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The Magic Ring of Brodgar:

Book one: The inheritance

Prologue

June proved to be unseasonably cold in Great Britain in the summer of 2016. The last suitcase was packed, and the road ahead for Megan led to Scotland—home to her ancestors, yet completely unfamiliar to her. Wistfully, she gazed out of the window at the rain. It had been falling day after day, with no end in sight. She gazed around her favourite room in the small Chelsea flat. She had spent much of her life living here with her mum, until her mother married a man from California and left for America to live with him. Megan was merely nineteen years old when she suddenly found herself all alone in London—a young girl in a huge metropolis. By the time she had turned twenty-five, she was already an independent young woman, able to cope with all the difficulties life threw her way.

Yesterday, she had received a phone call from Thurso, a small town in the far north of Scotland, informing her that her grandfather, the clan patriarch Malcolm McKenzie, had passed away. Since the Middle Ages, this had been a much-revered clan in the North of Scotland. Now Megan had become the sole heiress to the whole of Malcolm's estate, near Thurso. Following a serious argument in the distant past between her grandfather and her mother, Arline, Megan's mother had left for London; shortly thereafter, Megan was born. Some twenty-five years had passed since that time, and yet the father and daughter had never been able to reconcile their differences. Judging by the fact that Malcolm McKenzie had left his entire fortune to Megan without even so much as mentioning his daughter in his will, it was clear that even on his deathbed he was unable to bring himself to forgive her.

Megan knew nothing of this ancestral home that her mother had left while pregnant—this home of which she would now become mistress, along with a Scotch whisky distillery. She knew only that her grandfather's death was a painful and terrible loss for her. Now she had to go to Thurso to claim her inheritance, as well as to decide what to do with it. For some time, at least, she would have to radically break with the comfortable lifestyle she had created in London.

Chapter 1

The Arrival

The road itself was not the easiest. Having reached the city of Inverness by plane, Megan then had another four-hour journey by train. Fortunately, the magnificent scenery for which Scotland is so famous, made the time fly. She flew past lakes, rivers, bridges, picturesque beaches and ancient castles, all of them silently keeping their secrets.

The stunning natural beauty beyond the train window caused Megan to immerse herself in deep thoughts of the future. Finally it was time to get off the train and make her acquaintance with this strange new town—the home of her ancestors. As she got off the train, a light breeze caressed her face. Few people had arrived on this train, and fewer still were waiting to meet them, so she immediately noticed a man walking quickly toward her.

“Miss McKenzie?”

“Mr. Douglas?”

“Welcome to Scotland, miss. How was your trip? Not too tiring, I hope, despite the long journey,” said the rather stocky, grey-haired man, who Megan guessed was in his late sixties.

He smiled in a kind and fatherly manner and shook her hand. *She looks much younger than her years, a mere girl*, he thought. She was not very tall, with a neat, precise figure; beautiful big brown eyes; and thick brown hair—all the McKenzies were famous for their bushy brown manes. And yet she reminded him of a fragile porcelain figurine. She was wearing a dark tracksuit, complementing her slender figure. Comfortable, low-heeled shoes completed the look of a well-mannered and smart businessgirl, just as Malcolm had described her.

“I’m fine, thank you.” said Megan. She returned his warm smile. Glancing around at the tiny railway station and judging by its size, Megan thought this looked more like a village than a town.

“Very glad to see you, miss, and to make your acquaintance,” said Douglas. “I’ve heard a lot about you from your grandfather. He was proud of you. I spent most of my life with him. He was an amazing man. I always admired him,” He carefully placed Megan’s suitcases in the boot of his car.

“Thank you, Mr. Douglas. And I’m glad to meet you too,” she said politely.

“Please allow me to accompany you to your property, Miss McKenzie.”

“You may call me Megan, Mr. Douglas.”

“As you wish, Megan.”

“Have we far to go, Mr. Douglas?”

“About half an hour. Your house is near the Gulf of Melvin, about fifteen miles from Thurso. Tomorrow morning at ten, your relatives and the property manager will be waiting for you in the assembly hall.”

“Do any of them live in my grandfather’s house?”

“Yes, your cousin, Warren, with his wife, and the manager. Warren and his wife will be back rather late. Immediately after the funeral, they left town on urgent business. I don’t think you’ll be able to meet them today. But you’ll have a chance to do so tomorrow.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“My God! How beautiful! I could never imagine that I would see such wonderful places,” exclaimed Megan as soon as she got out of Mr. Douglas’s car. It was a delightful surprise.

