DIANA GABALDON

The Outlander Series

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Outlander

Dragonfly in Amber

Voyager

Drums of Autumn

The Fiery Cross

A Breath of Snow and Ashes

An Echo in the Bone

Delacorte Press

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OUTLANDER

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Contents

People disappear all the time. Ask any policeman. Better yet, ask a journalist. Disappearances are bread-and-butter to journalists.

Young girls run away from home. Young children stray from their parents and are never seen again. Housewives reach the end of their tether and take the grocery money and a taxi to the station. International financiers change their names and vanish into the smoke of imported cigars.

Many of the lost will be found, eventually, dead or alive. Disappearances, after all, have explanations.

Usually.

PART ONE

Inverness, 1945

1

A NEW BEGINNING

It wasn't a very likely place for disappearances, at least at first glance. Mrs. Baird's was like a thousand other Highland bed-and-breakfast establishments in 1945; clean and quiet, with fading floral wallpaper, gleaming floors, and a coin-operated hot-water geyser in the lavatory. Mrs. Baird herself was squat and easygoing, and made no objection to Frank lining her tiny rose-sprigged parlor with the dozens of books and papers with which he always traveled.

I met Mrs. Baird in the front hall on my way out. She stopped me with a pudgy hand on my arm and patted at my hair.

"Dear me, Mrs. Randall, ye canna go out like that! Here, just let me tuck that bit in for ye. There! That's better. Ye know, my cousin was tellin' me about a new perm she tried, comes out beautiful and holds like a dream; perhaps ye should try that kind next time."

I hadn't the heart to tell her that the waywardness of my light brown curls was strictly the fault of nature, and not due to any dereliction on the part of the permanent-wave manufacturers. Her own tightly marceled waves suffered from no such perversity.

"Yes, I'll do that, Mrs. Baird," I lied. "I'm just going down to the village to meet Frank. We'll be back for tea." I ducked out the door and down the path before she could detect any further defects in my undisciplined appearance. After four years as a Royal Army nurse, I was enjoying the escape from uniforms and rationing by indulging in brightly printed light cotton dresses, totally unsuited for rough walking through the heather.

Not that I had originally planned to do a lot of that; my thoughts ran more on the lines of sleeping late in the mornings, and long, lazy afternoons in bed with Frank, not sleeping. However, it was difficult to maintain the proper mood of languorous romance with Mrs. Baird industriously Hoovering away outside our door.

"That must be the dirtiest bit of carpet in the entire Scottish Highlands," Frank had observed that morning as we lay in bed listening to the ferocious roar of the vacuum in the hallway.

"Nearly as dirty as our landlady's mind," I agreed. "Perhaps we should have gone to Brighton after all." We had chosen the Highlands as a place to holiday before Frank took up his appointment as a history professor at Oxford, on the grounds that Scotland had been somewhat less touched by the physical horrors of war than the rest of Britain, and was less susceptible to the frenetic postwar gaiety that infected more popular vacation spots.

And without discussing it, I think we both felt that it was a symbolic place to reestablish our marriage; we had been married and spent a two-day honeymoon in the Highlands, shortly before the outbreak of war seven years before. A peaceful refuge in which to rediscover each other, we thought, not realizing that, while golf and fishing are Scotland's most popular outdoor sports, gossip is the most popular indoor sport. And when it rains as much as it does in Scotland, people spend a lot of time indoors.

"Where are you going?" I asked, as Frank swung his feet out of bed.

"I'd hate the dear old thing to be disappointed in us," he answered. Sitting up on the side of the ancient bed, he bounced gently up and down, creating a piercing rhythmic squeak. The Hoovering in the hall stopped abruptly. After a minute or two of bouncing, he gave a loud, theatrical groan and collapsed backward with a twang of protesting springs. I giggled helplessly into a pillow, so as not to disturb the breathless silence outside.

Frank waggled his eyebrows at me. "You're supposed to moan ecstatically, not giggle," he admonished in a whisper. "She'll think I'm not a good lover."

“You’ll have to keep it up for longer than that, if you expect ecstatic moans,” I answered. “Two minutes doesn’t deserve any more than a giggle.”

“Inconsiderate little wench. I came here for a rest, remember?”

“Lazybones. You’ll never manage the next branch on your family tree unless you show a bit more industry than that.”

Frank’s passion for genealogy was yet another reason for choosing the Highlands. According to one of the filthy scraps of paper he lugged to and fro, some tiresome ancestor of his had had something to do with something or other in this region back in the middle of the eighteenth—or was it seventeenth?—century.

“If I end as a childless stub on my family tree, it will undoubtedly be the fault of our untiring hostess out there. After all, we’ve been married almost eight years. Little Frank Jr. will be quite legitimate without being conceived in the presence of a witness.”

“If he’s conceived at all,” I said pessimistically. We had been disappointed yet again the week before leaving for our Highland retreat.

“With all this bracing fresh air and healthy diet? How could we help but manage here?” Dinner the night before had been herring, fried. Lunch had been herring, pickled. And the pungent scent now wafting up the stairwell strongly intimated that breakfast was to be herring, kippered.

“Unless you’re contemplating an encore performance for the edification of Mrs. Baird,” I suggested, “you’d better get dressed. Aren’t you meeting that parson at ten?” The Rev. Dr. Reginald Wakefield, vicar of the local parish, was to provide some rivetingly fascinating baptismal registers for Frank’s inspection, not to mention the glittering prospect that he might have unearthed some moldering army despatches or somesuch that mentioned the notorious ancestor.

“What’s the name of that great-great-great-great-grandfather of yours again?” I asked. “The one that mucked about here during one of the Risings? I can’t remember if it was Willy or Walter.”

“Actually, it was Jonathan.” Frank took my complete disinterest in family history placidly, but remained always on guard, ready to

seize the slightest expression of inquisitiveness as an excuse for telling me all facts known to date about the early Randalls and their connections. His eyes assumed the fervid gleam of the fanatic lecturer as he buttoned his shirt.

"Jonathan Wolverton Randall—Wolverton for his mother's uncle, a minor knight from Sussex. He was, however, known by the rather dashing nickname of 'Black Jack,' something he acquired in the army, probably during the time he was stationed here." I flopped facedown on the bed and affected to snore. Ignoring me, Frank went on with his scholarly exegesis.

"He bought his commission in the mid-thirties—1730s, that is—and served as a captain of dragoons. According to those old letters Cousin May sent me, he did quite well in the army. Good choice for a second son, you know; his younger brother followed tradition as well by becoming a curate, but I haven't found out much about him yet. Anyway, Jack Randall was highly commended by the Duke of Sandringham for his activities before and during the '45—the second—Jacobite Rising, you know," he amplified for the benefit of the ignorant amongst his audience, namely me. "You know, Bonnie Prince Charlie and that lot?"

"I'm not entirely sure the Scots realize they lost that one," I interrupted, sitting up and trying to subdue my hair. "I distinctly heard the barman at that pub last night refer to us as Sassenachs."

"Well, why not?" said Frank equably. "It only means 'Englishman,' after all, or at worst, 'outlander,' and we're all of that."

"I know what it means. It was the tone I objected to."

Frank searched through the bureau drawer for a belt. "He was just annoyed because I told him the ale was weak. I told him the true Highland brew requires an old boot to be added to the vat, and the final product to be strained through a well-worn undergarment."

"Ah, that accounts for the amount of the bill."

"Well, I phrased it a little more tactfully than that, but only because the Gaelic language hasn't got a specific word for drawers."

I reached for a pair of my own, intrigued. "Why not? Did the ancient Gaels not wear undergarments?"

Frank leered. “You’ve never heard that old song about what a Scotsman wears beneath his kilts?”

“Presumably not gents’ knee-length step-ins,” I said dryly. “Perhaps I’ll go out in search of a local kilt-wearer whilst you’re cavorting with vicars and ask him.”

“Well, do try not to get arrested, Claire. The dean of St. Giles College wouldn’t like it at all.”

