

Chapter One

She needed this job.

Jennet Fellowes stared across the imposing desk to the empty leather chair. Behind the chair stood a series of soaring shelves, stuffed haphazardly with hundreds of books. Leather-lined classics competed with tattered paperbacks for space. At any other time, she'd have been delighted to spend hours combing through the collection and finding new treasures.

This is not the time to get distracted, Jen.

No. It wasn't, was it? She needed to concentrate on getting the job. Not on a bunch of books.

"You must," her grandfather whispered in her memory. *"You're the only one who can."*

She hadn't argued with him.

She never argued with anyone.

And, in this case, he was right.

There was no use arguing there was anybody else to do this. The rest of the cousins were too important and well known. Her grandfather had tried his best, but failed. More importantly, none of them had the talent essential for getting this particular job.

Getting the job meant getting access to this outrageous mansion stuck in the-middle-of-nowhere Scotland. Getting access meant gaining time. Time to find what she'd come for.

The ring.

Her grandfather's most desired possession. A possession he'd lost years ago. She needed to find the ring. Then her grandfather would die in peace. And finally, at last, she would have paid him back.

So she needed to get this job.

The door behind her slammed open. Jen stiffened her spine and forced herself to take a deep breath in and out. She couldn't afford to lose her composure, much less slide into one of her attacks.

"Ms. Douglas."

A jolt ran through her at the name. The name she'd left behind.

The impact of his voice from behind slid inside her head and jolted her once more. She hadn't expected a voice like his. Not rich and sibilant. From the extensive research she'd done on this man, she'd expected loud and bombastic. Arriving at this travesty of a house hadn't changed her opinion. Only a monstrous ego would want such a place.

Another breath in. Another out.

His voice might surprise, but she'd done her homework. She'd read about Cameron Steward's various exploits and every one of his reviews. She'd scanned the photographs of this man on the web—thousands of them. The dashing war reporter, ladies' man, and lion of literature had drawn press attention for years. His voice may not meet her expectations, but she'd girded herself for the physical punch of him for one whole week.

The urge to swing around and stare became almost overwhelming.

But he moved before she slipped into temptation. He walked past her, moving toward the desk.

She stifled a gasp.

He was far bigger than she'd surmised from the web images. The black wool sweater he wore did nothing to disguise the broadness of his shoulders. The black jeans didn't diminish the strength of his thighs; rather, they highlighted their power as he prowled around the massive oak desk.

Jen didn't like big anything. Big houses. Big families. Big drama.

And she especially didn't like big men.

He turned and she nearly gasped again.

The photos portrayed him all wrong. The articles and interviews missed the true story. They'd shown him smiling and laughing. They'd portrayed a man who lived for the thrill and did everything on a lark.

The man standing behind the desk had the eyes of a predator.

Those eyes narrowed. "Ye are Ms. Douglas, correct?"

With a start, she realized she'd been sitting there like a mute idiot. "Yes, yes," she blurted, inwardly cringing at how desperate she sounded.

His tawny brows rose as if confirming her idiot status. The color of his brows matched the rough shadow of whiskers on his hard jaw, but they were a sharp deviation from the light amber hair falling past his ears in a messy jumble. “You’re sure?”

The tease in his voice was impossible to miss. The contrast to his predator eyes made her even more confused. Jen wasn’t good with teasing and not good with men. Her confusion only made the situation worse. The combination of the three flustered her to the point her breath stuck in her throat.

Not good. Not good at all.

She was already botching this interview. Suffering an attack would ruin any chance she had.

“Hmm.” His hand shifted across the clutter of papers on his grand desk while his steady gaze never left her face.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The long years of practice rescued her.

“I’m sure,” she said, pitching her voice low so she saved on air. “I’m Jennet Douglas and I’m here for the job of being your transcriber.”

“Hmm.” His hand kept sweeping back and forth, those eyes of his piercing into her. The energy he exuded, his masculine vitality, filled the large library, making her feel as if she experienced tunnel vision and the only thing she could focus on was him.

A flutter of instinct swished through her. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Lethal. He was lethal.

Her breath, her instinct, her heart all yelled at her.

Leave.

But she couldn’t. The ring and her obligation stood in her way. And more than anything, her grandfather. She couldn’t walk away from this man and this monstrous mansion. Her predicament made the air in her throat knot and then gasp in a clear sign of distress.

He stiffened, and the tawny brows dropped into a ferocious frown. “What’s wrong?”