In front of her was a castle of extraordinary beauty. Its last reconstruction was completed in 1768. For hundreds of years, the castle’s interior had changed, improving to keep up with the latest styles and developments. Yet its outward appearance remained unchanged—a picture postcard of medieval Scotland. The castle stood on a hill, with a breathtaking view of the mountain cliffs stretching off to the North Sea. A magnificent green landscape carpeted the vast territories surrounding the castle.

A brickwork path led directly to the castle. Its grounds were very well kept, Megan immediately noticed. By the massive front door stood the property manager, gazing intently at Megan.

“Good evening, Gregor,” she said. Megan studied the lanky, middle-aged man wearing a three-piece grey suit. Based on her grandfather’s stories, he was just as she had imagined. The expression on his face was impenetrable, and it seemed to her a bit stern—most likely because he was of such a serious disposition. Her grandfather greatly valued Gregor for his excellent manners, for being respectful, and for respecting personal boundaries.

He was a man of few words and had a cool and calculating head on his shoulders. He was one of those people who preferred to keep quiet and listen instead. In the early days, when times were tough and the whisky distillery was in a state of decline, Gregor had made excellent contracts for the plant. At present, Gregor and her cousin Warren, whom her grandfather had brought into the business not so long ago, were responsible for managing relations with the distillery’s partners, the main buyers of whisky.

“Good evening, Miss McKenzie. Welcome to the castle.”

He took her two suitcases from Mr. Douglas and accompanied Megan.

Megan entered the castle through the heavy front door and immediately noted the unusual interior decor of the mansion. Here the modern stood side by side with the historical. The castle's great stature was evidenced in the original stone walls, with many hunting trophies decorating the hall. Megan stared at the unusual objects.

"Deer hunting has always been considered a worthy occupation for real men, and especially for noble gentlemen like your grandfather," explained Mr. Douglas.

"Are there bears here?" asked Megan. She was looking somewhat puzzled at the bearskin spread by the fireplace.

The question made Gregor smile. He replied, "No. This skin was a gift to your grandfather from a friend in America."

"What a relief ..." said Megan thoughtfully. She had always been afraid of wild animals.

"You shouldn't fear animals. You should fear people; they often present a far greater danger," declared Gregor with a stern expression.

Megan glanced at Gregor's face inquisitively, trying to figure out what he had meant. This phrase, it seemed to her, carried a threat. But then she decided not to pay it any attention. Once again she turned her gaze to the hall.

The furniture boasted magnificent wool upholstery, custom made in-house in the colours of the McKenzie clan—blue-green plaid print. According to legend, which had been passed down from generation to generation, the colour and pattern had been adopted by the head of the clan and his relatives in the thirteenth century. Since then, all family members had always had in their wardrobe a few things in a blue-green plaid print for any weather, for festive occasions, for important events, and just for everyday use.

The castle had already made a strong impression on Megan.

A kind of bitter melancholy filled her soul. For so many years she had never once bothered to come here to see all of this with her own eyes, to sense this call of blood which she now felt. For many years, she had listened to her mother's stories about a remote, godforsaken place. She had imagined some tiny, old, decrepit castle; cold, damp, and miserable, on the verge of collapse and ready to decompose into a dim memory of the clan's long history. Now Megan realized just how much her assumptions were at odds with reality.

A wide, tall staircase led up from the hall. She went over to it and placed her hand on the cold, wide stone railing. The staircase had a thick wool carpet, made in the same clan colours as the furniture in the hall. The steps led up to the second floor, where the bedrooms were located.

“Miss McKenzie, I didn’t know which bedroom you would prefer,” Gregor said, “so we have prepared two for you to choose from: your grandfather’s bedroom and your mother’s former bedroom.”

“I’ll stay in my mother’s room,” replied Megan, thinking it unlikely that she would be able to fall asleep in her grandfather’s room. Although she was twenty-five, she still had a terrible fear of the dark. She sometimes laughed at herself: a young, successful business woman who could solve any problem or find an explanation for almost anything was afraid of the dark, ghosts, and horror films. It seemed rather amusing to her.

The castle is probably filled with the ghosts of my ancestors, she thought, and then immediately tried to push this thought out of her head so as not to frighten herself.

On the second floor, to the right and left of the stairs, there were two corridors lined with bedrooms.

“The second room on the left,” said Gregor.