In the event, there were no kilt-wearers loitering about the town square or patronizing the shops that surrounded it. There were a number of other people there, though, mostly housewives of the Mrs. Baird type, doing their daily shopping. They were garrulous and gossipy, and their solid, print-clad presences filled the shops with a cozy warmth; a buttress against the cold mist of the morning outdoors.

With as yet no house of my own to keep, I had little that needed buying, but enjoyed myself in browsing among the newly replenished shelves, for the pure joy of seeing lots of things for sale again. It had been a long time of rationing, of doing without the simple things like soap and eggs, and even longer without the minor luxuries of life, like L’Heure Bleu cologne.

My gaze lingered on a shop window filled with household goods —embroidered tea cloths and cozies, pitchers and glasses, a stack of quite homely pie tins, and a set of three vases.

I had never owned a vase in my life. During the war years, I had, of course, lived in the nurses’ quarters, first at Pembroke Hospital, later at the field station in France. But even before that, we had lived nowhere long enough to justify the purchase of such an item. Had I had such a thing, I reflected, Uncle Lamb would have filled it with potsherds long before I could have got near it with a bunch of daisies.

Quentin Lambert Beauchamp. “Q” to his archaeological students and his friends. “Dr. Beauchamp” to the scholarly circles in which he moved and lectured and had his being. But always Uncle Lamb to me.

My father's only brother, and my only living relative at the time, he had been landed with me, aged five, when my parents were killed in a car crash. Poised for a trip to the Middle East at the time, he had paused in his preparations long enough to make the funeral arrangements, dispose of my parents' estates, and enroll me in a proper girls' boarding school. Which I had flatly refused to attend.

Faced with the necessity of prying my chubby fingers off the car's door handle and dragging me by the heels up the steps of the school, Uncle Lamb, who hated personal conflict of any kind, had sighed in exasperation, then finally shrugged and tossed his better judgment out the window along with my newly purchased round straw boater.

"Ruddy thing," he muttered, seeing it rolling merrily away in the rearview mirror as we roared down the drive in high gear. "Always loathed hats on women, anyway." He had glanced down at me, fixing me with a fierce glare.

"One thing," he said, in awful tones. "You are *not* to play dolls with my Persian grave figurines. Anything else, but not that. Got it?"

I had nodded, content. And had gone with him to the Middle East, to South America, to dozens of study sites throughout the world. Had learned to read and write from the drafts of journal articles, to dig latrines and boil water, and to do a number of other things not suitable for a young lady of gentle birth—until I had met the handsome, dark-haired historian who came to consult Uncle Lamb on a point of French philosophy as it related to Egyptian religious practice.

Even after our marriage, Frank and I led the nomadic life of junior faculty, divided between continental conferences and temporary flats, until the outbreak of war had sent him to Officers Training and the Intelligence Unit at M16, and me to nurses training. Though we had been married nearly eight years, the new house in Oxford would be our first real home.

Tucking my handbag firmly under my arm, I marched into the shop and bought the vases.

I met Frank at the crossing of the High Street and the Gereside Road and we turned up it together. He raised his eyebrows at my purchases.

"Vases?" He smiled. "Wonderful. Perhaps now you'll stop putting flowers in my books."

"They aren't flowers, they're specimens. And it was you who suggested I take up botany. To occupy my mind, now that I've not got nursing to do," I reminded him.

"True." He nodded good-humoredly. "But I didn't realize I'd have bits of greenery dropping out into my lap every time I opened a reference. What was that horrible crumbly brown stuff you put in Tuscum and Banks?"

"Groutweed. Good for hemorrhoids."

"Preparing for my imminent old age, are you? Well, how very thoughtful of you, Claire."

We pushed through the gate, laughing, and Frank stood back to let me go first up the narrow front steps.

Suddenly he caught my arm. "Look out! You don't want to step in it."

I lifted my foot gingerly over a large brownish-red stain on the top step.

"How odd," I said. "Mrs. Baird scrubs the steps down every morning; I've seen her. What do you suppose that can be?"

Frank leaned over the step, sniffing delicately.

"Offhand, I should say that it's blood."

"Blood!" I took a step back into the entryway. "Whose?" I glanced nervously into the house. "Do you suppose Mrs. Baird's had an accident of some kind?" I couldn't imagine our immaculate landlady leaving bloodstains to dry on her doorstep unless some major catastrophe had occurred, and wondered just for a moment whether the parlor might be harboring a crazed ax-murderer, even now preparing to spring out on us with a spine-chilling shriek.

Frank shook his head. He stood on tiptoe to peer over the hedge into the next garden.

"I shouldn't think so. There's a stain like it on the Collinses' doorstep as well."

“Really?” I drew closer to Frank, both to see over the hedge and for moral support. The Highlands hardly seemed a likely spot for a mass murderer, but then I doubted such persons used any sort of logical criteria when picking their sites. “That’s rather … disagreeable,” I observed. There was no sign of life from the next residence. “What do you suppose has happened?”

Frank frowned, thinking, then slapped his hand briefly against his trouser leg in inspiration.

“I think I know! Wait here a moment.” He darted out to the gate and set off down the road at a trot, leaving me stranded on the edge of the doorstep.

He was back shortly, beaming with confirmation.

“Yes, that’s it, it must be. Every house in the row has had it.”

“Had what? A visit from a homicidal maniac?” I spoke a bit sharply, still nervous at having been abruptly abandoned with nothing but a large bloodstain for company.

Frank laughed. “No, a ritual sacrifice. Fascinating!” He was down on his hands and knees in the grass, peering interestedly at the stain.

This hardly sounded better than a homicidal maniac. I squatted beside him, wrinkling my nose at the smell. It was early for flies, but a couple of the big, slow-moving Highland midges circled the stain.

“What do you mean, ‘ritual sacrifice’?” I demanded. “Mrs. Baird’s a good church-goer, and so are all the neighbors. This isn’t Druid’s Hill or anything, you know.”

He stood, brushing grass-ends from his trousers. “That’s all you know, my girl,” he said. “There’s no place on earth with more of the old superstitions and magic mixed into its daily life than the Scottish Highlands. Church or no church, Mrs. Baird believes in the Old Folk, and so do all the neighbors.” He pointed at the stain with one neatly polished toe. “The blood of a black cock,” he explained, looking pleased. “The houses are new, you see. Pre-fabs.”

I looked at him coldly. “If you are under the impression that that explains everything, think again. What difference does it make how old the houses are? And where on earth is everybody?”

“Down the pub, I should expect. Let’s go along and see, shall we?” Taking my arm, he steered me out the gate and we set off down the Gereside Road.

“In the old days,” he explained as we went, “and not so long ago, either, when a house was built, it was customary to kill something and bury it under the foundation, as a propitiation to the local earth spirits. You know, ‘He shall lay the foundations thereof in his firstborn and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.’ Old as the hills.”

I shuddered at the quotation. “In that case, I suppose it’s quite modern and enlightened of them to be using chickens instead. You mean, since the houses are fairly new, nothing was buried under them, and the inhabitants are now remedying the omission.”

“Yes, exactly.” Frank seemed pleased with my progress, and patted me on the back. “According to the vicar, many of the local folk thought the War was due in part to people turning away from their roots and omitting to take proper precautions, such as burying a sacrifice under the foundation, that is, or burning fishes’ bones on the hearth—except haddocks, of course,” he added, happily distracted. “You never burn a haddock’s bones—did you know?—or you’ll never catch another. Always bury the bones of a haddock instead.”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” I said. “Tell me what you do in order never to see another herring, and I’ll do it forthwith.”

He shook his head, absorbed in one of his feats of memory, those brief periods of scholastic rapture where he lost touch with the world around him, absorbed completely in conjuring up knowledge from all its sources.

“I don’t know about herring,” he said absently. “For mice, though, you hang bunches of Trembling Jock about—‘Trembling Jock i’ the hoose, and ye’ll ne’er see a moose,’ you know. Bodies under the foundation, though—that’s where a lot of the local ghosts come from. You know Mountgerald, the big house at the end of the High Street? There’s a ghost there, a workman on the house who was killed as a sacrifice for the foundation. In the eighteenth century sometime; that’s really fairly recent,” he added thoughtfully.

