born.”

“They had so many good reasons. Dad was all over it. I’ll have to remind him about an ‘heir and a spare.’”

“When was that?”

“Oh, I think maybe a couple of weeks ago, before your encounter with him.”

“Hello, your dad wanted you to marry Tara, I might remind you.” I snapped it out.

“Your point is well-taken. So our answer is ‘no,’ right?”

“You’d better believe it.”

“We have lots of upkeep pending, and no way of paying.” He pulled me close and nibbled my ear.

“You mean even now, with the film crews coming, we don’t have enough?”

“Well, maybe so if it lasted, but how can we be sure it will last?”

“Oh.”

Mr. Farquhard appeared.

“Conducting family business on the steps?”

“Why not—it will make me early for the super-clan pow-wow. I mean, you think I’m not going when Tara will be there?”

“Lane, I told you she would rock the boat.” He winked at me.

“Yeah, rock it back upright. I worry more about our interests than you two.”

“Dad, we need to rewrite the contract to add Kenna to it.”

I just witnessed the man in Lane appearing.

“Yes, we do. You have it all turned around, Mr. Farquhard,” I said, going up to him and brushing off his shoulders, “I thought I saw a little snow, but now I’m brushing it off, you’re all better.” I brushed off his shoulder.

He pulled back as though taking offense, but then he said, “You might be surprised how I’ve emerged from our little talk.”

“Oh?” I smiled.

“Follow me,” he said, motioning us both into his office. “Here, have a seat.”

So we sat.

“I’m ready to be surprised,” I said.

“All right, Kenna, I’m all ears. What interests are we overlooking?” Mr. Farquhard asked.

I looked at Lane to ask permission.

He shrugged his shoulders as if to say the ball’s in your court.

“Well, is all the money you want to borrow for decaying structures?”

“No, but that’s a good portion.”

“That means they are piggy-backing their interest accrual onto our need for cash, thereby gaining leverage.”

He stood up, shuffled around in little circles before leaning back on the chest.

“Yes.”

“Well, here’s the thing with investors,” I plunged ahead. “I thought about this a long time on my own little inheritance and our small rental house back home. The problem is always that investors don’t like being ‘messed’ with, so they get you to anticipate upcoming needs to add to the present money. Only problem with that is, you’re sacrificing ownership or paying high interest now on future needs.”

“Well, Son, don’t tell me an American woman came all the way to Scotland to teach two Scotsmen how to deal with money. I must confess I find it most annoying.”

“Well, if you and Lane and Lane’s children—thinking future and present interests, here—get to keep their dark old Blackheart, you won’t be irritated long, I should hope.” My voice sounded testy, even to me.

Lane winced.

“No, I wouldn’t be. You are right. So, Son, looks like we have work to do. Revise the contract and print out at least a provisional one before tonight. I’ll call my solicitor and see if we can write it in safely just for tonight, or what he advises. I’m apologizing for nothing, however, Ms. Kenna.”

“Head or Tail,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“A mindset can lose you everything. You’re either the head or the tail of the dog.”

“Ouch.”

“And family security is not something I’m willing to sacrifice. I don’t intend to become someone else’s slave if I can possibly help it...especially not a slave to Lane’s former intended. I don’t want to be the tail that is wagged. I want to be the head wagging the tail.”

Now that the catastrophe seemed averted, I vented my emotions. I felt such anger at their slipshod thinking I wanted to jerk a knot in them. Why, I was ready to impute a motivation of voluntary servitude to the men. But I needed to calm down to think rationally. I needed to devise plans to keep them from giving away the Campbell crown jewels.

“Include me in all documents and all pow-wows,” I said. “Please.”

“Indeed, I will, Ms. Kenna. I can see benefit written all over you; I’m not stupid.”

“I sincerely doubt stupidity on your or Lane’s part,” I said, “but even older males can be swayed by beauty, power, and intelligence. I guess that about wraps up the Montfort’s.”

After that, they both stared at me, speechless.

We stayed in his sitting room together until Lane and his father had worked out a plan of action. At this point, my necessity was over and their cleverness began. I was surprisingly impressed with what they brought to the table. This marked the first advance—well, maybe my second, marrying Lane did have to be first—into the kingdom of Campbell I had made, and yet how secure the footing was, I would never know. Truth be told, I worried about all that and just how vulnerable Lane and his father had shown themselves capable of being with the Montfort’s. How prepared were they to fight for their own interest if the Montfort’s gave them resistance or kicked back? I hoped and prayed they would not take the easy way out or put their heads in the sand until it was all over.

When they came to their final agreement point, and laid down their pencils ready to call the lawyer, I turned to Mr. Farquhard.

“Pretty soon, if your film friends continue to rent your castle, you’ll be pulling in some serious cash, and you’ll pay off your debt, and keep ownership. He, meaning Gavin Montfort,

needs to appease you, and not vice-versa. Whatever the ‘take’ is, a sizeable portion needs to be plowed right back into the castle building instead of its day-to-day operation. If you lose it, it won’t go anywhere but into somebody else’s pocket.”

“Yes, separate out the interest and lower the amount requested, based on current income from rental. That should significantly lower the rate—almost to current level.”

“Good move, because it is substantial enough, now, and that’s a move in the right direction, backwards out of debt.”

“Yes, we were facing the wrong direction.”

I just smiled. He had been afraid of the wrong interloper. I reminded myself not to take off my bullet proof vest just yet.

“Lane, I’m going up to get ready for tonight.”

“Great. Be up shortly,” he said.

I headed back to our flat to change for the night. Thinking back to the night I saw Tara on Lane’s arm in her skinny black dress. Part of my weaponry tonight would be my own skinny black dress, I decided. Maybe I could seed the cloud, and the snow would descend from another direction, *moi*. I might be a scant 100 pounds, but I was packed.

After laying out my attire, I bathed, soaked, and scented.

Then I indulged myself in putting on all the pretty things a woman likes that make her feel feminine and attractive and give her that exclusive glow—the secrets of the ages—which no matter how well it was spelled out to men, would ever remain enigmatic. The substance of the open secret could not be absorbed, which in my opinion is why the programs which use flirty clothing alone as a provocative device totally fail. It started with the underpinnings, and proceeded to the architectural dress, snug and form-fitting with three-quarter sleeves but a shoulder cutout that showed a little skin. The neck was softly scooped. I added an antique gold collar, an orange-gold Renaissance color, with a garnet broche set into the nape of my

neck that Lane had given me as a wedding gift. I flipped my hair, scrunched and applied hair spray before flipping it back over where I began to see red highlights pop back out. My best secret weapon tonight, however, was my overriding self-confidence.

Lane walked in.

“Wow!” he said, stepping back, eyes wide. “You’re gorgeous!”

“Why, thank you, kind Sir.” It felt good to have my feminine armor on.

“I might not let you out,” he said, dipping low to kiss me.

I kissed him warmly. “Flattery will get you places. Now let me readjust my lipstick.”

“Hmmm,” he said, “I’ll just have to bathe and dress.”

Half an hour before the meeting, and as usual, the thought of the coming conflict energized me. No better proof for my warring tribe genetics “in me blood.” I slipped into a high heel as Lane reappeared.

“Nice legs,” he said.

“Now I know what you meant when you said, ‘nice vest’ at the falconing event.”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows, sat on the bed, and pulled on socks and shoes.

“I have the papers over in the briefcase if you want to look at them before we go.”

Instantly I was on alert.

“What—is it the changed contract--or some other papers?”

“They are loan papers.”

“I thought you and your father weren’t going through with this.”

“We aren’t going through with the 51 percent offer. You were so right. This amount only brings their ownership to 40 percent.”

“Close enough. We have to pay them off and regain full control of your inheritance. Are you sure you want any amount at all—what was the percentage before?”

“Thirty-five percent--don’t think about talking me out of it, Kenna.”

“I’m not talking you out of anything, Lane. Listen to your own voice. What is so all-fired important that you have to sign tonight? Ask yourself that. Tell me, if you will.”

“I have told you. It covers all the work I’ve been doing on the castle outposts which they have been financing.”

A light dawned, or rather, rose into full yellow-red splendor.

“That would have been your wedding gift had you married Tara. No wonder Papa was pushing you—finances, not just ‘auld acquaintance be forgot’—you are paying for marrying me. My Lord, Lane.”

I sat down on the bed beside him, hugging him.

“Listen, Lane, I don’t have all the answers, but I’ll promise you something on my mother’s memory who dubbed me stubborn Scot: give me the leeway and I will make a way out. Not overnight, but I will. Strategy and Scots’ fire in me veins.”

He held me on the bed at arm’s length, studying me like some green alien just landed.

“By all that’s holy, I think you will. But you don’t have the Scots’ lingo down pat.”

“Just call me Zena, warrior goddess,” I said, bunching my arm into muscle.

“Now I do fear for my life,” he said, backing off and laughing. “Let’s go down.”

We held hands walking down the stairs and into the dining room set up for us. He carried his briefcase in his other hand. I didn’t know what if anything had changed. However, I know we had lock-stepped into a deeper alliance and reliance upon one another. Of course, I wanted us totally free of debt, especially to the Montfort’s.

I shouldn’t have relaxed, but I couldn’t help being giddy holding Lane’s hand as we walked into the dining room.

Well, the first quote I thought of was one about the devil, because Tara was dressed in red, standing there nonchalantly talking to the head of our clan as to the Castle born. Good move, I gave her that. She cut her eyes up at Lane, emboldened by Lane’s visit of the day

before, I was sure. Lane shook hands and did a kiss-kiss with everyone but Tara. For her, he stepped back, and gave a little dip of deference.

I had to wait for greetings, but finally, Tara's mother came over and offered me an upper hand regal handshake.

"Kenna," she said, and gave a tight smile.

"Lady Montfort." I answered, deferring with a slight dip of the head.

"Lord Montfort," I said, turning from her to initiate contact with her husband.

"Mrs. Campbell." That was an acknowledgment of my status, not my person.

"Hello, Father," I said to Mr. Farquhard, who gave me both hands.

"Daughter."

The sheer unlikelihood of this moment covered my body in chill bumps—or maybe it was a low heat setting, or perhaps it was close proximity to a family that hated me, or because I stood next to my sexy Scottish Highland hunk. At any rate, tonight I found it invigorating.

"Lane, have you determined yet what is to be the use of your added buildings?" Lord Montfort asked, drink in hand.

"We were proposing," Lane said, "turning one into a shop for selling castle-related photos, ceramics, music CD's, books, and one into a gallery for art. We thought of the far one possibly as a store for archery-related items for an adjacent outdoor shooting range. And, of course, the birds of prey will continue where they are, with one more addition."

"Yes, yes, all good progress based on tourist trade," Lord Montfort began.

I listened.

"Have you exhausted your avenues and connections abroad for achieving 5-star accommodations on the networks? Are you preparing for an ad campaign in wedding magazines world-wide and offering the exotic marriage experience, and maybe courting TV

ads? I think the more you aim in an international direction, the clearer the purposes of the buildings will become, shall we say, dictated by demand.”

“Right,” Lane said. “Ads are pricey.”

“Yes, but it starts with a leap.”

It’s a leap that requires upfront money, indebtedness to you, control from you.

“We’ve done ads closer in, in the British Isles, Ireland, some in America. Kenna has advertising connections in Charlotte, North Carolina, home to a concentration of Scottish descendants.”

He ignored that.

“What about Dubai?” I asked randomly. “Those people know no boundaries. We have what they cannot create—so this destination would be exotic for them with their money and emphasis on limitless innovation.”

“Not a bad thought,” Lord Montfort conceded, to my surprise. “Include all the oil countries, for that matter. Include Bali, where Scots vacation. Get some of the money we spend there, back. Pursue these avenues this week, Lane. Come up with a preliminary plan.”

The look on Lane’s face was priceless. I could just hear him saying, my wife and Gavin Montfort, collaborating.

“I have some ideas, Lane.”

“I’ll be needing them, Luv. I may be ten times a fool, but I await your input. Scottish men are not easily threatened.” His look sparked with intimate challenge, at the ready.

I caught Tara studying us.

An evil look passed over her face, one that blew my arm hairs backward. “Hell hath no fury,” I quoted to myself, filing her red-dress warning sign for visual alert. If she couldn’t have him, well, she’d have him. I focused my mind on the business portion of Lord

Montfort's discussion. He did seem to give the men good advice on the castle. I would consider all the input from every angle, later, in leisure.

We shared a fine meal, and then Lane, Mr. Farquhard, and Lord Montfort were off with their briefcases and pens, leaving the Ladies Montfort with me, the three of us as charming as three garden spiders dancing around the wedged open shapes of the web—on silk fibers where they felt most at home. I was catching up, however, my Southern training handing me balance on the tightropes.

For my part, I introduced the spring community event and asked them to fill me in. They did, bandying names about that I am sure one should know. I used mnemonic devices to hold onto as many as I could. I feigned an attitude of ooh, ooh, such high society, in spite of my utter lack of acquiescence to same.

What the Ladies' own specialties were, I could not decipher. I would ask staff tomorrow. My mind was in the drawing room with the men, praying for what I hoped was a good-sense move. Any move at all attested at one and the same time to my success as to my failure. Even though I had succeeded in alarming them into not giving controlling interest, they were still raising our indebtedness to Gavin Montfort—a shark of the toothiest degree. Indebtedness stole security from under our noses, aiming us toward ruin.

Tie us up financially and we lost professional freedom, severally and jointly. Tie us up and I might lose Lane. In any case, the solid family base would not be solid if it were mixed with Masonic influence. Influence infiltrating the core of Scottish nobility, it would seem.

It might make sense to befriend Tara the Lady. I could keep an eye on her that way.

Maybe I'd call and offer my help for the Spring Fair event tomorrow. Disarm her? Good luck with that. Keep your enemies closer, but some other way.

At a loss for new subjects, an awkward silence descended.

Into which walked the men. We entered cordial farewells, and Lane and I walked upstairs talking about nothing special until I heard the castle door scrape, grate, and spring.

Lane opened our door, waited for me, and then started taking off shoes and coat. He jumped in first, strategist that he was.

“Clue me in. You were making plans in a friendly fashion with the ladies.”

“Yes, I figured I should get on with them.”

“I don’t know. You’re full of surprises.”

“So you’ve said. I’ll bet you’re holding on to a couple, as well.” I was slipping out of my little black dress.

“Like what?” he said. He shook his head, frowning while he ogled me.

“You didn’t sell our first-born?”

Lane was disrobing and putting on his corded sweat pants. “Certainly not!”

“Quit stalling, Lane, and tell me what will raise my hackles, before they rise automatically.

“I haven’t had to answer to a woman lately. Oh, and by the way, David appreciated your intervention.”

“That’s nice, Lane. All I want to know is, do we own the property, our lives, and do I have the love of my husband?”

“Would ye settle for one of the three?”

“No!”

He was bare-chested, holding me to keep me from wandering around the room, and forced me to look at him.

“Ye have my undying love.”

“So you sold the castle?”

“Not yet, but the future is a wee bit uncertain.”

“Oh, Lane,” I started tearing up.

“Nothing’s gone, yet; cheer up.”

I would have to wait for a full declaration of whatever happened.

Lane caught me, wiped my tears away, and kissed me all over my face and shoulders. He loosened my attachments and caressed my back. For the next while I forgot business and the loss of the other two things. Lane promptly fell asleep on his side, and I just lay there, wondering what alien monster would appear on the horizon.

Lying there unable to sleep, the meeting replayed like a video in my head. I hated re-living a close-knit, intimate group that included Tara. She would snatch Lane from me in a heartbeat, considering the move her rightful dues and my just desserts. Her mother’s game was less transparent. Yet each wanted Lane and the castle—inroads to one led to the other.

‘My love loves me, and all of life’s wonders I see,’ sang a French chanson in my head. Other forces battled our love. Nothing good would go unchallenged. A deep uneasiness stirred, chilling me under the warm blanket, like clamped down air bubbling under ice. Tara’s dangling earrings swung and tinkled. One eye smiled at Lane; the other, evil, glared at me.

She had hatched some plan tonight, I knew as well as I knew my own name and my Scottish legacy. I lay there, rehearsing lines and scenes, imagining their sequels, while all the time remembering Lane’s lovemaking. Lovemaking at once deep and fleeting; his touch faded into night like the last sunrays of the day. I reached for what I had had, not attaining it, and then reached for what lay ahead, missing once again. In the rationality of dream sequence, I bypassed him to ask her directly within my dream.

“Who gave you the night sphere to look through, to judge me with that evil eye?”

Chapter 26: Handwriting on Wall

“Man is a strange creature. He can rarely read the handwriting

on the wall until his back is up against it.”—Adlai Stephenson

Next morning, being awake early, I prodded Lane awake.

“Lane, wake up. You have to tell me what happened last night.”

He raised one lid to look at me suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing, really, I just had to add some drama.”

“You’re mean!”

“But I can definitely say, the Montfort’s were not happy about it. Lord Montfort thought I was undercutting his ability to make the castle industry earn big bucks.”

“Well, I have something to tell you. I’d forgotten all about it. Do you know you have full-blown inscriptions in the dungeon—written by a Campbell, evidently?”

“No! How did you come upon that?”

“It wasn’t easy.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, I went down there to retrieve wine and my torch gave out. The flicker of the light bulb set it off, so I saw it. So I went back with a fresh torch to illuminate the inscription in a direct up-lighting. I was able to read some words. Are you telling me no one has known about this, ever?”

“I certainly haven’t. I’ll ask Dad sometime this morning, but I really don’t think so.”

“The carvings in the dungeon need researching, including the writing. We need to get an epigraphy specialist and a history expert to look into the inscription over the door.”

“Kenna, you won’t do. What did the inscription say?”

“You won’t believe it. It actually solved one of my goals in coming to Scotland.”

“Well, don’t just tease me to death. Tell me!”

So I told him the quote and what I assumed and hoped it meant, and he agreed with me, but knew it was not definite until the history gurus came and did their testing and

research, and had more definitive history about who had lived in the older castle, and who they had incarcerated or had as visitors.

“Well, Lane, tomorrow we must canvas the whole United Kingdom for a specialist that can do this work.”

“I’ll do just that and look up contacts at Glasgow University I have. This is important enough to command a visit within the week.”

“Awesome—I married a man with contacts! And if you remember our recent conversation—you have a lot more carvings and mysteries downstairs. Don’t forget them. It could make our little castle an even more prominent tourist destination.”

“Ka-ching, ka-ching. We must inform David and Dad, first, for consensus.”

“Do you have to tell the Montfort’s?”

“Hmmm. Good question. Technically, I suppose so.”

“But once you’ve found someone to look at it, he can’t influence the outcome?”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“Maybe not, but I’d rather it be ‘he couldn’t do that.’”

“Well, maybe.”

“Lane. You have to work on the advertising plans for Lord Montfort. And did you forget tomorrow is a celebration of the Armageddon 7 set here at the castle? They’re doing fireworks to simulate an explosion. The castle’s in good shape and most of the action is outside, but we’ll have people tromping all through the castle, I’ll bet. I saw it in the paper. Who’s going to resist coming to a film set? I hope Highsmith knows what he’s unleashing.”

“Oh, great, I have to tend to two things at once, both worthy of the golden list, actually three, now—hire experts, watch entertainers, and get out the event ropes and stanchions to control the flow of visitors inside the castle. Thanks!”

“Happy to help,” I said and smiled. “You might want to hire a couple of goons of your own to watch things.”

“What a business partner I’ve gotten.”

“Are you messing with me?”

“No! It’s great!”

I had no idea how close the next day would come to the film title. Seemed mighty calm and peaceful to me at this moment in time, so much so, I thought I had entered into some euphoric state.

###

Pop! Crash!! Bang, bang bang!!!

I jerked out of bed. Lane was not there. What in the —? I looked at my watch and read 7:15 a.m. My imagination failed me for what could be going on. I looked out the window and saw a huge flame of red propelled upward, too near the window for comfort. My Lord, was the castle on fire? I hopped out of bed and bathed furiously just because I must do this before I let loose on a day. I won’t burn down dirty with Blackheart Heights. I threw on clothes that I had laid out hastily the night before, as only someone raised in open rooms could do.

By the time I let myself out of my door and pocketed the key, I realized, today was Armageddon 7’s promotional. It isn’t written in the script that one gets to plan for Armageddon 7, but evidently, Highsmith had. I raced downstairs and out the front door. Food could wait.

A small crowd was already drawing. The most exotic Hebrew music was piped through loudspeakers, and all the film crew—or at least a significant portion—was handing out autographed posters. Across the lawn was a huge contraption--the flying saucer back in place. A nearby booth was set up ostensibly for selling walk-throughs. Amidst all the heart-

racing, adrenalin-charged moments, I had neglected to bring my camera. *You know your camera is your third arm, don't you?*

I wheeled around and went back into the castle, upstairs, and descended with it by me. Ready for action that I could deliver, I wandered back outside.

No sooner had I walked onto the lawn than someone tapped my shoulder from behind.

“So what do you think, Lady Kenna?”

“Mr. Highsmith! I think it’s pretty breathtaking.”

“You are so American with your superlatives. Don’t get me wrong. I take it as praise.”

“You can trust it—I actually thought I was racing down the steps to a fire. I didn’t realize you were starting so early. I’m a wee bit breathless...had to retrieve my camera.”

“We have special effect fireworks worth a few crowns and shillings, for sure!”

“I wonder just how many.”

“Several thousand, say?”

“Well, I assume I’ll hear the bangs and pops again.”

“Every hour and a half we repeat. I pity the soldiers having to stay in costume, even though April isn’t all that warm.”

“Someone will take them drinks, I’m sure.”

“Hello, Kenna,” an unctuous female voice spoke. I turned to see Tara.

“Well, hello, Tara. Are your mom and dad here, too?”

“Yes, I left them over by the flying saucer.”

“That’s funny. Mr. Highsmith, Tara Montfort. Tara, this is the man responsible for bringing Armageddon 7 to Blackheart Heights.”

Tara didn’t smile, and I realized I had never seen her smile. I think she lacked a basic sense of humor, but she had everything else she needed.

“It’s a pleasure, Mr. Highsmith,” Tara said, and nodded at Highsmith, but did not offer her hand. I could tell he was panning her for a new part in one of his films or if not her, a look-alike. *Maybe she’s Snow White and the Witch all rolled into one, locked in her own world what time she wasn’t invading mine.* But hey—she was one of the 40-percent ownership of the castle, a proud woman, should I extend the smallest ounce of mercy, upstaged by Lane’s and my marriage so publicly. That was the limit to my nice thoughts.

“Wait, Tara, may I take a photograph of you with the producer that you wouldn’t mind seeing in a magazine overseas?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind,” she said, and posed next to him.

“Tell me about your film, Mr. Highsmith. What Armageddon are we talking?”

“Yes, tell us,” I said.

“Well, we’re calling it ‘Armageddon 7,’ Miz Tara. This film builds on one cataclysmic event the earth recovered from—or maybe as many as six. The idea here is that this is the final one, so we picked the number of perfection and completion, making this Number 7. This film shows the entrance of aliens as a conquering force, flying in, as you can see, with their space craft, flying saucers, and troops made up of artificial intelligence—robots—lining up opposite each other on the largest flat field on earth. Alien visits, I’m sure you are aware, have been suggested by hieroglyphics discovered in caves millennia ago. This film ties in religion, advancing armies and front-on attacks. Action in the heavens looks like falling meteors, unmanned flying objects attacking people.”

“I see. It sounds fast-paced, like science fiction.”

I wriggled free. Where was Lane? My eyes scanned the ever-expanding crowd.

“Well, enjoy the fanfare and hoopla, Tara. I’m between errands and want to see all this producer who blew in in a storm has prepared for us, today. See you, later, Mr. Highsmith.”

I looked back and they had stopped talking. Tara was wandering off. I finally found Lane and we rode the flying saucer, a real trip. We ran into Iain and had him take a shot of the two of us with the spacecraft. There were features on it which extended into the atmosphere to simulate flying that a touchup program could block out. Each exhibit enticed you to see the film. I took a picture of Lane and Iain, the flying saucer, Blackheart looming behind them. Sensational—I could see the headline, Blackheart’s Heir Arrives in UFO.”

All in all, the event was a great come-on for the film, I thought.

Our happy family split into three; we went our separate ways. I found a bite to eat.

The fireworks began again. I maneuvered into position to capture special effects with a section of the flying saucer. I had photographs to die for. I looked at my watch and saw it was almost 3:30 p.m. Tiring of that, I wondered how they were faring inside Blackheart, so I aimed to find out. My quota full, I would leave the camera behind to have more freedom.

Inside, I wove in and out between guests peering into family secrets and past Campbell history with all the curiosity that drove them. I ran upstairs and dumped my camera. The last time I used the torch was in the dungeon wine cellar following a sudden impulse. *I might need to take pictures of what I saw while someone manipulated lighting. We needed good shots of the handwriting on the wall.* I retrieved torch and small camera and headed to the dungeon.

“No, you aren’t allowed to come with me. No one is allowed down these steps,” I told a curious onlooker asking the question with his hands.

Down the first round of steps to the point they curved and turned. I felt the atmosphere tighten up, and wondered what supernatural force waited. The three rooms were on this level, and the door I was looking for was open...I washed light over the stone walls which did not reveal the handwriting, so I walked up closer and shone the light up the door opening, and

there were the words. I held torch in left hand, camera in right. All I wanted was enough to show Lane. We'd get professional photos for sending to experts.

I got three shots in when I heard the cry.

"Help! I'm down here; I've fallen, and can't get up!"

Had I mis-heard?

"Hello?" I called.

"Yes, please help me. I'm trapped."

"All right, I'm coming," I said. The voice sounded like Tara's. Tara in the flesh.

Prickles covered my arms.

"I'm coming," I repeated to reassure her. I hadn't delved this deep before. Why on earth had Tara gone into the nether regions of the burnt old castle from the 1600's? She had more moxie than me, but even with interest in the castle, why would she wander it without our knowledge? I didn't like it one bit. First of all, it was an intrusion. Secondly, a liability.

I finally made it down the twists and turns to the floor where she lay.

"Tara! What happened?"

"That urn fell over on me. I hope it's not damaged; it's valuable."

"And what do we do with you? Did you break something, turn your ankle?"

"I think I turned my ankle. I don't have enough leverage to pull up."

"Right or left?"

"Left."

"Okay. I'll get you to sitting position, where you can then lean on my right side and slide up on your right on the stone wall. Sorry. It's the only alternative. Ready?"

"Yes."

I shoved my camera into my back pocket and the worst of it was the necessity of getting close to her which I did, for no other reason than to get her out of here, my arm

holding the torch behind her back. We got the hobble rhythm going and propped her up. I won't say it was easy. But eventually we reached the next landing before the final set of stairs.