This interview was going horribly wrong and she needed to get herself refocused.

“You must, Jenet,” her grandfather whispered in her memories once more. *“The ring means everything to me.”*

“Nothing, sir.” Knotting her fingers in her lap, she forced herself to meet his gaze. His eyes were a mix of dark colors she couldn’t define. Certainly not black, but not brown either.

“Nothing?” He jerked the stately leather chair out from behind the desk and slammed his body into it, as if compelling himself to continue with this odd exchange. “Do ye have a problem with your breathing?”

The question surprised her. Not the words themselves; questions about her breathing weren’t uncommon. The surprise came from the sliver of compassion running through them. She wasn’t used to compassion. “No, sir. Not at all.”

“Stop calling me sir.” His frown deepened. “There’ll be none of that around here.”

“Yes, s...” She slithered to a stop.

A glimmer of humor lit in his odd eyes. The frown eased. “Call me Cam.”

She didn’t want to speak his first name. Just as she didn’t want him to speak hers. First names smacked of potential friendship. She wanted none of that. She was here to get the job and do a job. The last thing she wanted was to feel any guilt about what she planned to take from this man. “I think it would be better to keep things businesslike.”

“Do ye?” One brow rose again. “Why?”

“It’s more professional.”

“Professional.” The word hung in the air. He edged it with wry whimsy, rolling the vowels in his rich voice as if he testing it for clarity.

“Yes.” Jen’s hands tightened until her nails cut into her skin. She was no good at this kind of thing: talking, chatting, interviewing. The desperate need to jump up and run out the door swept through her again. The only thing she wanted to do was run and run and run back to her place. The placid and peaceful place her grandfather’s summons had yanked her from one week ago.

“Hmm.” His hand pawed through the mound of papers once more and much to her relief, his gaze dropped from her face. Silence, the wretched silence she couldn’t ever seem to fill with easy chatter or witty words, lay like a heavy woolen blanket between them.

“Ye come highly recommended.” His abrupt pronouncement split through the room.

Jen jumped in her seat and swallowed a squeak, like a mouse in front of a big, growling cat.

His lips tightened. “Are ye a nervous woman?”

“No, sir.” As soon as the title came out of her mouth, she winced.

“If not nervous, then perhaps unwilling to take concise directions.” His tone went sharp, all humor gone.

Two years ago, this would have been the end. The old Jennet would have given up, fled in defeat, and disappointed every member of her family. For two years, though, she’d been nurturing herself, growing confidence, finding her own way.

The new and fragile confidence shot down her spine, making her straighten in the hard antique chair. “I can take directions.”

Cameron Steward stared at her across the vast expanse of his desk. The quiet tick-tock of the ancient grandfather clock standing beside the enormous pit of a marbled fireplace was the only sound filling the silence. Until another one replaced it.

“Hmm.”

The sound was apparently a signature for him and she couldn’t help but think it resembled the deep purr of a giant cat. There was something silky and seductive to it, while underneath rolled the potential of a quick strike.

He coiled out of his chair, a slinky glide that startled her. Even though the movement was smooth and subtle, the heft of his big body and the intensity of his presence shot through her.

Lethal.

The man stalked over to another bookcase, this one filled with an assortment of scary African masks and other memorabilia. His hands swung around, clasping behind his back. “The work is usually in the morning.”

Her forehead creased. Transcription could be done at any time of day and she worked best at night. Daytime meant being outside. Why did he insist on what time the work was done if all that mattered was that it got completed?

You need this job, Jen.

“That’s fine.” Her knotted hands loosened. When she transcribed didn’t matter. She’d only be here for as long as it took to find the ring. If she got lucky, that would amount to only a few days.

Mr. Steward kept looking at his memorabilia. “I believe it was made clear the position requires ye to live here.”

Here was where she needed to be. “Yes. That’s fine, too.”

“There isn’t a lot of social activity in the area.” His wide shoulders curved into his neck and then relaxed as if he’d shaken off any hesitancy about the subject.

“I have no problem with that.” Her non-interest in the social scene had been a huge issue with her family. Yet now, they could only be relieved Jenet fit into this role in so many ways. “I prefer it, actually.”

“Really?” The shoulders moved again, this time indicating disbelief. The man used his body like a fine-tuned communication device.

“Yes, really.” Her hands loosened further and she allowed herself a quick slide down her wool skirt to sweep away any lingering perspiration.

She was gaining ground in this interview. A thrill of accomplishment ran through her.