“The story goes that by order of the house’s owner, one wall was built up first, then a stone block was dropped from the top of it onto one of the workmen—presumably a dislikable fellow was chosen for the sacrifice—and he was buried then in the cellar and the rest of the house built up over him. He haunts the cellar where he was killed, except on the anniversary of his death and the four Old Days.”

“Old Days?”

“The ancient feasts,” he explained, still lost in his mental notes. “Hogmanay, that’s New Year’s, Midsummer Day, Beltane and All Hallows’. Druids, Beaker Folk, early Picts, everybody kept the sun feasts and the fire feasts, so far as we know. Anyway, ghosts are freed on the holy days, and can wander about at will, to do harm or good as they please.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “It’s getting on for Beltane—close to the spring equinox. Best keep an eye out, next time you pass the kirkyard.” His eyes twinkled, and I realized the trance had ended.

I laughed. “Are there a number of famous local ghosts, then?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. We’ll ask the Vicar, shall we, next time we see him?”

We saw the Vicar quite shortly, in fact. He, along with most of the other inhabitants of the village, was down in the pub, having a lager-and-light in celebration of the houses’ new sanctification.

He seemed rather embarrassed at being caught in the act of condoning acts of paganism, as it were, but brushed it off as merely a local observance with historical color, like the Wearing of the Green.

“Really rather fascinating, you know,” he confided, and I recognized, with an internal sigh, the song of the scholar, as identifying a sound as the *terr-whit!* of a thrush. Harking to the call of a kindred spirit, Frank at once settled down to the mating dance of academe, and they were soon neck-deep in archetypes and the parallels between ancient superstitions and modern religions. I shrugged and made my own way through the crowd to the bar and back, a large brandy-and-splash in each hand.

Knowing from experience how difficult it was to distract Frank's attention from this sort of discussion, I simply picked up his hand, wrapped his fingers about the stem of the glass and left him to his own devices.

I found Mrs. Baird on a deep bench near the window, sharing a companionable pint of bitter with an elderly man whom she introduced to me as Mr. Crook.

"This is the man I tell't ye about, Mrs. Randall," she said, eyes bright with the stimulation of alcohol and company. "The one as knows about plants of all sorts.

"Mrs. Randall's verra much interested in the wee plants," she confided to her companion, who inclined his head in a combination of politeness and deafness. "Presses them in books and such."

"Do ye, indeed?" Mr. Crook asked, one tufted white brow raised in interest. "I've some presses—the real ones, mind—for plants and such. Had them from my nephew, when he come up from university over his holiday. He brought them for me, and I'd not the heart to tell him I never uses such things. Hangin's what's wanted for herbs, ye ken, or maybe to be dried on a frame and put in a bit o' gauze bag or a jar, but whyever you'd be after squashing the wee things flat, I've no idea."

"Well, to look at, maybe," Mrs. Baird interjected kindly. "Mrs. Randall's made some lovely bits out of mallow blossoms, and violets, same as you could put in a frame and hang on the wall, like."

"Mmmphm." Mr. Crook's seamed face seemed to be admitting a dubious possibility to this suggestion. "Weel, if they're of any use to ye, Missus, you can have the presses, and welcome. I didna wish to be throwing them awa', but I must say I've no use for them."

I assured Mr. Crook that I would be delighted to make use of the plant presses, and still more delighted if he would show me where some of the rarer plants in the area could be found. He eyed me sharply for a moment, head to one side like an elderly kestrel, but appeared finally to decide that my interest was genuine, and we fixed it up that I should meet him in the morning for a tour of the local shrubbery. Frank, I knew, meant to go into Inverness for the

day to consult some records in the town hall there, and I was pleased to have an excuse not to accompany him. One record was much like another, so far as I was concerned.

Soon after this, Frank pried himself away from the Vicar, and we walked home in company with Mrs. Baird. I was reluctant to mention the cock's blood on the doorstep, myself, but Frank suffered from no such reticence, and questioned her eagerly as to the background of the custom.

"I suppose it's quite old, then?" he asked, swishing a stick along through the roadside weeds. Lamb's-quarters and cinquefoil were already blooming, and I could see the buds of sweet broom swelling; another week and they'd be in flower.

"Och, aye." Mrs. Baird waddled along at a brisk pace, asking no quarter from our younger limbs. "Older than anyone knows, Mr. Randall. Even back before the days of the giants."

"Giants?" I asked.

"Aye. Fionn and the Feinn, ye ken."

"Gaelic folktales," Frank remarked with interest. "Heroes, you know. Probably from Norse roots. There's a lot of the Norse influence round here, and all the way up the coast to the West. Some of the place names are Norse, you know, not Gaelic at all."

I rolled my eyes, sensing another outburst, but Mrs. Baird smiled kindly and encouraged him, saying that was true, then, she'd been up to the north, and seen the Two Brothers stone, and that was Norse, wasn't it?

"The Norsemen came down on that coast hundreds of times between A.D. 500 and 1300 or so," Frank said, looking dreamily at the horizon, seeing dragon-ships in the wind-swept cloud. "Vikings, you know. And they brought a lot of their own myths along. It's a good country for myths. Things seem to take root here."

This I could believe. Twilight was coming on, and so was a storm. In the eerie light beneath the clouds, even the thoroughly modern houses along the road looked as ancient and as sinister as the weathered Pictish stone that stood a hundred feet away, guarding the crossroads it had marked for a thousand years. It seemed a good night to be inside with the shutters fastened.

Rather than staying cozily in Mrs. Baird's parlor to be entertained by stere-opticon views of Perth Harbor, though, Frank chose to keep his appointment for sherry with Mr. Bainbridge, a solicitor with an interest in local historical records. Bearing in mind my earlier encounter with Mr. Bainbridge, I elected to stay at home with Perth Harbor.

"Try to come back before the storm breaks," I said, kissing Frank goodbye. "And give my regards to Mr. Bainbridge."

"Umm, yes. Yes, of course." Carefully not meeting my eye, Frank shrugged into his overcoat and left, collecting an umbrella from the stand by the door.

I closed the door after him, but left it on the latch so he could get back in. I wandered back toward the parlor, reflecting that Frank would doubtless pretend that he didn't have a wife—a pretense in which Mr. Bainbridge would cheerfully join. Not that I could blame him, particularly.

At first, everything had gone quite well on our visit to Mr. Bainbridge's home the afternoon before. I had been demure, genteel, intelligent but self-effacing, well groomed, and quietly dressed—everything the Perfect Don's Wife should be. Until the tea was served.

I now turned my right hand over, ruefully examining the large blister that ran across the bases of all four fingers. After all, it was not my fault that Mr. Bainbridge, a widower, made do with a cheap tin teapot instead of a proper crockery one. Nor that the solicitor, seeking to be polite, had asked me to pour out. Nor that the potholder he provided had a worn patch that allowed the red-hot handle of the teapot to come into direct contact with my hand when I picked it up.

No, I decided. Dropping the teapot was a perfectly normal reaction. Dropping it into Mr. Bainbridge's lap was merely an accident of placement; I had to drop it somewhere. It was my exclaiming "Bloody fucking hell!" in a voice that topped Mr. Bainbridge's heartcry that had made Frank glare at me across the scones.

Once he recovered from the shock, Mr. Bainbridge had been quite gallant, fussing about my hand and ignoring Frank's attempts to excuse my language on grounds that I had been stationed in a field hospital for the better part of two years. "I'm afraid my wife picked up a number of, er, colorful expressions from the Yanks and such," Frank offered, with a nervous smile.

"True," I said, gritting my teeth as I wrapped a water-soaked napkin about my hand. "Men tend to be very 'colorful' when you're picking shrapnel out of them."

Mr. Bainbridge had tactfully tried to distract the conversation onto neutral historical ground by saying that he had always been interested in the variations of what was considered profane speech through the ages. There was "Gorblimey," for example, a recent corruption of the oath "God blind me."