Arline’s room was very cosy and spacious. To the right of the door, there was a large mahogany bed covered with a white duvet; and a blue-green plaid wool blanket lay over the top.

“Everything is in the same style,” Megan noted approvingly.

To the left of the door, there was a large, wide fireplace which had long been unused but remained for decoration. Megan’s room was located on the far corner of the building, and thanks to the two tall windows, it was one of the brightest rooms in the castle. Between the windows there stood a small round table and two armchairs. The stone floor of the room was covered with a thick, fluffy carpet. Her feet had the pleasant sensation of almost sinking into it. Warm carpets are not an uncommon feature in historical castles; they create comfort and warmth in spacious, cold rooms. The north of Scotland has always been known for its rather harsh and cold climate, and since the McKenzie castle was very close to the North Sea, it was extremely susceptible to cold and damp, which was now managed with the help of modern technology.

“Thank you, Gregor, everything is perfect. I will rest now. See you tomorrow at ten.”

“See you tomorrow, Miss McKenzie. The assembly hall is to the right of the entrance downstairs.”

“Megan, if you haven’t got any questions for me, I’ll go too.”

“No questions, Mr. Douglas. Thank you for meeting me and seeing me inside. I’m very grateful to you.”

Chapter 2

Independent Life

She hadn't known how long she would have to stay in Scotland, so she had taken along enough things to last about two to three weeks of stay here. She could do with her time as she pleased, since her affair with a young man in London had just come to an end, and she had an excellent manager at the restaurant whom she could depend on. After her mother had left for America, many years before, Megan had taken over the business, but her interest in the restaurant went back a long way. She was eleven years old when she began to take an interest in Arline's work. She saw the joy with which her mother worked; Arline loved her job and was proud of it. She, too, really wanted to experience the same feelings as her mother, and to emulate her in every way. After school, she would spend all her time in the restaurant. She studied there; she did her homework there. As time went by, this amounted to nothing less than professional training in the restaurant business. By the time she was seventeen, she knew everything there was to know about the business, so when Arline announced that she was marrying Ted from California and they were going to move to America.

"And the restaurant, Mum, what about our restaurant? Surely you aren't ready to sell something that we've put so much effort and love into over these years?" pleaded Megan desperately.

Arline replied, "Baby, I know it's a very difficult choice right now, but one day you'll understand me. There's nothing more powerful in this life than love. When it comes—everything changes: your values, the meaning of life. Megan, we'll open a new restaurant in the States with the money we get from selling this one. We'll start afresh, and bring all our habits and our way of life there. You'll make many new friends, and we'll be happy there, all of us together: you, me, and Ted."

"Mum, dear, your values may have changed now, but mine haven't. I love this city, this country, this life, and, most importantly, this restaurant—not some other. I want to live and work here. Please, don't make me give it up."

At that time, at that age, Megan couldn't understand what love and the love of a man meant to her mother. They had always been together, worked together, and relaxed together. Her mum had never been married. She had devoted her entire life to her beloved daughter—to her and her alone.

"Honey, what should we do then? How can I live like this? My soul is torn between two passions: you are my daughter, and he is the love of my life." Arline sat down in the chair again and began to cry bitterly.

Megan's heart was breaking for her mother. "I'm so selfish," she chided herself.

“Mum, dear, go to America, get married, be happy. And I will stay here and run the restaurant. I’m old and mature enough already,” she said, making the only decision she felt was right.

“But how will you manage alone? You still need to complete your studies. Have you got any idea how difficult this will be?” said her mother anxiously, worried about her only and beloved daughter.

“I don’t think it will be too difficult, since I love this job, and I’m not alone,” Megan reassured her mother. “We’ve got a wonderful manager. He will help me, and you know perfectly well that I spend all my free time from school there anyway.”

“Well my dear, it will give me joy to see you succeed and I do have faith in you. You can achieve anything. You take after your grandfather—just as stubborn, determined, and independent. When you set your mind to something, there’s no dissuading you. I’m so proud of you, honey.” Arline wiped away her tears and gave her courageous daughter a firm hug.

“Thanks, Mum. I love you. Go in peace and be happy.”

“Promise me that if you need any advice, no matter what it is, no matter what time of day or night, you’ll call me, and I’ll always be there to help you.”

“Of course!”

“I love you.”

“And I love you.”

