

## Chapter One

Lorne Alasdair Ross stood in the old graveyard of Pictloch. Rain dripped on his face and his neck, but he didn't move. He hadn't moved in quite some time.

*William Stewart Ross*

*Laird, husband, father*

*A good man, a good life*

The last date chiseled into the granite stone had passed four months ago. Yet the carving appeared as old as the church that stood some ten feet from the grave. He reached out a hand, sweeping his cold palm across the top of the marker. "Rest in peace, Da," he murmured, the sound wafting away in the sharp wind.

A sudden burst of rain poured over his bare head, and the landscape went dim with sheets of sleet and billowing mist. He ignored it, moving his gaze to the slab that stood to the right.

*Freya Eileen Murray Ross*

*Lady, wife, mother*

*A sweet lass, a warm woman*

He stared at the dates on that stone, too. It hadn't seemed like ten years had gone by since his mum had died so suddenly. It still pinged in him, the loss. The loss of so much more than just his mother.

The ping surprised him.

"Sir," his solicitor called from the open door of the limousine. "You're going to get sick."

His glance slid away from the stones to focus on the distressed face of Mr. Reid. Mr. Reid often appeared distressed around Lorne Ross. The solicitor was paid good money, though, and didn't want to lose the account of his richest client.

Which made perfect sense to Lorne. Very logical.

"Sir." A white hand waved from the open door. "Come in from the rain."

Lorne went back to staring at his parents' tombstones. He'd ordered his da's when he'd been in Singapore. In the middle of supervising the last technicalities of Gaes, Inc.'s new Asian factory, he hadn't been able to leave. It hadn't been necessary he do so. His father had already died. All that needed to be taken care of were the various details after anyone's death.

He'd taken care of them. Then, he'd returned to his work.

The limo's back door slammed shut.

Mr. Reid was apparently more distressed than usual.

Looking at the church, he calculated that at the current pitch of the right line of the wall, the place would collapse within twenty years. His mother would once have chuckled if he made the observation out loud. His father would have grown distressed that he would even be thinking such a thing.

His father, along with Mr. Reid, had often been distressed with Lorne.

Shifting from his stance by the graves, he picked his way through the long grass and tumbled stones of ancient ancestors until he arrived at the low rock wall circling the church grounds. Below him stood the village of Pictloch, drenched in rain, perched on a prominent roll of the tallest mountain in the area.

He couldn't see the mountain because of the fog and mist, yet he knew it was there. He knew where everything was, here in the land of his birth. As a child, he'd made a series of maps, detailing every crevice, every ridge of his heritage.

Ben Ross was the mountain's name.

Named after his family's founder more than a thousand years ago. Or so the tale went his da had told him when he'd been too young to question anything. Lorne looked out at the twinkling lights of the village, the grand roll of the land down to Loch Ross, and finally focused on the white stone walls of his family home. Even in the dim light of the early evening of April seventh, it gleamed through the rain.

Castle Ross.

His work had consumed him for the four months after his father's death. His work often consumed him, and he hadn't seen anything wrong with that. He was the only son, and so he'd taken care of the immediate responsibilities. The rest of the duties could wait until he arrived

back in London. He'd ignored Mr. Reid's increasingly frantic calls, because the solicitor always prefaced his rants by mentioning the late Mr. Ross.

The late Mr. Ross was dead, Lorne had thought, before he clicked the voicemail off.

Not until he'd arrived in England and met with the dour solicitor had the reality of the situation become clear.

His cold hands fisted in the pockets of his long overcoat.

William Stewart Ross had fallen into the clutches of a scheming woman. A scheming woman who, his security team had informed him after doing their due diligence, had done this before with another older man.

She'd left that one dead, too.

Lorne shifted on his feet again, never letting his gaze leave the white walls of his ancestral home. A home that hadn't been passed down to a Ross as it had previously, for more than a thousand years.

Castle Ross had been given to a woman.

Along with everything else.