"Yes, of course," said Frank, gratefully accepting the diversion. "No sugar, thank you, Claire. What about 'Gadzooks'? The 'Gad' part is quite clear, of course, but the 'zook'…."

"Well, you know," the solicitor interjected, "I've sometimes thought it might be a corruption of an old Scots word, in fact —'yeuk.' Means 'itch.' That would make sense, wouldn't it?"

Frank nodded, letting his unscholarly forelock fall across his forehead. He pushed it back automatically. "Interesting," he said, "the whole evolution of profanity."

"Yes, and it's still going on," I said, carefully picking up a lump of sugar with the tongs.

"Oh?" said Mr. Bainbridge politely. "Did you encounter some interesting variations during your, er, war experience?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "My favorite was one I picked up from a Yank. Man named Williamson, from New York, I believe. He said it every time I changed his dressing."

"What was it?"

" 'Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,' " I said, and dropped the sugar lump neatly into Frank's coffee.

After a peaceful and not unpleasant sit with Mrs. Baird, I made my way upstairs, to ready myself before Frank came home. I knew his

limit with sherry was two glasses, so I expected him back soon.

The wind was rising, and the very air of the bedroom was prickly with electricity. I drew the brush through my hair, making the curls snap with static and spring into knots and furious tangles. My hair would have to do without its hundred strokes tonight, I decided. I would settle for brushing my teeth, in this sort of weather. Strands of hair adhered stickily to my cheeks, clinging stubbornly as I tried to smooth them back.

No water in the ewer; Frank had used it, tidying himself before setting out for his meeting with Mr. Bainbridge, and I had not bothered to refill it from the lavatory tap. I picked up the bottle of L'Heure Bleu and poured a generous puddle into the palm of my hand. Rubbing my hands briskly together before the scent could evaporate, I smoothed them rapidly through my hair. I poured another dollop onto my hairbrush and swept the curls back behind my ears with it.

Well. That was rather better, I thought, turning my head from side to side to examine the results in the speckled looking glass. The moisture had dissipated the static electricity in my hair, so that it floated in heavy, shining waves about my face. And the evaporating alcohol had left behind a very pleasant scent. Frank would like that, I thought. L'Heure Bleu was his favorite.

There was a sudden flash close at hand, with the crash of thunder following close on its heels, and all the lights went out. Cursing under my breath, I groped in the drawers.

Somewhere I had seen candles and matches; power failure was so frequent an occurrence in the Highlands that candles were a necessary furnishing for all inn and hotel rooms. I had seen them even in the most elegant hotels, where they were scented with honeysuckle, and presented in frosted glass holders with shimmering pendants.

Mrs. Baird's candles were far more utilitarian—plain white plumber's candles—but there were a lot of them, and three folders of matches as well. I was not inclined to be picky over style at a time like this.

I fitted a candle to the blue ceramic holder on the dressing table by the light of the next flash, then moved about the room, lighting others, 'til the whole room was filled with a soft, wavering radiance. Very romantic, I thought, and with some presence of mind, I pressed down the light switch, so that a sudden return of power shouldn't ruin the mood at some inopportune moment.

The candles had burned no more than a half-inch when the door opened and Frank blew in. Literally, for the draft that followed him up the stairs extinguished three of the candles.

The door closed behind him with a bang that blew out two more, and he peered into the sudden gloom, pushing a hand through his disheveled hair. I got up and relit the candles, making mild remarks about his abrupt methods of entering rooms. It was only when I had finished and turned to ask him whether he'd like a drink, that I saw he was looking rather white and unsettled.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Seen a ghost?"

"Well, you know," he said slowly, "I'm not at all sure that I haven't." Absentmindedly, he picked up my hairbrush and raised it to tidy his hair. When a sudden whiff of L'Heure Bleu reached his nostrils, he wrinkled his nose and set it down again, settling for the attentions of his pocket comb instead.

I glanced through the window, where the elm trees were lashing to and fro like flails. A loose shutter was banging somewhere on the other side of the house, and it occurred to me that we ought perhaps to close our own, though the carry-on outside was rather exciting to watch.

"Bit blustery for a ghost, I'd think," I said. "Don't they like quiet, misty evenings in graveyards?"

Frank laughed a bit sheepishly. "Well, I daresay it's only Bainbridge's stories, plus a bit more of his sherry than I really meant to have. Nothing at all, likely."

Now I was curious. "What exactly did you see?" I asked, settling myself on the dressing-table seat. I motioned to the whisky bottle with a half-lifted brow, and Frank went at once to pour a couple of drinks.

“Well, only a man, really,” he began, measuring out a jigger for himself and two for me. “Standing down in the road outside.”

“What, outside this house?” I laughed. “Must have been a ghost, then; I can’t feature any living person standing about on a night like this.”

Frank tilted the ewer over his glass, then looked accusingly at me when no water came out.

“Don’t look at me,” I said. “You used up all the water. I don’t mind it neat, though.” I took a sip in illustration.

Frank looked as though he were tempted to nip down to the lavatory for water, but abandoned the idea and went on with his story, sipping cautiously as though his glass contained vitriol, rather than the best Glenfiddich single malt whisky.

“Yes, he was down at the edge of the garden on this side, standing by the fence. I thought”—he hesitated, looking down into his glass —“I rather thought he was looking up at your window.”

“My window? How extraordinary!” I couldn’t repress a mild shiver, and went across to fasten the shutters, though it seemed a bit late for that. Frank followed me across the room, still talking.

“Yes, I could see you myself from below. You were brushing your hair and cursing a bit because it was standing on end.”

“In that case, the fellow was probably enjoying a good laugh,” I said tartly. Frank shook his head, though he smiled and smoothed his hands over my hair.

“No, he wasn’t laughing. In fact, he seemed terribly unhappy about something. Not that I could see his face well; just something about the way he stood. I came up behind him, and when he didn’t move, I asked politely if I could help him with something. He acted at first as though he didn’t hear me, and I thought perhaps he didn’t, over the noise of the wind, so I repeated myself, and I reached out to tap his shoulder, to get his attention, you know. But before I could touch him, he whirled suddenly round and pushed past me and walked off down the road.”

“Sounds a bit rude, but not very ghostly,” I observed, draining my glass. “What did he look like?”

“Big chap,” said Frank, frowning in recollection. “And a Scot, in complete Highland rig-out, complete to sporran and the most beautiful running-stag brooch on his plaid. I wanted to ask where he’d got it from, but he was off before I could.”

I went to the bureau and poured another drink. “Well, not so unusual an appearance for these parts, surely? I’ve seen men dressed like that in the village now and then.”

“Nooo …” Frank sounded doubtful. “No, it wasn’t his dress that was odd. But when he pushed past me, I could swear he was close enough that I should have felt him brush my sleeve—but I didn’t. And I was intrigued enough to turn round and watch him as he walked away. He walked down the Gereside Road, but when he’d almost reached the corner, he … disappeared. That’s when I began to feel a bit cold down the backbone.”

“Perhaps your attention was distracted for a second, and he just stepped aside into the shadows,” I suggested. “There are a lot of trees down near that corner.”

“I could swear I didn’t take my eyes off him for a moment,” muttered Frank. He looked up suddenly. “I know! I remember now why I thought he was so odd, though I didn’t realize it at the time.”

“What?” I was getting a bit tired of the ghost, and wanted to go on to more interesting matters, such as bed.

“The wind was cutting up like billy-o, but his drapes—his kilts and his plaid, you know—they didn’t move at all, except to the stir of his walking.”

We stared at each other. “Well,” I said finally, “that is a bit spooky.”

Frank shrugged and smiled suddenly, dismissing it. “At least I’ll have something to tell the Vicar next time I see him. Perhaps it’s a well-known local ghost, and he can give me its gory history.” He glanced at his watch. “But now I’d say it’s bedtime.”

“So it is,” I murmured.

I watched him in the mirror as he removed his shirt and reached for a hanger. Suddenly he paused in mid-button.

“Did you have many Scots in your charge, Claire?” he asked abruptly. “At the field hospital, or at Pembroke?”