"Can we make these the same way, or do you want my staff's help?"

She considered it.

"I think we'll make it."

We hobbled up the remaining steps into the hall and I had her hold on to me to get her into the kitchen where I shoveled her into a chair.

"Wait while I find our first aid kit. Oh—you still have your shoe on."

I gingerly slipped it off over the swelling.

I retrieved the kit, pulled out an ace bandage, and then wound it round ankle and foot.

"Why are you being kind to me, Kenna? I will still hate you afterward, you know."

I flinched, but took that as an admission of weakness on Tara's part that she would even say that. Being physically close in avowals of hate coming from the dungeon of a moody castle while outside Armageddon's forces assembled to duke out mankind's final war was rather overwhelming. Wrestlers and warriors alone know such intimate hate. Surreal, and yet strangely exhilarating.

"I'll get you mobile enough that you can leave without leaning on me," I said.

"Yes, I was intruding. You're probably thinking 'it serves me right.'"

"I hadn't gotten that far, yet, Tara. You could have been on some official errand."

She flashed her wicked queen smile. "*Right. I'm sure you believe that.*"

"No. So what were you doing? Hope you accomplished it your first attempt."

She glared at me, trying to pull her shoe over the bandage enough to hobble.

"Shall I call Mommy and Daddy to pick you up?"

"No. Would you make me a tea?"

"I suppose." I put the kettle on, thinking of heaping on burning coals.

“I just need to sit awhile, if you don’t mind.”

“No.” I pulled out the pills in the first-aid pack, ran water in a glass. “Here, take these anti-inflammatory pills; they’ll decrease the swelling.”

She did so.

When the water boiled, I made her a tea, gave it to her with choice of sweeteners, and left the room, which in retrospect, turned out to be close to the dumbest thing I have ever done, because I got side-tracked, and left a poisonous, dangerous, predatory animal on the grounds, one not nearly as immobile as she gave on.

###

Nearly an hour later, after a prolonged talk with Highsmith outside, I returned.

I saw more people littering the halls and venturing into the chapel. I heard talking, and walked into it, where to my surprised horror, I saw Lane and Tara on one of the pews, talking. Well, I wondered, how had she managed to get there? More to the point of it, how had she managed to get Lane there?

Naturally, I walked up to them and slid into the seat beside Lane. I felt like climbing over him and pushing him off the pew, and telling Tara now she had room to walk out. She was obviously planning some rubbing by him on her way out. I tugged Lane’s hand to bring him closer to me.

“So, Tara, your foot’s all better? I guess the tea worked wonders.”

“It hurts less, thank you.” The thank you was for Lane’s benefit.

“How did you know?” Lane asked.

“Oh, Tara didn’t tell you I found her in the dungeon, three levels down, her ankle turned, and that I singlehandedly moved her up the steps before I made her tea?” I leaned over Lane and looked. She still wore the bandage.

“She told me she got help—”

“I was confessing to Lane about my plundering in his castle and about breaking the urn, as I’m sure he’d like to know. Dad and I had talked about the urns. There are several, actually, and I wanted to see how they compared to each other. Fortunately the one that turned over was the least valuable of them all, according to my information. On impulse, I used the Armageddon occasion to blend in and get a picture of each one.”

“Just tell us about it next time, right, Kenna?” Lane said.

“I’d say, we’ll get them for you,” I said. No *carte blanche* next-times to her.

“May I go up to the altar before I go?” she asked, “because I’d best get on,” Tara said.

“Yes, you may,” Lane said.

I pulled Lane’s arm to get us both out so she was free to walk past us unhindered. She hopped forward, but did well enough I didn’t offer help. Like she said, she would still hate me afterward. Tara walked to the altar, speaking something, causing chills to mate and spawn offspring all over my body. Supernatural horror of prayerful curses she unleashed upon us or Masonic rituals she was invoking, incantations she muttered.

We waited for her and all walked out together.

“You won’t have trouble driving?” I asked, as she approached her car.

“No, I think a lame left is fine,” she said.

We put her in her car and took the scenic path behind where the rhododendron grew. When we seemed far enough away from the madding crowd, I turned and faced off Lane.

“Lane, what do you mean sitting in a dark chapel alone with your ex-fiancée? You are so clueless. You *like* to flirt with disaster.”

“Damn, Kenna, I didn’t consider it our sitting together. Not like you mean.”

“And if I hadn’t come ‘til later, you’d be saying, ‘Darn, Kenna I didn’t know she was going to throw her arms around me and force herself on me.’”

I was furious.

“Okay, okay. I won’t let myself get caught in a situation, again.”

“Darn well better not. You sure are a slow learner. I bet the Blackheart staff thinks you have two women on the hook. You humiliate me. I can’t leave home without worrying what I’ll find when I return.”

He shook his head. “It sure looks that way.”

I stamped my foot on the ground. “Yes!”

He reached for me then, like he always did when I was angry.

I pushed him back.

“I’m not ready to make up.”

“I keep messing up,” he said, achieving his best hang-dog expression.

“Lane, I don’t want to fuss at you forever,” I told him, “so get a clue.”

“The gals have always liked me.”

“And you, Lane Campbell, have always liked the girls. Loyalty is not negotiable.”

He reached for my hand, sensing the crack in the armor.

I stiffened.

“Come on, Kenna,” he said, wheedling, caressing my back, boring into my soul with his eyes. Those confounded eyes.

I sniffed, and let out a tear.

“Oh,” he said, wiping the tears away. I just couldn’t stay mad with this man.

He kissed a tear, and when he felt my body relax, he took it for success. He soothed my face, my hair, and pulled me to him tightly. I threw my arms around his neck and we found ways to say yes to each other.

A twig snapped and we both jumped apart.

A couple passed by, smiling.

“Guess we’d better return to our safe castle,” Lane said.

“Yes, it’s certainly day’s end and end to fireworks. I don’t hear any now.”

“Armageddon 7 scorched the earth. I’m in between jobs, at loose ends.”

“Next time, give me advance notice.”

We walked back to the castle through the last booths shutting down.

“Fine nose you have, all up in the air.”

I waved to the receding figures.

“Yes,” I said. “I think we’ve tasted Armageddon 7 enough for one day.”

Chapter 27: Dinner at the Montfort’s

“Deep into that darkness peering...fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal
ever dared to dream before.”--Edgar Allan Poe

We had been invited, the whole lot of us, to dine at the Montfort Estate.

It seems the Montfort’s wanted to make amends for Tara’s bungling into our dungeon. Curiosity probably made me say ‘yes’ when Lane asked if I would go with him to dinner, with his father and David at their invitation. Iain declined, citing the need to stay behind as backup for the castle staff, rather responsible of him. I mean, the invasion of the aliens was all right on a film set, but excitement palled when one of the aliens was a real enemy.

Now I was going to the lair of a woman who had told me no amount of kindness on my part would keep her from hating me forever. Normal people don’t consider evil ahead of time. No one appreciated that I was intended prey. So innocently one walks into a sticky black widow spider’s web. They were abhorrent, repugnant to the touch.

From Blackheart Heights to Mr. Bill’s to Rosslyn Chapel to the Montfort Estate, darkness chased us from secret societies, posh gentleman’s clubs and government agencies glomming onto us—stalking, listening—wearying. Give me an escape to the bright, sunshiny South. *You mean, the 19th century house locals would not visit due to ghosts.* Yes, right in the

heart of the Bible belt. *There by the haunting graveyard of Cape Fear's Old Bluff.* Defeated, I ducked under the canopy of a little darkness and subterfuge of my own. I would spy on them. I hated to follow Tara's initiatives—she had first worn black, and at the castle, she was like *Prada*, the 'devil wearing red.'

Tonight I wore a slinky teal green dress that would highlight my curves—and my hair and complexion—dissolve freckles to gold dust. I would look like a red fox.. Forget being intelligent enough to work up through the male-dominated obstacle course, through supernatural layers of little green men in Rosslyn Chapel, and manipulators who sneakily switched one of the seven virtues, poverty, for greed over the arch there. I mean, Rosslyn Chapel, a miniature Solomon's Temple, was replete with the same foreign gods Solomon brought in with his wives. Montfort Estate would surely hold its own wonders.

"Wow, you look fantastic!" Lane said, as I emerged to walk with him downstairs.

"Why, thank you. This cameo is an heirloom of my grandmother's. Is it too much with my gold locket?"

"No, the shapes are similar. It looks old family, but I wasn't looking at that," he said, looking at my backside.

I smiled happily, as though the moment would last forever. We walked into the family dining area and sat at one of the tables. Mr. Farquhard joined us first, and then a few minutes later, David. Iain stuck around, too. A pre-game scrum, as it were. We talked business excitedly, referring to the engraving as the 'handwriting on the wall' which by now everyone had studied. Also the urns, including Tara's fractured one. A further check revealed that the carvings were more numerous than anyone had suspected. Lane announced that he had managed to get an appraiser knee-deep in requests from Montague and Ross to provide a valuation. It might take a few weeks.

“Please, everybody, let’s don’t share the epigraphy of our prisoner with the Montfort’s yet,” I said, pleading. “We need to know a little more, first. Besides, why should we upstage Tara and what she discovered yesterday? Because you know she did. That urn wouldn’t have toppled had she not examined it closely. So all we have to do is say nothing so they will inform us thoroughly about that. I’m sure Lord Montfort’s curiosity got the best of him and he wants to justify Tara’s actions, maybe give financial credit.”

“Agreed,” David said, “besides, her sneaking around doesn’t sit well with me. We caught her in the act. We know what she was up to, and she won’t likely repeat it...”

“Well, I’ll try not to let it slip, then,” said Mr. Farquhard.

“Lane?”

“Not me, Baby. I won’t give away our position.” He smiled.

“Well, it feels better going with a game plan,” I said.

“I agree,” David said.

“I’m keeping an eye out for anything Masonic. Books, Knights Templar—whatever, and make mental notes.”

“You sure are getting a fever on that subject,” Mr. Farquhard said.

“Yes, Mr. Farquhard, maybe I am. Tara was muttering something at the altar in the chapel and I didn’t like it. When Mason talk dies down, here they come again. If they wanted me to forget them, they shouldn’t pursue me and make me mad.”

“What are they going to do?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Sponsor a new revolution. Push chips into our arms so we can bank naked. Slice somebody’s throat who reveals their secrets like the gesture they practice when they enter the Lodge.”

“Oh, you’re funny,” David said, snorting.

Lane always paid more attention to me when others thought I was smart.

“Well we’d best pull out,” Mr. Farquhard said, “or we might be fashionably late.”

“Yes. Do we take a wine or something?” I asked.

All three men stared at me again.

“Of course one should in this case,” Lane said. “David, you know what to choose.”

“Always me.” He left and returned with a dusty Chateau Lafite Rothschild Pauillac 1961, an aged wine worthy of the occasion at the Lord, Lady, and Little Lady Montfort estate. He proceeded to wipe it clean.

The estate was not far up the road at Lochgilphead to the west of Loch Fyne on an offshoot called the Gilp, west of Loch Lomond.

“What does it look like?” I asked, as David shot out of the driveway.

“Spread out on a hill and larger than Blackheart Heights,” Lane said.

“But still not a castle,” I said.

“We’ll be driving over their land for some way, but no, it’s not a castle. The Royal Castle of Tarbert is the nearest castle, and of course, Inveraray,” Mr. Farquhard said. “They have quite a list of land holdings, mostly contiguous. He acquired land from his ancestors and has kept on acquiring it. They have a chapel there which demands its own respect, but so far, has stayed unknown to the touristy public. Whether or not that’s their intent, I cannae say.”

“Why did you never join the Masons, Mr. Farquhard?”

“I have little use for sitting around smoking cigars and sipping brandy in some old boys’ club, nor any use for ritual. And I have even less patience for taking oaths. If I say I’ll do something, well then, that should be good enough for anybody.”

“So, you’re not into the good old boy clubs. Will that work against you in your surgery practice?”

He jerked around to look at me.

“It might. Almost anyone who is anyone is a member.”

“I’m not suggesting anything.”

“Aye, right! Wouldn’t matter, anyhow,” Lane said. “Dad would never. I would never. Scotland has had plenty of it. It’s part of everyday life like Scouts and Church deacons and good services to humankind. Me, I’m not after it.”

“Yes, I heard about a lawyer who pulled out of the Masons. He was shunned and ostracized,” David said. “They would cross the street when they saw him coming just to avoid speaking to him.”

“I never heard of their doing anything violent, however,” Lane said.

“You probably wouldn’t. I mean, historically, there were some cases,” I said.

“Yeah, but not in this day and age,” Lane said.

“Their oath language is certainly abusive,” I said, laughing. “I’ve been doing some research. ‘May my throat be slit, and my entrails fall out’—doesn’t sound gentlemanly or non-violent. You didn’t know Lane and I were abducted in Bali by upper crust Masonic, did you?”

I might as well have dropped a bomb. I looked at Lane, realizing I’d broken a promise, and said, “Sorry, Lane.” I put my hand over my mouth

“No!” David said.

“What?” Mr. Farquhard demanded.

“Kenna,” Lane said, obviously not pleased with my revelation.

“Well, we have to have friends somewhere, sometime, don’t we?”

“No, do tell us about it, Lane,” Mr. Farquhard demanded, and so for the next fifteen minutes, the Scottish landscape flew by and Lane told all.

#

The access to Montfort Estate was bounded by neat old trees with white-washed trunks on the right hand side and flowering shrubs in between. The left showed a well-

manicured lawn. This was my own observation, but rarely did you find symmetrical homes or grounds in Scotland, due to the asymmetrical nature of landscapes here.

David parked the Volvo. We exited and walked up the stone walkway to the front steps. Lane used the knocker on the massive front door, taking charge. I don't know why that should irritate me, but it did.

The door opened a little, then the whole way, and a butler in a black suit and white shirt leaned out and said, "Welcome to the Campbell Family from the Montfort's. May I take your hats, coats, and umbrellas?"

The transition into the inside accomplished, my wrap left in the foyer, we walked into a house with detailing that could entertain the eye forever. Framed coats of arms and museum masterpieces hung on the walls. The walls themselves were paneled in mahogany or covered in damask, or multi-layered in stained colors. Chandeliers hung from deeply ornate ceiling medallions. The crystal drops caught the sparkle and color of rainbow light.

Were I entering the den of darkness, this one had caught the magnificence of outside light in its tears. Inside, something fought my sense of rightness, however, and it wasn't the opulence or largesse of the estate. It wasn't simply that it was overdone Victorian or Renaissance Revival. It wasn't the presence of the riches themselves. It wasn't only the ambience. I struggled to identify the factor. What I concluded was that it, by its existence, obviated the need for anything or any person in the whole universe. It was the total displacement of the need for a higher power which I knew ran counter to Masonic requirement of members who believed in a higher power.

We were left to our own company.

The three men had little to say.

From their plush couch, I studied details and took in everything in true sensory overload, from plush couch in richly paneled library reading rare book spines. Some were

continental books, with the title reversed. I read names like LeMessurier and titles proudly bearing Masonic symbols and referring to different branches of Masonic orders' history. Shelves replete with Knights Templar, Solomon's Temple, the complete works of prominent Scottish Masons like Burns and Scott, architecture and every subject one could imagine, like mathematics, philosophy, and art, including Leonardo da Vinci's work. Some books touched arcane subjects. My article writing research sped ahead.

The door knocker sounded again, and I heard the butler greet more guests. One of the voices sounded familiar. No, two of the voices sounded familiar. My heart leapt.

Just then the butler brought in a man and a woman. I jumped from my seat and enthusiastically hugged the woman.

"Sally! I can't believe this is happening! Did you stay in Scotland after all—or have you returned for a visit?"

Before I let her answer, I turned to Bryan and gave him my hand and a half hug.

"Bryan! This has to be the biggest surprise in the world! What a delight!"

"Lane, Mr. Farquhard, David, you remember the guests at the castle before the Stone's return—Sally Graham and Bryan Wallace—who traveled all over Scotland with me as a newbie tourist?"

"Yes, yes," the Castle master said, and everyone shook hands all round.

"To answer your question, Kenna, Bryan and I came back to get married in Scotland."

"No! The two of you getting married? I never guessed. That's wonderful. I love it," I said, sounding like an idiot in my enthusiasm.

"Scotland—the land of romance," David said, "for everyone but me."

"You have to be part of the wedding, Lane and Kenna," Sally said.

"I want to be! When? We're off for America soon—you'll have to make it fast!"

“In two weeks! You don’t have to buy anything—actually, you can wear what you have on, now—that teal green with those golden copper tones would be perfect. You could even sling your red McAllister plaid over it, and those colors would work with the colors and flowers I’ve picked.”

“Wonderful. Let’s sit, and you can tell us more,” I said. “Like when this happened, how you know the Montfort’s—I knew you knew everybody in the world, Bryan, in Scotland and the U.S, which amazes me, but this—well,” I said.

“Lord Montfort is my father’s friend,” he said. “They met at a conference in Israel.”

Immediately I glanced at Bryan’s hand and saw the gaudiest, largest ring I have ever seen on a man’s finger. I knew Bryan was the son of a Mason, but I wondered if this were part of an initiation ceremony, and why his friendship with Lord Montfort was public only now.

Speak of the devil—*do mind your attitude, I admonished myself—it might show.*

We all stood up to greet Lord Montfort who was pleased as punch to introduce former friends. We were all shaking hands and mingling. *What a master chess move that was. Now he had us all in the palm of his hand, thinking what a swell fellow he was.* I looked up to see Tara way back in the hallway studying me. With papa’s coup nicely established, in walked the lady of the house. Lady Montfort wore a taupe and pearl long dress, the height of tasteful elegance. Once again, we mix-matched conversation in random partner mixes.

Which left high tension in the air for Tara’s grand entrance timing impeccable—in she sashayed, pausing, hand on hip, framed in the door opening in a deep blue gown with a heavenly purplish sheen on its surface. She paused at the door for dramatic effect, I assumed, looking around at us all with well-taught stage presence, fairly commanding our attention, pausing to flash me a malevolent smile before checking out the rest of the incoming parties.

True theater.

First she greeted Mr. Farquhard, flirting with the old fool. I knew who was next, right beside him—yes, Lane, of course. She lifted her hand—which he took in his. I walked up right at that time and offered my own so he wouldn't have to kiss hers. We flashed swords, figuratively speaking. As soon as the thought occurred to me, I began noticing swords, flags, and Masonic symbols. Mr. Farquhard was right: I had a fever on the subject.

The butler began serving aperitifs. We sipped and talked. Usually lively, I perched like an eagle listening, so I wouldn't miss anything.

Soon we were hand-delivered into the dining room for a beautifully-catered meal, each seated strategically, I with Lord Montfort to my left and Lane to my right. The seating was like this: Lord Montfort, me, Lane; to Lane's right sat David, then Lady Montfort at the head, to her right Bryan, then Sally, then to her right Tara, and Mr. Farquhard. Lord and Lady Montfort sat opposite one another, so Tara was opposite Lane, Mr. Farquhard opposite me, Bryan and Sally opposite David.

The meal commenced with an elegant broth. An artichoke salad followed by a seafood appetizer, a meal of lamb with peas and carrots and a delicate dumpling, covered with a light white wine sauce and green chives. The wine was a dry white.

"Bryan, what a phenomenal ring you are wearing!" Tara exclaimed.

"It was my grandfather's," he said. "My dad let me bring it on the trip. I probably shouldn't wear it, but I was hoping you might comment on it, Lord Montfort. Thanks for noticing, Tara."

"Yes, Daddy, do tell us the nature of that ring, who would wear it and how old it is."

"You're too old for the Job's Daughter's group, Tara. Why don't you look into the Eastern Star and join them?" Lord Montfort said, dismissing her.

"Oh, Daddy, surely you can explain just the symbols on the ring, and tell Bryan what degree Mason would wear it. If Bryan shouldn't be wearing it," she said, "then you should tell

him. He wouldn't want to go against protocols." She seemed to tease more information from her father in a public setting than polite, surprising me.

"Bryan, I don't have much to say, except that it is quite fine wearing it for purposes of showing me, but you wouldn't otherwise, especially if you intended joining the Masons. They might take it that you were giving on you were one."

"Oh, I see. My apologies. I don't think Dad knew I intended to wear it. I'll take it off, now," he said, removing it and putting it in his pocket.

We all smiled at the interchange, but Lord Montfort said nothing more, except to bring up the whole testy subject of the damaged urn. "I'm sorry, Tara, but we really must do something to make amends to the Campbell's for your unfortunate accident with the urn."

"Oh, I understand, Father. I can't believe I was so clumsy. I stepped on an uneven surface. I'm thankful it wasn't the prettiest one."

She shouldn't have said that. That diminished the Campbell's rights to compensation.

"Tara. I'm not upset with you, darling. I'm glad you weren't hurt." He turned to Lane.

"Lane, have someone assess the damage and the worth of the vessel and let us know. Of course, we will take care of it."

"I don't know what to say," Lane began.

"Well, Lane, they can always deduct the assessment from what you owe already."

The conversation froze. Everyone looked shocked. I waited for the public reprimand.

"No, Lane, don't worry. Your wife once more rises to the occasion. Excellent suggestion, Kenna." He patted my left hand out next to him. Tara went pouty.

That settled, the conversation shifted to neutral waters. The wait staff brought us pear halves with chocolate drizzle and two raspberries, powdered sugar sprinkle. I left some. Coffee was served.

Tara barely ate any of her courses, I noticed.

Lane was enjoying himself immensely. When the subject of Rosslyn Chapel came up, he mentioned our recent visit.

Bryan chimed in. "There was a great book published about Rosslyn Chapel last year—by Lomas and Knight, *The Hiram Key*, which broached the subject of non-intrusive means of examining what was in The Apprentice Pillar and underground. It was supported by *Historic Scotland Magazine*, but the Rosslyn Chapel Trust withdrew their previously given support."

"Some real fanatics have tried to demolish the Pillar to see what was inside," Sally said, "I think they believe the Holy Grail is."

"They say it was the one Jesus drank communion from," Bryan said.

"I can't see Jesus drinking from an ornate Holy Grail," I said.

"Unless He had access to Solomon's treasures," Lady Montfort injected with a smile.

Lord Montfort was noticeably quiet.

When finished, we were directed into the drawing room. "It's such a nice evening. Perhaps you gents and ladies would like to retire to the Masonic porch?" Lord Montfort asked. "Since I know you are wondering, it is a reflection of the porch in Solomon's Temple."

"Let's go, Gavin," Mr. Farquhard said.

We moved onto the porch. I asked Lord Montfort if I might possibly be allowed a photograph or two for our magazine. They quite graciously acquiesced, giving me a shot of them in front of their ancestor's oil painting, and then all three by the dramatic staircase. They didn't mind signing a release. Lane looked a little embarrassed, so I made a joke of it.

"You can dress me up, but you can't take me to an estate, right, Lane?" I said.

"Oh, apologies are unnecessary. It is a compliment, and quite acceptable," Lady Montfort said. "Please give us a magazine when it is published, Kenna, and we will display it proudly in our study with your by-line."

“Certainly, I will.” It is possible a thaw between the Montfort’s and me could occur, but Tara was looking less and less pleased. Even Lane looked confused.

We came in from the porch and lingered shortly saying our goodbyes and gathering our wraps to leave. We parted with Sally and Bryan at the same time, exchanging telephone numbers for ringing her next day.

No one talked on the trip back home. I don’t know what was going through everyone’s minds. As to my own thoughts, they were simply this: *We absolutely cannot lose Blackheart Heights to these people.*

Unnerving how well the evening went from my perspective. Surely a backlash from some quarter would be soon forthcoming. Truth be told, I wasn’t prepared for how or where.

Chapter 28: Uninvited Guests

“Sons of the dark and bloody ground,
Ye must not slumber there, where strangers stop
And tongues resound along the heedless air.

—Theodore O’Hara, the *Bivouac of the Dead*

Lane loved the idea of hosting a castle wedding for our friends. We had nothing major going on that weekend. With only a few days left to finalize packing for the States, we matched the price Bryan and Sally had from another venue to offer Blackheart for the honors.

In a hurried call to our local Presbyterian minister, he said he did not mind marrying a Presbyterian and a Catholic Scot “as long as they were both Celtic” and laughed.

“All kinds of historical precedents have been set.” I laughed, oblivious to what would happen to underscore that theme.

Having my friends back in the mix brought me a measure of sanity, less fear. Sally practically single-handedly got Lane and me married. It was only right they should be married

here. With the ongoing maneuvering on Tara's end, I needed a nearby ally. Sally brought welcome relief from the steady buildup of tension. The prospect of their wedding lightened Blackheart Heights.

We made a date to go over things at lunch hour so everyone could be present.

Their first return to Blackheart Heights was to check it out as a wedding location.

When Sally and Bryan came in, the receptionist let us know. I ran up to them and hugged them.

Who passed us in the hall but the film director? I introduced them to one another.

"Sally and Bryan, I'd like you to meet Mr. Highsmith, producer of *Armageddon 7*."

"Exciting. Kenna told me about your project," Sally said to him.

"I fear that point has flown by for me. I'm just about over it."

"I'm not sure we should mix our scripts," Bryan made his dry joke, shaking his hand.

"A wedding only two weeks away," I said.

Highsmith looked startled, and then rallied. "Oh I get it. No, nor should they. We won't be in your hair that week, it turns out."

"Unless, of course, we want to ride off in a UFO," Sally said.

I read Sally's mind as I watched relief wash over her face. It made me happy seeing Sally, even if our reunion would be short. While we waited for Lane, I introduced them to any film stars that walked through the reception area. Highsmith and Bryan hit it off right away.

Mr. Farquhard joined us. "Not sure why you need me, but here I am."

"I'll be getting back to my crew," Highsmith said, leaving. We acknowledged it.

Lane bounced in, gave me a kiss, and said, "I don't have much time. Let's look at the chapel and reception room, pick the plan, and you can work out details with the head of the operation, David. Here he comes, now."

From the kitchen David joined our huddle.

David surprised us all with an off-the-cuff request.

“Would you consider helping me out while these two are in the States, Bryan and Sally, after your honeymoon, of course?” David surprised everyone by asking.

“Why, I’d love to,” Sally said. “What about you, Bryan?”

“You mean actually stay here? Or commute?”

“Stay here three or four months. However long it takes.”

“Might solve our issues renting between leaving our current rental and moving into the house we’re buying to renovate.” Bryan communicated a question to Sally.

“I’m game,” Sally said.

“Then my impulse was justified,” David said. “Okay with you, Daddy, Lane, Kenna?”

“Can’t see anything but win-win, all the way,” Lane answered for us all.