Five months after this conversation, Arline got married and moved to California. Over time, Megan came to realize that her notions of an independent life didn’t quite match up with reality. Work and study took up all her time. A perfectionist by nature, she demanded of herself maximum care and attention in everything she did. Without her mother nearby, she feared bringing to ruin the business they had put so much effort into building. Her sleepless nights were spent reading textbooks, and her days were spent at the restaurant, working. Taking a holiday or break remained but a distant dream, and there was no time whatsoever for a personal life. But she pushed forward courageously, never telling a soul of her difficulties. She didn’t want to upset either her mother or her grandfather.

When Malcolm McKenzie learned of this on one of his visits and found out that his granddaughter had been living alone for a year and running the restaurant on her own, he was furious. He raged and shouted, making no attempt to hold back his anger.

“Your mother was a frivolous girl twenty years ago, and she hasn’t matured one bit since then. To imagine, abandoning her child, her only daughter, for a man. The nerve! How dare she! Just take a look at how you’ve lost weight! Dark circles under your eyes! You’re still just a child, but everything has fallen on your fragile shoulders! When I die, she won’t see a penny of the

inheritance. Never will I permit the fortune of our clan to be squandered in another country, and for our family name to be scattered in the wind and forgotten as though it had never existed. You are my pride and joy, Megan. I am proud that you stayed behind, that you didn't trade us up for another land. You are my only heir, and you must maintain and lead our clan line forward."

This conversation had taken place five years prior. Malcolm would come to London once a year to visit his granddaughter.

Then, eight months ago, during his last visit to London, he said, "My health is not what it used to be, Megan. In all likelihood, this is probably my last visit. Now it's your turn to come and visit your old grandpa."

"I was planning to do so this summer, but you see, Mum had surgery, and I had to go to California and support her during her rehabilitation. I promise, next year, for sure, in the summer, I will definitely come to visit you for a few weeks. I'd like to come in the summer, as I've heard it's the only time of year when you don't freeze to death and drown in the rain." Megan laughed. "But I promise; this time I will definitely come, and nothing can make me change my mind." She gazed kindly at her grandfather.

"Drown in the rain? What nonsense! No doubt your good-for-nothing mother planted such ideas in your head. Of course it's cooler in the north than in the centre of the country, but it's not nearly as awful as you say! Your visit will give me great pleasure. I will arrange a celebration to mark this day."

Chapter 3

Bagpipes

And now she was here. He would have been so glad to see her. What cause for celebration her arrival might have been. But, as it turns out, she arrived the day after his body was buried in the McKenzie family crypt. He had passed in the evening, and the very next day his body was in the crypt—such were the burial customs. Feelings of guilt had tormented her ever since she learned of his passing. After all, she had broken her promise; the old man had waited and waited, but she never came.

“Grandpa, I’m so sorry. Forgive me, please. I didn’t make it in time,” she whispered. Wiping away the tears streaming down her cheeks, she decided that now was not the time. She had important decisions to make, and she needed to keep a cool head. Tomorrow would be a difficult day, and she had to be ready. She would have to meet her grandfather’s brother Alaric and her two cousins, Alaric’s grandchildren, Warren and Duncan. As she recalled from her grandfather’s stories, by the twentieth century, the McKenzie family had two castles in their possession—Castle Mal and Castle Raven. Castle Mal was the ancestral home built by the McKenzie clan, and Castle Raven was inherited from the neighbouring Drummon clan in 1898, when the last of the Drummon clan members went missing, leaving no heir. Her Grandfather Malcolm and her Great-Uncle Alaric were the two heirs of David McKenzie, who bequeathed to Alaric Castle Raven and the wool factory, while Malcolm inherited Castle Mal and the Scotch whisky distillery. At present, Alaric and Duncan were residing at Castle Raven, while Warren and his wife were temporarily staying at Castle Mal, where Megan was currently staying. Megan would become the official owner of Mal the following day, after the formal reading of the will by the family lawyer. The best way to proceed under the circumstances, Megan thought, would be to offer her relatives the chance to buy the distillery and castle from her, should they wish to do so. Megan had no intention of selling the estate to strangers; she didn’t want Malcolm turning over in his grave, knowing that the clan’s ancestral home had been sold to someone outside the family circle.

Having changed her clothes and finished unpacking, Megan looked at the clock on the fireplace mantel. What a long day it had been. Her arrival at the airport that morning now seemed an age ago. It was now 10.25 p.m., and the room was getting chilly, so she turned on the heater and threw a beige stole over her shoulders. She was about to go and remove her make-up when she heard an unusual sounds. It took her a while to figure out it was coming from. She listened carefully. This strange gurgling, flowing sound fascinated her, drawing her attention and stirring in her a vague sense of alarm.