“Of course,” I replied, somewhat puzzled. “There were quite a few of the Seaforths and Camerons through the field hospital at Amiens, and then a bit later, after Caen, we had a lot of the Gordons. Nice chaps, most of them. Very stoic about things generally, but terrible cowards about injections.” I smiled, remembering one in particular.

“We had one—rather a crusty old thing really, a piper from the Third Seaforths—who couldn’t stand being stuck, especially not in the hip. He’d go for hours in the most awful discomfort before he’d let anyone near him with a needle, and even then he’d try to get us to give him the injection in the arm, though it’s meant to be intramuscular.” I laughed at the memory of Corporal Chisholm. “He told me, ‘If I’m goin’ to lie on my face wi’ my buttocks bared, I want the lass *under* me, not behind me wi’ a hatpin!’ ”

Frank smiled, but looked a trifle uneasy, as he often did about my less delicate war stories. “Don’t worry,” I assured him, seeing the look, “I won’t tell that one at tea in the Senior Common Room.”

The smile lightened and he came forward to stand behind me as I sat at the dressing table. He pressed a kiss on the top of my head.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “The Senior Common Room will love you, no matter what stories you tell. Mmmm. Your hair smells wonderful.”

“Do you like it then?” His hands slid forward over my shoulders in answer, cupping my breasts in the thin nightdress. I could see his head above mine in the mirror, his chin resting on top of my head.

“I like everything about you,” he said huskily. “You look wonderful by candlelight, you know. Your eyes are like sherry in crystal, and your skin glows like ivory. A candlelight witch, you are. Perhaps I should disconnect the lamps permanently.”

“Make it hard to read in bed,” I said, my heart beginning to speed up.

“I could think of better things to do in bed,” he murmured.

“Could you, indeed?” I said, rising and turning to put my arms about his neck. “Like what?”

Sometime later, cuddled close behind bolted shutters, I lifted my head from his shoulder and said, “Why did you ask me that earlier?

About whether I'd had to do with any Scots, I mean—you must know I had, there are all sorts of men through those hospitals."

He stirred and ran a hand softly down my back.

"Mmm. Oh, nothing, really. Just, when I saw that chap outside, it occurred to me he might be"—he hesitated, tightening his hold a bit—"er, you know, that he might have been someone you'd nursed, perhaps … maybe heard you were staying here, and came along to see … something like that."

"In that case," I said practically, "why wouldn't he come in and ask to see me?"

"Well," Frank's voice was very casual, "maybe he didn't want particularly to run into me."

I pushed up onto one elbow, staring at him. We had left one candle burning, and I could see him well enough. He had turned his head, and was looking oh-so-casually off toward the chromolithograph of Bonnie Prince Charlie with which Mrs. Baird had seen fit to decorate our wall.

I grabbed his chin and turned his head to face me. He widened his eyes in simulated surprise.

"Are you implying," I demanded, "that the man you saw outside was some sort of, of …" I hesitated, looking for the proper word.

"Liaison?" he suggested helpfully.

"Romantic interest of mine?" I finished.

"No, no, certainly not," he said unconvincingly. He took my hands away from his face, and tried to kiss me, but now it was my turn for head-turning. He settled for pressing me back down to lie beside him.

"It's only…." he began. "Well, you know, Claire, it *was* six years. And we saw each other only three times, and only just for the day that last time. It wouldn't be unusual if … I mean, everyone knows doctors and nurses are under tremendous stress during emergencies, and … well, I … it's just that … well, I'd understand, you know, if anything, er, of a spontaneous nature …"

I interrupted this rambling by jerking free and exploding out of bed.

“Do you think I’ve been unfaithful to you?” I demanded. “Do you? Because if so, you can leave this room this instant. Leave the house altogether! How dare you imply such a thing?” I was seething, and Frank, sitting up, reached out to try to soothe me.

“Don’t you touch me!” I snapped. “Just tell me—*do* you think, on the evidence of a strange man happening to glance up at my window, that I’ve had some flaming affair with one of my patients?”

Frank got out of bed and wrapped his arms around me. I stayed stiff as Lot’s wife, but he persisted, caressing my hair and rubbing my shoulders in the way he knew I liked.

“No, I don’t think any such thing,” he said firmly. He pulled me closer, and I relaxed slightly, though not enough to put my arms around him.

After a long time, he murmured into my hair, “No, I know you’d never do such a thing. I only meant to say that even if you ever did … Claire, it would make no difference to me. I love you so. Nothing you ever did could stop my loving you.” He took my face between his hands—only four inches taller than I, he could look directly into my eyes without trouble—and said softly, “Forgive me?” His breath, barely scented with the tang of Glenfiddich, was warm on my face, and his lips, full and inviting, were disturbingly close.

Another flash from outside heralded the sudden breaking of the storm, and a thundering rain smashed down on the slates of the roof.

I slowly put my arms around his waist.

“ ‘The quality of mercy is not strained,’ ” I quoted. “ ‘It droppeth as the gentle dew from heaven …’ ”

Frank laughed and looked upward; the overlapping stains on the ceiling boded ill for the prospects of our sleeping dry all night.

“If that’s a sample of your mercy,” he said, “I’d hate to see your vengeance.” The thunder went off like a mortar attack, as though in answer to his words, and we both laughed, at ease again.

It was only later, listening to his regular deep breathing beside me, that I began to wonder. As I had said, there was no evidence

whatsoever to imply unfaithfulness on my part. *My* part. But six years, as he'd said, was a long time.

2

STANDING STONES

Mr. Crook called for me, as arranged, promptly at seven the next morning.

"So as we'll catch the dew on the buttercups, eh, lass?" he said, twinkling with elderly gallantry. He had brought a motorcycle of his own approximate vintage, on which to transport us into the countryside. The plant presses were tidily strapped to the sides of this enormous machine, like bumpers on a tugboat. It was a leisurely ramble through the quiet countryside, made all the more quiet by contrast with the thunderous roar of Mr. Crook's cycle, suddenly throttled into silence. The old man did indeed know a lot about the local plants, I discovered. Not only where they were to be found but their medicinal uses, and how to prepare them. I wished I had brought a notebook to get it all down, but listened intently to the cracked old voice, and did my best to commit the information to memory as I stowed our specimens in the heavy plant presses.

We stopped for a packed luncheon near the base of a curious flat-topped hill. Green as most of its neighbors, with the same rocky juts and crags, it had something different: a well-worn path leading up one side and disappearing abruptly behind a granite outcrop.

"What's up there?" I asked, gesturing with a ham sandwich. "It seems a difficult place for picnicking."

"Ah." Mr. Crook glanced at the hill. "That's Craigh na Dun, lass. I'd meant to show ye after our meal."

"Really? Is there something special about it?"

“Oh, aye,” he answered, but refused to elaborate further, merely saying that I’d see when I saw.

I had some fears about his ability to climb such a steep path, but these evaporated as I found myself panting in his wake. At last, Mr. Crook extended a gnarled hand and pulled me up over the rim of the hill.

“There ’tis.” He waved a hand with a sort of proprietorial gesture.

“Why, it’s a henge!” I said, delighted. “A miniature henge!”

Because of the war, it had been several years since I had last visited Salisbury Plain, but Frank and I had seen Stonehenge soon after we were married. Like the other tourists wandering awed among the huge standing stones, we had gaped at the Altar Stone (‘w’ere ancient Druid priests performed their dreadful ’uman sacrifices,’ announced the sonorous Cockney tour guide accompanying a busload of Italian tourists, who all dutifully took photographs of the rather ordinary-looking stone block).

Out of the same passion for exactness that made Frank adjust his ties on the hanger so that the ends hung precisely even, we had even trekked around the circumference of the circle, pacing off the distance between the Z holes and the Y holes, and counting the lintels in the Sarsen Circle, the outermost ring of monstrous uprights.

Three hours later, we knew how many Y and Z holes there were (fifty-nine, if you care; I didn’t), but had no more clue to the purpose of the structure than had the dozens of amateur and professional archaeologists who had crawled over the site for the last five hundred years.