“I love a plan that works,” I said. I beamed at my resurfaced friends.

Everything firmed, we left.

Late that afternoon, more break-through’s. The epigrapher was suddenly available. I called Sally, told her he was coming next day, and heard Bryan telling her in the background he wanted to be in on it.

“Please, Kenna, may Bryan follow the epigrapher around? It gets him out of my hair.”

“Well, I’ll pass it by Lane tonight, but that sounds wonderful. He could interpret ‘epigrapher language’ for us.”

So we hung up with plans to see Bryan next day.

###

“Mrs. Campbell, Mr. McLeod is here,” they called up from reception.

“Coming.” I ran down the steps to greet him.

He was medium height, slim, with close-cut hair.

“Mr. McLeod? Kenna Campbell. We are excited you could come now.”

“I’m keen to give it the once over,” he said. “It’s in the basement, is it? Would that be the dungeon? Or did this castle ever have one?”

“That it is,” I said, “but it is the old section of the burnt castle that abuts the new one.”

“Bring Bryan down when he comes. We’re going on,” I told reception.

“Will do.”

“Mind the uneven floor,” I said, leading him over stone steps and into the basement.

“I want to show you something else, as well.” He followed me around to the first room where I showed him the urn.

“Some intruder tried to read this and toppled it, breaking a piece off. When you are finished with the inscription, could you assess its value as well, both before and after the chip, along with two or three similar urns, and tell us anything about it you can? There’s another room full of these. Do you appraise as well?”

“Certainly do. I was prepared for a collection.”

“All right, just give the estimate, but bill us on that one separately, with a separate estimate of its worth. Come on around this way for the just-discovered inscription.”

He followed me close under the archway. I grabbed the torch hanging on the wall and aimed it straight up under the doorway. Light traveled up the surface, wall to ceiling.

He directed my hand and beam to see exactly what we had. He then opened his case, pulled out a light on a tripod, pulled out a long utility cord and plugged it in. He worked until it illuminated the script in far better detail.

Bryan caught up with us.

“Bryan Wallace, meet Harry McLeod.”

“Nice to meet you, I’ve studied engravings and was keen to observe the process.”

“That’s good. A second set of hands and eyes is always a help.”

“Do you have a ladder?”

“Inside the door.” I pointed.

Harry pulled out a paper roll, positioned our ladder, and climbed up to lay the paper over the inscription. He affixed it with tape outside and removable putty inside. Carefully he pushed the paper into the crevices, continuing along the inscription. He returned with pastel to color the lettering edges. I was mesmerized by the process, one similar to brass rubbings in a cathedral crypt.

“I probably will only finish the first stage today.”

“What do you do next?” Bryan asked.

“I’ll actually fill the receding area with clay, pull it out when hardened, and recreate the engraved surface in my studio,” he said.

“Exciting to see illumination techniques,” I said.

“We try to keep up. I should be finished with the inscription layout this week. The real work begins in my studio.”

Another stone in place, I thought, and in sync with wedding plans.

“So Bryan, you can work with Mr. McLeod while we are in the U.S., if need be.”

“I’d be more than happy to, as you well know, Kenna.” He smiled at me.

“I’ve made a new rule for myself. When an epigrapher comes, always pair him with a stone expert like Bryan. Your wedding is just a week and a half away. I’m sure you’ve invited your good friend, Lord Montfort, and his family. Is your dad coming, too?”

“Yes, Kenna, both my mom, sister, brother, and his family are coming, and also Sally’s folks. We need to set aside some rooms. Glad you asked.”

The Montfort’s were coming. *Tara better behave and not roam around my home.*

“I’ll leave you to it,” I said. “When should I return to check on you?”

“Give me two hours, thereabouts, should be enough time to finish,” Mr. McLeod said.

“See you, then, Bryan, Harry,” I said.

#

On my way out, I picked up the mail and found a fat letter from my magazine. Good, a check and a letter saying how happy they would be to see me again back in Charlotte and have me work on site. They also informed me of an office party planned on my behalf as a sendoff party at the end of three months, one they hoped Lane would attend in his kilt. They had scheduled a bagpiper. I wondered: do they know how loud bagpipes are? I wasn't going to spoil the party by telling them. It sounded great to me. I'd put it on our calendar, and tell Lane about it later.

I needed to finish my follow-on interview with Highsmith about filming of *Armageddon 7* at Blackheart for *Scotland News Today*. I had done one for *South!* Inc. already, and it was not derivative, so I could offer it to other U.S. magazines later. I would use a version of it for a follow-on in our magazine, as well. My plate was overfull, at the moment, but today I was visiting Sally in Edinburgh to help her pack. We would talk Life and Romance since our marriage.

#

Next day, wedding prep for our friends began in earnest. We jumped through the hoops, making memories and recording them, all significant. However, a major event not germane to the wedding happened at the reception.

Lane and I were talking with family Montfort nibbling our petit fours. Gavin frowned over the just disclosed information that we were leaving Scotland for the U.S. earlier than he had expected, before the annual fair. Tara showed extreme irritation that Lane would not attend.

"You promised us you would be there," she said in a whine. Bless her little heart. I stayed quiet as Tara showed her true colors.

A discrepancy of historical detail was working in background mode in my brain concerning the Stone of Destiny. I decided to take another look at my papers. Something in my research niggled at me. Bold in my teal dress, I wandered off with the assurance that Tara's voice tone created the necessary wedge between her and Lane. Annoyed with Lane as she was, I had no worries.

I skipped up steps to our flat as well as one could in 5-inch golden slippers, found my stash, and stuck them in a lace pocketbook. Hiding my need to be nerdy, I withdrew to the stone porch. It was an unusually warm evening for April, so I sat on the steps. The moon shone full on me, brightly illuminating the letters.

First, the letters. What had I seen? Was it a phrase, a place, a name? I wasn't sure what I was looking for or where I had heard it—in business circles, social circles, or roaming around the castle. I'd plundered amongst castle records, too. I guess I'd know it when I found it. Something Lord Montfort had said? A wrong date?

It's tough, searching for the unknown. I spread the documents out—ship's manifest, bill of lading describing the items on the ship. I picked Alexander McAllister's letter apart for the umpteenth time. For one thing, I wondered about the name for the little baby he had later married. I could check in the National Registry for Jean Colvin. That might help. I was starting to worry Lane would detect me missing and come looking.

Time slipped away so easily when I studied something engrossing.

Thud!

My head jerked up from my reading.

What made such an awful ruckus? Something had fallen. I was outside where no one knew it, released from toe-cramping heels. There I was barefooted, my dress slit to my waist, papers spread everywhere. Cancel any notions of a speedy take-off. That would not happen. I

detected movement in the bushes opposite me, from the other stone wall. Castles may be protective masses of stone, but they can hide any number of interlopers and intruders.

“Who’s there?” I said loudly.

Quickly gathering my papers while keeping my eye locked on where the noise came from, I slipped on my shoes.

Dear God, please protect me, I prayed.

Just as I put on the second shoe, I heard a twig snap.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

I jerked up from my sitting position and wondered why in heaven’s name I had put the shoes back on—protecting hose was really not a priority.

Fortunately, my side was closer to the back door into the castle, so I ran for it, careful not to stumble over uneven stone.

I looked behind me as I ran, seeing nothing, but the door in front of me was dark. More than one intruder might be out here. One final dark corner to turn, I rounded the stone wall in a rush.

My ears keened to the wind for noise of footsteps or evidence of a stalker. Bush movement—no! I couldn’t stand it. I covered my racing heart.

A hand grabbed mine. I screamed in full volume, turned, and looked into Lane’s face.

“Oh, God, thank you. Lane, I’m so glad it’s you. I heard a thud in the bushes, someone’s over there.”

“Kenna, why are you out here? I never know what you’ll do next.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay—”

“Tara’s whining reminded me of an important timeline concerning the Stone.”

“And you came here to look for it?”

“No, Silly. It was something key, but I couldn’t put my finger on it, so I searched these documents for the clue.”

“Come on in. We’ll get a few men with torches to sweep the grounds.”

“All right, Lane. What a relief. I’ll report my position from now on, I promise.”

“Don’t promise that, Kenna. You’ll break it in a day. Let’s get you in and settled.”

Back into the reception room we went, everyone asking what was wrong immediately upon seeing my face. You could read me like a book.

“I heard someone near the porch area,” I explained.

Lane rounded up the men who left to tour the grounds with heavy duty torches they kept for such occasions. They were gone 20 minutes or more and returned to report a concrete flower planter toppled and broken, bushes disturbed, but saw nobody. They checked all cars, and none seemed unaccounted for, being those the attendant checked in. All wedding-goers were present.

“On foot,” I said to Lane. “Let’s forget it. I don’t want Bryan and Sally’s event shadowed by this.”

“No, but it’s in everyone’s interest to locate intruders on the grounds,” Lane said. “David, this underscores the need to upgrade security.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said.

So for the rest of the evening, I did penance and paid rapt attention to my friends Sally and Bryan, practically stalking them.

“Your ring is beautiful, Sally,” I said, holding her hand up.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed.

“We love it,” Bryan said, taking her hand in his, and showing his wedding ring beside it. I took a picture of their hands then and there. I was relieved not to see the Masonic ring.

Chapter 29: A Priestly Blessing

“We are the guardians of these treasures,
But they belong to the world.”—Zahi Hawass

During the next week, when Bryan and Sally were honeymooning in the nearby Hebrides, Lane and I pulled together our preparations for leaving the country. We had a strange way of doing so, which meant completing a report for Douglas of personal research I had been doing for the family driving all over the countryside.

Much I ran down in addition to discoveries falling into my lap, like finding the inscription over the dungeon wall which would probably re-write history books. We kept the epigrapher coming to continue work. We followed through on an appointment I had made with the National Scottish Registry which yielded startling results: two boat voyages made by Alexander, one in 1736, and another 1740.

Lane and I drove from Tarbert to Campbeltown where my ancestors had set sail for America, specifically to the Campbeltown Heritage Centre to examine the Thistle’s and Gigha’s records for cargos. On the way we stopped at a lonely graveyard overlooking the West Loch Tarbert, locating my kinsmen’s gravestones.

At the Campbeltown Heritage Centre, we had a little shuffle before a senior records person who knew how to upload earlier documents like these, found what I needed and made us copies to take.

I showed her my letters and let her make copies for their records, since they directly affected their history.

Back in the car, I read to Lane from the Ship’s manifest in 1740:

“Fourteen trunks, one large crate, one weaver’s wheel, one large stone with handles.”

“You’re kidding!” he said.

“I kid you not. I wonder what the Scone Palace people would make of it.”

“We can always ask.”

“Lane, there’s a document sandwiched in between these letters I brought from home. It’s original, with a couple of thin, folded, original letters, looks like. I know I didn’t copy them. They’re all folded and have been that way forever. How could I have missed them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Inside the envelope is this fragment of a letter. It’s not signed ‘Alexander,’ who wrote most of the letters, Lane. It says, ‘Coll.’ Coll is a generation earlier, father to my ancestor Isabella, and her brother, Alexander. Their father, Coll, came over, too.”

“From Tarbert we are retracing the route my ancestors traveled to Campbeltown before they left for America.”

“That is amazing and feels so otherworldly.”

“Like our whole lives together—uncanny.”

“You feel that way, too?” I touched him.

“Yes, I do, Kenna.”

“Chill bumps. Alexander’s second letter is famous, penned during the 1740 return to the states. It contains what has been published many times over and was widely known, but it contains specifics I don’t remember, and I don’t think were known. I’ll read you the letter.”

“Fine.”

“The voyage is dull and drear save for the excitement of the occasional storm at sea to enliven us, and the new-born peasan who cries incessantly. The boat is large enough to hold three more people, so we are not elbow to elbow, since I arranged with the captain to leave off three people to make way for an object of corresponding weight that a Catholic priest, a friend of mine near Tarbert asked me to bring with me and safeguard in the new country for a season. He gave me money enough to cover it, though I would have done it for naught. Some nights when the sea roils I worry it could be the death of us and anchor us at the

bottom of the sea, but if the stories about it are true, it also might be the saving of us. I dare not put more to pen, as my favor is highly controversial to several countries, as well as to my dear Presbyterian brothers, were it to be widely known might end our brave little experiment. I call to mind the motto of our ancestors, *fortiter*, go bravely forth. I will tell the tale of our friendship later.

“Please tell kith and kin we will more than likely arrive ‘safe and sound’ on the soil of our promised land and wend our way upward to Wilmington. I do have treasures which belong to future generations.

“The communal aspect is quite wearing, like the baby I mentioned who wailed the whole time. I gave the brat’s mom a piece of me mind about her failures to quieten her squalling baby, told her to spank the little b---, to which she had the gall to reply, ‘niver ye mind, she’ll be the wife of ye yet.’

More later, affectionately,

Your ever-adventuring son Alexander”

“Kenna, that is phenomenal.”

“The letter was never posted.”

“How do you know?”

“A similar one was and was quoted. It’s part of Scots history, in the books for a long time. It was found near present-day Fayetteville in early 1700’s. I’ve heard ‘niver ye mind, she’ll be the wife of ye yet’ all my life.” He must’ve repeated the story often.

“The letters build suspense.”

“Here’s a folded original; a letter fragment folded small from Coll to his son Alexander, saved with his original, maybe why I didn’t see it, one of the batch Uncle found behind the fireplace at Lebanon, Isabella McAllister’s descendants’ house in later generations, part of the bunch Douglas gave me.”

‘My Dearest Alexander,

Ye are now and always me special son, called, I think to carry the Presbyterian faith into the new world and take these rare treasures out of harm’s way and into safety, to a place where you and they may prosper and flourish, Your loving daddy Coll.” The rest was indistinguishable, lost in water stains and dark smudges.

“That’s exciting, Kenna.”

“Both belong to the brick-dyed collection found behind the chimney. See the stains?”

“You know I can’t look.”

“Lane, listen to this:

”Here’s the third letter. It was in an unaddressed envelope, never mailed or published, except inside another letter, maybe. Can you believe it? It looks barely handled.”

“I can believe anything connected with you!”

“A Catholic priest befriends a Presbyterian layman in 18th century Scotland tops the list for tolerance among Ulster Scots and fights between clans during the reign of Queen Mary. Protestants and Catholics were set against each other.”

“Yes, that war-torn page of history should have precluded any alliance between Catholic and Protestant. Reformation froths with intolerance. Presbyterians were as stodgy and rigid of their new faith as they are tolerant of everybody’s lack of it, now. I speak from experience. Maybe pockets of faith and Scottish blood ran deeper than sectarian squabbles.”

“Well, I said, “perhaps the intolerance of one century births latitude of the next. Or perhaps tolerance was rooted in this deep friendship from their past.”

“There you go,” Lane said.

“Lane, I think we need to stop our retracing journey for now and look to see what possibility of a Catholic cloister there was in this area, not too far away from Tarbert, and not too far away from Dunstaffnage. It’s known historically that the stone was kept there, and it

was a transitional spot from early days. It wouldn't have been far-fetched to have been a spot for transferring the stone further from there. Let's go home and plan our next step. I think we have to do it right away, though. Dunstaffnage, how far is it from Tarbert?"

"An hour and a half, but it's a long ways from here. So your plan is sound."

"That's what we'll do, then. I have a hunch we're on the right track."

Once back at home, we did our catch-up jobs, got out Lane's trusty map, and began pouring over it. At least, he did.

So the next day we set out early, going first to Oban. There along the scenic waterfront we took a quick break, and then continued on A85.

Just out of Oban Lane and I both noticed the same car had been following us awhile.

"Lane, isn't that the same car that's been behind us awhile?"

"It is. Don't look back, Kenna, but we are riding in caravan."

"You mean the same thing, right?"

"Yes; that we have a tail."

I blanched.

"Yes. You strapped in?"

"I am."

Oh, no, stalked again! Why in heaven's name were our movements so noteworthy? We must be terribly interesting. Perhaps somebody wanted to know what we knew, or what we had found out or maybe they already knew something and wanted to prevent our finding out what they know. Of the three possibilities, the last was scariest.

When Lane escalated, they sped up. The Volvo hugged the road.

When he slowed down, they slowed. Scotland is no favorable place for a chase.

"Don't worry; I've been on the lookout for a way to lose him."

We passed Dunstaffnage turnoff to the left and continued over Conell bridge. We took a small secondary road off to the right, still headed toward our destination of Ardchattan. This road parallels Loch Etive.

“Did it stay on course when we turned? Nope, he turned, too. We didn’t lose him.”

“And the road is getting curvy. Look, Lane, there’s a long, tree-lined driveway to the left, dart in, quick!”

“Hold on. I’m going to turn into the cloister driveway at full speed.”

“Oh, Lord. Okay.”

He ripped into the driveway, wheels spitting out stones and sand, car bouncing. I hoped we wouldn’t have to resurface the road for someone or pay for shocks for the car.

The tail was caught off guard and missed the turn. We drove up to what was a fully functional, moderate sized estate home, and paused.

“Oh, Lane, the car is turning in, too.”

The car turned in, but then turned around and left as we pulled around back.

“They won’t wait for us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Lane, this is a retirement home for aging clergy, purchased by the Catholic Church after the 1878 Restoration. That’s what the sign says at the side.”

“Thank goodness. I hate to admit it, but I was scared.”

Lane drove around to the back of a charming stone building and parked. We exited and hurried to the door.

“You know, I was wondering how we would find any continuous Catholic thread with all that’s happened through the years. And Ardchattan has been only open as gardens since the 1800’s though it was run as a priory for ages.”

“Yes, it must have been acquired by Catholics after the long underground hiatus for them.”

We knocked and rang. Immediately the door opened, and we were welcomed in.

“Hello, *je m'appelle François, je soigne le Prêtre*. Father McFarlane is quite ill just now. He told me, however, that he was expecting someone. Would you be those people?”

Lane and I exchanged glances. Whoever he was looking for, we were it.

“We are overcome with gratitude that he would see us,” I said, playing along. “We won't stay long.”

François seemed not to understand, hesitated, and said, “Let me inquire of him, first. I'll be right back.” He walked away. In less than two minutes he returned, saying, “*Il vous attend.*”

“I wonder who he thinks we are, Lane,” I said in a whisper.

Lane shushed me. We followed the French intern to the priest.

François ushered us in. The priest had a bluish pallor to his skin tone and face.

“*Mon Père, je vous present* Madame, Monsieur Campbell.”

“I have been expecting you. I just told François you were coming.”

“François, would you mind leaving us to this wee chat alone? I have a bell; I have a whistle. I will ring for you or blow the whistle, if I need you.”

“*Comme vous voulez, ma Père,*” he said, bowing and kissing his hand, oozing concern, and performing housekeeping tasks on his way out.

“Go, *François*. They are not assassins.”

He withdrew deliberately.

“Sit, please.”

We sat where he indicated. It was strange being ushered into the holy of holies, so to speak, with some retired Catholic priest, our being Protestant, but I would not question it.

“You are on a treasure hunt, are you not?” he asked.

“We are, but how--“

--no time, no time. God tells me you will come and won't let me die before we talk.”

I was unsure how we could be the ones he was expecting.

“What in the world?” Lane asked.

The father put a restraining hand on Lane.

“Let me talk.”

“Of course.”

“I have no energy for interchange...must forego politeness...you see, as long as I have one unfulfilled job on earth, God will not let me go. You are McAllister's, too, are you not?” he asked. “I am Father Tim McFarlane and I have been here forever. I am old as dirt and will meet it, soon, and I have no peace until a sacred trust passed down to me is discharged, if I decide you are the right people. First let me tell you a story, one seven generations old, about another McAllister who lived not far from here.”

My breath caught.

“You are interested, I see, Mrs.--“

“Campbell, Father. Kenna and Lane Campbell, but I'm a McAllister descendant.”

“Yes, Mr. Campbell, be so kind as to close the door, quietly.” His dim eyes twinkled.

As Lane did so, the Priest tapped on his wheelchair arm. With Lane back in place, he informed us that they had someone with him night and day, now, “even sent this toady from France to ‘help’ me. What do they think I can do at this late date?” he said with anger.

“Probably this encounter. We are not all the same. Not the same at all.” He waved his index finger in a circle, indicating the whole building with its people.

We waited without answering. He began again.

“The story concerns something of national, no, international import. No, tell it like it is—world significance. And the timing is now. Time has run out. Let’s get on with it. I don’t know how long I have. Mrs. Campbell, your ancestor is Alexander McAllister—?”

“My ancestor’s brother, but close enough--“

“--yes, Alexander, well, extraordinary lad, it seems.”

He motioned for his cup of water which Lane handed him.

“He was friends with another young boy, Jeremy, from the village. They were playing after school one day near the priory and noticed someone stealing from the garden. The boys had an inkling of who it might be. Not long after the stealing began, a little girl about their age from the village died. The boys did not believe her death accidental. Jeremy had seen her at the cloister before and reported that occurrence to the priest, noting his weird feeling that she was not supposed to be there. Feelings couldnae be expressed in those days. He thought someone noted his seeing her, which was bad for him.

“The boys, one Catholic, one Presbyterian, pursued leads throughout their friendship as they grew to manhood. Once they had enough evidence, they took it to the authorities. Nothing came of it, because the one responsible was too important.

“This is part of what drove Alexander to leave for America as a young man. Jeremy left for school to study for the priesthood, eventually returning to the cloister and from there to the underground movement of Catholics.

“Much earlier, forces for saving the Stone of Destiny from King Edward had hidden it. There were words spoken over its being used in the last days of the earth by the forces of Antichrist. Don’t stop me. I know it sounds strange, coming from a Catholic priest. Scotland wanted to exhibit its Stone, but only at the right time, so it would not end up in the hands of the Knights Templar or later on, in the hands of the Illuminati. So they hatched the plan to have Jeremy, Father Jeremy, by now, approach Alexander. Alexander, along with their

family's company of workers, was immigrating to America. He could take the Stone with him to get it out of harm's way. Give me my water bottle, please ma'am."

I gave him the bottle from where he had last left it.

"I'm not going to tell you where the Stone was hidden. But I will tell you where it was not." He paused for dramatic effect.

"Where?" I asked.

"It was not hidden in the cave at Dunsinane Hill. That whole debacle was cleverly staged as a smoke screen to throw people off, throw off history, and confuse the dates."

Suddenly it dawned on me. That was the discrepancy that had been plaguing me, the one thing that didn't jibe with the rest. It was the date of it, 1875—way later than the Stone actually left Scotland. That was why I was drawn out and told that they were descendants of the boys who had 'seen' the Stone in a storm, with a cave opening up, so I would discard the evidence so close at hand to me from my family.

"Oh, yes, they paid them to 'see,'" Father McFarlane said. "By the way, I have a letter from Alexander. I will get François to retrieve it for you to take when you go. Where was I? Oh, back to 1732, in the Jacobite era, when Catholics and Episcopalians were generally Jacobites and Presbyterians were almost all Hanoverians. That made them political enemies, although most normal people just got on with things and weren't at odds. During this period often Catholics would meet in the homes of great magnates like the Gordons in the Northeast because it was illegal for them to hold mass publicly. Catholic priests were safest under the wings of powerful families. Oh, that's too convoluted. Back to Jeremy."

Father McFarlane took a sip of his water.

"Jeremy was sad to see his friend leave for America, but his Tarbert land holdings were close to the land we Catholics held. Bitter war was waged in those years, just preceding

and during the immigrations. The Guardians of the Stone wanted a sure path forged to avoid its falling into the wrong hands.”

He paused.

“You may not know that the Carthusian monks were selected to guard the Stone of Destiny during Bruce’s time, during the hideous battle of King Edward’s that nearly wiped a portion of our people from the earth.

“What was I saying? The Stone was put in a safe place and a fake one made before the day of Edward’s victory. Yes, Robert the Bruce was crowned on it at Ardchattan.”

He hacked out a dry laugh.

“Anyhow, Guardians of the Stone: one guardian priest per generation. Each priest was sworn to silence and to passing the information with secret orders on to the next, sworn to making sure the receiver was not an enemy. We are infiltrated by Knights Templar in their new guise, as well, the Illuminati, now. In fact, there is no one I could trust now.”

“I am the current Guardian of the line. And the most blessed, because I am transferring custodianship to you two, and need never trust anyone in the cloister again, but it stayed at Ardchattan Priory from 1296 to 1736. That’s a 440-year gap.”

“Indeed. A gap--700 years minus 440 years is 260 years. I am not that old. Fifteen guardians...I am 15th in the line of Guardians of the Stone.”

“But the Stone is not in Scotland. Who guarded it en route to the Cape Fear and beyond?” I asked.

“The answer to that is that the Guardians were always in Scotland, but they corresponded with the keepers in America, for a time. However, the contact was cut off, and the last five of us have feared the worst had happened, that the Stone had been apprehended and shipped to some Masonic holding point for the final Solomon’s Temple.”

“Oh, my,” I said. “That’s why we’ve been hounded, chased, courted, and kidnapped.”

“Indeed, I am not surprised. In fact, hearing this actually gives me hope,” Father McFarlane whispered.

“Why?” I blurted out.

“Because if they had it, you would be of no more use,” he said. He looked grim.

“What is the last that you know of it, Father?” Lane asked.

“Only that it traveled to the lower Cape Fear, where it was held for a season. From there, it traveled up the Cape Fear to a resting place near Roger’s Meeting Place, an early Presbyterian preaching point. But where it is, if it is still there at all, and who the last contact was, I do not know. I assume that what I know is what the other side knows, as well. I am tired, now. You will see this through to the end, will you not?”

Lane and I looked at each other. No answer than yes would do. Its destiny was ours.

We nodded, and the Priest gripped both our hands.

“Yes, the Stone. They sent it away. And now there is only you left as Guardians of the Stone. I had a dream before you came--of a man and a woman with halos around their heads, one gold, one copper, hair caught up into the halo...and God’s voice spoke, audibly coming from the Stone and said, “Give them the secret. I have selected them to carry it forward until the Stone shall be called for, and I will tell them to whom they may give it, and I will tell them from whom they must hide it. And I will show them its resting place until the time is full.”

The chill bumps I had felt to this point shared nothing in common with these.

“Oh, yes, look in that top drawer. I already had François bring me the McAllister letter. I just remembered. I had forgot.”

Lane opened the drawer, saw a letter that looked like the ones I had in the car and held it up. “This it?”

“It is. Now. Let me bless you and convey the anointing of the Guardianship upon you. I place the hand of blessing on your journey, for even now, the men are coming who would take your life, and steal the information you possess.”

“Which is so little,” I said.

“And even that is too much.”

We kneeled on the floor on either side of Father McFarlane’s wheelchair. He placed firm hands on our heads and prayed in words I could not understand. It was like I was in another place, another time, transported into a blissful state.