“The book will be long and once I start, I won’t stop.” The clasp of his hands compressed, making his knuckles white. “I expect it will take at least four months to complete.”

She’d be long gone before then. “Fine.”

Swing around, his movement was fluid with animal grace. “An agreeable little thing, aren’t ye?”

Condescension layered his words, along with the latent humor. Jen didn’t mind the humor, but she did mind the arrogance. Not arguing didn’t mean she couldn’t defend herself. Growing up among the boisterous Felloweses, she’d learned. “I wouldn’t be here if the terms weren’t agreeable to me.”

Her soft voice held a hint of steel.

An acknowledgment of the hint flickered in his eyes. This man was smart. And savvy. She’d figured out the first from her research about him. The second realization hit her now and made her shiver. Her grandfather had been thorough in this setup, making sure nothing would be

tied to the Fellowes family, but she still needed to find the ring and escape; all under this man's keen gaze.

She had no choice, although she now realized how tricky this would be.

“Well.” He paced back to the desk and grabbed one paper and a pen off the mess. “Then we have a deal, Jen—”

He stopped with a dramatic pause, the curl of his mouth telling her this was another tease, another test.

“Again, I'd prefer to keep this professional. Ms. Douglas will be fine.” She didn't think standing firm in this area would risk her getting the job. The importance of keeping her distance made this worth the slight risk.

His mouth went from a curl to a quirk. “I guess that will work, if ye insist.”

Jen took in a deep breath. “I insist.”

“Hmm.” His eyes sparked with humor, as if her puny attempts at setting some of her own rules amused him. “All right.” Another dramatic pause. “Ms. Douglas it will be.”

A bang of thrilled victory raced around in her stomach, along with trepidation.

She'd got the job. Just like that. She'd expected a long, drawn-out interview. Lots of lengthy questions, maybe even a test of her skills. Apparently, however, this man made his decisions in a flash.

Cameron Steward smiled for the first time. Something like complete terror tumbled right into the mix of triumph and trepidation coursing through her. The smile creased his cheeks into long dimples and lit his dark eyes. His teeth gleamed in white perfection, only adding to the menace of his appeal.

Yes, very, very lethal.

“Sign here.” He moved toward her, pen and paper in hand, and she forced herself to keep still.

The paper landed on the edge of his massive desk and the pen was thrust in her face. This time, she couldn't help her timid withdrawal.

“Sorry.” The pen, held in his big hand, drew back too. “I thought we had a deal.”

“We do.” Before he retreated farther, she pushed herself to pluck the odd pen away from him.

Leaning over, she tried to make herself read the short paragraph. There was something about time off. Her pay. Her room and board. Yet the details blurred because he stood so near. His heat reached out, warming her one side, making the other side of her feel cold. The smell of him wrapped around her too. A crisp, minty scent with something underneath, a scent that reminded her of deep forests and dark seas.

“The terms are the same as I listed with the job agency.” His voice came from above her and she felt as if he encircled her with his heat and scent and sound. “Is there something wrong with any of them?”

“No.” What did the terms matter? She’d be gone before her first pay packet. Scribbling her fake name on the paper, she slid the pen on the desk and edged farther into her seat.

Silence came from behind her chair. Then the man moved again in his unique prow, walking past her to stand behind his desk once more. His finger punched several buttons on the utilitarian office phone. Nothing happened. An irritated growl rumbled from his throat as he punched more buttons.

The phone beeped and then went silent.

“Baw!” The roar erupted from his mouth, a long, drawn-out cry that thundered through the room. “Mrs. Rivers!”

Before his last vowel rang its peal over the books and memorabilia and Jen, the same woman who’d ushered her into the house not one hour ago, appeared at the open library door. “Mr. Steward?”

She looked completely unfazed at the noise her employer had made, as if this were a daily occurrence.

Was the place filled with nutters?

Finding the ring and getting away from this madhouse couldn’t happen soon enough for Jen’s peace of mind.

“Ye will show Ms. Douglas to her room.” The rumble of disgust at the intransigence of his phone lingered in his voice. “Give her a wee bit of a tour as well. I’ll see ye at eight a.m. sharp, Ms. Douglas.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jen’s words made her new employer frown again. But before he could rebut her use of a title he’d rejected, the other woman intervened with her own assent.

“Yes, Mr. Steward.” The older woman beckoned to her, and with dizzy relief to be out of his presence, she clutched her purse and coat and followed Mrs. Rivers out the door into the vast hall.