He turned to the limousine and paced through the graveyard one more time. His hands came out of his pockets as he got to the side of the car.

The door opened. "You're completely wet," Mr. Reid muttered.

He slid onto the leather seat and settled back, letting his legs ease forward, letting his hands relax on his thighs.

Leaving the Highlands at the age of eighteen, not six months after his mother's death, Lorne hadn't been focused on anything other than Oxford and computer code. During the last ten years, his focus hadn't swerved—it had only transitioned. From Oxford to Gaes, from computer code to hiring coders. But never had it crossed his mind that this land and castle and loch and mountain wouldn't one day be his.

Not once.

"Mr. Ross." His solicitor sneezed before continuing. "Are we going directly to the castle to make the offer?"

Staring through the window at the wind-whipped moor, he calculated the punishment he would deliver. This wasn't about money. He had plenty of that. Much more than his da would have entrusted to the schemer. Mr. Reid, in his naïveté, had assumed this trip was about reclaiming his family's home using his wealth.

This trip was about far more.

"Mr. Ross?" The man ran his hand across his bald head. "Perhaps we should arrive tomorrow, instead of tonight. The woman might be more willing to talk then."

Lorne kept his focus on the land. His land.

He wasn't surprised at his solicitor's assumption that he was going to merely hand over money to obtain something that was already his. After all, the man had been working for him since he'd made his first million. In every area of his affairs, Lorne Ross was methodical. Never had emotion carried him away in his investments, his careful control of his business, nor his admittedly non-existent social life. It would be logical to assume he'd throw money at this situation and move on.

Mr. Reid was rarely distressed about Lorne's business decisions.

He would, however, be distressed about this one.

"We will stop at the castle tonight." His voice was soft and quiet. "To take possession."

"Yes, sir." The driver nodded his head and turned the limo toward the town's main street.

"But Mr. Ross, wouldn't it—"

"Tonight, Reid." His mind continued to calculate. "Tonight."

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Ceri Carys Olwen sat at the stout wooden table Will had brought from the castle when she'd moved into the cottage four years ago. The papers strewn in front of her were the work of months, and she still hadn't nailed down all the details because she wanted it to be exactly right.

Will would say she was being *fykie*.

At the thought of him, her throat closed.

She missed him—something fierce, as he would also say. She missed his wistful off-tune whistling as he helped her with her herbs. She missed his counsel on how to best handle a

seventeen-year-old boy who didn't want to listen to his older sister. More than anything, though, she missed his hug.

Usually, she didn't like a man's touch.

But Will had been different.

Restless, she shuffled the papers together and stood. She put the kettle on before messing around in the tiny pantry looking for biscuits or sweets. Settling on some shortbread, which would go nicely with the strawberry jam she'd bought in Pictloch yesterday, she placed her goodies on the table. She walked over and looked out into the rain, waiting for the kettle to heat.

She'd been in Scotland now for almost five years and she still hadn't gotten used to the rain. Wales had lots of rain, yet it didn't seem as harsh and icy as up here in the north. The rain in her homeland hadn't kept her inside as it did here. Brushing her cold palm across the mist of the window, she peered into the dark.

Rain. Rain. And more rain.

A light flashed far off, shocking her. The light wavered and then went out.

Ceri narrowed her eyes and glared at the gardens leading to the castle. It was probably a group of stupid teenagers on some dare to see the ghost. On a night like this, though? They must have windmills whirring in their heads. She'd bet they'd have colds and chills when they returned to their scolding mums.

Sighing, she tapped her fingers on the windowsill. She did not want to go out in this storm, but she was responsible now for the castle and its grounds. Will had left her with the sacred duty, and she didn't take it lightly.

She'd wait. See if anything else appeared.

The rain slanted against the window pane, and the pitch black of the moonless night gave her nothing to worry about. Really, why should she? The castle was well-locked, she'd made sure of that this afternoon once the cleaners had left. And how much damage could a bunch of rowdy teenagers do to empty flowerbeds?

The kettle whistled for attention.