“Now go, before François returns. If he has contacted his superiors in the meantime, I do not know what will happen to you. There is an exit from this room. Take it.”

We got up; left the way he indicated, made our way out to the car, and drove off before anyone noticed we were gone. As we turned north toward Tarbert, the same dark car pulled out from a hidden cul-de-sac and began pursuing us aggressively.

What now? Yet I had been blessed and knew that the Priest’s last prayer had been said over us, that we would overcome.

Lane maneuvered slow, fast, held tenaciously to the curves endemic to Scotland’s terrain. In Tarbert, Lane navigated to the police station, where we sat and waited. The tail was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 30: Off to the States

“...as white ink drawings on black backgrounds...man's destiny appears as a thread lost in an endless labyrinth.”—Marcel Marceau

Darkness, everywhere darkness enveloped us. There was the darkness of an unknown future, our own or the world’s. There was the darkness that gathered at Blackheart, which filled the cloister where a priest who was an uncompromised man of God now lay dying with

no worthy successor. There was the darkness of evil men who wanted to banish God's light and all that is good from the universe...that followed us on wheels, listened on phones, threatened to snuff us out. Yet, a thin white line wrote its cursive of love, hope, faith's people, God's Word, wholesomeness, a treasure we safeguarded to make the world safe. And now, was there darkness lurking back home behind the chimney wall?

I retreated under my down comforter in a safer darkness.

Everything about making the trip home to Carolina had seemed light to me—and likewise to Lane. He was chomping at the bit to start his new gig in Charlotte, engineering for a large contractor there. Instead of shuffling around, staying near the fire or hanging over the cliff precipice making himself a target for designing ladies, he was galvanized. He hopped about, ordered things and people, brought raw material under control. This was a new Lane. I could get used to a no-nonsense, take-charge kind of guy.

After being watched and stalked, our fear escalating to a fever pitch near madness, relief lay on the horizon. We would soon be out of harm's way; I lied to myself, knowing that wherever we went, we were watched.

Sally had reminded me in our brief talk that was what Masons and Illuminati were all about: the ubiquitous all-seeing eye. I guess she attributed our being followed at Rosslyn to one of the two, though the name of the organization was moot. Keeping their purposes secret was their modus operandi. As to why we were spotlighted persons of interest, I could only speculate.

Once in the States, we would stay in Charlotte for three months, and then the lovely antebellum house of my kin on the Cape Fear—or near it for a full month after Lane finished his three-month assignment. Vacation there would relieve the caretaker for a month. We could ride down to the mouth of the Cape Fear. I could show Lane everything about the Scots' arrival in our area and about my ancestry—part of them his kin, as well. Turns out from all

my research, we had learned we were cousins at least at one juncture where McAllister's and Campbell's had intermarried, so there was some McAllister in him, too, I thought, referring to the priest's vision. Who knew what other lines crossed or joined?

Being out of reach of the Montfort's and the evil witch of the North, Tara, for whom I was an ongoing vendetta for having stolen Lane, was reason for rejoicing. Her theory was wrong. Lane had hooked me long before I knew about her, a fact that would change nothing.

Space, delicious, three-thousand-mile plus-space would work wonders. I'm distancing myself from the wicked witches of the West, North, South, and East, like Dorothy.

The night before I had told Lane, "We're moving there in hot, humid weather. Ye've never seen a summer like a Carolina one, especially down East. Oh, which reminds me, Lebanon is not air conditioned."

He had smiled and turned to flirting. "I like it all hot and sweaty," he said.

Now here I was in our flat eagerly packing. There I would be going into the office for three months to my old job, but actually my old job had morphed into something new which came with my promotion.

I would be armed with the cachet of having an international assignment plus having married gentry with a castle, not to mention a darn good looking Scot of classic movie star looks.

"I'll make them all want a kilt—or a Scot wearing one!" I said, making him pack a full outfit with sporran, pins, and medals.

I longed to have him walk the beloved land where I had grown up, walk to the Cape Fear through meandering tributaries between their high bluffs, show him mountainous vegetation—rhododendron, heart leaf, and even endangered flora. We would pursue our family connections. I was giddy with excitement at returning and hoped we could continue to return to this place for many years to come. My Highland piece of North Carolina I simply

could not give up. That and the country of my ancestors' origins were seared into my soul. I was now doomed to being torn between two countries. No, wait, I was blessed to be torn between two countries. My two worlds had in fact, become one.

I had to get up. It was the day before Saturday and duty called. Mr. Farquhard was here, as was his habit on weekends to leave his surgery, and David had taken over the castle's operations. The Montfort's had been shamed into accepting the new terms. The contract I had pushed through had been modified and signed anti-climactically by all participants. No one had to fear forfeiting the castle.

McLeod had made progress on the castle inscriptions, but not the urn and collateral pieces. The production crew only needed a couple of months' more sessions for the finishing the film, but would be returning for a new release not long after we returned, and so had already put down a retainer for the ensuing months. The Campbell men, with me as frequent interloper, had inventoried all the rooms and objects and had decided which and what were off limits—like the china, silverware. They wouldn't be allowed to hang cameras from chandeliers.

I got up and dressed, put finishing touches on boxes we were shipping ahead to Charlotte. Our suitcases were packed to the gills.

"So you've just about finished, have you?" Lane said, walking in, rather sweaty and stinky from hard labor.

"Just about." I taped the box lid shut. "I'm calling it quits. I need to clean my own dirty self."

"We can bathe together."

"That's a thought."

"Come on." He nodded with his head to the bathroom.

Usually I can't be deterred from work that easily, but I followed him.

“You wash me first, and then I’ll wash you.”

“Oh dear. What have I gotten myself into?” I said, laughing.

We emerged a happy couple, dressed for the sit-down meal Mr. Farquhard had ordered. Our Sunday flight from EDI was at 2:00p.m. There was one connection in Newark. We were as lighthearted as we had been during the wedding celebration.

“Hello, all,” Lane said as we walked into the dining room together.

“Hello, hello. Hard to think what it will be like the next four months without the two of ye,” David said.

“Yes, but you’ll have Bryan and Sally to work with, to take up the slack.”

“Yes, take a seat. I invited them tonight. Should be here shortly.”

“Great!” I said. We heard the massive castle door creak open on rusty hinges.

“Typical castle sound,” I added, laughing, “David, don’t think of oiling it while we are gone! It belongs to the ambience.”

David gave me a look.

Mr. Farquhard and the married pair entered.

“Hail, hail,” Lane began.

“I’m making the authoritative list of what’s off limits to film crew,” Mr. Farquhard said.

“Let me tell the kitchen we’re ready,” David said.

So we all found a seat, jabbered on about this and that, until drinks were served, and a tomato bisque soup appetizer was brought in.

“Let’s think of far out possibilities to put down,” Lane said.

“Playing Frisbee over the crystal,” said Iain, as he walked in.

“Hey, Iain. Okay, don’t take King Henry chairs out onto the lawn.” That was me.

“Or lift any chairs by their arms,” Lane.

“Or ‘borrow’ artifacts from other spots in the castle,” David said.

“Don’t pull the drapes around,” said Sally.

“Don’t shred the curtains in Lady Campbell’s room.”

“Don’t throw away any papers at all,” Bryan added.

“Or dredge my pretty lawn,” Lane said.

“Don’t be making new parking spots,” Mr. Farquhard said.

We were all in fits of laughter by the time the main course arrived, *coquilles St.*

Jacques, basically a large, bacon-wrapped scallop with a delicious white sauce.

“So, ye’ve a tight turnaround, Son, on yer new job?”

“Yes, it has to be finished and in place in three months. There are penalty clauses. And they have a team waiting for me to command,” he said.

“How did you get an international reputation so early?” I asked.

“By being so good,” he said, smiling at me.

I knew what he meant. I blushed.

“Lane, don’t be so cocky,” Mr. Farquhard said. “I’ve always had to warn ye about that. Makes someone want to take ye off yer perch.”

Lane smiled big, looking first at his father, and then at me.

“But they won’t, you know,” he said, taking another sip of white Bordeaux.

“So how are the honeymooners?” I asked Bryan and Sally, just as the first course dishes were being removed.

“Great,” Sally said. “And extending our honeymoon to the castle is a bonus. I’ve told the whole family about it. You haven’t changed your mind, have you, David?”

“No, indeed. I was hoping you hadn’t changed yours.”

“Yes, it’s going to be great here with the epigrapher,” Bryan said, his eyes bright. The main course was deposited at his place as if to underscore his pleasure.

“Who knows?” David said. “We might find we’re worth more than we thought.”

“Aye, that would be fine,” Mr. Farquhard said. “I love me new job. I’m picking it back up and the skill is just flowing into me fingers.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, and patted him.

“I’ll be back at the castle for a month the same time ye’re at your Civil War house in North Carolina for your vacation.”

I handed him the photographs of Lebanon.

“Pretty place,” he said, thumping it. Bit by bit, I was gaining approval.

We stayed and talked through chocolate mousse and coffee, and Lane and I arose at the same time.

“We’ll be turning in early, so we can get our things taken care of and out of here by 10 in the morning. An hour to the airport, plus arriving 3 hours early for international flights.”

“Have a great time there, Kenna,” Sally said, with maybe a little less tension.

“No need for Blackheart ghosts to follow me; Lebanon has its own.”

“Now I’ll not be hearing about our ghosts, Ms. Kenna,” David said. “And ye’ll not be taking our ghosts with you.” He got me back for telling him to oil his rusty castle door.

“We’ll miss you,” I said.

“Like a hole in the head,” David quipped.

We all hugged each other. Sally whispered to me. “I’ll look out for your interests, Kenna.”

“Are you human, or are you my guardian angel?”

“A little each, perhaps.”

“So it’s cheers to ye for a third of a year.”

How perverse my feelings were.

Suddenly I wondered if I could get along without Scotland that long, as I waved to them walking up the stairs our last night prior to flight.

Inside our room, I raced around re-packing until Lane called a halt. "Pull it to a close, m'Luv. We need our sleep."

"Oh, all right."

I lay down beside him. He pulled me to his chest, my head burrowed into his nest of hair that tickled my cheek. I lay there wondering what awaited us in the States. I had no idea, and might have changed my mind if I had I known what trials, mishaps, and sinister plans were a-foot. As I began to fret, he caressed my body leaning on top of him. My final memory was his big hand stroking my side, my arm, my chest, and encroaching deep, dark sleep.

#

From the second the alarm rang, our feet barely touched the floor, and we were racing to get there. Too late for second guessing, I had packed as well as I could. Lane had the car as near the door as it could go, and all his things in it. He had packed a box of his special tools and added it to the boxes at the door waiting for the Scottish shipping company on Monday. He bounded up the steps for my suitcases. He had everything packed before I came down the final time with pocketbook, camera, and coat. I had left my valuables in a safe in our room. Not that it eased my mind much, what with the free flow of all sorts of traffic and keys in Blackheart.

"I'm in," I said, throwing myself onto the leather seats and pulling my attachments in behind me, closing the door. My oversized pocketbook I threw in the back and put my seatbelt on. I held the camera in my lap.

"By the skin of our teeth." He shook his head at all my stuff and said, "Got your passport?"

"It's in this thing hanging around my neck."

“We both have too much. At least, we’re off.”

“We are off.” I patted his hand. “I can’t wait to share my secret past with you.”

“Can’t wait, either. I’m glad to leave the castle awhile. It can get claustrophobic. I’ve loved my trips to the States.”

“I had no idea you felt that way.”

“Now it’s out. Don’t tell Dad.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Where’s Iain?”

“Here he comes.”

Iain slipped behind the wheel, applied foot to pedal, and off we flew.

“I have a touch of claustrophobia, myself. That night I was followed by the black van—that was awful. Had I not surged ahead of him and turned off my lights, I wouldn’t be here to tell you about it, I don’t think.”

“Your cure or salvation might have been the death of ye. I don’t want to think about that—no, I can’t dwell on that.”

“No? Thank you, Lane.”

“Thank me, that you’re everything I hold dear?”

“You are to me, Lane.”

“Let’s stick around for each other, all right?”

“Yes, let’s. Iain, would you like to come with us one time?”

“Why not? You’re old enough to work on site as one of my helpers, just a matter of getting a work visa.”

“It would be fun, if we could solve the school problem.”

“It’s a thought.”

“So tell me, Lane, who is behind the stalking and the chasing?”

“Every day, ten times a day I ask myself, but find no new wisdom. The secretive man who abducted us in Bali, Mr. Bill, the Montfort’s, a St. Clair, who knows? Even though there’s a strong Masonic thread, we don’t know for sure who pulls his strings. Same minions, different group. Maybe it’s Illuminati. Maybe the Vatican. Maybe the Israeli Mafia.”

“I’ve researched Masons since our trip to Rosslyn. They are bent on building Solomon’s temple on the Temple Mount. And they want it to be Ezekiel’s perfect version. They quote the Scripture, ‘unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it, and they hang on the story of Zerubbabel.’”

“And what do they take that to mean?”

“It means someone will be on hand to help them build it, someone they call ‘lord.’”

“Oh, the Antichrist theme.”

“Everyone pooh-poohs it, I know. In a way, I do myself, but it explains a lot.”

“Such as?” He toyed with the wipers and flushed water over the windshield. The light was adding color to the hills outside, dancing over the drops of water.

“Such as why they are so intent on getting the Stone back, if that is the stone the Jews carried with them through the wilderness wanderings. Or if they believe it is.”

“Our stone—the Stone of Destiny?”

“Yes, Lane, one and the same. Our Stone of Destiny. Scotland’s Stone of Destiny.”

“Och, and we’ve only just gotten it back, sort of.”

“And they need it to wrap up history to bring it full circle. I bet they’ll use it as the cornerstone or as the rock under the throne chair place there to cry out. You remember that the first pick of the Knights Templar for the ‘New Jerusalem’ was Scotland.

“No, I’d forgotten.”

“I suppose evil has its own ‘progressive revelation.’”

“Now there’s an insight, itself.”

“Yes, the Knights Templar relished all sorts of supernatural elements beginning with Christian and migrating into pure magic. So they would want lineage and continuity. They would want the real Stone. And they would believe literally that it spoke.”

“Isn’t there a verse that says even the stones will cry out?”

“Yes. It’s a supernatural testimony Jesus referred to.”

“So if the Stone cries out, that ‘testifies’ it’s the right ‘lord.’ I get the picture.”

“Exactly!”

“Funny thing, Kenna, isn’t it, having the Armageddon 7 film set at the castle?”

“Lane!”

“Don’t startle me like that, Kenna.”

“Sorry. But the man who set up the deal—I bet he is one of these ‘Illuminati.’ Or else he works for them. All these strange events started happening right about when they came, didn’t they?”

“Hmmm. Not sure. When were we spirited away?”

“Oh, that was before, of course, in Bali.”

“Yes. I hadn’t told you all this, had I, Iain?”

“No, but I’m just along for the ride.”

I kept on track. “But when that didn’t work, then here comes the film crew. Then the Montfort’s. Then the descendants of those who had ‘seen’ the Stone in a storm. Then the car on my tail. Then the breaking of the castle relic, the offer to buy it from your old friend, Lord Montfort. They’re linked. That many different people couldn’t be interested in our holdings and activities all at the same time, otherwise.”

“Too many coincidences, you’re right. I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Nor do I. Makes me gladder than ever to leave.”

Lane was quiet.

“What, Lane? What’s bothering you?”

“What international flight stops a world-wide organization, Kenna?”

“None,” I said, falling silent myself.

“So we mustn’t put on our happy shoes, just yet.”

“No.”

“Wrong answer. We will pretend we are happy-go-lucky, but we will keep alert, careful. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Lane.” He rarely spoke in that no-nonsense tone. “Yes, I hear you.”

“Iain, we didn’t worry you too much, did we?”

“No, ma’am. You will be all right.”

That ended our conversation and our carefree moment. The next moments were spent pulling into Edinburgh airport and finding departure terminal. Lane grabbed a luggage cart, and Iain helped us load our luggage on it. We hugged Iain good-bye curbside.

We entered the terminal and got in the check-in queue, then into the checking line for American Airlines where we stood forever in snaking lines just to go through security.

Soon we had our seats. Mine was by the window. Lane was entirely too big for the inside seat. Besides, when he stood up he made a pathway for me to exit.

I pulled out my Steve Berry novel, appropriate under the circumstances, and started reading.

It wasn’t long before we were airborne. Relief. Unfortunately we had to make a tight connection at Newark airport for Charlotte. I tried to forget it and lose myself in the book. It worked for a while, but the book was too tedious for my brain, and I needed to use the rest room. Once we reached our cruising altitude, I slipped out of my seat. On my way back I noticed a man who looked familiar. This had to be our film producer, Elton Highsmith. I was about to speak when he turned the other way.

As I sat back down, I wrote a note to Lane and made an x in the spot where he sat.

“I’m sure that is Mr. Highsmith. You check him out,” I wrote.

Lane stared hard at me.

We are not getting off easily, I thought. Our backs would be watched continuously. I shook my head. Then I bowed my head and prayed, “Lord, please save our lives, and protect Lane’s son.” I mustered all my vision forcefully for the coming days. I had done a mission tour of duty in Poland one summer, and I had learned some tricks there. I would need every one of them.

I found Lane’s hand and put mine in his. He squeezed it hard.

I squeezed back and leaned on his shoulder.

He leaned his head onto mine which for now was enough.

I slept through most of the flight and woke to the flight announcements from the cockpit. Food and drinks were on the way. My mind flipped instantly to the all-seeing eye, but I was beginning to understand. How would they find out what we knew or would discover? Who could protect us from unidentified stalkers? All I could do was obsess about the all-seeing eye prying, unnerving, waiting to extract what we knew, us sitting ducks for unidentified stalkers wanting to kill us. Nothing was clear at this point.

Oh my. Lane had to work on buildings in precarious places. My prayer raised the stakes; opened possibilities. I heard heavy breathing, only to discover it was my own. Lane pressed my hand onto my stomach.

A flight attendant approached

“She’s having a hard time breathing,” Lane told her.

“Is she asthmatic?” she asked.

“No. She’s never experienced this before.”

“Breathe deep, Kenna,” Lane ordered, pushing my stomach in.

“Anxiety attack, more than likely,” she said.

I took a deep breath and caught it. I repeated it, and my air waves cleared. The two of them helped me, and gradually, I was back in control.

Then the hot, camphorated towels that came helped.

The attendant pulled back, and the airplane landed.

“Be ready to leap, Kenna,” Lane whispered in my ear. I obeyed, and when the plane stopped and the release seatbelt sign went off, we raced out, Lane apologizing to all and sundry for needing to make a quick connection as we plowed through.

“Let’s take a cart,” he said, pulling out coins to release one.

“There’s an elevator. Quick, we’ll be there in time for the bags to come off the belt.”

At the belt, we had to wait a long time for our suitcases, and we didn’t see the film man again. Lane pulled the cart over and grabbed our luggage piece by piece and we hustled to go through U.S. customs and passport control. Then we hustled to the gate for the cramped U.S. Air Commuter flight to Charlotte.

Boarding by category, I identified no suspicious watchers. We departed without incident.

My brother had offered us his place to stay, but we needed our own space, so we had taken one of those extended-stay hotels. We picked up our rental car.

“I’ll drive, Lane. You’re tired.”

“Oh, no, I’ve got it. You forget—I’ve worked back and forth several years, now.”

“All right, whatever you say. Be sure to drive on the right, not on the left, side.”

The car rental attendant pulled the car up and I climbed in the wrong side and waited while Lane loaded the luggage and opened his map.

I looked around to stare right in the face of the film crew man, Highsmith. When I spoke, he looked like he didn't know me. I've heard a lot about doubles, but this was crazy. Lord, I hated this.

As soon as Lane got in, I dumped the information of what just happened.

"No!" He hit the steering wheel.

"What can we do?"

"Kenna, for the first time in me life, I am at a loss. I do not know. But I'll say this: we'll be doing a wee bit of praying, that's for sure."

"Down on the old knees. You think he's headed for the same place we are?"

"No, but no doubt he knows where we'll be." He grabbed my hand. "Let's pray."

"Lord, we need your protection. We need your guidance. And we ask You to make seeing eyes blind, and hide us from the enemy."

"Oh thank you, Lane," I said, and hugged him.

"Well, let's go to our place," he said, pulling off with a screech.

"So much for hiding," I quipped. "Lord, make hearing ears deaf to screeching cars."

Lane laughed.

"At least we still have our sense of humor."

"And each other. And faith."

"Yes." I gripped the door as we wound through Charlotte's multi-laned traffic and Lane stayed just above the speed limit and in the right-hand lanes. White-knuckled upon arrival, we checked in, found our suite on second floor, and Lane began pulling in all our belongings. I stayed inside to order them and make it livable for the coming weeks. I picked up the phone and ordered subs delivered. We were tired and hungry, more than ready to eat and sleep, yet hardly willing to yield to the normalcy of either activity, while we waited for our food. Stocking our larder would have to wait for later.

Chapter 31: Sea Change at *South!* Inc.

“We leave something of ourselves behind when we leave a place....

And there are things in us that we can find again only

by going back there.--Pascal Mercier, *Night Train to Lisbon*

Next morning Lane and I reported to our respective jobs. I dropped him off at his, because he had a fellow worker who would drive him back to our hotel. I arrived at my building about 9 a.m., a departure from my customary pre-Scotland 8:00 a.m. appearance.

I walked into the office complex and into a full-blown celebration.

The receptionist met me at the door with streamers in her hair and a fizzy drink in her hand which she offered me. I took it, sipping while we walked.

“Welcome home!” she said, hugging me gingerly around the drink I held.

We merged into the large reception area. As soon as Gaynelle saw me she came and hugged me like she rarely did. Then I noticed my benefactor, the big man Bob, who strode over to me. We shook hands. Arlene, the new gal when I left, had stuck it out and greeted me next.

“Hail, the conquering heroine!” Gaynelle proclaimed as she stood by my side, her arm around me, and asked Jack to photograph us. “This was a trial venture, you know, that worked! We must have photos!”

“Worked better than even *she* thought,” Jack said. “She brought back her own Highlander!”

Everybody laughed, me included.

“Yes, Kenna, the real party is a Saturday night three months from now. It’s your grand sendoff, aka command performance. You and your husband must come, and he must wear his kilt!” Bob said.

“Well, all right,” I said. “Though, then all the ad companies will want to hire him on as their model and keep him here in this country,” I said and laughed.

Bob put his hand on my shoulder and took my hand, looking at the camera as it clicked. “Good stories, Kenna. You have energy and an ear for it. We need to talk today at lunch time. Is one o’clock all right?”

“Yes, of course. Will you be here until then?”

“No, but I’ll be back by then. Meet you in the lobby.”

“I will. And thank you, by the way, for believing in me, Bob.”

“You are welcome, Kenna. You deserve credit for bringing expansion to *South!* Inc.”

“We’ve missed you,” Gaynelle said.

“Well, I’ll be getting on, so I can get back, Gaynelle,” said Bob. “Again, welcome home, Kenna.”

“Later, Gaynelle,” Bob said, finger to head.

I smiled and shook my head as he left.

“I’ve missed you,” Arlene said. “Gaynelle doesn’t have enough time to teach me things.” Her moment of boldness regretted, she darted timid eyes at Gaynelle.

“The cost of progress,” Gaynelle said. “Kenna, go get some refreshments. We’re impolite, making you listen to us without food. It’s a long time until one o’clock.”

I took the plate extended picked out salty snacks, a couple of cucumber sandwiches, grapes, salted pecans, and other Southern delicacies. The South allured me with food. *Au contraire*, Gaynelle, one o’clock might be too soon.

“We’d have made this lunch, but then the surprise element would have been lost,” Gaynelle said. “So you’re the only one who gets lunch off today, Kenna. This is their lunch.”

I headed to my office with the plate and then stopped. I probably didn’t *have* an office.

I called back to Gaynelle, “Do I still have the same office?”

“Well, no. I’ll show you our interim solution in a minute.”

I balanced my plate in air, waiting.

“We have a ‘guest work space’ for you,” Gaynelle said, taking the lead.

Interim solution sounded ominous, guest work space even more so. *A roving editor roves, Silly. I should have figured, but, knocked me off base. Sharing an open space didn’t excite me.*

“Did you bring more pictures with you?” people asked

“You better believe it. At least 10,000, all wonderful, close to as good as a Scotland tour group. Not exactly a press packet, but almost as good. Maybe I can show slides when I introduce Lane to you.”

“We’ll have a local Scot, a bagpiper, coming,” Arlene said.

Gaynelle pulled me aside to reveal a side section with a window we had formerly located the fax and printer in as the spot she had claimed for me. A freestanding wall separated it from the traffic. It was as good as any open plan office possibly could be. I would only be here three months, so this was perfectly adequate.

“It’s great, Gaynelle. I brought my laptop. I should probably trade it in, if we have a newer model.

“With all the abuse you give it. We do have one I’ll grab for you.”

“Okay, what do you want me to work on now?”

“Have you written a story for this month, yet?”

“Not one I’ve completed.”

“Well, table that one.”

“Ah, you’ve got a new project, I can tell.”

“I want you to do a piece about the emerging phenomenon of international marriages.”

“I could, but do I know enough about it?”

“No, but I have four couples I want you to interview who face the different issues each venture poses—you can write about remote marriages, nomadic marriages, single working partner marriage, and DINK (double income, no kids) marriage. And your style is an alternating home base marriage. Endemic to each type is probably the difference between their backgrounds and ethnicities. This is not the typical article about open marriages, Kenna, nor even the gay-lesbian marriage. In this series, we are exploring differing external formats, and only using the glue of caring in whatever unique form it comes.”

“What a fascinating concept, Gaynelle. It sounds amazing and yes, I could. All right, I’ll need their contact numbers.”

“I’ll get them. One is Irish-American to American Black, one Israeli-American, one German-Russian, and the other African American-Asian, and yours, of course, Southern American to native Scot. You’ll write about five different viewpoints, five different marriage formats. We want the slant to be modernistic revamps for changing cultural norms. Have you finished mixing with the magazine loiterers at the buffet line?”

“For now, Gaynelle. You know me.”

She gave me a look and marched off to fill my orders which pleased me.

I sorted through the desk drawers, trying to claim my spot. I did a lot of fussing to make my nest. The introvert in me needed a protected zone for the creative juices and ideas to start flowing. I found a plant and placed it next to the end of the wall to further define a ‘no trespassing zone.’ The last thing I wanted to look was accessible. Having completed the task of hiding myself, Gaynelle showed up with her prepared worksheet.

“Sounds like fun.”

She gave me a quick hug, left, and looked back in.