“Well, he’s found another one, I see. You’re younger than the others.” The woman wore a serviceable grey jumper matched with a darker-grey skirt. Her silver hair was cut short, highlighting the myriad wrinkles circling her vacant blue eyes. “You can call me Mrs. Rivers.”

“Um.” Another one? Had Mr. Steward run through a whole slew of transcribers before her? Not that she cared; she wasn’t here to keep a job. Yet, the way the woman looked her over gave her the willies. A cold draft of air drifted along the intricately-designed parquet floor, sending a shiver up her legs. She tried to distract herself by glancing down the hallway the woman led her into.

The chill in her gut intensified.

The great hall of this massive mansion should have been glorious. The arched ceiling soared above their heads, held up by elegant marble columns. From where she stood, Jen counted four magnificent stone fireplaces. Panels of oak lined the walls, interspersed with ancient suits of armor and old medieval shields and huge threatening pikes. Dotting the hall were a series of velveteen sofas and elaborately carved chairs and tables. An immense Steinway grand piano stood in solitary splendor at the end of the hall.

The lot of it gave the impression that it all might crumble into dust if a crisp Scottish wind ran through the room.

“You’ll be wanting to gather your luggage.” Mrs. Rivers stuck her hands in her pockets, making it clear she wouldn’t be helping.

Jen obediently glanced around and spotted her one small suitcase nudged into a corner by the double front doors. Her grandfather had been so sure she'd get this job, she'd decided to pack and bring everything she needed for the few days she'd be here. Why go to the hassle and expense to take the train all the way back to London?

"Go on." The older woman gave her an imperious look. "I've got things to do."

Shuffling to her luggage, she gave herself a wry grimace. She'd been so focused on the coming interview when she'd arrived, she'd barely taken in anything. Ushered into the library so quickly, she hadn't had time to take in details of the house or this woman. The only thing she'd had time to do was hand over her case and step into Mr. Steward's lair.

Now, the reality seeped in. This place was strange and so was the housekeeper.

"Well, come then." The woman marched off down the long line of dusty Persian rugs. Jen snatched up her luggage and scrambled to keep pace.

"I'm the housekeeper here." The silver head bobbed in front of her as the words wafted back. "I've put you on the third floor so you'll be away from the noise."

The noise?

Like the roar of her new employer?

Clutching her coat and purse, she dragged her case behind. The rollers kept getting stuck on the tassels of the rugs and she wondered if tugging some fringe off one of these antiques might lead to her immediate dismissal.

But no. Clearly, Mrs. Rivers was not much of a housekeeper. The likelihood of her noticing a missing heirloom, much less a missing tuft, was small.

Good. Fulfilling her grandfather's wish appeared to be getting easier and easier.

A thick ridge of dust lay on the maple wood of the piano. Each of the statues and suits of armor she passed looked like they needed a good wash. From afar, the velveteen sofas appeared impressive. Up close, she decided if she sat on any of them, she'd be consumed in a cloud of dirt.

"This is the drawing room." Mrs. Rivers swung two massive oak doors open to another huge room.

Drawing room? Who in this day and age had a drawing room?

At the woman's impatient wave, she dutifully stuck her head in. The walls were covered in a deep-green tapestry, sporting colorful birds and a weave of plants. Floor-length satin curtains draped to the floor, muting the light falling on a mishmash of antique tables and bookcases—all as dusty as their counterparts in the great hall. Above a black marble fireplace hung a huge painting of a man, dressed in 19th-century clothes, surrounded by a bevy of dogs.

Wanting to be cordial and realizing she hadn't said a word since she'd left the library, Jen plastered on an inquiring smile. "Who's the man in the painting?"

"How would I know?" The housekeeper gave her another dull look before she turned from the room and went down another hallway.

"Oookay," she muttered under her breath as she continued to follow behind. They passed through a dining room sporting an enormous, grimy glass chandelier, into another hall featuring a grand limestone staircase covered with a worn, ruby-red runner.

"You'll want to stay away from the second floor." Mrs. Rivers waved a wrinkled hand to the stairs winding to the left. "That's for family."

Family? She frowned. Her research spoke of a dead wife in her new employer's past, but that had been years ago.

"You'll want to stick to the right." Another wave of the wrinkled hand. "Those stairs lead to the third floor."

She glanced at the woman. A pursed mouth, blank eyes, and hands folded firmly in front of her told Jen the tour was over. "I'll just go up then."