No lack of opinions, of course. Life among academics had taught me that a well-expressed opinion is usually better than a badly expressed fact, so far as professional advancement goes.

A temple. A burial ground. An astronomical observatory. A place of execution (hence the inaptly named “Slaughter Stone” that lies to one side, half sunk in its own pit). An open-air market. I liked this last suggestion, visualizing Megalithic housewives strolling between the lintels, baskets on their arms, critically judging the glaze on the latest shipment of red-clay beakers and listening skeptically to the

claims of stone-age bakers and vendors of deer-bone shovels and amber beads.

The only thing I could see against that hypothesis was the presence of bodies under the Altar Stone and cremated remains in the Z holes. Unless these were the hapless remains of merchants accused of short-weighting the customers, it seemed a bit unsanitary to be burying people in the marketplace.

There were no signs of burial in the miniature henge atop the hill. By “miniature,” I mean only that the circle of standing stones was smaller than Stonehenge; each stone was still twice my own height, and massive in proportion.

I had heard from another tour-guide at Stonehenge that these stone circles occur all over Britain and Europe—some in better repair than others, some differing slightly in orientation or form, all of purpose and origin unknown.

Mr. Crook stood smiling benignly as I prowled among the stones, pausing now and then to touch one gently, as though my touch could make an impression on the monumental boulders.

Some of the standing stones were brindled, striped with dim colors. Others were speckled with flakes of mica that caught the morning sun with a cheerful shimmer. All of them were remarkably different from the clumps of native stone that thrust out of the bracken all around. Whoever built the stone circles, and for whatever purpose, thought it important enough to have quarried, shaped, and transported special stone blocks for the erection of their testimonial. Shaped—how? Transported—how, and from what unimaginable distance?

“My husband would be fascinated,” I told Mr. Crook, stopping to thank him for showing me the place and the plants. “I’ll bring him up to see it later.” The gnarled old man gallantly offered me an arm at the top of the trail. I took it, deciding after one look down the precipitous decline that in spite of his age, he was likely steadier on his pins than I was.

I swung down the road that afternoon toward the village, to fetch Frank from the vicarage. I happily breathed in that heady Highland

mix of heather, sage, and broom, spiced here and there with chimney smoke and the tang of fried herring, as I passed the scattered cottages. The village lay nestled in a small declivity at the foot of one of those soaring crags that rise so steeply from the Highland moors. Those cottages near the road were nice. The bloom of postwar prosperity had spread as far as a new coat of paint, and even the manse, which must be at least a hundred years old, sported bright yellow trim around its sagging windowframes.

The vicar's housekeeper answered the door, a tall, stringy woman with three strands of artificial pearls round her neck. Hearing who I was, she welcomed me in and towed me down a long, narrow, dark hallway, lined with sepia engravings of people who may have been famous personages of their time, or cherished relatives of the present vicar, but might as well have been the Royal Family, for all I could see of their features in the gloom.

By contrast, the vicar's study was blinding with light from the enormous windows that ran nearly from ceiling to floor in one wall. An easel near the fireplace, bearing a half-finished oil of black cliffs against the evening sky, showed the reason for the windows, which must have been added long after the house was built.

Frank and a short, tubby man with a clerical dog-collar were cozily poring over a mass of tattered paper on the desk by the far wall. Frank barely looked up in greeting, but the vicar politely left off his explanations and hurried over to clasp my hand, his round face beaming with sociable delight.

"Mrs. Randall!" he said, pumping my hand heartily. "How nice to see you again. And you've come just in time to hear the news!"

"News?" Casting an eye on the grubbiness and typeface of the papers on the desk, I calculated the date of the news in question as being likely around 1750. Not precisely stop-the-presses, then.

"Yes, indeed. We've been tracing your husband's ancestor, Jack Randall, through the army dispatches of the period." The vicar leaned close, speaking out of the side of his mouth like a gangster in an American film. "I've, er, 'borrowed' the original dispatches from the local Historical Society files. You'll be careful not to tell anyone?"

Amused, I agreed that I would not reveal his deadly secret, and looked about for a comfortable chair in which to receive the latest revelations from the eighteenth century. The wing chair nearest the windows looked suitable, but as I reached to turn it toward the desk, I discovered that it was already occupied. The inhabitant, a small boy with a shock of glossy black hair, was curled up in the depths of the chair, sound asleep.

"Roger!" The vicar, coming to assist me, was as surprised as I. The boy, startled out of sleep, shot bolt upright, wide eyes the color of moss.

"Now what are you up to in here, you young scamp?" The vicar was scolding affectionately. "Oh, fell asleep reading the comic papers again?" He scooped up the brightly colored pages and handed them to the lad. "Run along now, Roger, I have business with the Randalls. Oh, wait, I've forgotten to introduce you—Mrs. Randall, this is my son, Roger."

I was a bit surprised. If ever I'd seen a confirmed bachelor, I would have thought the Reverend Wakefield was it. Still, I took the politely proffered paw and shook it warmly, resisting the urge to wipe a certain residual stickiness on my skirt.

The Reverend Wakefield looked fondly after the boy as he trooped off toward the kitchen.

"My niece's son, really," he confided. "Father shot down over the Channel, and mother killed in the Blitz, though, so I've taken him."

"How kind of you," I murmured, thinking of Uncle Lamb. He, too, had died in the Blitz, killed by a hit to the auditorium of the British Museum, where he had been lecturing. Knowing him, I thought his main feeling would have been gratification that the wing of Persian antiquities next door had escaped.

"Not at all, not at all." The vicar flapped a hand in embarrassment. "Nice to have a bit of young life about the house. Now, do have a seat."

Frank began talking even before I had set my handbag down. "The most amazing luck, Claire," he enthused, thumbing through the dog-eared pile. "The vicar's located a whole series of military dispatches that mention Jonathan Randall."

“Well, a good deal of the prominence seems to have been Captain Randall’s own doing,” the vicar observed, taking some of the papers from Frank. “He was in command of the garrison at Fort William for four years or so, but he seems to have spent quite a bit of his time harassing the Scottish countryside above the Border on behalf of the Crown. This lot”—he gingerly separated a stack of papers and laid them on the desk—“is reports of complaints lodged against the Captain by various families and estate holders, claiming everything from interference with their maidservants by the soldiers of the garrison to outright theft of horses, not to mention assorted instances of ‘insult,’ unspecified.”

I was amused. “So you have the proverbial horse thief in your family tree?” I said to Frank.

He shrugged, unperturbed. “He was what he was, and nothing I can do about it. I only want to find out. The complaints aren’t all that odd, for that particular time period; the English in general, and the army in particular, were rather notably unpopular throughout the Highlands. No, what’s odd is that nothing ever seems to have come of the complaints, even the serious ones.”

The vicar, unable to keep still for long, broke in. “That’s right. Not that officers then were held to anything like modern standards; they could do very much as they liked in minor matters. But this is odd. It’s not that the complaints are investigated and dismissed; they’re just never mentioned again. You know what I suspect, Randall? Your ancestor must have had a patron. Someone who could protect him from the censure of his superiors.”

Frank scratched his head, squinting at the dispatches. “You could be right. Had to have been someone quite powerful, though. High up in the army hierarchy, perhaps, or maybe a member of the nobility.”

“Yes, or possibly—” The vicar was interrupted in his theories by the entrance of the housekeeper, Mrs. Graham.

“I’ve brought ye a wee bit of refreshment, gentlemen,” she announced, setting the tea tray firmly in the center of the desk, from which the vicar rescued his precious dispatches in the nick of time.

She looked me over with a shrewd eye, assessing the twitching limbs and faint glaze over the eyeballs.

"I've brought but the two cups, for I thought perhaps Mrs. Randall would care to join me in the kitchen. I've a bit of—" I didn't wait for the conclusion of her invitation, but leapt to my feet with alacrity. I could hear the theories breaking out again behind me as we pushed through the swinging door that led to the manse's kitchen.