“Bagpipes,” she said softly. Her heart began pounding and her soul contracted so sweetly, yet also so painfully; she could not understand why the sounds of the instrument excited and worried her thus. Something beckoned her. She opened the window to listen and see where this music,

which moved her to the core, was coming from. Indeed, someone was playing the bagpipes not far from her window. For a moment she listened, and she then decided to go outside and stand for a while, savouring the melody of this magnificent instrument. She left the room and rushed down the stairs, going outside into the dark. At first she could barely make out the outlines of objects. It was cool outside; the temperature had dropped and the wind from the sea sent chills down her spine.

After a few minutes, Megan's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and she could clearly make out the water at the foot of the castle grounds; the Halladale River. Far away in the distance, the sea roared, carrying with it the sound of the bagpipes. There wasn't a soul in sight and though she feared the dark, she was inexplicably and irresistibly drawn to the sounds of the magical music. Spellbound, she followed their call. The castle grounds were private property, and it was highly unlikely that someone could easily enter. With such thoughts, she calmed herself, rationalizing her impetuous act. She knew that she hadn't come far, so if fear suddenly overtook her, she could return immediately.

At that moment, a full moon appeared in the sky, lighting up the river and the surrounding hills. On the hill overlooking the river to the right of the castle, she suddenly saw the player of the bagpipes. A tall, impressive figure — he looked to Megan the embodiment of a northern highlander; his stature and stance, combined with his sweet music, the very stuff of tales and legend. He stood proudly on the hill, his feet shoulder-width apart, wearing a tartan kilt and knee-high white woollen socks. Megan was unable to see the colours of the kilt, as the lighting of the moon was too dim to make out the details. He was wearing a jacket, with a cape draped over the left shoulder. Probably the same colour as the kilt, she thought. He continued playing the bagpipes—the same heartbreaking melody, which was as beautiful as it was sad. Megan headed towards the stranger, drawn to him like a moth to the light. She desperately wanted to get close to him, to see him close up; an irresistible desire was driving her. Her soul was in awe, as if her whole life depended on meeting him. Never before in her life had a stranger made her feel this way.

Suddenly the moon hid itself behind a cloud, the melody broke off, and at once the area became very dark, the only sound that of the sea. She felt an instant sense of unease, as if she had just awoken from a dream. Try as she might to find the silhouette of the stranger on the hill, she was unable to. At that moment, behind her, she heard something shift on the gravel. She turned abruptly, and a shadow flashed before her eyes. She froze. Sensing that someone was watching her, she gazed around in confusion, but there was no one in sight. "You're just tired," Megan told herself, "and now you're imagining things." But her heart began beating anxiously with fear. How could I have been so foolish as to go out alone at night? she now chided herself. She exhaled and was just about to run back to the castle when there came a frightening rustle behind her. She turned her head quickly. In the darkness, she could clearly make out a silhouette. It was watching her. Everything inside her froze up. Thin trickles of cold sweat sprung out on her back, a chilling fear paralyzed her. This was someone else, not the man from the hill.

“He couldn’t have moved so quickly from one place to another and changed his clothes. What if this is some sort of trap? But who is this? Why are they behaving like this?” Suddenly, the shadow began to approach Megan. She could now make out a black cloak and a bonnet. Raising a finger to his lips, he indicated she keep quiet. This was something sinister, his intentions were clearly the worst imaginable, and she sensed it with every cell of her body. Megan backed away. In her fear, it took her a moment to realize that her feet were in the water, as she didn’t feel the cold of the river. Where to run, what to do? She was completely seized by panic, and made a dash along the river toward the front door of the castle. It was only some thirty metres away; she would not have dared to stray far, for it seemed to her that nothing could threaten her on the castle grounds. Oh, how naive she turned out to be. The shadow was moving along the river, blocking the road to the castle entrance.