"Yours is the first door on the right." Mrs. Rivers turned and walked off down the dusty hall and into the bowels of the house.

"I couldn't feel more welcome," she said to the empty room before yanking her suitcase up one step after another. By the time she reached the third floor, the luggage felt like a load of lead. She hadn't counted, but she'd bet there'd been more than a hundred steps.

"Why did you pack so much, silly fool?"

Her words echoed down the long, long hallway. At the end of the corridor, a round window spilled the last of the misty mid-March sun onto another dusty rug. A half-dozen doors ran along each side of the rug, cutting neat oak planks into the yellowed wallpaper.

Why would a man own such a magnificent home and not take care of the place? From what she'd read about Cameron Steward's life in the past eight years, he'd made himself filthy rich selling his line of thrillers. Why hadn't he spent any money on upkeep?

Jen shook off her thoughts and walked to the first door on the right. Pushing it open, she stepped into a surprisingly clean suite. On the left stood a door to a compact bathroom. Straight across was a cozy little nook starring a fat armchair in front of roaring fire. A mini-kitchen ran along the wall beyond the fireplace, and to the right was a cozy-looking bed with a bright-blue comforter and a jumble of pristine white pillows.

"Not bad." She could stand to live here for a few days.

The roaring fire and made-up bed told her the job had been hers before she'd even entered the mansion. There hadn't been a string of other applicants waiting in the wings that she'd detected. Her concern had been for nothing.

"See? As usual, you got yourself into a stew for no reason at all."

Her fragile confidence bloomed once more.

Within a couple of minutes, she'd unpacked an assortment of jumpers and pants into the old-fashioned armoire. The kitchen fridge yielded a frozen casserole filled with shredded chicken, potatoes, and mushrooms. The microwave buzzed and she settled into the armchair to eat her dinner.

The flames of the fire crackled into a slow simmer and her eyelids grew heavy. It had been a long week. First, the summons from her cousin Edward. Away from her position at the nursery. Away from the small cottage she'd decorated to suit her own inclinations. Away from the serene life she'd created.

Then the meeting with her deathly-ill grandfather in his hospital room. Her acceptance of the task before her. The planning, the packing, the trip to Scotland using the train instead of her trusty Volkswagen hatchback to avoid any detection after she'd left this place.

She needed to get a good night's sleep.

After a quick wash and slipping on her favorite old flannel nightgown, she slid into the cool sheets and sighed with relief.

She'd done it. She'd gotten the job.

The rest should be easy. Transcribing would be no problem. She'd merely put on her headphones and type away. Once she got her daily allotment of work completed, she'd have all the time in the world to find the ring.

Within a few days, her grandfather would be satisfied.

Within a few days, she'd be back in her pleasant life.

Within a few days, this would seem like a bad dream.

Her eyes fluttered shut, the whistling wind and the crackle of the remaining fire the last things she remembered...

A low cry leached into her dreams, making her twist in her bed.

The cry came again, louder and more piercing. She flopped on her other side, pulling the pillow closer.

Another cry, this one too high-pitched and shrill to ignore.

Her eyes popped open.

The cry came once more, filled with a fierce mix of anger and fear.

She lurched up. The fire had died down to ash, and the small window by the bathroom scattered the muted moonlight on the hand-knotted rug covering the floor of the suite.

Another cry.

Her heart pounded in response. Part anxiety and part compassion. A hurt flowed through her for this poor person. Who was in such misery they'd cry like that? Where were they?

She scooted to the edge of the bed and stepped on the cold wooden floor. Shivering, she tiptoed to the door. She rattled the old knob. Opening a small crack, she peeked out.

The hallway held no ghostly apparitions or haunting phantoms. Silent and shadowed, it gave nothing away.

Jen waited, waited, waited.

Only the harsh whip of the wind outside made any noise.

Only the faint light of the moon streaked over one side of the hall.

After several minutes, she pulled herself back into her cozy den and closed the door. The old clock standing on the mantle chimed a low clang only once.

So much for a good night's sleep. She was wide awake.

With a snort, she walked to the window and peered out.

The full moon fought with the misty clouds, managing to light the extensive grounds with only a hazy gloom. The gardens rolled down to the loch where the moonlight flickered over the roiling water. A wicked March wind thrashed the bare tree limbs to and fro.

Jen took in a deep breath.

He stood at the edge of the water, his broad back already familiar to her. His hands fisted at his side as if he argued with the wild waves. The way he held himself, tight and taut, made her heart hurt.

For the second time tonight.