Giving the outside one more glare, Ceri decided the flash of light wasn't a threat. She walked to the stove, poured herself a big cup of hot tea and went back to the table to peruse her extensive plans as she ate her treat.

Tourist season was less than a month away. Come the beginning of May, the buses would start arriving to tour the castle, and then go on to Pictloch. The quaint, cozy town now sported two new restaurants and several pubs to handle the crowds. The tourists would also likely drop a few pennies to buy the souvenirs loaded in the new stores: the wools and tartans sporting the Ross red and navy, the bottles of fine whiskey that came from the Ross distillery down the road, the silver Celtic jewelry an industrious lad had taken to making ever since the castle had opened to the public three years ago.

At her suggestion.

Will hadn't liked the idea at first. Eventually, he'd come around.

He'd had no choice.

Finishing her treat, she washed her cup and plate and wiped them dry before stacking them on the dish rack. It was only nine p.m. and yet, she was tired after a long day supervising the cleaning crew. Perhaps it would be best to get an early night because come tomorrow, even if it kept raining, she was going to start planting the flowers for the new season. Castle Ross was known for the gardens as much as the indoor antiques.

Walking past the window, she gave the outside one more glance and stopped still once more.

The light. Again, the light.

She leaned into the cottage's deep windowsill and tried to figure out what it was. The flash bobbed, and then, inexplicably rose.

"What the hell?" she muttered to herself.

It was far off, past the gardens, she now realized. Could it possibly be Will's famous ghost?

Ceri had ghosts in her own life so she'd sympathized with his, but she'd never believed in all the tall tales about Lady Aileen Ross. Supposedly, Will's great-great-something aunt had fallen down the tower stairs to her death some three hundred years ago, and had been haunting it ever since.

That light was coming from the tower, dammit. A shiver of shock made goose bumps rise along her arms. Then, the light went out again.

She stood. For a long time.

The light did not come back on.

Illusions and mirages had always been her curse and her savior. In this case, she was going to chalk these two sightings up as pure folly and ignore it. There was no way anyone could be in the castle and there was no way she was going to start believing in Will's Lady Aileen.

Padding down the stone hallway, she let herself into her simple bedroom. She stripped naked, then eased under the comforter Will had bought her last Christmas, and sighed.

He'd been so excited about their new plans.

Then, just like that, he'd been gone. A stroke taking him away from her and Elis so quickly, she still hadn't quite caught her breath.

Punching her pillow the way she wanted to punch fate, she lay her head on it and sighed once more. Will wouldn't be here physically, yet she'd hold him in her heart as she put in place the plans they'd shared during many teas and biscuits. This would be as much his as hers. Whatever happened to the project, she'd make sure it didn't impact the castle or its grounds negatively.

The castle was hers, now. The gardens, hers.

A precious gift of trust.

Something no man had ever given her.

She aimed to keep that trust to her last breath.

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The day broke sunny and warm, much to Ceri's pleasure. She had only two weeks to lay all the flowerbeds before the landscaping team came in and finished the heavy work. If she had more money, she'd hand the entire job to them and focus on her herb garden, instead. But she didn't, and that was that.

Striding out of her stone cottage, she breathed in the fresh air.

For a moment, she let her imagination go, and dreamed of seeing Will ambling across the garden path towards her, his dear face wreathed in smiles, his wisp of white hair bouncing in the

breeze. For good measure, she added in her brother to the picture. Elis would be smiling, too, his lanky legs far outdistancing the man who'd become almost a father to him during the last five years.

She let the dream go.

She had too much to do today to dream for long.

Walking down the path leading to the back of the stone-walled garden, she took in the damage last night's storm had done. There were a few broken tree limbs off the line of crab apple trees. Still, other than that, not much harm. The sturdy stone wall had been put in place by Will's grandfather for just such weather as last night's.