“Gregor, help me!” Megan shouted. She heard the shadow approaching and turned to see how close it was. Looking back, she tripped over a rock, fell backward, and smacked her head. She didn’t even have time to feel the pain. She was consumed by one thought, and one thought alone: how to save herself. Fitfully and convulsively moving, she tried stand up, but to no avail. The fear had her in its paralyzing grip, leaving her no chance of reaching the castle. Meanwhile, the moon reappeared from behind the clouds, illuminating everything around and the cloaked figure in black. Although his face was not visible, a knife blade suddenly flashed, raised above her. A rush of adrenalin gave her a little strength. She was able to crawl a bit away from her attacker. And just at that moment, a loud bird cry suddenly pierced the night. A huge (as it seemed to Megan) black bird was flying at the would-be killer, deliberately targeting his face. The black figure raised his knife towards the raven but missed; the raven was too quick. With its claws, it tore away at the face and head of the attacker, furiously beating him with its wings. Trying to fight the bird off, the assailant dropped his knife and tried to grab the raven by the wings, but all was in vain. Losing his balance, he, too, fell on the bank of the river, rolled over onto his stomach, and covered his head with his hands, fearing that the raven would finally peck out his eyes. A minute later, he abruptly jumped to his feet, cowering and crouching. His hands still covering his head, he made haste to get away as quickly as possible. Megan saw everything as though it were a dream. Be it the shock of the experience or the impact of her head on the stone, Megan’s vision slowly went dark, and she lost consciousness, never finding out how it all ended.

Chapter 4

Heather

When Megan awoke, she didn’t immediately realize where she was. In all certainty, she was lying in bed. When she turned her head, the first thing she saw was the mantel clock. The time was 7.40 a.m. The sun was shining through the windows. Reconstructing the events of the previous night in her head, she reached the moment when she heard the sound of the bagpipes and went outside. It took her breath away. Could everything that followed really be true? Or was

it a dream—just a bad dream—a nightmare? Sitting up in bed, she took a careful look at herself. She was wearing the same clothes as the previous day. In the evening, she had put on white trousers, which were now completely soiled. Her beige-and-white blouse was covered in mud, she had no shoes on her feet, and on the bed next to her lay her beige stole, all crumpled and still wet.

“My God! It wasn’t a dream! How did I end up here? Who brought me back to my room?” Megan whispered in horror. “Gregor? Warren? What happened to the man who tried to kill me? Why did he try to do this?” She couldn’t even imagine how dangerous leaving the castle in the evening would be, considering she had remained on its territory. After all, she hadn’t gone far—only a few metres away from the entrance.

Slowly getting out of bed, she went to the bathroom to clean herself up before meeting her relatives. It was imperative that she see Gregor immediately to understand what had happened the previous night after she lost consciousness.

Megan put on a formal black suit and low-heeled shoes, pulled her thick chestnut-brown hair into a bun, and finished off with a few light and subtle touches of make-up. Having descended the main staircase, she found herself in the hall. Memories of the previous night would not leave her—as in a film, she saw herself yesterday, mesmerized by the music, leaving the castle through the front door, which was now before her.

“I wonder what role the highlander with the bagpipes had to play in all this? From his vantage point on the hill, he must have had a clear view of what was happening on the riverbank. And yet he didn’t come to my rescue. Probably they were in cahoots. One was acting as bait and distracting me, while the other was trying to kill me.” Megan looked around. The castle was dead silent, as if she were completely alone. Suddenly, Gregor appeared, as if from nowhere.

“Oh, Gregor, I was looking for you,” she said anxiously.

“Good morning, miss. What can I do for you? Did you have a good rest? Are you comfortable in your room?”

“Yes, quite. I left the castle last night. I heard the bagpipes and wanted to see who was playing them,” she began, and then she paused, waiting for Gregor’s response.

“The bagpipes?” repeated Gregor, sounding surprised. “Strange ... who could be playing them in the castle grounds? I heard nothing of the kind yesterday.”

“You didn’t leave the castle at all last night?”

“No, miss, I didn’t. After I left your room, I worked for several hours on the reports for our meeting today.”

“I see. Thank you.” Megan was perplexed. “Where is the kitchen? I’d like to have breakfast before meeting my relatives.”

“The assembly hall is to the right of the stairs, and the kitchen is across from it.”

“Thank you. See you at the meeting, Gregor.”

“Yes, miss. See you later.”

If not Gregor, then who could have brought me back to the bedroom after the night’s incident? Megan frantically wondered. Perhaps Gregor was the figure in the black cloak? He didn’t hear the bagpipes or my calling him. Maybe it’s a plot against me? Or maybe it really is some sort of maniac on the hunt for random prey ... I must be extremely cautious. I can’t trust anyone right now. Although what would be the point of Gregor trying to kill me? From the point of view of inheritance, my relatives have a much better motive. Megan’s mind raced confusedly, one thought replacing another. Especially troubling was that someone had carried her back to the castle the night before. And this someone even knew which bedroom was hers.