The tea was green, hot and fragrant, with bits of leaf swirling through the liquid.

"Mmm," I said, setting the cup down. "It's been a long time since I tasted Oolong."

Mrs. Graham nodded, beaming at my pleasure in her refreshments. She had clearly gone to some trouble, laying out handmade lace mats beneath the eggshell cups and providing thick clotted cream with the scones.

"Aye, I couldna get it during the War, ye know. It's the best for the readings, though. Had a terrible time with that Earl Grey. The leaves fall apart so fast, it's hard to tell anything at all."

"Oh, you read tea leaves?" I asked, mildly amused. Nothing could be farther from the popular conception of the gypsy fortune-teller than Mrs. Graham, with her short, iron-grey perm and triple-stranded pearl choker. A swallow of tea ran visibly down the long, stringy neck and disappeared beneath the gleaming beads.

"Why, certainly I do, my dear. Just as my grandmother taught me, and her grandmother before her. Drink up your cup, and I'll see what you have there."

She was silent for a long time, once in a while tilting the cup to catch the light, or rolling it slowly between lean palms to get a different angle.

She set the cup down carefully, as though afraid it might blow up in her face. The grooves on either side of her mouth had deepened, and her brows pressed together in what looked like puzzlement.

"Well," she said finally. "That's one of the stranger ones I've seen."

"Oh?" I was still amused, but beginning to be curious. "Am I going to meet a tall dark stranger, or journey across the sea?"

“Could be.” Mrs. Graham had caught my ironic tone, and echoed it, smiling slightly. “And could not. That’s what’s odd about your cup, my dear. Everything in it’s contradictory. There’s the curved leaf for a journey, but it’s crossed by the broken one that means staying put. And strangers there are, to be sure, several of them. And one of them’s your husband, if I read the leaves aright.”

My amusement dissipated somewhat. After six years apart, and six months together, my husband *was* still something of a stranger. Though I failed to see how a tea leaf could know it.

Mrs. Graham’s brow was still furrowed. “Let me see your hand, child,” she said.

The hand holding mine was bony, but surprisingly warm. A scent of lavender water emanated from the neat part of the grizzled head bent over my palm. She stared into my hand for quite a long time, now and then tracing one of the lines with a finger, as though following a map whose roads all petered out in sandy washes and deserted wastes.

“Well, what is it?” I asked, trying to maintain a light air. “Or is my fate too horrible to be revealed?”

Mrs. Graham raised quizzical eyes and looked thoughtfully at my face, but retained her hold on my hand. She shook her head, pursing her lips.

“Oh, no, my dear. It’s not your fate is in your hand. Only the seed of it.” The birdlike head cocked to one side, considering. “The lines in your hand change, ye know. At another point in your life, they may be quite different than they are now.”

“I didn’t know that. I thought you were born with them, and that was that.” I was repressing an urge to jerk my hand away. “What’s the point of palm reading, then?” I didn’t wish to sound rude, but I found this scrutiny a bit unsettling, especially following on the heels of that tea-leaf reading. Mrs. Graham smiled unexpectedly, and folded my fingers closed over my palm.

“Why, the lines of your palm show what ye are, dear. That’s why they change—or should. They don’t, in some people; those unlucky enough never to change in themselves, but there are few like that.” She gave my folded hand a squeeze and patted it. “I doubt that

you're one of those. Your hand shows quite a lot of change already, for one so young. That would likely be the War, of course," she said, as though to herself.

I was curious again, and opened my palm voluntarily.

"What am I, then, according to my hand?"

Mrs. Graham frowned, but did not pick up my hand again.

"I canna just say. It's odd, for most hands have a likeness to them. Mind, I'd no just say that it's 'see one, you've seen them all,' but it's often like that—there are patterns, you know." She smiled suddenly, an oddly engaging grin, displaying very white and patently false teeth.

"That's how a fortune-teller works, you know. I do it for the church fete every year—or did, before the War; suppose I'll do it again now. But a girl comes into the tent—and there am I, done up in a turban with a peacock feather borrowed from Mr. Donaldson, and 'robes of oriental splendor'—that's the vicar's dressing gown, all over peacocks it is and yellow as the sun—anyway, I look her over while I pretend to be watching her hand, and I see she's got her blouse cut down to her breakfast, cheap scent, and earrings down to her shoulders. I needn't have a crystal ball to be tellin' her she'll have a child before the next year's fete." Mrs. Graham, paused, grey eyes alight with mischief. "Though if the hand you're holding is bare, it's tactful to predict first that she'll marry soon."

I laughed, and so did she. "So you don't look at their hands at all, then?" I asked. "Except to check for rings?"

She looked surprised. "Oh, of course you do. It's just that you know ahead of time what you'll see. Generally." She nodded at my open hand. "But that is not a pattern I've seen before. The large thumb, now"—she did lean forward then and touch it lightly—"that wouldn't change much. Means you're strong-minded, and have a will not easily crossed." She twinkled at me. "Reckon your husband could have told ye that. Likewise about that one." She pointed to the fleshy mound at the base of the thumb.

"What is it?"

"The Mount of Venus, it's called." She pursed her thin lips primly together, though the corners turned irrepressibly up. "In a man, ye'd

say it means he likes the lasses. For a woman, 'tis a bit different. To be polite about it, I'll make a bit of a prediction for you, and say your husband isna like to stray far from your bed." She gave a surprisingly deep and bawdy chuckle, and I blushed slightly.

The elderly housekeeper pored over my hand again, stabbing a pointed forefinger here and there to mark her words.

"Now, there, a well-marked lifeline; you're in good health, and likely to stay so. The lifeline's interrupted, meaning your life's changed markedly—well, that's true of us all, is it not? But yours is more chopped-up, like, than I usually see; all bits and pieces. And your marriage-line, now"—she shook her head again—"it's divided; that's not unusual, means two marriages …"

My reaction was slight, and immediately suppressed, but she caught the flicker and looked up at once. I thought she probably was quite a shrewd fortune-teller, at that. The grey head shook reassuringly at me.

"No, no, lass. It doesna mean anything's like to happen to your good man. It's only that if it did," she emphasized the "if" with a slight squeeze of my hand, "you'd not be one to pine away and waste the rest of your life in mourning. What it means is, you're one of those can love again if your first love's lost."

She squinted nearsightedly at my palm, running a short, ridged nail gently down the deep marriage line. "But most divided lines are broken—yours is forked." She looked up with a roguish smile. "Sure you're not a bigamist, on the quiet, like?"

I shook my head, laughing. "No. When would I have the time?" Then I turned my hand, showing the outer edge.

"I've heard that small marks on the side of the hand indicate how many children you'll have?" My tone was casual, I hoped. The edge of my palm was disappointingly smooth.

Mrs. Graham flicked a scornful hand at this idea.

"Pah! After ye've had a bairn or two, ye might show lines there. More like you'd have them on your face. Proves nothing at all beforehand."

"Oh, it doesn't?" I was foolishly relieved to hear this. I was going to ask whether the deep lines across the base of my wrist meant

anything (a potential for suicide?), but we were interrupted at that point by the Reverend Wakefield coming into the kitchen bearing the empty tea cups. He set them on the drainboard and began a loud and clumsy fumbling through the cupboard, obviously in hopes of provoking help.

Mrs. Graham sprang to her feet to defend the sanctity of her kitchen, and pushing the Reverend adroitly to one side, set about assembling tea things on a tray for the study. He drew me to one side, safely out of the way.

"Why don't you come to the study and have another cup of tea with me and your husband, Mrs. Randall? We've made really a most gratifying discovery."

I could see that in spite of outward composure, he was bursting with the glee of whatever they had found, like a small boy with a toad in his pocket. Plainly I was going to have to go and read Captain Jonathan Randall's laundry bill, his receipt for boot repairs, or some document of similar fascination.

Frank was so absorbed in the tattered documents that he scarcely looked up when I entered the study. He reluctantly surrendered them to the vicar's podgy hands, and came round to stand behind the Reverend Wakefield and peer over his shoulder, as though he could not bear to let the papers out of his sight for a moment.