“Bob’s going to offer you a raise.”

“Oh. He likes the setup?”

“For now—until or unless Scottish articles start to bore the Charlotte reading public.”

“Readership falling off?”

“I’ll let him talk, first.”

That meant new tactics, inroads into the Charlotteans’ mind set and beyond as we need to expand our readership into the entire South. I immersed myself in the subject notes Gaynelle had thoughtfully compiled, looking for a can opener to get into a totally new concept. An overview with insets of five stories—each a different mix of backgrounds, professions, and solutions. Cultural preferences would play a role. All in-city at present, exception, us--in Scotland and at home, we lived on the countryside.

Fortunately Lane’s and my upstairs suite was conceived as a studio apartment suite over a first story of offices, so I could set up meetings at a downstairs coffee shop on street level.

So I began setting up appointments by telephone, noting them by their day and time on the calendar conveniently provided by my editor-in-chief. I set two for the next day, two on Thursday, and would have to perform our own interview on a Sunday.

I could work up the storyline and marriage definitions first, changing it as information rolled in. Tonight I could start the interview with myself and Lane. I wondered how Lane was faring. I fired off a call to him, but failed to connect. I collected questions to provide depth without violating privacy of each couple, both intrusive and not-so. That focused the playing field. How long this article would take to write was anybody’s guess. I checked my watch, thinking ‘not long until I needed to go downstairs to meet Bob.’

Gaynelle had mug shots of the couples I would add to in their favorite spot, and at home.

I stashed my materials neatly in a file folder, one of five labeled folders. I added a blank form for photo releases and a recent copy of *South!* Inc. to each folder. I clipped their

photo inside left. I stacked these all together, found a cassette recorder, and presto, I had the project packet.

Then I researched the subject and read further, right up until almost time.

Like a good employee, my notebook and pen accompanied me, tucked down in the recesses of my pocketbook. Down in the front lobby, I wandered back and forth so he could spot me easily when he came in. Bored, I sat down.

Not 30 seconds later, Bob appeared.

“Let’s go to a little restaurant down the street for sushi; that suit you?”

“Certainly.”

We set out on foot.

“I brought you all the issues of our magazine since you’ve been gone. Remind me to get them out of the car when we get back.”

“Terrific; I’ve missed reading a few of them.”

“We’ll set up a subscription for you.”

“So I am going back as your representative and roving reporter, then. And you have an assignment for me that blends the content of the articles, somehow.”

“Sharp. That’s what I like. Yes, viewing them all simultaneously gives overview. You can see clout; you perceive gaps. Ah, here we are.”

He held the door open for me, and waited.

The Japanese receptionist was prompt. “Two?”

“Yes.”

We sat in sturdy, dark brown chairs.

“So, Mr. Bob, which article was your favorite?”

“Put me on the spot, will you? Perhaps the one about the film set taking over Blackheart Heights.”

“Ah.”

“But my next favorite was the one on the Scottish National Party and their uphill climb to national sovereignty against an overwhelming majority who prefer world solidarity.”

“One for splash and one for content.”

“Which was your personal favorite?”

“Back to the Stone, the first one, I think.”

“Yes, the article that jump-started your new career. That was amazing, as well.”

“Yes. Speaking of castles, I’m thinking about a series on Scotland’s castles, or Scotland’s landed gentry. How they maintain and fund their castles—a recurring series, one you could plug to alleviate the risk of boring our readers.” I anticipated future discussion.

We paused to place our orders, and then returned to the thread.

“We’ve been thinking, Kenna, on a new idea. We’d like you to curry favor with some big names and do fireside, in-depth articles—the type that ushers our reader into the prince’s home, the high names, and a drawing room scoop on a leading personality of the day. That dovetails nicely with your own idea. Just broadens it.”

“Alex Salmond, Liam Neeson—names like those?”

“Exactly. David McCallum and Ewan McGregor, and we could claim Rod Stewart.”

I’ll have to have a big moniker after my name to get press secretaries interested.”

“Yes, and you will. You have a new title, as of your party coming up. That should help, along with a new salary. We’ll supplement with reviews from personalities beyond *South! Inc.*”

“That is wonderful. I’m definitely curious.”

“How would—and he whispered a sum in my ear—sound?”

“Like heaven,” I said.

“Well, I want you to feel important enough to do the job we are seeking. It would be almost a news magazine approach, just richer and finer—let’s all get together and sort out the interpretation of times and subjects. Treat the controversial with a soft touch. Maybe view and photograph one’s bee collection, another’s curio art collection, another’s polo, a country weekend party—you know—inside track to the rich and famous, but classier.”

“Oh, yes, I do know. I love it. I’m getting all sorts of ideas while we’re talking. Bob, if you don’t mind, jot down your ideas, so I’ll have a stable to start with. Should I let up on Scottish subjects *per se*, just go for broad spectrum subjects that happen to be Scottish?”

“I think so. Now, while you’re here, maybe you can write a couple of articles on sources of Scottish entertainment, cuisine, and fun.”

“You mean mainstream haggis?”

“Ha-ha. What about an article or more on the Highland Games in North Carolina? What about an article about McAlister College in Minnesota? They are out of season, but probably one will fit in the time span, perhaps on our vacation.”

“So, underscore the Scottish connection not just in the South or Scotland.”

“Yes, double blind testing.”

“So the roving staff is good for another year.”

“For sure.”

“And my new pay scale goes into effect now?”

He smiled. “You drive a hard bargain. Yes, of course, Kenna.”

“Thank you, Sir. I am excited.”

“I am, as well, as are Friends of the magazine and the Board.”

We finished up, left the table. Bob placed a tip under his plate and picked up the bill.

“Busy execs,” he said.

Back at the office, I had time to flesh out a few more questions for tomorrow's first interview. It had been a full day.

I couldn't wait to get home. Charlotte traffic was a bear, so unlike Bonnie Rigg. Up at our room, a peck on the cheek from Lane later, I was downloading my day.

"Looks like I'm set for work, Lane. New directions, new emphases—they will change our lives once we return. I'm on staff, secure for a year, a new title to be announced at our sendoff celebration, and a sizable raise, as of right now." I told him how much.

"My, my, Kenna, that's great. My project is off and running, too, no more glitches than normal. Everything is on schedule, in fact a little ahead of schedule. I will have to be a slave driver, but I don't mind that."

"Slave driver is good; long I'm not the slave," I said, "or the driver."

"Such wishy-washy standards," he said. "One for you, one for the rest of the world."

"At least I'm rigidly honest about my wishy-washy standards."

"Ha. Aren't you the funny girl?"

"Oh, yes, always. Oh, and I have to interview us for an article on our marriage type."

"You can update me on that one, later. Have you noticed anyone following you today?" he asked.

"No, I didn't, but my head was so pre-occupied and entertained, I wouldn't have. Come to think of it, a man attended the office party I didn't know and no one introduced me. I thought that strange. And he did stare at me a lot. Guess I was too conceited to think of the spy theme; I thought he was checking me out."

"Yes, spying can be a pleasant diversion," Lane said.

Later I realized I should have picked up on his concern, not the cute innuendo, and asked him what had happened. The worry in his voice flew right over my head. Lane's worries had gone subterranean.

Chapter 32: Peeling Back the Layers

“And night, the dark blue hunter, followed fast.”

—George W. Russell, *The Unknown God*

My work ran smoothly on a version of its old track. I noticed, however, that I enjoyed a new authority. Lane’s work was intense; he was always tired. He didn’t talk shop much.

Day in and day out, work was thorough; work was good. Lane and I were two professionals commuting to separate jobs in the real world that converged at night and unloaded what we’d experienced individually. I scheduled my next interviews in the mid-afternoons so I could return home early, thus avoiding Charlotte’s rush hour.

On the last two weekends, we had relaxed, eaten out, visited my brother’s house on Lake Norman, and visited a friend of mine from prior to the marriage. We had tried two churches.

These three months provided a welcome change from being chased and living in a constant state of fear. At first, it had felt almost normal, free of former tensions. The sultry North Carolina summer and the familiar home surroundings muted the feelings of being watched and followed. Still, my fear did not reach the fever pitch it had escalated to before we left Scotland, a pitch approaching mania. Everywhere we had moved about in Scotland had produced fear and foreboding. Sally, bless her heart, had reminded me right before we left that the all seeing eye was emblematic of the ubiquitous Masons or rather, Illuminati. This was a disquieting thought. Watchers watch; that’s what they do.

Why we were persons of interest was unclear, but that an obscure priest believed his dying call from God was to convey his guardianship role over to us to secure the Stone of Destiny against international forces which would redirect it to evil use in the service of the Antichrist.

Amidst the confusing and spotty real data, much depended on the sense of serendipity and leading to this point to embrace a rock so unique that it spoke. The Stone of Destiny was also unique in the world with its enduring role as both spiritual and temporal coronation stone...no matter how confusing its provenance, history, and origin.

That overshadows the remaining confusion. Many believed what Scotland held was not the original stone. We had been anointed by a lone priest as guardians of a rock that was supposedly safe at home in Edinburgh Castle and secured by guards night and day. Only the two of us and one or more active secret societies knew better.

Watching a 'conspiracy theory' film the last Friday night ended in a current idea.

"Lane, have you talked to your son, brother, or father lately?"

"No. Why? Do I need to?"

"No, but if you do call anytime soon, ask to speak to Highsmith."

"Ah. Check out his itinerary. See if that was really him that we saw."

"You got it, Big Boy."

"I was putting it off, but I'll call tomorrow or Sunday. Oh, Sunday, we are going to a Messianic Christian church to try it out. Then eat at your brother's."

"So tomorrow, then, you'll call home to Scotland, and ask for Highsmith. At least then we'd know who the international players were, or assume we know."

"We'll do it." He gave me a big conspiratorial grin.

So far, we had not been able to fit in a visit to Lebanon, so I concluded it might have to wait until our last month. There was just too much to pack in now. Lane was always subject to being gone on his construction project, always on call. Something was likely to happen that required immediate attention.

"Let's rent a film or two, tomorrow."

"I like that idea, Kenna. How about Armageddon 7?"

“Ha-ha-ha. I need to select the slides of Scotland for the party.”

“Great idea.”

I ordered and re-ordered them, making entertaining notes.

Most of my co-workers were Scotophiles, nuts about the subject. It was close to a prerequisite for the job.

South! Inc. started planning the *big* party even before we came. It made the sendoff special and official and Lane must absolutely appear in his kilt with sporran. So in addition to day-to-day work of interviewing couples for articles, I planned a program for colleagues.

I wondered at my new salary. Bob-the penurious had been generous with me.

Anyhow, next day when Lane called home, he found out something curious. Highsmith had not been at the site and had not been seen at Blackheart Heights the last two weeks. No amount of hashing theories around between us yielded any brilliant reasons. We just knew he had followed us to Charlotte for Somebody’s reason.

Next morning we dressed for church and entered the world of exotic chant-like Hebrew, Hebrew phrases written on walls and screens, Hebrew music pouring out. We talked with enthusiasts about the proposed new temple. We were offered a package trip to Israel. The sermon quoted Yeshua prophesying about the Temple's ruin as recorded in Luke 21:6, with its destruction a generation later. Supercessionists that included many Evangelicals say this means the end to any lingering importance to the Temple or a separate state of Israel.

However in quoting the verse, the preacher said, “But in Yeshua's account, destruction of the Holy City, which included the Temple, was not a permanent state of affairs but rather a season. ‘Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the age of the Gentiles has run its course,’ Luke 21:24b, actually obligates faithful Jews to rebuild.”

“Of course, the main problem with rebuilding lies with another house of worship occupying the Temple Mount space. There is reason to believe that Israelis of all backgrounds

show interest in rebuilding. Not only ultra-Orthodox, but many other Jews look forward to rebuilding the Temple, including non-religious Jews and many seculars worldwide.

“Greater numbers of Jews visit the Temple Mount every year than before, and there is an active core movement dedicated to rebuilding, including Christian Zionists.

“In contrast, Supersessionists unsympathetically reject Christian Zionist support for this Jewish endeavor. Critics of Christian Zionism find no biblical mandate for rebuilding the Temple or maintaining any distinction of the Jewish people.

“Basically, we think all prohibitions described in Hebrews apply only to observing sacrifices as a replacement of Jesus. As long as they attest to being only a shadowing of what was done by Christ in the body, they are allowed.”

Why this was so important is that our stone, the beloved Stone of Destiny, only made sense as an object of international intrigue if it were linked to the building of the third and final Temple.

Lane and I left flabbergasted.

I had been so sure Christian Zionism was anti-Christ in spirit and nature. My judgment was not so intractable now. We knew who not to enlist to vet in stewarding the Stone.

###

We left our unusual new church environment and headed to my brother’s house. My brother had decried my hasty action to leave the U.S. for Scotland and had picked at my feelings of self-worth. We had always been seated at opposite poles on conservative, experimental issues, on creativity of expression and on straight-laced orthodoxy, so our reunion made me nervous.

“Lane, welcome, welcome,” Robert said at the door, shaking hands and clapping Lane’s shoulder.

Lane, however, hugged him heartily, nearly crushing the breath from him.

I smiled from behind them. Robert came and hugged me.

“Lauren, so good to see you,” I said, and hugged his wife.

“We’ve been looking forward to your visit,” the pretty brunette said. Robert was a redhead like me.

We discussed our plans, told about our weird church experience. I was sure Robert disapproved. However, he surprised me.

“Interesting, what you heard. And your coverage of the Stone of Destiny in Scotland interests me as well. I find so few people here in the U.S. know anything much about it at all. And it’s the only stone pointing to a sacred kingship left in the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“It speaks the authority of the Queen as the head of state.”

“Well said, Robert,” Lane said.

“It’s been some experience for you, I’ll wager.”

“You got that right, Brother.”

“I feel better about Kenna, knowing you’re looking out for her,” he told Lane.

We all laughed.

“I’ve read a lot of your articles, Sis.”

“Thank you.”

“You know there is a popular sect that believes some of what one of those legends claims regarding the Stone.”

“And what would that be?” I asked, amazed he would know anything about a sect.

“British Zionism, or Garner Ted Armstrong in America, ‘the plain truth about the world tomorrow.’”

“Okay, and are you warning us off them, or are you recommending them?”

“Neither. Let’s sit down. We all ready, Lauren? It’s that they believe the British Isles were populated by the Jews and that British royals are Jews, proving God’s promise to David to keep someone of his seed on the throne forever, I Kings 1:2-4. They said Queen Elizabeth is that person.”

“We’ll have to read up on it.”

“I don’t know what, if anything, their heresy is,” Robert said, “but it doesn’t always have to be something doctrinally hideous, could be only a little bit weird.”

“How true,” I said, wondering at the sources for truth that expanded like light around us, even while people were followed, their wires tapped.

“Seems like there’s a book you might want to read. I’ll check with my musician friend of Scottish extract. I think he mentioned it.”

Awesome family reunion and I didn’t need to have worried. We ended up looking at photos of us in earlier days, of mom and dad, and rummaging around in news clips.

Sunday night, at leisure at home, I went through my internal lists. External lists were never productive for me at all. In the quiet moment, however, when I propped my legs up with a book in hand, I could think.

“Oh, no, Lane! Where is it? I’ve lost it, I know I have.”

“What, Kenna, what? You’ll give me a heart attack, one of these days.”

Hopping off the couch, I raced to my corner which held my pocketbook. Frantically, I rummaged through tickets, disclosures, passport, and paper items which, in all my hurry and bustle I had failed to file in a safer place.

“I’m glad these places have a safe. Lane, figure the combo out and give me the number. Here’s my passport to stash.”

“Is that what you were looking for?”

“No, Lane. The letter from McAllister the priest gave us.” I pulled out makeup kit, credit card holder, certificates.

“Oh, thank goodness. I thought I’d dropped it out. Here it is, the letter Father McFarlane gave us. We have to read it.”

“Yes, we must.”

“Is anything more important than a letter given on a deathbed?” I looked at him accusingly.

“Don’t glare at me. I didn’t lose it, and I wasn’t making fun of you.”

“You should have made sure I didn’t lose it.”

“Right, right, right. I get your female logic. Guess I’d better hold on for the whirlwind tour. What does it say?”

“Scared to look. Hold my hand, Lane.”

He gripped my hand firmly, until I jerked it away.

“Why did the priest have a letter from him, a few centuries removed? I mean, I know he was an avid letter writer, but--”

“Are you going to kill us with suspense? Open it and read it, you crazy woman.”

“Watch it,” I said, slowly opening the letter, focusing on the elaborate script, the occasional misspelled word.

“So?” He drummed his fingers on the side of his lounge chair.

“‘My dearest friend Jeremy,’ he says. Oh, yes, Jeremy was his childhood chum, the one who became the head of the Cloister in 1738. I have been through rigors which have challenged my faith, and lost nearly everything I held dear, immigrating to America. Pray for me, brother in Christ. For although we espouse different traditions, my heart knows yours and that we share a bond that earth, sea, and separation cannot sever, for I lost my wife at sea, and must return to Scotland for family reasons, if not this year, then the next or the next. ‘I have

struggled hard with the task you gave me, Jeremy, and have found an interim solution. The Reverend James Campbell from Campbeltown, called to the Cape Fear region, owns 200 acres of land on the west side of the Cape Fear across from the cemetery which is located on a high bluff. He has agreed to be custodian of the Stone with all due discretion until a better and more permanent solution can be found.

‘Campbell has a vision for three places of worship. He already has a small one on the west bank, Rogers Meeting House, and he hopes to establish a church up on the Bluff.

‘I propose that we leave the Stone with the man of God on his property to either bury or display, depending on which would do it least damage, and which would keep it as hidden as is necessary as per our agreement, and then, once a meeting place has been built stationary and permanent enough to house it, that it be built into its structure or into a grave, marked with a puzzle which would identify it to someone generations to come as the Stone which they seek.

‘Let us remain in correspondence as we need to transfer the Stone which the Hebrew children followed around in the wilderness many times.

“‘I can tell you that now it will be secure under hundred foot pines, if you can envision that. Who knows the times? I am neither a prophet nor the son of one.

‘My heart is heavy and I will every thought to planning these churches and tending the congregations for The Reverend Campbell in the days to come.

Ever, your faithful friend

And servant,

Alexander McAllister”

“Fer the love of all that’s holy!” Lane said.

“Yes. How could it go so deep? This has dredged my heart, Lane.”

“Who’d a-thought?” Lane shook his head back and forth.

“Yes, now I’ve got one more job to do before we can hope to push the puzzle some further, Lane. More research into Bluff and our ancestors who came up on the Cape Fear River to stay. And all I ever thought was, ‘my, this is a pretty place to live.’”

“Oh, my love, what have I gotten myself into, marrying the likes of ye? I am in deep, as they say. I believe we must re-dig the old trenches. And now I must hie me hither into sleep. Give me the letter and the passport. Safety, first.”

I yielded them, all defenses down, and played ‘nice kitty,’ curling up beside him.

The Temple Institute Israel wants to build the third temple where the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock now rest on the Temple Mount.

“Lane, the list of people who want to build the third temple of Solomon is growing. It includes of Messianic Jews, Zionist Christians, The Temple Institute Israel, the Masons, and who all else, I am not sure. All working as one or all at cross purposes. The same building, with different motives. Maybe Catholics and Russian Orthodox do at present?”

“Such a grand plan.”

“In fact, I’m reasonably certain that the Masons are bringing in their own Lord for the event. So we have groups diametrically opposed in purposes united to do one thing—to have Christ sit on the Throne. Only several will seat the Antichrist on the Throne, if they can.”

“And all the Christians saying, ‘God won’t let it come to this.’”

“Yeah, did anybody read Thessalonians lately?”

“Did you know the Masons have a special section dedicated to the building of the Temple? They have retreats to it, but the recruits must be serious about it. They must work hard while they are there. And it is not on the advertised list of activities.”

“No!”

###

Finally the last week of our stay in Charlotte had come. Lane's building was wrapping up in the way that only the best things do, on schedule and under budget.

My work at *South!* Inc. was also coming to an orderly end. My feature stories on international marriages were completed. When I thought about it, they really had nothing whatever to do with the vision Bob had bought me into in encapsulating Scotland for the magazine, so in many ways it underscored my severance from the home base. I doubted I would ever return in this capacity, even though I had no real idea of what my newly-created position would turn into back in Scotland.

That left us packing again. One could tire of it.

And planning for the party at the Ritz-Carlton: weren't we the up and coming little Charlotte magazine! I suspected we were slated for going national.

I reviewed the order of our Scotland slides in the trays. The first 30 would illustrate my talk; the other hundreds would be on a timed slide show during the dinner and talks. Suddenly, I realized the truth about the situation.

We were the show for the party. This wasn't about us at all. This was about *South!* Inc.'s going national, maybe even international.

David and Lane had already agreed on castle ads in the magazine. David had hired a graphic designer who had produced stunning Old-World elegant ads they had bought for the upcoming issue.

Never in all my life and I repeat, *never*, have I unknowingly achieved the spotlight. This afternoon, I promised myself, I will pick up Lane's kilt from the cleaner's so one of us would look good.

###

Everyone was in a festive mood wanting to see the hot, young, bearded bagpiper the company had hired. We arrived while people were still gathering at the Carlton-Ritz during the meet-greet section. I was dressed in my party dress of metallic copper. Lane wore his kilt.

The men in Scottish skirts greeted each other happily.

Then Bob gave him the signal to begin.

He walked to the steps looking down on the entrance where the people were arriving, and began playing the pipes. The notes throbbed into the night, undulating in a faintly familiar song.

I got shots of him alone and of him with Lane. Someone offered to get us three, and I let them. Then we returned inside to talk and prepare our slide set up in the main room where the screen already was installed. Tonight we listened to the bagpipes intermittently, and during the slide show, had pretty music playing in the background.

Several photographers worked the event.

We mixed among light hors d'oeuvres and wine, talking and networking. Those who had placed ads had been invited, as well. I got a chance to eat delicious oysters, dipped in a cream sauce, and tiny tomato sandwiches until Bob called time for our Scotland slide show. I introduced Lane. We told a little of our story of love and kinship, and he threaded the slides together with his commentary.

At the end, after the clapping had died down, Bob came and introduced me and the work I had done, beginning with my article about the Stone of Destiny and my going on staff as a stringer, making the transition seamless.

“Thank you, Everyone. I have to say I am excited to be the liaison for *South! Inc.* based in Scotland, searching out stories for our enjoyment of the greater Charlotte area. Scotland may be small, but boasts the earliest magna carta of a free state in existence. It is the home of my ancestry in four separate lines. When I moved to Scotland on a shoestring, I had

just lost my uncle, my friend of many years, my parents earlier, and my cousin was moving across the country. I went to the Highland hills as a photojournalist to cover the return of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland after 700 years, delivered back to them by Prince Andrew on St. Andrews' Day, November 26th, 1996. A spoil of war taken by Edward I in 1296, it sat under Prince Edward's Chair in Westminster Abbey, England. Look it up in *South!* Inc.'s Winter Issue no. 37, 1997. Now Scotland retains its coronation stone in well-fortified Edinburgh Castle. It is said to speak when the rightful king sits on it. This man, Lane Campbell in the lovely kilt, drove me to Edinburgh Castle to witness the royal handoff. Long story short, Lane and I married not long after at his castle Blackheart Heights where we live most of the year. In another month, Lane and I will return. If you like, you can join us there on one of our resort package deals. The ads in our magazine give you a special discount. Well, enjoy the rest of the party. I am sure Gaynelle has a word, as well."

Gaynelle came up in her green dress. "We appreciate the work of all of you--from writers to copywriters to computer and printer technicians to Board members, to correspondents. Please continue eating as you enjoy the slides."

Returning to my table, I joined Bob, the Board Members, Lane, the bagpiper, Gaynelle, and other of the top staff element.

We were eating smoked salmon, exotic salads, breads filled with creamy crab dip, and other delightful foods from the table's laden fare. Conversation was brisk and friendly. Bob was cordial. Gaynelle was sprightly, full of ideas and excitement, talking about projects to come.

Just as I had taken a bite of salmon, a board member I did not know so well on my left side, leaned toward me and said, "If you know what's good for you, you'll back off following the Stone."

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

He smiled a wrong sort of smile to let me know he knew I had heard, and he knew that I had received the message.

Chapter 33: Yellow Ribbon

Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful,
strong tree.... Trees are sanctuaries.—Hermann Hesse,

Bäume, Betrachtungen und Gedichte

The first thing we saw driving up through the grove on either side was the old oak tree which visually divided the view of Lebanon's red tin roof and two-story Victorian porch. A chestnut oak of about 50 feet, the old oak was a unifier, an emotional rivet for all the generations who played around it, and a potting bed for flower gardens between the root arms.

I had no idea, driving up the gravel road to the hardy antebellum fence, that bringing Lane home with me would change everything between us. Lebanon's ghosts would exact their toll, as would walking past the daily gauntlet of photographs durable as that fence, all those brown prints, black and white photographs hidden in files, lurking on antique tables, relatives locked behind bubble glass, and hanging on every wall, stern eyes forever following, boring holes into my psyche, deciphering every thought. I was not prepared for the power of the visitation, nor for my sleepy Southern past waking me to interrogate my return with a jolt.

Nostalgic and curious spirits; I must curb their questions.

It was a muggy first day of August. We walked from the picket fence covered in ivy to the steps and up, hints of magnolia fragrance lingering, June bugs beat out a staccato symphony in greeting. Lane, I could tell, took it all in. I pointed right toward an extant mimosa and behind to the remembered pecan grove and a collapsed barn, now gone. Ivy wound up the long front porch columns. Though gone only a year, I registered a dozen year's changes.

Someone noticed our approach. Lane tensed up, on guard. I remembered when I had raced up the steps to see my cousin, abruptly braking at the top step before a hateful presence.

Ghosts were a given at Lebanon.

Exciting to think Douglas was here to meet us and stay the first weekend, hosting a cousin reunion so we could meet piles of relatives. Reports were fine, but long talks into the night, better. Her presence would mitigate our grief at her dad's passing.

No sooner had I thought that than my foot touched the top step, the door opened, and my grinning cousin hugged me tight and demanded introduction, taking the pall off the dark hallway entrance backlit through Victorian bric-a-brac.

"Hey, Kenna, you look fantastic. Lane, I didn't get to really visit at the wedding, but I loved Blackheart Heights and Scotland. Welcome to Lebanon. I'm glad you'll be staying August until our new crew comes. I said good-bye to Kenna forever, and back she comes with her trophy Scot! But not wearing a kilt, I see."

"It's in me luggage," Lane said, laughing. "I'm for it, but I'll niver play the bagpipes. Kenna tells me lies about you, too, Douglas, but thinks you hung the moon."