Submersed in all of these thoughts, Megan entered the dining room. At the head of the table was a man not much older than Megan, with hair the same colour as hers. Rich chestnut-brown hair was a characteristic feature of the entire McKenzie clan. He was well-built and quite attractive. His face had a thoughtful and rather tired expression. To his right sat a woman who appeared to be near Megan in age. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and she was wearing practically no make-up, but her face was open and pleasant enough. This was Cousin Warren and his wife, Glenn. Her grandfather had mentioned that her cousins were a couple of years older than she, but she couldn’t recall their exact ages. They sat in silence, drinking tea, lost in their own thoughts. When Warren saw Megan, he quickly put down his teacup and rose to greet her with a polite smile.

“Hello, I’m Warren. Nice to meet you. Malcolm told me a great deal about you, and always only good things. And this is my wife, Glenn,” he said in a friendly manner.

“Hello, Warren; hello, Glenn. It’s nice to meet you, too,” replied Megan, with a slightly strained smile.

“Have a seat,” offered Glenn, passing Megan some warm croissants and pouring her a cup of hot tea. Their eyes met, and Megan got the sense that the young woman felt somewhat embarrassed. Apparently she was rather shy and not very sociable.

“Thank you. We didn’t have a chance to meet yesterday; did you come back late?” asked Megan, hoping they might know something about the events of the previous evening.

“It was already past midnight when we got back. Glenn’s sister had a misfortune, and we had to go to Inverness to see her. My apologies we were unable to meet you yesterday.”

“It’s fine, Warren. Mr. Douglas and Gregor helped me. I am sorry to hear about your sister Glenn” Megan said, but Glenn only nodded politely.

“Megan, in his final days, Malcolm asked us to come and stay with him for a while. He had been feeling very lonely but I think it’s only right that Glenn and I go back to Castle Raven after the meeting today,” said Warren, as if apologizing for their presence in the castle.

“As you wish. But if you decide to stay here a bit longer, I’d be only too happy.” The thought of being left all alone in this big, cold castle, with only Gregor for company terrified her. “If you remained for at least another week, we’d have a chance to get to know one another better.”

“All right, we’ll stay for a few days or so to help you adapt to these parts,” said Warren, with a genuinely warm smile.

“Great, thank you,” said Megan. To herself, she thought, *First of all, it wasn’t Warren who brought me in last night. Most likely it was the highlander with the bagpipes. Never mind, I’ll deal with that later. But why would he do this, and how did he know which bedroom was mine? Who is he? Time will sort things out. But it would be best to wrap up the business here as quickly as possible and head back to London.*

Having finished their tea, they all went to the assembly hall together. This was a truly historic room. Stone walls, high arches, antlers, and other hunting trophies decorated the hall. A massive mahogany table was placed in the centre. The chairs around it were made of the same material. Lancet windows along the longest wall made the hall very bright. The windows offered a beautiful view of the river and hills.

In addition to Mr. Douglas and Gregor, two men Megan hadn’t yet met were already sitting at the table. Upon Megan’s entrance, both men stood up and held out their hands to her.

“Hello Megan,” said the oldest of the group. “It’s my pleasure to welcome you to your historical homeland. My brother had been dreaming of your arrival for years, and now that day has finally come. I am Alaric McKenzie, your late grandfather’s brother.”

His words made Megan feel guilty, as they sounded like a reproach, but she kept her emotions in check and calmly replied that the pleasure was mutual.

“Hi, cousin, I’m Duncan,” said the other man, grinning broadly and gazing at her admiringly. “She’s so beautiful. What a pity that we’re related by blood; otherwise, I’d have already started courting you.” He not only shook her hand but also kissed her on both cheeks, as if they were old friends who hadn’t seen one another in years.

Duncan was a bit taller than Warren, with a good-looking figure and playful eyes. It was clear he was extremely confident in himself and was very popular with the ladies. When he smiled, his handsome face radiated an intense magnetism. If at first glance Warren gave the impression of being a very serious and modest young man, Duncan was the exact opposite. Cheerful, quick, and playful, he immediately commanded attention. He was a ceaseless fountain of energy.