"Yes?" I said politely, fingering the dirty bits of paper. "Ummm, yes, very interesting." In fact, the spidery handwriting was so faded and so ornate that it hardly seemed worth the trouble of deciphering it. One sheet, better preserved than the rest, had some sort of crest at the top.

"The Duke of … Sandringham, is it?" I asked, peering at the crest, with its faded leopard couchant, and the printing below, more legible than the handwriting.

"Yes, indeed," the vicar said, beaming even more. "An extinct title, now, you know."

I didn't, but nodded intelligently, being no stranger to historians in the manic grip of discovery. It was seldom necessary to do more than nod periodically, saying "Oh, really?" or "How perfectly fascinating!" at appropriate intervals.

After a certain amount of deferring back and forth between Frank and the vicar, the latter won the honor of telling me about their discovery. Evidently, all this rubbish made it appear that Frank's ancestor, the notorious Black Jack Randall, had not been merely a gallant soldier for the Crown, but a trusted—and secret—agent of the Duke of Sandringham.

"Almost an agent provocateur, wouldn't you say, Dr. Randall?" The vicar graciously handed the ball back to Frank, who seized it and ran.

"Yes, indeed. The language is very guarded, of course.…" He turned the pages gently with a scrubbed forefinger.

"Oh, really?" I said.

"But it seems from this that Jonathan Randall was entrusted with the job of stirring up Jacobite sentiments, if any existed, among the prominent Scottish families in his area. The point being to smoke out any baronets and clan chieftains who might be harboring secret sympathies in that direction. But that's odd. Wasn't Sandringham a suspected Jacobite himself?" Frank turned to the vicar, a frown of inquiry on his face. The vicar's smooth, bald head creased in an identical frown.

"Why, yes, I believe you're right. But wait, let's check in Cameron"—he made a dive for the bookshelf, crammed with calf-bound volumes—"he's sure to mention Sandringham."

"How perfectly fascinating," I murmured, allowing my attention to wander to the huge corkboard that covered one wall of the study from floor to ceiling.

It was covered with an amazing assortment of things; mostly papers of one sort or another, gas bills, correspondence, notices from the Diocesan Council, loose pages of novels, notes in the vicar's own hand, but also small items like keys, bottle caps, and what appeared to be small car parts, attached with tacks and string.

I browsed idly through the miscellanea, keeping half an ear tuned to the argument going on behind me. (The Duke of Sandringham probably *was* a Jacobite, they decided.) My attention was caught by a genealogical chart, tacked up with special care in a spot by itself, using four tacks, one to a corner. The top of the chart included

names dated in the early seventeenth century. But it was the name at the bottom of the chart that had caught my eye: “Roger W. (MacKenzie) Wakefield,” it read.

“Excuse me,” I said, interrupting a final sputter of dispute as to whether the leopard in the Duke’s crest had a lily in its paw, or was it meant to be a crocus? “Is this your son’s chart?”

“Eh? Oh, why, yes, yes it is.” Distracted, the vicar hurried over, beaming once more. He detached the chart tenderly from the wall and laid it on the table in front of me.

“I didn’t want him to forget his own family, you see,” he explained. “It’s quite an old lineage, back to the sixteen hundreds.” His stubby forefinger traced the line of descent almost reverently.

“I gave him my own name because it seemed more suitable, as he lives here, but I didn’t want him to forget where he came from.” He made an apologetic grimace. “I’m afraid my own family is nothing to boast of, genealogically. Vicars and curates, with the occasional bookseller thrown in for variety, and only traceable back to 1762 or so. Rather poor record-keeping, you know,” he said, wagging his head remorsefully over the lethargy of his ancestors.

It was growing late by the time we finally left the vicarage, with the vicar promising to take the letters to town for copying first thing in the morning. Frank babbled happily of spies and Jacobites most of the way back to Mrs. Baird’s. Finally, though, he noticed my quietness.

“What is it, love?” he asked, taking my arm solicitously. “Not feeling well?” This was asked with a mingled tone of concern and hope.

“No, I’m quite well. I was only thinking …” I hesitated, because we had discussed this matter before. “I was thinking about Roger.”

“Roger?”

I gave a sigh of impatience. “Really, Frank! You can be so … oblivious! Roger, the Reverend Wakefield’s son.”

“Oh. Yes, of course,” he said vaguely. “Charming child. What about him?”

“Well … only that there are a lot of children like that. Orphaned, you know.”

He gave me a sharp look, and shook his head.

"No, Claire. Really, I'd like to, but I've told you how I feel about adoption. It's just … I couldn't feel properly toward a child that's not … well, not of my blood. No doubt that's ridiculous and selfish of me, but there it is. Maybe I'll change my mind in time, but now. …" We walked a few steps in a barbed silence. Suddenly he stopped and turned to me, gripping my hands.

"Claire," he said huskily, "I want *our* child. You're the most important thing in the world to me. I want you to be happy, above all else, but I want … well, I want to keep you to myself. I'm afraid a child from outside, one we had no real relationship with, would seem an intruder, and I'd resent it. But to be able to give you a child, see it grow in you, see it born … then I'd feel as though it were more an … extension of you, perhaps. And me. A real part of the family." His eyes were wide, pleading.

"Yes, all right. I understand." I was willing to abandon the topic—for now. I turned to go on walking, but he reached out and took me in his arms.

"Claire. I love you." The tenderness in his voice was overwhelming, and I leaned my head against his jacket, feeling his warmth and the strength of his arms around me.

"I love you too." We stood locked together for a moment, swaying slightly in the wind that swept down the road. Suddenly Frank drew back a bit, smiling down at me.

"Besides," he said softly, smoothing the wind-blown hair back from my face, "we haven't given up yet, have we?"

I smiled back. "No."

He took my hand, tucking it snugly beneath his elbow, and we turned toward our lodgings.

"Game for another try?"

"Yes. Why not?" We strolled, hand in hand, back toward the Gereside Road. It was the sight of the Baragh Mhor, the Pictish stone that stands at the corner of the road there, that made me remember things ancient.

"I forgot!" I exclaimed. "I have something exciting to show you." Frank looked down at me and pulled me closer. He squeezed my

hand.

"So have I," he said, grinning. "You can show me yours tomorrow."

When tomorrow came, though, we had other things to do. I had forgotten that we had planned a day trip to the Great Glen of Loch Ness.

It was a long drive through the Glen, and we left early in the morning, before sunup. After the hurry to the waiting car through the freezing dawn, it was cozy to relax under the rug and feel the warmth stealing back into my hands and feet. Along with it came a most delicious drowsiness, and I fell blissfully asleep against Frank's shoulder, my last conscious sight the driver's head in red-rimmed silhouette against the dawning sky.

It was after nine when we arrived, and the guide Frank had called for was awaiting us on the edge of the loch with a small sailing skiff.

"An' it suits ye, sir, I thought we'd take a wee sail down the loch-side to Urquhart Castle. Perhaps we'll sup a bit there, before goin' on." The guide, a dour-looking little man in weather-beaten cotton shirt and twill trousers, stowed the picnic hamper tidily beneath the seat, and offered me a callused hand down into the well of the boat.

It was a beautiful day, with the burgeoning greenery of the steep banks blurring in the ruffled surface of the loch. Our guide, despite his dour appearance, was knowledgeable and talkative, pointing out the islands, castles, and ruins that rimmed the long, narrow loch.

"Yonder, that's Urquhart Castle." He pointed to a smooth-faced wall of stone, barely visible through the trees. "Or what's left of it. 'Twas cursed by the witches of the Glen, and saw one unhappiness after another."

He told us the story of Mary Grant, daughter of the laird of Urquhart Castle, and her lover, Donald Donn, poet son of MacDonald of Bohuntin. Forbidden to meet because of her father's objection to the latter's habits of "lifting" any cattle he came across (an old and honorable Highland profession, the guide assured us), they met anyway. The father got wind of it, Donald was lured to a false rendezvous and thus taken. Condemned to die, he begged to be