Smooth operator, throwing in that sexy Scot lingo.

"Come in. We have piles of food and will feast the whole weekend."

"It's so great being back," I said.

"When I visited Scotland before," Douglas said, "I went with Mom. She especially loved Iona. We should have visited your castle then. We tried to find all our ancestors."

"Had to leave one discovery for Kenna," he said, turning towards me with a smile.

"Yes. Did she ever need it. When she left, I thought she was descending into a crypt."

"She's cryptic, all right—has a friend working on lettering in a crypt in our castle, now. We're tying up loose ends of genealogy from new world to old," Lane said.

"And chasing shadows," I said.

“And we’ll hear all about it. But first, let’s get something to drink. Mint julips are for further south than here. We’ll do sweet iced tea. Hope a European like you can stand it.”

“When in Rome,” Lane said. “I never tried it. My USA visits landed north of here.”

“Then sweet tea it is.”

###

That night we caught up on details about each other’s lives, what Douglas and Marvin did and with whom, who the main characters were back at the castle, what sort of engineering work Lane did in Charlotte, the work I did at the magazine. Naturally, I had *South!* Inc. magazine issues with me for Douglas who ooh’ed and ah’ed and promised to read them all.

We retired early, because the family reunion would start happening early next day. Funeral tents were already set up in the back yard, but we had to put on tablecloths, napkins, serving spoons, the non-perishable food in containers to hold down the cloths, ice buckets, soft drinks, all of that. Robert and Laura were actually coming from Charlotte, aunts and uncles from Scotland County, Florida, and D.C. It would be a grand reunion like we hadn’t had for years that I was looking forward to it in the best way.

Caterers were bringing Eastern NC barbecue with its wonderful vinegar sauce, and hushpuppies. They were adding hot dogs, hamburgers, baked beans, and slaw, wrapping up with banana pudding and pineapple cake for dessert.

Having Lane steadied me. In our diverse family, one-sided political discussions were the norm, heated, intense, and upsetting.

We retired early—to the room I’d used when I lived there. It boasted a fireplace and two large windows, one facing the highway and the little house beyond that had belonged to my family. An antique dresser was to the right of the door and a luggage rack beside it. Lane put my suitcase there. A cushioned chair sat opposite the window.

On impulse, I left to visit the room with the fireplace where letters were found. Upon examination, there was nothing really to see, not even a hole where letters and valuables had been stuffed during the Civil War, ahead of Sherman's advancing troops. Had he burned the house, we'd have never known, but since, in a fit of decency he spared all three family ante-bellum houses which were pressed into service as field hospitals, they marched down history.

The mistress of the house might have changed Sherman's mind for the worse, since when she was ordered to make Union officers breakfast, she replied defiantly, "Southern ladies don't make breakfast; their servants do that." Or, had he read her letter to 'Dear Janie' which was now in all the local area history books, written to one of her friends referring to "stinking Yankees," he might well have changed his mind.

What a journey—on land extending to the Cape Fear River owned by family for seven generations. That River supplied the main concourse of traffic from Wilmington to the upper Cape Fear, which bore hundreds and hundreds of Scottish settlers into the Carolina interior.

My ancestors had been prominent in government affairs. My seven times great grandfather, Farquhard Campbell, had managed to move and groove on both sides of the political divide, as a Tory and a Whig, and actually went to prison and humbly beseeched the governor for pardon, eventually receiving it. He is reputed to have been a rounder.

I sensed Lane beside me before I saw him.

"Memories?" he came up behind me gently.

"Musings on Scottish migrations." I looked at him adoringly.

"A line to retrace again and again," he said, kissing my neck.

"Just think of all the people who have lived here."

"I can't wait for you to show me where Farquhard Campbell's place was."

"I can't either. You know he owned over 4000 acres of land."

"Some land grant. I've heard about those."

“Yes, several Gaelic speakers received them. Bluff’s first pastor was imported from Scotland, preached in English and Gaelic to the Scots, including black slaves.”

“A terrible time in your history.”

“Yes, it was a scourge on the country we’ll never overcome, I fear.”

“No worries for now. I don’t speak Gaelic all that well, myself.”

“Takes a Scot to understand how slavery came in with the European slave trade, but dovetailed conveniently with the feudal system you lived under, and how you stayed together around a farm as a self-contained industry. I never talked much about slavery.”

“Probably a subject best avoided tomorrow.”

“Yes. It’s a given that slavery existed in the old South. Many citizens had great grandfathers that were slave owners; many citizens had great grandfathers who were slaves. I’ve heard embarrassing expressions, but my folks never used crude or disparaging language.”

“I hear you. It’s crazy that we haven’t traced our own lineage in Scotland any better than we have. My excuse? Too many Campbell’s. Truth? I don’t know my great grandparents.”

“We’ll work on that. I guess we’d better sleep.”

“Or *something*.”

“It’s so dark up here,” I said, ignoring his innuendo. Climbing into bed, I nestled down under covers. We snuggled, one might say, soon asleep to the sound of the fan.

###

The next day was upon us. We woke, dressed, and joined the gang downstairs for a light breakfast of bread, scrambled eggs, watermelon and cantaloupe.

“I’m right at home with my porridge,” Lane said, laughing.

“Is that a Scottish thing? Hey, Lane, I’m Cousin Jim, great to meet you.”

“Ha-ha,” I laughed, “it’s on every breakfast bar in every restaurant in Scotland.”

“Mush,” said Lane.

“Black pudding, hot oatmeal, muesli, tomatoes, eggs, fat bacon...”

“I’m gaining weight just listening,” Douglas chimed in. “Oh, look.” She pointed out the kitchen window. “Here comes the next crew.”

So we each replenished our plates from the Lazy Susan, and then sat in the anteroom.

Once finished, we moved out onto the back lawn, mingled on the long porch, sat on the steps, and roamed around back inside. Every place was a meeting place. Guests arrived ongoing; everyone was eager to make contact.

A younger cousin danced a Highland fling, deferring to Lane, who allowed as how truly Scottish it was. Later in the day, bagpipes played. We made merry ‘the livelong day.’

“Aunt Eunice!”

“Kenna! I brought the Campbell family Bible. You have gone and married a Campbell that you are kin to, have you?”

“Yes, Auntie. I’ll look later.” She had spirited it away, custodian for the family.

“Why, Lane, it is so delightful to make your acquaintance and learn about your family. Now, you must tell us your ancestry so we can locate where you fit on the family tree. I know we’re kin, but just how and where and which Campbell’s, I don’t know. That’s why I brought the Bible with me, for the names in the front.”

“Nice to meet you. You’ll have to visit Scotland one day.”

“You must be a kissing cousin. Come give me a great big hug!”

She accomplished her goal. For his part, his eyes widened in fear over her back.

“Aye, right,” Lane said, “I’m for it, but being unsure who my ancestors are, I can’t know how I relate to my wife.”

“Beautiful Bible,” I said to her.

Others gathered around to check it out, before we delivered it back indoors to safety. I placed it next to my issues of *South!* Inc.

Truth be told, I turned hyper at parties, silly as an extrovert, not myself at all, but a Kenna caricature everyone recognized. We retired that night bushed, as did a few extra houseguests in the upstairs rooms.

###

Douglas and I met for business Monday morning. I showed her the photograph capturing the inscription over the dungeon door in the castle. By then I had a more updated report on the history of the McAllister's and Campbell's and the story of the young girl who claimed to have been raped by a kinsman, that being exacerbating the war differences of the crew's invited relatives that the one in charge commanded killed, earning us the most scorned name in all of Scotland until this very day, as being capable of things no one in the world could countenance. Actually it had happened a century earlier, as well, and had a name.

Relieved to hear reasons, she cried.

"Is that a tear, Douglas?" I asked.

"Yes, oh brother!" she said. "Daddy would be delirious at your discovery. In fact, he would be about your marrying a Scot, and living in a wonderful castle!"

I laughed. "Yes, wonderful, dank, dark Blackheart...not so different from Lebanon, are they?"

We hugged.

"Keep the research going, Cuz," she said. "I'll take on outright expenses."

"Full throttle."

"We'll attack the Smith lineage, once you're done with Campbell's and McAllister's."

"I have a theory about that, too. Smith, would you believe, is a Scottish clan, actually descended from the Picts. Since it sounds like an English name, and is not place specific, few

check on a Smith Scottish clan. It's a delicious researcher rabbit trail, and possibly why the search dead ended...in the wrong country. You'd better believe I'll take you up on that offer."

"Thanks, Kenna," she said. We hugged again, an old-fashioned bear hug.

####

With cousins gone, Lebanon darkened. I cringed each time Lane exited to jog, dreaded remaining there alone, to my surprise.

My work area was set up in Douglas's old bedroom right across our bedroom. I made good progress on my articles.

We drove into the outlying towns of Wade, Godwin, Lillington, Buies Creek, and Dunn from time to time to access library holdings or grab a bite to eat. Everyone who had heard about Lane wanted to meet him. We were invited to speak at civic functions and did, upon occasion. One trip out with Lane, we ran into my old boyfriend. Naturally I introduced my Highland hunk to him with great glee, shamelessly showing off my Scot with a wee notion of 'I did better.'

"There *is* vindication," I told Lane, later.

At one meet and greet function an acquaintance named the area Masonic greats, warning me not to mention his name as the information source.

Why he thought I would be interested was unclear.

We knew other Masons in town. Strangely enough, one made tombstones, even though stone masonry had nothing to do with being a Mason. Cecil Edgerton was part of the church in Wade, an offshoot of Old Bluff Presbyterian where we fully planned to explore the stones of all my kin. He was involved in their cemetery oversight.

He was often at the local deli, so we would pull up chairs and talk about local history and gravestones.

Might as well have friends inside the group.

Of course he found out I wrote articles for a fancy magazine.

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll do an article about Bluff, Barbecue, and Longstreet. Maybe write on Carbine Williams who invented the Carbine rifle from jail—my uncle knew him.”

“Who are you talking about?” Lane inquired

“A famous-infamous man buried in Old Bluff Cemetery,” I told him.

Nonsensical jokes and puns too subtle for most locals were Cecil’s stock in trade. He told me I could write an article about him.

I assured him I would. Lane and I set a date to visit the graveyard at Old Bluff, and scope out gravestones belonging to our family, in particular the oldest stones, to determine anything of particular—or peculiar—interest.

Chapter 34, River Chase

"Your life is at the mercy of God if you jump in this river. Once you go 4 or 5 feet underneath, it's total blackness. You can't see anything."—Rescue worker

While the River changed aspects closer to Wilmington, it was overall a muddy river that lacked transparency. We drove to Fayetteville, where Lane rented an outboard motor boat. We put in at Breece’s Landing. Lane helped me climb into the aqua boat. My sneakers squeaked as I slipped into the passenger seat.

“Put on your life vest, Kenna.”

“Yes, *sir*.” We strapped on our red life vests.

From Fayetteville we maneuvered upstream, slicing through the murky brown soup. It was a perfect day with manageable current, not a given on this fickle and dangerous body of water. Since there had been no rain in two to three weeks and the water level low, we kept to the deeper water center by avoiding the shade of green that indicated shallow spots.

Lane had checked the depth gauge. He had means of tracking the depth for the next few hours for navigation purposes, of which I knew little.

Lane knew virtually everything.

The powerful outboard engine was more than a match for the current. Lane kept the speed moderate; we were in no big hurry. This was a day to enjoy and retrace the route my ancestors had taken on the Cape Fear River when they came from Wilmington.

Puffy white clouds floated dreamily overhead. High banks and tall trees—all that was visible except for an occasional boat or two while we were still in the Fayetteville area—shot upward into the clouds.

“Where are the farms?” Lane asked.

“There’s farmland everywhere. We just can’t see it! This is relaxing. I like boating beneath the radar.”

“Right, while I’m slaving at navigating, you’re lying back at ease.”

“Ouch!”

“Just teasing. It’s relaxing to me, too, even with occasional snags in the water. I just had to point out that you were using me.”

“I do worry an overhanging branch harbors a snake perched to jump into our boat.”

“Not likely.”

“Boaters say it’s happened,” I said, miffed. *He thought that was a girl thing to say.*

We meandered along with the twists the river took southward near Wade, and then again veered right at the Cumberland County-Harnett County line. That’s where the Cape Fear is joined by the Lower Little River.

“I talked to the natives,” Lane said. “They doubted we’d get farther than Smiley’s Falls at Erwin. Let’s see how far we can safely get, probably to the NC 217 Bridge. That’s where the rocks become a garrison blocking further navigation, they told me.”

“If you know what to look for at Erwin, you can see the remains of the locks and dams from the 1850’s.”

“I could get use to this,” Lane said, smiling. “Plenty of daylight, plenty of gas.”

“Yes. I’m remembering that great film, *Cape Fear*, you asked me about when we first met. It wasn’t set here. It was one of the creepiest films I ever sat through. The old version starred Robert Mitchum was best and most sinister. Mitchum seemed evil, the quintessential Hollywood bad boy. Saw the remake a while back. What did you think of ‘Cape Fear’?”

“It was a rugged film.”

“Yes, it was. A criminal returned to wreak vengeance on a man who put him in the pen for 8 years. Haunted like the River always has been, always will be. It’s a lonely place, hardly anything built up to its edge. The name suggests the horror, I think.”

“Dangerous, the boys told me. Lots of people die on it because they underestimate it.”

“Yes, I’ve seen frequent searches for missing people. Periodic floods turn it into a raging torrent. When the water level is high, currents are deadly. Uncle always warned us about it. I remember seeing a helicopter hover three days over our trees. With Fort Bragg so close, not unusual, but staying in the same place three days in a row was. We knew something was up. Finally, we read in the paper that Fort Bragg had sent helicopters searching a peg-legged man who had gone kayaking alone, drunk, the river at flood stage.”

“That’s not smart, but you can’t always find a companion.”

“They found him the third day, hanging from a tree limb. High water had lifted him.”

“Too bad.”

“Yes. Lots of history along the Cape Fear. Indians, settlers.”

“I might spend some time on it.”

“It was the major concourse for years in the early days, through the wars. My ancestors have been all over it. Early settlers had no outboards to fight the current, either.”

“Muscle power, I guess,” Lane said, flexing his chest.

“They weren’t all like you.”

“Certainly not.” He pumped out his chest.

We continued into a northwesterly bow, and then were coming up even with the town of Wade to our east, well south of where my ancestor Ferry John had lived and plied his trade.

“So, Lane, over there was home to the vast McAllister and Campbell estates. We’ll have to drive it by land, as well.”

“Exciting stuff,” Lane said.

We headed back north, almost to the site of Old Bluff Church.

“Be on the lookout for the wooden steps leading down from the church, okay?”

“Right on.”

“There!” He cut off the engine, navigated with an oar to land, wedging the boat in dirt.

We tied the boat to a leaning tree.

“Let’s go look,” I said. “I’ve never been here from the River, before!”

“Prepare to disembark. Imagine you’re a wayfaring Scot, set off to the land of milk and honey to own land, land, and more land.”

“’Bout sums up the ancestors’ voyage.”

“Now put on your thinking cap. You’ve already landed and returned in a pole boat with a rock weighing 500 pounds. That’s how all the settlers came, more or less. The conveyances had to be sturdy enough to transport the belongings and not sink them. One man alone could for sure not ha’ lifted it.”

“How many stones sink a ship? Don’t the Brits measure weight in stones? Ha, ha. Oh, mind those hairy vines—they are poison ivy. ‘Hairy vine, no friend of mine.’”

We disembarked.

We climbed the long, zigzaggy flights of stairs past the old spring, careful to avoid the lush poison ivy, batting away mosquitoes and gnats as we walked. Old churches had to be built near a water source.

“It’s hot and sticky,” said Lane, “we’re feeling their pain, and about to feel their refreshing from cool spring waters. That must be the Old Spring over there.”

“I’m dripping wet,” I said, wiping sweat from my eyes. We splashed ourselves and walked around the section of aging tombstones. “See, Lane, I’ve spotted a McNeill stone, several McAllister’s, and a few Campbell’s. Farquhard Campbell’s stone rises above the others near Col. McAllister’s. I love the motley charcoal gravestone color.”

Lane was silent as the grave.

“The old slave graves are over there, off property.” I pointed in a general direction toward them. “No inscriptions.”

“Shameful, the segregation. We need to drive back down here, Kenna. We’d best be going if we hope to get as far as Erwin Bridge and back to Fayetteville at our leisurely pace.”

“You’re right. I wanted to find something significant.”

“Yes, but not everything comes as easy as careening into a Catholic retirement home up to a priest waiting for you by name,” he said, laughed at me, casting my mind back to the chase up the driveway where Father McFarlane expected a McAllister to come through the doors. No, not everything could turn out like that, for sure.

We descended the stairs, untied the boat, fired up the engine, and climbed aboard, grateful that the breeze created by the moving boat left a few bugs behind.

A few hundred yards on the right, he pointed out a stream emptying into the River. “That’s ‘Silver Run.’ I’m glad your cousin sent such detailed information.”

“Where Blind John McKethan operated a gristmill, common in those days, when no stores sold a sack of flour or cornmeal. His home, ‘Rose Hall,’ was up there.”

“All these Scottish relatives took over the area.”

The small boat purred on upstream meandering gently before the Cape Fear veered off to the left.

“Okay, we’re coming up on the Cumberland/Harnett County line which follows the track of the Lower Little River, according to the map and what the boys told me. There’s the mouth on the left.”

The River swerved gently to the right, and then resumed a northwesterly direction.

“Lane, all along the Eastern side here were the homes of the Scottish ancestry— Lebanon, Oak Grove, and another Smith antebellum house. Ancestor ‘Ferry John’ Smith ran a ferry across the River at the mouth of the Lower Little, a place called Chofenington, which has been spelled as many ways as ‘McAllister.’ Now we’re passing where our friends the doctors had bought and settled, past another neighbor’s home which was on the highway side cutting off from our Smith Ferry Cemetery.

“Lane, over there, deep wagon wheel ruts are still visible going up the hill. And the Smith private family cemetery on the left is swallowed by undergrowth. Family has tried to keep it up from time to time.”

“See that white silo up on the left? Bet that’s a great landmark from the air, opposite that creek.”

“Those banks are probably 50 to 90 feet high, right here in the flatlands. Who would have thought? Even now, you can’t tell from the road. We’re about even with Lebanon, now.”

“What an experience it is, marrying you.”

“What a *good* experience?” I asked.

“You know it,” he said.

“Just checking.”

“I’m slowing down some now, closing in on those rapids I mentioned. Without locks, the boys said the River could not be commercially navigable past them.”

“So much I have yet to absorb, myself. That’s the NC 217 Bridge up ahead—”

“And the end of the line for us. We don’t want to get any closer.”

“No, we don’t. Old timers say that during droughts, they walked across the River here, yet before the Jordan Dam went upstream, this River would flood vast areas on the low lying west side. I rode up the highway past our house as a small child with my uncle, water up past the floorboards of the car.”

“Well, Kenna, we’ve seen it. Let’s head back.”

I hugged him.

“Gratitude, I don’t mind.”

The whole trip had been languorous, luxurious, even, the wind cooling the sticky sweat playing on our fevered skin.

“I don’t want to jinx our day, but ever since we were at Old Bluff, I’ve had the weirdest feeling, almost a foreboding, like something dying. I’ve tried to dismiss it, but that insidious yuck feeling is intensifying. Sorry!”

“Kenna, I haven’t felt anything like that.”

“I keep seeing the peg-legged man hanging from a tree branch.”

Lane gave me one of his looks.

We continued our homeward journey in silence as he eased back up to a faster speed.

I’ve done it now, dampened our carefree mood on our magical day. Silly me.

Suddenly, just as we passed the Lower Little River, the quiet of the day was broken, punctuated by the roar of a smaller, sleeker boat than ours as it roared out and bore down on us. From leisurely to fearful in a heartbeat, the high-pitched roar bore down on us.

“It’s a white boat. Two men in black wearing black sunglasses.”

It's started again. Stalked, hunted down. God, please don't let us be grist for the mill.

Split seconds after asking, Lane floored it, giving their outboard a chance to show us up—ours was wide open. The gentle breeze transformed into a stiff wind. In deeper water, the danger of hitting rocks lessened. The smaller craft continued on our tail without gaining on us, though the hotter boat could have easily overtaken us.

We knew we skirted the edge of darkness with the mission we were given, and yet, fear peaked to overwhelming. We were prey on the Cape Fear just like the movie. Speed created eruptions of cresting water on either side. Soft clouds turned angry bracken black. The reflection in the thick river soup floated us. Disaster dogged close in its evil desire to claim us. We *had* to prevail.

Adrenalin rushed in inordinate amounts. *Nothing* like this happens on the lonely Cape Fear. *Nothing*, the everyday mantra mocked.

I studied the men.

Lane asked: "Do they have weapons?"

"No, I see no guns, only two middle-aged men with grim foreign faces, flapping their arms."

They yelled over the wind and engine noise.

"Still not gaining on us."

"Yet they are after us, Lane. I know they are. They know who we are, and they don't like what we are doing, but how?"

"I don't know. They could easily catch us, if they wanted."

"How far have we got to go?"

He looked at me briefly. "I'd rather not say, but we just passed Silver Run. Old Bluff is just ahead. Keep your eye on them."

"I will." My fist was white-knuckled on the boat's edge.

As the River jogged westward past Old Bluff, a Pontoon boat full of merry sightseers and fishermen hove into view, chugging upstream.

And as abruptly as it had started, the chase was over. Our pursuers broke off, slowed enough to execute a tight 180-degree turn, as passengers of the pontoon boat looked on, open-mouthed, speeding back upstream. Where they'd come from, if they'd been located near a landing on the Lower Little, we didn't know. My grip on the boat's edge tightened; the space separating us failed to comfort.

Lane kept the throttle wide open until we saw Breece's landing. He pulled us in. We disembarked, tied up in a flurry, shaken from unexpected 'recreation.'

They had targeted us. My only question was how their timing had been so impeccable.

Chapter 35: Cemetery Search

"I am a cemetery by the moon unblessed." —

Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*

A Cape Fear River boat chase, once over, emboldened us. More than anything, it alerted us to enemies lurking its waters, snakes that slithered its depths, shiny reptiles with open grins ready to snap sharp teeth shut on you at first chance. Our *legère* afternoon with its abrupt *dénouement* would not soon be forgotten.

Later that day we returned to Old Bluff cemetery by car to look for any unusual marker or stone, realizing whatever was unusual three to four hundred years ago might have been dug up, removed, capsized, mossed over, ivied over, or obscured by a root. *Gone*.

Spurred on by all the Masonic interest in us, we combed the older portion of the cemetery for graves with Masonic notations or symbols. We wouldn't use shaving cream and brush as that might surely anger someone who saw it before the shaving cream evaporated. It

wouldn't hurt them or strip them of organic materials. Cardboard scraped across engraving left white in the crevices, perfect for reading names. We'd only do it on one or two.

We tried to recall the priest's exact words about Alexander McAllister that his predecessor had shared about location.

On small notebook paper I drew a quick map of locations that could help us, section noted, name noted. We would request records from the Bluff Association who published all known names of graveyard inhabitants. I was a local Presbyterian in Good Standing.

We needed to know if the present church was built over the original church foundation, since there had been three. If there were three locations, we would need to explore three settings. I doubted they would have covered any known grave locations.

Days like today, that turned from bright to somber, easy to sinister tended to make us forget we believed in a supernatural God. God wanted us to find it, so it logically followed, He would help us find it, not delighting in fools' errands. Strange events from the dark side heralded and underscored this fact.

"Let's go down past the spring to the steps and retrace our first trip up from the boat," Lane said. So we did.

"Okay, how would they have heaved a rock up such a steep incline? Several men would have come together, probably with a mule team."

"A flat bed with wheels would have worked, or a sheet of some strength like burlap to drag with, although burlap would have snagged on rocks and torn."

"Most likely they used a sturdy wooden sledge drawn up by a mule team," Lane said.

"Yes, but where did they go with it? I don't think they had a church, yet, or houses. The area was settled, how much and where, we don't know."

"Lean-to's, graveyards, houses, gotta have 'em."

“And I have no idea where anybody died. Oh, wait, McAllister’s first wife died and was buried at sea, so they might have done a memorial here, later.”

“Possible.”

“So, where do you hide a 500-pound stone?”

“Answer: in a cemetery.”

“What was the earliest marker in here that you’ve seen?”

“I’ve seen 1730. Let’s look. We’ll check records and ask the caretaker. “

“Do you reckon McAllister might have thought to combine his missions, and have a memorial casket made for his wife that would house the Stone?”

“That’s brilliant. Possibly; it would have been a great idea. Let’s find any memorial to his first wife.”

“What if earlier Masons found it and confiscated it?”

“Well, aren’t you of a suspicious turn of mind?”

“Always.”

“Hmm, if anyone knew about it or thought it significant, they might have. If so, how did other brothers of the lodge fail to note it? I’m assuming they no longer know its location, or they wouldn’t dog our heels so concertedly. Anyhow, I continue to be amazed at the sudden revived interest in this rock.”

“I agree. We’re starting from a spiritual certainty, supernaturally given, so we’re sure it exists. They don’t have that; they’ve lost the information. Either it stays lost, or their all-seeing eyes find the rest of us and extract what they need from us. Invasive watching and truth extraction is an evil we’re unused to experiencing.”

If I had not had that experience back in Scotland with the priest and all the letters from Douglas’s hand of Alexander McAllister’s, or the final one from a trusted priest’s hand, I would have abandoned this quest.

####

The local Bluff historian seemed eager to talk to us, even though he did not know the nature of our requests.

He told us that a congregation of people from the area gathered long before 1730. That set the scene for Alexander's advent in 1736 and his later return in 1740, presumably with Farquhard. That happened way before Reverend Campbell's call from Scotland encountered a boatload of opposition from Scots' commissioning agencies and finally arrived.

Alexander, known as Col. Alexander McAllister and Farquhard Campbell were both elders in the church. The land on both sides of the River—which includes present land belonging to Bluff Presbyterian—had been owned by McNeill's and was gifted to Bluff by Hector McNeill. The tract's integrity and longevity remained intact.

"Mr. Bain, thank you for meeting us here. Can you give a Bluff history in a nutshell?"

"I can, indeed." Mr. Bain answered Lane

"Let's sit on the church steps." We ambled over to them.

"The Presbyterian Church in the Upper Cape Fear Valley was organized October 18, 1758. A contract with Rev. Campbell was signed by "Presbyterian Gentlemen," the list included Hector (called "Bluff" Hector) McNeill, Gilbert Clark, Thomas Gibson, Alexander McAlister (original spelling), Malcom Smith, Archibald McKay, John Patterson, Dushie Shaw, Neil McNeill, Archibald Buie, Angus Culbreth and John McPherson for 'the sum of 100 pounds in good & lawful money of North Carolina . . . yearly.'"