Megan was pleasantly surprised that all three of the men in her family were dressed in traditional costumes in the clan colours. To her mind, this was very attractive. Each was wearing a wool kilt, which, to this day, was still an integral part of Scottish national dress. A man's skirt with large pleats at the back, a tartan cape draped over the left shoulder and fastened with a brooch, a white shirt, handkerchief tie, black waistcoat, and black jacket—all of this looked perfectly stunning on the male members of the McKenzie family. Other essential attributes of dress included high woollen knee socks; all three men were wearing white ones. Each man was wearing a belt with a large buckle, to which a sporran was attached with a chain, which was fastened around the waist. Three small rabbit-like tails were attached to it, but these, in fact, were made of seal fur—the most common type of sporran trim. The McKenzie men looked absolutely dashing decked out in their Scottish national costumes. All three McKenzie men were tall, handsome, and well-built. The national costumes only served to highlight these positive features.

Having taken a moment to carefully examine their appearance and dress, Megan exclaimed in admiration, "I've seen many Scots in national dress in England, and Grandfather also wore a national costume, but never before had I noted the details. It's really very beautiful and extremely elegant, especially when men know how to wear this clothing with all the necessary accompanying attributes and accessories, which, I think, many people these days neglect. All three of you look gorgeous—like Scottish national fashion models."

"You are absolutely correct," Alaric stated. "A costume put together with knowledge and care embodies our history and our traditions, of which we are proud. In the big towns, few people nowadays wear a kilt; they mostly prefer trousers. But the northern Scots will never give up their traditions and their national costume. This is its birthplace. Its history begins here, in these mountains, on these hills." Alaric finished his speech on Scottish national costume and sat down on a chair at the head of the table. His grandsons, Duncan and Warren, followed his lead.

Megan noticed that Alaric and her grandfather were very similar in appearance. He was a strong white-haired man, shorter than his grandchildren, and had the same serious expression, eyes, nose, and commanding chin as his brother Malcolm. They were even similar in age. Megan couldn't recall who was younger, Alaric or Malcolm, though she felt probably her Grandfather was older, since it was he who had inherited Castle Mal, the clan's ancestral home. This resemblance was a source of renewed heartache for her, as she couldn't help but think that they were all here, but he wasn't.

"Mr. Douglas, you may begin," Warren said.

“All the members of the McKenzie family are gathered here today for the reading of the will of the late Malcolm McKenzie,” Mr. Douglas stated. “Allow me to state his will: ‘I hereby bequeath Castle Mal and the Mal Scotch Production whisky distillery, as well as all the funds remaining in my bank accounts, to my only granddaughter, Megan McKenzie.’ Miss McKenzie, there is one more amendment you should be aware of. In the event of your death, if there are no legitimate children-heirs, your mother cannot inherit what your grandfather left you. The entire estate will pass to Alaric and his grandsons, such was his will.”

Without a doubt, it must have been one of them who tried to kill me, thought Megan, her head reeling from the sudden thought. It blindsided her. How could they appear so charming and pleasant? *Now everything is falling into place. If I disappear, they’ll get the whole fortune, as they’ll be the rightful heirs. They may well try to kill me again. God, how dreadful.* There was no point in offering to allow them to buy the distillery and castle now. Why should they pay for something if they could get it all for nothing?

After several seconds of complete silence, Alaric asked her a question: “Megan, how are you going to manage the distillery and the castle? Are you going to stay here, or would you like to manage things from London?”

“This is precisely why I came here—to see the distillery first-hand and get acquainted with its management specifics. Based on this, I will make my decision. Perhaps there is something you would like to recommend in this regard?”

“I was thinking that if you have difficulties, we could offer our help. Warren could help look after the castle, as well as help Gregor manage the distillery. It’s unlikely that Duncan will be able to offer his help, as he is occupied in our wool and woollen products manufacturing. Warren has got more free time on his hands and could help you. If you find this prospect of interest, I’m sure you’ll be able to work out the details of the partnership by yourselves.”

“Thank you, Alaric. I will definitely give your offer some thought. But..There’s something I’d like to discuss. Last night, near the castle, I was attacked by a man with a knife. He tried to kill me.” She paused, drew breath and then continued. “Please don’t misunderstand me; by no means do I wish to accuse anyone here of what happened. However, just in case, I would like to inform you that, in light of what I’ve just learned about my inheritance of the McKenzie estate and the amendment regarding my death, first thing after our meeting, I will call my lawyer in London and ask that he draw up a document ensuring that, in the event of my death, a thorough investigation of possible direct-inheritance-related issues and interests take place.”

Dead silence filled the assembly hall as those present went from astonishment to indignation and outrage. Not only was the accusation itself offensive to all the family members, but the tone in which Megan had said everything was nothing less than insulting. Duncan was the first to recover and find a voice to speak.

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