"You've memorized it, Mr. Bain." I laughed.

"I've repeated it so many times. He came in 1758. Legally, he couldn't preach or marry couples until 1759 when he vowed he would not oppose doctrine, discipline, or liturgy of the Church of England. Neill and his wife Catharine deeded that tract to Hector McNeill

and Alexander McAlister, members of the original Session who resided on the east side of the Cape Fear River... see, I have the document.” He pulled it out of his back pocket.

““In 1761, one acre of land whereon is built and erected a Meeting House as the same now stands on the west side of the Cape Fear River near Trantham’s Creek, close to the home of Roger McNeill, son of Neill McNeill and called Roger's Meeting House, a small log structure built about 1759 and the first church building in the Upper Cape Fear Valley.””

“Those are all relatives and ancestors’ surnames.”

Lane looked at me and smiled.

“Rev. Campbell served three churches, Old Bluff, Longstreet, and Barbecue until 1776,” Mr. Bain continued, “when he was threatened that his prayers supported the Patriot Cause, he quickly left America and returned later to his home on the west bank, where he died and was buried in a family graveyard.

“I hope we can remember it all,” Lane said.

“I’ll give you a printed copy. Sometime after 1780, a new meeting house, probably also a log structure, was built on the east side of the river. Both meeting houses were used until about 1785. Then a frame building was built on the bluff at the east side of the river. On July 23, 1791, John MacNeill conveyed to Farquhard Campbell and Alexander MacAlester (same man, yet another spelling), as trustees of the Bluff Meeting House, two acres near the burying ground ‘part of 200 acres possessed by said MacNeill known by the name of the Bluff where said piece of land with the Meeting House now standing on the same. . . .’”

“I appreciate your doing this, Sir,” Lane said.

“This frame building was repaired in 1816, the subscription list totaling \$112, and used until about 1855. Then the present Old Bluff church was built.”

“My dad’s name is Farquhard Campbell,” Lane said and smiled.

“You don’t say. Well, let’s go in, and I’ll give you a copy of this.”

“My 7th great grandfather was named Farquhard Campbell,” I said. “His marker is here, whether or not his body followed.”

“We’re proud of our history,” he commented to my strange revelation.

“Thank you,” Lane and I said simultaneously.

“You know, Ms. Kenna, your uncle told me that when passengers came up the Cape Fear River from Wilmington to Fayetteville and on to just behind Smith’s Ferry, the rule of thumb was this: if you could see the fording rock, it was safe to cross with horse and buggy. If not, you paid Ferry John to take you across on his cable ferry. The flats stayed in the water, suspended from ropes. If a big boat met them, they lowered the ropes to allow the boat to pass, and once the boat passed, they lifted the ropes again.”

“Words from ancestors are priceless. We’d wondered how it was done.”

“They probably used pole boats to transport the people to a landing site. These sites were already nicely worked by cattle herded down to the water, turning the high banks into slides upon which children slid to their deaths. So by reversing the process, using freight wagons pulled by horses, oxen, or mules, dragging the freight back uphill, they continued on their route by stagecoach or wagon, accompanying their freight without returning.”

“Is there any strange or unknown grave around, or an old commemorative rock?”

“I seem to remember there was an old pauper’s grave. A man arrived early before the congregation. They tried to help him, but he died, so they dug the hole and buried him.”

“Interesting story; does he have a tombstone?” I asked.

“He may, but it’s too late to find and show you now, maybe in a day or two. Believe a marker says, “For the poor one, Forgive our hearts of stone.”

“Forgive our hearts of stone?” Lane asked.

“I think so, but don’t quote me. Well, I’ll be getting on.”

“Do you know where that was?”

“Somewhere on the back side, I can’t rightly be sure.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bain.”

“You are welcome, folks. Have a great day.”

“Forgive our hearts of stone. That sounds promising, Lane.”

“Enough to get out the prods and see if there’s a stone underneath.”

###

All the legal strings had been pulled for using an electrician’s metal rods to probe the pauper’s grave. All the bureaucrat gods had been satisfied with sacrificial mounds of forms filled out in triplicate signed by board members of the Old Bluff Association, the Sheriff’s office, the county coroner’s office, and actually God Himself.

After much haggling and stonewalling, I laughed at my low-brow pun, but finally, here we all stood in early morn’s first light so as not to attract a bevy of onlookers which would slow down work and workers.

I paced back and forth, a sick feeling grinding in my stomach making me wonder if I were fighting cancer, churning like a laundromat wash cycle that wouldn’t finish.

“Don’t worry.” Lane patted my arm.

I shook him off abruptly, regretting seeming rude to Lane publicly. I mustn’t upset Lane. When you are antsy, you don’t want to be patted.

“What do you mean, ‘don’t worry.’ I’m all nerves.”

“I know, m’Luv. Just think; it’s not the end of the world if they find nothing.”

“No, but of my reputation.”

“Don’t worry. We’re going back to Scotland.” He flashed a smile.

“‘Crazy Harnett County Woman returns to Kintyre.’”

“Think how nice it was for Seton Gordon and Robbie the Pict to write letters to the Board, especially on a long shot. ‘Crazy in Kintyre,’ as well.”

“Well, that’s as it may be.”

Two men Cecil had sent along were there with umpteen metal rods 4 feet long, a couple of 8-footers. They chatted, grunted, figured, and postured like men do before they actually do something. Finally they started puncturing ground and tamping down with a hammer at intervals which reminded me of the game ‘submarine’ where you cautiously tapped a square that might contain a bomb. It was actually to keep the rod from mushrooming and confusing us.

They covered the whole square, as far as available space extended. They used metal detectors, as well. In the end, all they found was hard and soft Carolina dirt and clay.

Chapter 36, Smith Ferry Cemetery

“Semper fidelis. Always faithful.”--Smith Clan Motto; Picts,

Forefathers of the Smith family in Scotland

Accepting defeat died hard. Our ‘certain’ discovery that the Stone lay in the pauper’s grave failed to be certain, when it so clearly, rightly should have been, since Old Bluff congregation asked forgiveness ‘for hearts of stone,’ a giveaway key. Doubt seeped in through the holes in the sieve; faith dropped out. There was no Stone. It was an idiotic conclusion, anyhow. Why in heaven’s name would we think the Stone was anywhere but in Edinburgh where we had seen it arrive in great fanfare in Prince Andrew’s cavalcade?

I was discouraged enough to quit. Our total search must be futile. Everything that occurred until now had been a fairy tale, a tale told by idiots, vanity, and chasing of the wind. It didn’t matter how many tales hung together made of ashes and dust.

Back at Lebanon, Lane held and comforted me. We poured through the writings of locals to tell us again the history of the house we lived in, Lebanon, and all the kin who had lived up and down the highway where land left largely to family members in large tracts

survived intact for generations until after the Civil War. The names up and down the highway were old and familiar.

Lane recalled the conversation we had had with Father McFarlane back in Scotland. He reminded me that oral tradition said the Stone was buried in an old settlers' cemetery on the Cape Fear.

"Is there another cemetery that borders on the Cape Fear?" he asked.

"Why, yes, there's our family cemetery, Smith Ferry Cemetery, not public at all."

"Do you know which road it was to the River to which Mr. Bain referred?"

"Wait, Lane. Roughly three-quarters of a mile the road sits--want to take a guess?"

"No—tell me, you vixen, before I pound you “

"Yes, Lane, McGruder Road takes you to our family cemetery.”

"So we just assumed the cemetery they referred to was Bluff.”

"We did. This one is dirt and gravel and winds to the river. Uncle used to take me bouncing over it, driving fast as he could to thrill us children. My cousin told me later how cattle were herded to it in the old days, and how they slid down into the water, using it as their watering hole and ruining any scenic beauty. The area looks more pristine now than then.”

"Yes. Mr. Bain's snippet should have redirected me, referring to the Cape Fear and your kinsmen, McAllister's and Campbell's”

"This egress from the Cape Fear River is nowhere near Old Bluff or Godwin. In fact, it's up the road from Lebanon and our little house.”

"Never heard of it before.”

"No, and my knowledge of it faded. Douglas described it. The banks were, in fact, all torn up and ragged, not overgrown and untouched, and children died having fun sliding into the water.”

"Really, Kenna, this ties the circle together, past to future.”

“Lane, the whole reason Uncle took me down there was to see our family cemetery, Smith Ferry Cemetery. We went on more cemetery walks than I can number, reading gravestone after gravestone. We couldn’t go to movies; we couldn’t do sports. I grew up thinking reading gravestones was what families did on a Sunday afternoon.”

“He didn’t want you to forget about it, did he?”

“No, he didn’t. Do you think he knew something? Lane. It did not once occur to me to consider Smith Ferry Cemetery.”

“No.” A huge smile appeared on his face.

“Yes!”

“It’s the next logical place to look,” he said. “Maybe, it’s even a lot more logical a place than Old Bluff and more accessible from the River.”

“Fits his oral tradition,” I said.

“Guess we’ll have to go dig. How about tomorrow—who should we call?”

“Mr. Dorman,” I said, and started looking in the telephone book. “I’ll call, since they don’t know you.”

“Mr. Dorman, this is Kenna, from up the road at Lebanon. My husband, who’s here with me from Scotland and I wondered if we could drive onto your property to check out my family’s gravestones at the Smith Ferry Cemetery? I know the season is wrong, but we only have a month, and I need to show him all the family gravestones before we return to Scotland. By the way, he’s kin as well.”

He chatted a bit, gave his permission, and making a time to meet us and open the gate. He ended with the caveat: “Watch out for snakes and poison ivy. Take a machete; it’s so overgrown at Smith Ferry Cemetery this time of year. Not taken care of for years, now.”

“Good to know; we’ll dress accordingly even in the heat.”

We needed shovels and rods.

“Lane, we left the rods at Old Bluff.”

“It’s too late, Kenna. They close at dusk, you know.”

“So, pick them up first thing tomorrow morning and go back to Smith Ferry?”

“Guess so. Come on, Kenna. It’s early to bed tonight for an early start tomorrow.”

Next morning, I arose from a dreamless sleep. Lebanon was over a century old; it had no built-in closets. Galoshes were in the large wardrobe where Uncle last used them. We dressed roughly in jeans and boots for protection against snakes and water.

We drove to Old Bluff, collected prod rods, and loaded them. We needed no official permissions to work on our family cemetery, only permission for ingress.

“See that car over there, Lane?”

We drove back to the entrance beside Mr. Dorman’s house, and down the road. Good thing Lane drove a Jeep high enough to clear ruts and weeds on the road.

We located the cemetery and walked its perimeter. It was beautiful, overgrown though it was. We had photographs of the cemetery we’d studied and a document with each gravestone identified by name we brought with us. The biggest space earmarked Ferry John’s burial spot; the one beside it, his wife, Isabella. This cemetery was most unusual, however. The stones were lying down, rather than standing up.

Uncle did not let things or animals get the best of him. Tired of cows belonging to the local farmer knocking stones over, he first tried to build a pipe fence which failed. The cows knocked them over again. So then he had concrete poured and fixed each stone in place in horizontal position, giving Smith Ferry Cemetery a custom look.

We discussed the likely spots within the half-acre perimeter, and dug in. There would not be any real excavating at the outset and the day dragged on. Good thing we had a huge ice chest with us. We drank cold water and kept ourselves hydrated.

We studied the oldest graves, the spots next to them, looking for the connection. We probed next to gravestones and even then did not meet stone or casket. On probes that met stone, we tied red ribbon

At lunch we sat, ate a sandwich, and drank more water.

Refreshed, we started gain. By now, surveyor's flags protruding from the ground filled the space. Still we probed with rods. For two hours longer we proceeded with random red flags.

"Stop, hold it," he said mid-afternoon. "We keep hitting something hard. Let's go out around it, widen the area. Wait, here's another one."

Slowly, the rectangular shape of a rock appeared in reds and rods.

"It's about the right size," Lane said. "We'll have to go back in with shovels. We'll need a backhoe, too. But look, the 8' rod is sticking 3' in the air; so we don't have to dig too deep. The parameters of the shape outlined our plans for subterranean work the next day. I would need to renew permission with Mr. Dorman.

"Kenna, did ye notice how all of the rods extend at the same height?"

"We hit a rectangular rock, Lane," I said.

"We have to stop, Kenna, go home, and bathe. Let's go to Fayetteville to eat, relax, and let it all sink in."

Home at Lebanon, we bathed and left for Fayetteville,

"Lane, there was a name at Old Bluff right at the gate where we can walk in, even if it's closed. Let's get it."

We drove into Old Bluff grounds, past a helicopter sitting in the field.

"An army helicopter."

"No insignia, just army green."

We approached the gate when we saw a black SUV with tinted windows in the parking lot bearing a Masonic symbol. Beyond that, in the darker area where we had probed just last night were men probing the same spot we had!

“Uh-oh, Lane, not liking this. Ever so cautiously, let’s turn around and mosey off.”

We hightailed out of there past the helicopter.

“Strange.” I said.

Lane was pensive.

We headed on toward Fayetteville, listening to classical music to relax, arriving at Wade. At Wade we took River Road. On a straight stretch, I pointed right to the tree line.

“Just beyond that tree line is the Cape Fear,” I said. “It’s quite close.”

“It certainly is well hidden,” Lane replied.

Dusk was falling. We rounded a curve, and then the road straightened out.

At that moment we began hearing a helicopter throbbing, a more or less daily occurrence along the Cape Fear with nearby Fort Bragg. We heard it before we saw it, noisy machines they are.

“Look, Lane, there’s a helicopter overhead. Bet it’s the one we passed leaving Old Bluff Cemetery.”

“Yes, mighty close on us, too.”

He surged beyond us, and then hovered.

“Oh, Lord, Lane. There’s no other car on this lonely highway. He’s waiting for us.”

Chapter 37: Shadow Government

“Is it more childish and foolish to insist that there is a conspiracy or that there is not?”—China Miéville, *The City & the City*

As I said, the helicopter was directly overhead. We figured they were taking a rest stop or making an emergency landing, because the downwash was raising dust and trash. The windows were open, and my hair was flying.

We drove along in tandem until we reached a big field, with a dirt road up ahead that looked unused. My uneasy fear that they were shadowing us didn't wait long.

"Pull over onto the dirt road ahead and stop, Mr. Campbell," ordered a loud voice with the crackle of a loudspeaker.

"Oh, God, Lane, we are in the ultimate chase."

"No chase, here. I'll respond instantly. I'm turning in, doing like he says."

He veered the car onto the dirt road and stopped.

My heart leapt; my tongue went dry.

The chopper took a while, but settled to the ground. A man hopped down. He approached Lane's side.

He had military bearing, and I asked politely what the trouble might be. "Are you traffic police or something?" I asked.

"No, ma'am, we have a situation. And we need you to go with us to tell us about it."

"Go with you, where?" Lane said. "Who are you?"

"Not far sir, just to the old Maxton-Laurinburg air base."

"Who are you? Show us some identification," I said, repeating Lane lamely.

For answer, he opened his vest and showed us he was packing. Lane and I left our car, locked the doors, and walked to where the helicopter idled, flattening the close-by grass.

I'd heard that a huge air base had shut down and turned into a civilian airport, home to a salvage operation bringing in decommissioned airliners, and that they sold parts off them around the world. I was sure we weren't part of an airplane parts salvage operation.

I was helped into the 'copter. Lane followed suit, sat, and covered my hand with his.

“Sorry,” the man said, “but put these on, please, until we get there.”

Odd, I thought, tells us where we’re going and then tells us to put on hoods, anyhow. Maybe he lied.

In no time at all we were airborne, and the ride in the helicopter was every bit as exhilarating as heli’s tended to be or more. The main thrill was missing, however, sight. I would rather be looking at dark terrain below us, instead of imagining hills, houses, and fields, but this was not a scenic tour.

We navigated in pretty much a straight course for a while, turned right, went straight another good while, turned right again, made another straight course. I couldn’t tell for sure, but it felt we flew pretty low, maybe under radar. The unidentified brand did not feel like government, CIA, or drug traffickers.

It felt like our shadows the Masons, and we had seen a Mason decal on the helicopter.

Lane and I communicated through hand squeezes the whole way. We dared not talk, even if we had permission.

The two in the front row exchanged infrequent communications, indistinguishable.

Finally, the helicopter sounds changed, its speed decreased, and we hovered in place like a hummingbird seeking nectar for minutes before setting down.

A door opened and slammed. Our door opened. A light breeze, silent in the night, fanned us, or maybe it was the motion of the still-turning rotors.

“Mrs. Campbell? Take my hand, and I will set you down.”

I gave him my hand, and he did.

“Mr. Campbell, turn 90 degrees from your seat and slide, and you’ll hit earth.”

He did. I heard him make contact, but it was more like shoes hitting concrete. The racket of the helicopter engine, along with its blades, winding down to a stop, was not replaced by other noticeable noises. In fact, it was loudly absent of any airport noises.

We were led on a two to three minute walk until one of the handlers warned, “Steep steps coming. Take the railing.” He guided my hand onto it. “Ascend slowly now, carefully. Mrs. Campbell, your husband is right behind you. Someone is waiting to receive you at the top. Find the next step and keep moving.”

Oh, these steps are not concrete. They're wobbly. We're going into a plane. My heart stopped. Where are they taking us? This is a big plane...somewhere overseas?

I clanked my shoe down and heard the hollow metal ring of rollup plane steps. I kept climbing. This really must be a huge aircraft, as high up off the ground as it was. I felt some paint flake off and fall from the handrail.

A huge hand pulled me in.

As I passed through the door, my hood was lifted and removed.

Inside was spacious and well-lit. We were guided to a circular staircase climbing to an upper deck. In turning I saw Lane behind me. We locked gazes. Above was a sea of faded and threadbare passenger seats. I nearly stumbled and fell, but I regained my footing. *No one stays here long enough to clean or organize.* I saw old shell casings of various calibers strewn on the floor. Comfortable interior temperature-regulated by the background humming, I guessed.

Off these stairs was a spacious lounge compartment with swivel chairs circling around a red carpet.

I was waved to one, sat down, and handed a sweet iced tea.

Lane joined the circle next to me, and received his.

Our conveyors and handlers disappeared behind the entrance.

“We would like to interview each of you separately, if you don't mind. Mr. Campbell, take your tea and accompany Max into the cockpit while we interview Mrs. C where she sits. Mr. Campbell, I suppose you've never been in the cockpit of a 747 before—a fascinating machine, to be sure, even these old 100 models. Quite the thing in their day,” he continued in

a rhapsody of wonder at the technology. “This bird flew for PanAm starting in the early ‘70’s. Since its ‘retirement,’ it was used for counter-terrorism, hi-jacking training by various agencies, domestic and foreign. It makes a convenient clubhouse from time to time.”

No one spoke.

“Oh, how thoughtless of me,” the nameless man said, pausing.

“There are working lavatories at the bottom of the stairs. Just give the word and I’ll have Max or Moritz escort you. All the comforts of home, don’t you see?”

Disarming to me, was alarming. Max and Moritz were German cartoon characters.

If this was the good cop, I didn’t want to see the bad. I watched who I assumed was Max escort Lane to the cockpit before I allowed terror to escalate. Two men sat in the swivel chairs, closer than I liked. Too close. They stared, thinking I would spill my guts to them, I guessed. Some may. I don’t work that way. The silence wore on. I stared back. I’d learned a few things from interviewing, myself.

After ten minutes of this, the leader spoke.

“Come now, Mrs. Campbell, we know you enjoy boat outings on the Cape Fear and know the region’s history. Your uncle traced genealogy and you took up his sport.”

He waited, to let it sink in, how much private scoop he had on me. I did not speak.

“We know you are on a quest for the Real Stone of Scone or Destiny or Lia Fàil, or whichever name you choose to call it. We are fellow seekers of the Holy Grail,” he said.

He thought that would disarm me. I refused to speak.

“Our highly placed friends also seek this Stone. You can help us. We can pool our findings. You have done impressive research, but at this point, why re-invent the wheel? We have the same goal. Together, we can accomplish much. Join forces, tell us what you know, and we can help each other find the Stone. Everyone wants to--” He checked himself.

They had been following our search, knew a lot, but which specifics were unclear. *Oh! They didn't know about Smith Ferry Cemetery, or I wouldn't have seen the men with the prod sticks at Old Bluff Cemetery on the way past the helicopter. They had gone to Old Bluff Cemetery site together. This offensive threw sand in our eyes to discover how we got our leads. They feigned an 'innocents abroad' approach. Of course they knew nothing. They weren't counting on supernatural leading. That told me all, now didn't it? If they weren't on a major information feed other than ours, then their 'leading' had given out, whether from fellow Masons, Jewish splinter group, or other close alignment. That's why they'd resorted to kidnapping, again. My lips were sealed. Helicopter meant they'd brought in the big guns.*

"It can get frustrating," I said, finally.

"You came up dry from your last search," he said, gratified seemingly, that he was getting somewhere.

"Yes. How did your group discover the Stone was not real?" I asked.

"We've known that for some time. We just didn't know anyone else did." His side-kick Moritz laughed.

"When a noisy stone pouts silently for 700 years, what's a body to think?" I laughed.

"Well, I didn't say we'd known it that long."

"No. Did you listen in on our phone conversations? Oh, I know you can't answer me on that one, but I wonder, of course. We'll have to be more careful, won't we?"

He smiled.

I saw a familiar face in the back. The man moved to sit in Chair Number Four.

"Why, hello, Mr. Highsmith. I knew I saw you at the airport...and on the plane."

"That was a mistake."

"I supposed. I was once accused of being someone's double."

"No matter."

“I’m not sure I can say that, not knowing what you have planned.”

“Certainly nothing adverse, like you must be thinking. Well, of course, we checked out every group coming into Scotland that had on its agenda seeing the Stone. That is too simple for most people, but there you have it. You know we would, I guess.”

“I know you’re not going to tell me who ‘we’ is, but you will allow me to guess?”

“Guess away. Moritz, you can go get Mrs. Campbell a refill on iced tea.”

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“The ‘we’ referred to are the shadows,” I whispered.

“You are so right, Mrs. Campbell. The Shadows. ‘We’ are like Britain’s opposition party when they are not in power...it always elects its shadow cabinet.”

Shadows. Spooks. Shadow cabinet of the world. In spite of myself, I trembled.

How am I supposed to relate to you?”

He said nothing.

“Mr. Highsmith, does this end our working arrangement for film production at Blackheart Heights?”

“Why, no, Mrs. Campbell, quite the contrary. We will carry on as though nothing happened, because, you know, nothing did.” He smiled that reserved, pinch-lipped smile with as sinister and cold a warning in his words as a woman would ever hear.

I looked up to see Lane returning, and Max motioning me to accompany him.

We switched positions, and I followed Max to the cockpit. *Lord, please don’t let Lane give anything away, I prayed.*

I settled into what Lane would surely call the comfortable flight engineer’s seat, cringing as I heard Max lock the door behind me. Lying on the instrument panel was an old issue of Life magazine from 1972. Someone must have unearthed it when the plane was retired from service. It certainly wasn’t kept for old news, obsolete fashions, and old

technology in ads. I had thought, really, that I would get a second interrogation, but here I was, left wondering what Lane was saying, if he were spilling his guts, or telling stuff. Extreme interrogation wasn't happening. I couldn't hear anything, but certainly shouting interrogation, needles, and fire wasn't happening.

As I sipped tea, I wondered what they'd slipped in it, if it were an altruistic mistake, an idea I immediately discarded. If it contained a sedative, they'd have to deal with limp bodies, and they weren't flying out in this plane. Maybe they wanted fingerprints, personal data. Maybe it was a gentleman's interrogation, tea to loosen the Southerner's tongue.

Twenty minutes later, the cockpit door opened with Max motioning me to go with him. I followed him back to starting position in a swivel chair. It looked like now; they would pit us against one another.

This might get touchy.

"So, Mr. Campbell," began the first handler who stayed nameless, "your wife's uncle talked about a stone. Why did you not tell me?" he said, hurling fiery rockets of accusation.

"I, I, well, really, no one gave those old stories any credence. I thought you were looking for facts. Why would I then hand you a myth?"

I hoped that was a save. Why Lane had told him a lie, I couldn't fathom. That would just fuel their shadowing of us.

"I told them that myth about a stone hidden along the Cape Fear was what piqued our interest in the Stone of Destiny," Lane said, answering my unspoken question.

"Mr. Campbell, please refrain from speaking," said Highsmith.

"Right."

"Mr. Highsmith," I said, "I did an article for my magazine. And as to the hearsay locally, it could have been any kind of stone that the Highland immigration meant. It's purely

hair-brained, and embarrassing for me to think you thought we really believed it could have been the Stone of Destiny. Such a tale,” I interjected.

“Then why do you comb the land and river up and down its trajectory?”

“Well, sure, it’s fun going on a maybe. It’s a lark, an exercise, something preposterously fun. That’s all. And we’ve looked in all the obvious places and come up dry-- no stone of any kind that is remarkable in any way,” Lane said. “Besides, I’ve enjoyed retracing the path of my kinsmen to this area.”

Would they believe us?

From that point we sat in stunned, uncomfortable silence, me, churning to get outside and get hold of Lane for feeding him that lie. I could pop him on the arm with great force, right now. I’m sure my agitation showed.

Yet another measure of eternity and Highsmith spoke up.

“You have been most helpful. Your story is interesting and may even be helpful.”

The true Shadow spoke up. “You will keep us apprised of any successes on your search, will you not? We do appreciate your thoroughness and your tenacity, the energy of your youth. Let me give you a contact number where one of us can be reached any time, day or night.”

He handed me a number on a slip of paper with a familiar Charlotte area code.

“Max and Moritz will escort you back to the helicopter which is standing by, engine running. You will be returned to your automobile. They will then return your cell phones and batteries, once you land. *À bientôt,*” concluded the Shadow.

French, why French, I fumed. I know good French, and that was. They reversed their process and did everything they had promised they would.

In no time, we had mounted the helicopter, donned our hoods. We were flying back to our car. I still would not breathe easy until we were in it, safely driving to Lebanon with its

ghosts, otherworldly spooks, and shadows lurking in the August Southern sun. No nice, relaxing dinner at the Lobster House. I almost longed for Blackheart Heights.

Once again, we had been kidnapped. Whether these gentlemen were Masons or other secret society, and not acting as officials of a secret service operation like CIA, unlikely for the speculative Stone venture, they were still connected internationally, powerful, and, professional. This inquiry was international import; I sensed it. We were quiet in the jeep. I kept thinking about a Shadow Cabinet running our country, our world.

Chapter 38: Good or Evil Counsel

“The land of darkness and the shadow of death.”--Job 10:21, the Bible

“Situation,” voices said, hovering over me. “We have a situation.”

I saw Highsmith, Mr. Anonymous, Max, and Moritz leaning over me with instruments, looking into my eyes and reaching toward them as though they were about to extract something through them. I shook myself.

“Lane! Lane! Where are you?” I turned over on the huge bed that had the extra hump in it where they’d made a sectional mattress, seeing a hunched ninja warrior that was really a massive umber wardrobe.

“Kenna, I’m right here. Did you have a nightmare?”

“Close enough. Those men were operating on my eyes, trying to enter my soul.”

He put his finger to his lips. I understood what he meant, so I sanitized my next words. It was hard coming down from such a fright.

“That was a creepy experience, yesterday. Really weird being spirited away, questioned and then waking up seeing them staring into my eye cavities, but the men seemed all right. Highsmith said nothing had changed about using Blackheart Heights for his film venues. How hot is it today?” I asked him. “Let’s take our coffee out on the porch and sit.”

So we went to the porch, sat on the swing where there could be no hearing devices, and I asked him, “Well, I guess we’re done with digging for the day. Do we continue or hold off for a while?”

“No, we definitely do not continue. They’ll be checking to see if we came up dry.”

“Waiting until we have done the work, and then snatching it.”

“You have a decidedly treacherous turn of mind, my dear Kenna. No, we do absolutely nothing today.”

“You know we could mess with them and go to Old Bluff. We need that name.

“We need someone else to dig it up. We don’t know anybody. Maybe Cecil would do it for us. He wanted to be part of the action.” I laughed.

“You’re right. Actually, that’s a great idea. He has the equipment for handling big stones, since he’s in the gravestone business. Or a gravedigger associate with a backhoe.”

“Oh, Lane. I didn’t think of that aspect. I was being humorous.”

“We need to have all this set up way ahead of time. We need to get back in contact with the Scottish authorities to let them know we think we have it, although it isn’t dug up yet, and that we need to arrange a quick pickup on a certain day.”

“Lane, my heart is thumping like a drum. Are they safe? This has been a story, a fiction, and a preposterous possibility until now. Now that it’s real, I’m getting scared.”

“Don’t buckle on me. We’re almost there. Remember Father McFarlane said, we would be guided, so we need to talk to God and Cecil. He must make a Smith monument for the cemetery, so he has reason to go with the right equipment.”

“But for whom? No one has died recently.”

“Your uncle.”

“But he’s at Old Bluff.”

“We could have the spot made for him at Smith Ferry Cemetery against moving him there later, say, when the cemetery is fixed up. We can act as though we are fixing it up, and you know it needs that. If it’s a family cemetery, families are notoriously whimsical and erratic about their loved ones’ caskets, ashes, and resting places. Or it can just be a monument to him as caretaker and patriarch.”

“You are too dangerously clever. I’ll need to pull Douglas in on this.”

“Suddenly, we probably only barely have enough time left to accomplish this. Putting these elements into play and pulling off the anti-heist of the century will take our two weeks.”

“Exactly, and you know Southerners...they must socialize and spend time building rapport. It’s molasses with their biscuits ‘as does it.’”

“Okay. We’ll go back in, talk to the microphone about how we’ll spend our last days of vacation, and then set off for town to talk to Cecil. Maybe you should try your Scottish SNP contact first, but not from the house. You know he will want the Stone back, be it real or be it fake, one of a thousand replicas, or whatever.”

“We can send a photograph once we have it up.”

“Yes. Have all the plans in place, subject to confirmation all round.”

“Roger, as in Roger Moore.”

We set those exact plans in motion.

###

We drove into town to Edgerton’s Monuments to talk to Cecil, but first I called Scotland on my cell phone and talked with the right man who naturally, unlike Cecil, wanted his name kept out of the disclosures. We set a date two weeks ahead. Douglas had approved the expenditure for a Smith Ferry Cemetery stone, so I wrote down in exact detail just what should be inscribed on it.

“We have to tell Cecil everything,” I said, in a moment of revelation.

“Yes, we do.”

So Lane and I intercepted Cecil on his way to the local eatery and told him the story about the Stone during the walk there. We compelled him to take a seat in the back, away from his usual buddies, and continued talking throughout the soup and sandwich. If anybody heard us, they would only think it a crazy story, of which he told many. If anyone watched us, we would instantly know a stranger in that setting.

We lingered long over lunch, answered questions, and filled him in on the plan for making a Smith cemetery stone. He made a list, but at the top of it was the deadline of one week to get the stone engraved, and that left just a week to dig, pull up and hide, fill in and set monument.

“You’ll have to accept a blank stone from whatever I have in stock.”

“Do you have a tall, narrow monument?”

“Let’s drive to my workshop and see what we can dig up.” He flashed his famous grin.

“That’s great, Cecil.”

“You know my work is truly monumental.”

What we worried about were the details, but he had all the contacts needed for setting up a date with a local funeral home to line up a hearse and his own airplane and casket capable of transporting the Stone, once dug up.

At Lebanon, we talked about the memorial for Uncle, connecting it to Bluff Cemetery.

Now, why we would be shipping a body or a rock to Scotland was the next hurdle.

Crate it up or leave it in the coffin with hearse; there’s the dilemma to sort itself out.

One week until the digging. We told Cecil we were being shadowed.

So far we planned on not going with them, so we explained exactly how we left it at Smith Ferry Cemetery, so he would know exactly where to dig. Dig up the stone, slip it behind the sheet over the granite, and into the hearse. Prepare the ground for new stone in the

same place. It could work. We didn't think the international shadow set had seen us in that location, for whatever reason, maybe a supernatural Being made seeing eyes blind. We had not noticed anyone following us that day, and had noted it then as being an anomaly. We had eluded scrutiny.

###

Tension filled the air; the day had come.

I was glad Edgerton Memorial had a flat scoop on the front loader. I'm sure time had left no casket surrounding the Stone; surely it would have rotted and fallen apart. Two men went with shovels. Lane and I were stowaways in the back of the hearse.

"I have to see the action, Lane," I said, from my hidden place in the hearse.

I watched for nearly an hour, as they carefully sifted dirt and clay and pulled up bones. After that, the main guy motioned to the back hoe operator, and they dug again.

I had a good vantage point for following the progress.

I opened the door and headed off, running.

"Kenna!" Lane said, stopping me in my tracks when I got too close.

I backed up a few steps to a safe distance, pacing.

"If you don't settle down, I am going to put you in an arm lock," he said.

"That sounds like fun," I flirted.

Then we saw the beginning shape emerge like a baby's leg from the womb. At the point where the shovels had pushed a couple of feet beneath the 'thing,' it began to move.

"We've got it!" they yelled. They continued carefully until they extracted a large stone, its iron rings on either end still miraculously intact.

"O, Lord, O Lord," I kept repeating like an idiot, prancing up and down, stamping my feet, jumping. "It's so slow, so slow."

“Take it easy, Kenna. Calm down. The men are conferring, now. It looks like they are using the flat boards to prop it up on a slant, with a rope pull like ski skids or a slingshot.”

I took my camera, snapping picture after picture of the whole process as it unfolded, and the dusty stone. Then I made the men pose. I would probably never get to use the photographs, as this was a secret project. Secret, that is, if we could get the men currently filling the grave hole to stay mum. The photographs would be sealed along with the rock for the day of the great reveal.

“They’re putting the rock in a reinforced casket which will ride with us in the back of the hearse. The hearse will drive to the airport.”

“If we had planned this better, Lane, we’d be getting on our flight at the same time.”

“No, it’s better this way.”

####

Back home from the delivery of said stone, anticlimactic after the event of the century, we sat innocently on the porch with the iced tea Lane had come to love, said it matched the climate, and talked about the forces who wanted to possess this stone. We commiserated about whose plot or plan it was to ultimately own it, and for what good or nefarious purpose.

It was a matter for speculation, since we had identified at least eight separate groups.

For those who consider this issue peripheral, ancient, and of no consequence, I must seriously beg to differ. To bring those uninitiated up to speed, I must report that two temples existed already, the first built by Solomon from materials accumulated by David, between 827 and 833 B.C., destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians.

The second temple was built thanks to Cyrus who allowed Zerubbabel to rebuild, finished in 516 B.C. Jesus gave a prophetic word about the second temple’s destruction towards the end of his ministry that “not one stone will be left standing upon another” which occurred after Pentecost, in 70 A.D.

The Herodian Temple, a renovation of the second, had centered Israeli life, was focus of religious ritual, repository of Holy Scriptures and other national literature, and meeting place of the Sanhedrin, the highest court of Jewish law during the Roman period. The rebellion against Rome in A.D. 66 focused on the Temple and ended with the Temple's destruction by Titus, the 9th/10th of Av, A.D. 70.

All that remained of the Second Temple was a portion of the Western Wall, the Wailing Wall, which continues to be the focus of Jewish aspirations and pilgrimage, and was made part of the wall surrounding the Muslim Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqṣā Mosque in A.D. 691. The site returned to Jewish control in 1967.

Had you traveled to Jerusalem, you might have walked the shady paths of the southern hilltop where the United Nations headquarters sits. What you might not know is that this hill is named "Hill of Evil Counsel," since it was where the High Priest Caiaphas and his Pharisees arrested Jesus. It lies across the Hinnom Valley just south of Jerusalem's ancient walled precinct, and is also thought the spot where Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

The UN has peacekeeping authority over the site of the Temple Mount, it is rumored.

Jerusalem is a protected city, but the protection comes at the price of virtual ownership because the UN gets to make major decisions concerning it.

Few know how hard Catholics have vied, haggled with, and received, legal rights to a portion of Jerusalem, which can only signify that the scene is being set for a future world enclave, a playing out of forces of Armageddon, world domination; no one knows what.

Few put much stock in a Third Temple. Even if, then it's crazy, interesting, speculative. Unless you live in the past, this old issue and former custom is not relevant. Then, why do so many groups have as a goal rebuilding Solomon's Temple? Before Israel was reborn as a nation in 1948, everyone said it would never happen. *As fait accompli*, as prophecy fulfillment, Christians ignored it and still ignore this undeniably remarkable event.

Yet half of today's secularists unite in favor of building Solomon's temple. Group One: Secularists.

Group Two is The Temple Institute of Israel. Group Three are Messianic Jews, Orthodox Jews, with or without the institution of the sacrifices. Group Four are Christian Zionists, and Group Five, Evangelicals. Group Six, in no particular order, is The Order of Freemasonry, and Group Seven is the Roman Catholic Church. Group Eight would be British Israelism, a sect equating Britain with descendants of Israel's ten lost tribes.

As it relates to the Stone of Destiny, this last, thought to be a heresy, has an intriguing appeal, not as heresy, but in the fulfillment of the prophetic promise God made to David that one of his descendants would not fail to sit on the throne forever.

There must be others determined to build the Third Temple. However, you can be sure this is an odd conglomeration of world actors on any stage, disparate. Skeptics can well wonder how they could ever join forces.

However, at this moment, plans proceed at a rapid pace for gathering the prerequisites for the temple event—the red heifer being one item still 'in the oven.'

Motive for building the Temple is where agreement turns dissonant. Everyone has his own reason for desiring it. The orthodox Jews want to 'shadow' Christ's substitutionary death in their act of Temple obedience. The Catholics want to signify their and the Pope's ascendancy over all other religions. Freemasonry wants to re-institute ancient pagan religions and usher in the rule and reign of a world religious leader in order to build a 'perfect' temple, unlike the first two. They teach among their own that "unless the Lord builds the Temple, they labor in vain who build it." That's Scripture, calculated to create no resistance among Christians. 'The lord' must be physically present during the building process. I think we can safely guess this 'lord' is not the Lord Jesus Christ of Nazareth, but another, a 'Lord Maitreya' or whatnot, yes, an, or the, Antichrist.

I found out what few know—that the Masons have a separate commission for education of their people in Temple lore, and that Temple masonry has from the outset figured into their core doctrine in Solomon’s temple, teaching a ritual death to life symbolized by Hiram Abiff’s death, then, echoed in the murder of master stone mason’s underling who crafted the column in small Rosslyn chapel in Scotland.

Another resource I cannot reveal let me in on another secret blooming from way back, purposely kept obscure. Few know of ‘The Prophecy of the Popes,’ *Prophetia Sancti Malachiae Archiepiscopi, de Summis Pontificibus*, published in Lignum Vitae in 1595, and kept secret by Catholics for years which have only recently re-surfaced. This prophecy of Malachi Martin, 12th-century Archbishop of Armagh, Ireland, named all the popes since 1590 long ago in 38 pithy descriptions. The final pope draws everyone in, only to become the epitome of the apostate church, exhibiting macabre and spooky tenets of female god worship, necromancy, using dead men’s bones, witchcraft, permissive morals, and other aberrations of mainstream Christianity. His prophecy concludes with the destruction of Rome.

It is no wonder at all that I could never answer the man interrogating me in the plane, telling me to give him information, because “we’re all working together.” Yes we are, and no, we never will be.

In truth, none of those groups are. And whether or not you add Scotland in as a ninth group, at the present, they were the current owners who wanted their stone, or any version thereof, back. Who knew if the Stone of Destiny would ever find its way into the Third Temple? It is an esoteric question, at present, and an issue that would have to be solved on a higher plane, in higher courts than my brain accessed, even though I fully believed that antichrist would sit on the throne of God one day, claiming to be God.

And I knew that a stone that literally, vocally cried out, “This is the rightful King!” was one of the most supernatural ways to exhibit and prove it, to deceive ‘even the elect,’ if

that were possible.’ England certainly wanted it enough to steal it, keep it for 700 years, and then give it back on a string, ready to pull back for crowning their next king.

So these were the issues Lane and I talked about in the summer breeze as we relaxed for the final time in North Carolina—nice little relaxing themes to consider before packing to return to beloved Scotland. I had missed it.

Now in one return trip Lebanon and Blackheart Heights were forged together forever in my heart.

Chapter 39, Ninth Meridian: Cape Fear to Kintyre

“Sometimes paranoids have enemies...conspiracies are only laughable when they fail to materialize.” —Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*

Lane and I returned Lebanon to its previous state as well as we could. I told the pictures on the walls good-bye, naming each one I could. I walked in and out the back door, down the back steps and up the steps to the kitchen past the area beneath the breakfast nook where I used to tame wild kittens, in and out the house like a ritual walk to memorize rooms, sear memories, make every entry an exit, every exit an entry.

What was humorous to me about our adventure was that we had leveraged one man with Masonic commitments to outwit others with similar ties. Their secrecy had helped us, or at least proved providential in staying time and the release of the last horseman of the apocalypse, final days and the dreaded forces of Armageddon, what Lane and I believed.

We were returning to Scotland with a story we could not tell. We drove down the road to take one final look at Smith Ferry Cemetery and headed for RDU.

Wouldn't you know it, we were followed again.

Our package delivered and mission accomplished, we chose not let it faze us. We kept navigating the bumpy gravel road through the extra greenery reaching and scraping the car,

noting trees left and right on approach to the cemetery situated on the east bank of the Cape Fear River. It was a short distance upstream from the point where Lower Little River empties into the Cape Fear. Memories of bouncing down the road with Uncle driving as fast as he could, laughing playfully, brought tears to my eyes.

Finally, we were there.

Almost all those buried here were descended from, or in-laws of, Alexander Smith, son of John Smith of Smithfield. All these relatives were referenced by number in the Whitfield/Bryan/Smith genealogy.

What I was most proud of was the new monument in Uncle's honor which rose high within a little more kempt version of the cemetery surrounds.

I was ecstatic that the monument concluded a giant event and commemorated a giant, a Smith. It was so fitting. We pulled up. I walked up to the monument, placed a straggler gardenia at the bottom of it, Uncle's favorite flower, knowing its sweetness would only last a few minutes in this sweltering heat.

The men in the car behind us waited, considerate of my final moments visiting ancestors.

As we returned to our car, Highsmith and Anonymous approached.

"Nice monument," Highsmith said, pointing to it.

"Yes. It is a testament to my uncle and all he stood for."

"Proof you got what you came for, isn't it?"

I looked at him, erased quickly the smile that wanted to come. *Never be seen to gloat.*

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked.

"Proof we tied present to past, Kintyre ancestors' trek to arrival on the Cape Fear."

"Thin meridian to Scotland," I ended his thought, looking up at him.

“Of course, of course,” the man whose name we never knew said. “Just call me ‘Smith.’”

I looked at him and laughed. “Kin, are we? Typical spies, Miller, Meyer, and Smith.”

They laughed, as well.

“See you back in Scotland, Mr. Highsmith,” Lane said.

“Smith and Highsmith,” I said, and smiled.

“Yes, we will. Thus endeth the set of Armageddon 7,” he said.

We all walked quietly to our cars.

###

My mind turned suddenly to Bryan and Sally, yes, Bryan who knew prominent Masons in Scotland and the U.S. That must be why he floated to mind.

“Lane, what is up with Bryan? Is he a Mason, or not? We have never asked, have we? I suppose I am so tight with Sally, I assumed Sally wouldn’t have married someone who was too active in secret societies.”

“Bryan’s okay,” Lane said. “He didn’t wear that gaudy Masonic ring at the wedding, so a member in good standing must have told him not to. Wonder how the work at Blackheart is progressing. Have to admit, I’m all about setting foot on Scottish soil, m’Luv.”

“I’m longing to, as well. We’ve laid a lot of ghosts and demons to rest, haven’t we?”

“Yes, m’Luv, we have, with one or two significant dragons yet to slay.”

“You are so right, Sweetheart,” I said. “One dragon is Debt. Another dragon is named Tara, pardon me, but I can see fire issuing from an old flame of yours.”

“Yes. I can’t wait to get an in-person report on what the epigrapher has found.”

“Well, it won’t be long, eighteen to twenty-four hours, everything going smoothly.”

###

“I have followed the epigrapher around keeping a written record as an addendum to his estimates and reports,” Bryan said. “Plus, I’ve learned much about the science. I’m considering returning to school.”

“You didn’t tell me that, Bryan,” Sally said.

“That is awesome,” Lane and I almost simultaneously said.

“Among other things, I found out that the urn was worth 130,000 pounds, which will knock 130,000 off the Campbell’s debt to the Montfort’s. That is significant, I should think.”

“Incredible,” I said. “And what does the dungeon collection appraise at?” I asked.

“Oh, just a couple of mill,” he said, grinning.

I just turned and stared at Lane, and we hugged each other and danced around.

“One dragon down,” Lane said, and Bryan looked totally confused.

“Oh, Kenna, by the way, the inscriber was a Campbell who was kept prisoner here and there was historical rumor to the molestation sense in the inscription. That lends credence to the discovery saying what you had hoped it did. It certainly doesn’t explain the full history, but it chips away at the marble monster.”

“Such good news will cheer the heart of Douglas. She will be ecstatic. In fact, Campbell’s all over the globe will be ecstatic. We can admit to our name. We are vindicated.”

After our return, we saw that Bryan seemed to be friends with the Montfort’s and with Highsmith. While I didn’t like this, I had not a clue as to how to approach Sally about her husband to find out what was happening. I had to find out who he was, and what we could expect down the road.

“What is the scoop with Bryan, and why is he going back to school?” I asked Lane.

“They are moving to Scotland,” Lane said.

“Iain, it is so great seeing you. We missed you.” I gave him the heartiest of hugs.

“And I missed the both of you. Come to the falconry. I’ll show you what I’ve done!”

We followed him.

“Iain, do you mind if we take a detour? You can come with us.”

“Lane, Iain, go up with me to Dame Campbell’s room? I need to ask some questions.”

“You’re a mysterious one. Yes, we’ll come.”

“I’m coming,” Iain said.

We opened the door on her room, and there was the little girl.

“All right, Lane, you have to tell me why you let this little girl have the run of our castle, and why nobody talks to her, and she won’t respond to me.”

Lane looked at me as though I were an alien.

“What in heaven’s name are you talking about, Kenna?”

“The little girl--she’s been coloring in that same book, now, ever since I came. She has to live and eat somewhere. You have to have given her a key. Tell me what is going on.”

“She is that real to you.”

“Of course.”

“Kenna, I see no little girl. Yet I know it must be the apparition of the little girl I once had. She would have been two years younger than Iain, had she lived.”

“You never told me.”

“Don’t be angry, Kenna. No one talks about her; no one speaks of her. A car struck her down at 6. I have not been able to talk about it to anyone. Is she blonde? With pigtails?”

“Yes, Lane. And she obviously ‘owns’ the castle.”

Lane started crying. I have never seen a grown man cry. Iain looked troubled, too.

“But Lane, what was her name?”

“Isabella,” he said. I felt the past click onto the chain, the circle of the future.

“But Lane, she is so peaceful. The shredded curtain that the tour tells about,” I pointed to it, “that has nothing to do with her, does it?”

“No, Kenna.”

“Then, what? Is it that doll that turns up everywhere? Did the doll belong to Isabella?”

“No, she hated it. It was part of the castle from old days, and has just stayed here.”

“I have an idea that when we remove it—and the shredded curtains—it won’t return.”

“Yes, I think you’re right,” he said, as we both wiped his eyes.

“Sit down,” he said, and we all three sat on the bed near the little girl. We held hands and prayed over Lane and Isabella’s memory. He told me about his mother. He told me all about his little girl and his former wife. “I will never speak of her again, Kenna.”

I nodded. “But we will talk about Isabella often,” I said. The little girl stopped playing with her doll long enough to look at me and smile, and that is all I ever knew of her except a happy laugh or two.

“I thought I saw her gather up her crayons,” Iain said.

“And now we must see what your son has accomplished for you.”

We were amazed at the room Iain had added, the new order brought to the operation.

Lane hugged him, crying once again.

Then, sensing my presence, he slipped back into man-to-man stance, clapping him firmly on the back, shaking his hand, and declaring, “Son, I do believe you’re a chip off the old block!” I will never forget the look in Iain’s eyes.

Blackheart Heights grew lighter. The darkness receded, and with it, the spirit of overwhelming grief.

The Farquhard connection, an ongoing search has, to date, not been solved.

David was installed as Castle Operations Manager, met a village woman he quite liked. We anticipated wedding bells in spring.

Our dungeon collection was sold in part to Scone Palace, original home of the Stone of Destiny. We used the income to fully pay off the remaining Montfort mortgage on

Blackheart Heights. With that paid, the relationship turned into what anyone would call normal.

Lane's father Farquhard became as sentimental and sappy as any doting father, which was hard for me to believe. I kept waiting for the grumpy, irascible man I had first known to reappear.

We had a break from Highsmith until his next film, when he and his crew arrived in full force. His new film was called, 'Post Armageddon.'

Hmmm, I wondered. Whatever happened to the Stone of Destiny? Did they deem it the real stone with a one hundred percent documented provenance, or yet another duplicate with which they had been duped? No one was telling, and as of yet, the Third Temple had not shown up in the news. If it was the Stone of Destiny, destined to speak for Antichrist at the end of time, in the way it was said to have spoken earlier for the proper kings of Scotland, or later as it sat under the Throne Chair in Edinburgh, well, then--I didn't know, but it had certainly been the Stone of *my* Destiny. It had tied all of my past together for seven generations. It had pointed me in the right direction: away from the secret, the occult, and any shred of bondage to them.

Stalkers and stalking had subsided. Perhaps we were so normalized, we failed to notice.

"Lane, I just heard back from Cecil Edgerton, when I wrote the thank you note."

"You did, eh?"

"Yes, he'll be flying out here soon for a visit."

"Tell him he's more than welcome. We'll take him to Rosslyn Chapel."

We laughed.

Lane and I met with Sally and Bryan for a celebration. We walked down to the dungeon, took a look at the engraving, while Bryan went on and on and on about the work in

stone and all the wonderful castles and structures he would visit to decipher obscure inscriptions once he had his degree.

In the front dungeon room, now a restaurant, we sat down to a castle dinner like tourists, and Sally and I chatted happily.

It looked as though we couples would soon have offspring. They would certainly get the chance to play together like cousins on the green, gold, and purple grass of Blackheart Heights in August. And who knows? Maybe one day join us on the lawn at Lebanon in a Post Armageddon conclave, if Armageddon 7 failed to materialize.

THE END

Coming soon...
A DEADLY MOSAIC

By

Joanna A. McKethan

Chapter 1: Young at Art

“The Mosaicist was making the fine hairs on the nape of Mona’s swan neck out of chips of gold.”—Kurt Vonnegut

Scrolling through pictures of the famed Hagia Sophia, I noticed that the interior view of the dome, cut in half, looked just like the All-seeing eye. Not that I thought it was designed

by a secret society to beam its message abroad or that I thought secret societies plagued the great cathedral cum museum cum mosque.

The recognition was not cerebral at all, in fact, but rather a sudden visual, visceral stab in the eye that I knew was significant, but did not yet understand why it was.

My mother Lexi, a former North Carolinian who had married my father after she moved to Germany, had encouraged me never to ignore flashes of sight that I would receive. She had experienced the same insights all her life and had learned to credit them when no one else did.

She had made me write them down when she could, or at least voice them.

She and Dad were quite disturbed at my current status. Single, alone, I lived in Istanbul, Turkey. In fact, they had by turns fought me, argued with me logically, and enlisted friends to deter me. That my artist friend, Alexander, dark-haired like me, was going too, was probably my only salvation.

Here I was, Anya Justine von Ost, half Ami, quarter German, quarter Russian to make Dad's half, on the floor of my new digs in Turkey, legs bow-crossed on a beautiful, soft, bright green prayer rug, wondering what I would eat for supper and how I would navigate a world foreign to me in every way to get it.

All my parents' arguments against my living in Turkey turned into my conclusive arguments for doing just that. I heard some bright, tinkling bells and I realized the carriage had arrived along with Alexander, or Sasha, as we all called him.

And my sole connection with my past and my parents at this point was the Cross of St. Vladimir, a large processional cross that my mother had unearthed, or should I say 'de-attic-vated' from Father's inherited collection of few things that survived another generation's exodus from his stately ancestral home before the onslaught of communists.

Mom and Dad had donated the Cross of St. Vladimir to the Orthodox Church's collection kept here in Istanbul at the Hagia Sophia. It was a Russian Orthodox relic--not in the sense of saints' bones, but in it's over arcing sense of old and valuable, Oxford dictionary sense, just look it up.

I was chosen from a wide net thrown to capture artists who were adept at restoration of mosaics, the prominent feature of the art work in the exquisite, domed building I had fallen in love with, the building that filled my waking thoughts, my working days, and my tortured dreams.

(more to come)