Satisfied she wouldn't have to spend much time cleaning up, Ceri hiked to the large wooden shed she and Will had put up two summers ago. Eying the flats filled with annuals, she made quick work of deciding where she'd start. The daisies first, intermixed with the daffodils she'd planted last fall. They'd look quite well next to the sweet gale shrubs she and Will had placed on the sides of the beds. Cornflowers and marigolds second. Then she'd tackle the pruning of the roses. Hefting the first tray of flowers into her arms, she walked out of the shed and came to an abrupt stop.

A tall, lean man stood in the middle path of the garden.

He was dressed in what she could only label as London Savile Row. A dark wool suit jacket and pants with a fine pinstripe. Crisp white shirt paired with a steel-grey tie. Tight-laced leather shoes she'd bet were Hugo Boss at its best.

She'd once paid quite a lot of attention to clothes.

It had been one of the few things she'd been allowed to concentrate on.

She gawked at him as if he were an alien. Because standing here, in her wet, wild Scottish garden, he was one.

"Hello?" She finally stuttered. "May I help you?"

He looked at her, not saying a word.

Shifting the flowers onto her hip as they were beginning to be heavy, she tamped down a sliver of irritation. This guy had clearly wandered off whatever track he was supposed to be on



and got lost. Into her garden. She shouldn't scold him for that, merely shoo him on his way.

"We're not open yet. Not until the first of May, I'm afraid."

His eyes widened, and then his hands moved into his pockets, shifting his jacket enough that she could see he was whip-thin.

He said nothing.

Her irritation bubbled. Frowning at him, she made the shooing more clear. "You'll have to come back later. We're not open."

"Mrs. Ceri Llewellyn."

The old name she'd discarded, as soon as Gareth had died, sliced through her in a swift cut. What struck her even harder was the way he said the words. His voice didn't lift at the end. This wasn't a question.

"No." She shifted the flowers in front of her in a poor defense. "That's not my name."

His eyes never left hers. He went silent again.

"Who are you?" Her hands tightened on the tray.

"Are ye saying you're not Ceri Llewellyn?" This time, his voice lifted slightly, but then it slid down at the end, in a hushed, quiet way.

A hushed, quiet threat.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose.

It was ever-so-slight, his accent. There was posh London riding over every vowel, and a bit of Oxford polish, too. Underneath, though, lay Scots. Pure Scots.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her voice rising, a counterpoint to his.

"Sir!" The call came from behind, strident and harassed. A short, portly man dressed in fine London clothes, too, came waddling across the garden pathway. Coming from the back end of the castle, not the wide swath of parking lot she and Will had installed the first year the tourists started arriving.

The castle.

The lights last night.

A man who might actually have a key to the castle. A key of his own.

Maybe she was dealing with a ghost besides Lady Aileen. Because now that she had a moment to think, this man standing in front of her had Will's build, if nothing else. "Are you—?"

"Sir!"

The sir standing in front of her didn't stir. Not one hair.

And that hair was a clue, too. Will's beloved wife had red hair. Ceri had seen several pictures in the castle, and the one magnificent portrait he'd commissioned of his wife right before her death.

Freya Ross with her red-gold hair. A fiery blessing, Will had said with fondness.

This man had his hair pulled back, but his short beard and the hair she could see was all fire. All red-gold fire.

"Sir!" The portly man raced to the other man's side, his round face flushed. "Ah!" He stumbled to a stop when he spotted her. "You've found her."

"I don't know." His voice was so soft, so low.

She could have been lulled by the gentleness of it, if she hadn't learned some very hard, fast lessons about men. She'd thought she'd left those lessons and those kind of men back in Wales. When she'd pulled her roots up and left for good, she'd thought she'd start a new life here, where no one knew her or what she'd been before.

"What do you mean?" The older man lifted his head, his eyes puzzled.

"She won't confess."

*Confess.*

Ceri dropped the flat of flowers onto the dirt-and-stone path. She hadn't fought in a long time. Not since she'd arrived in Pictloch to be greeted with warmth. Not since she'd met Will and come under his protection. And not since she and Elis had been welcomed into Castle Ross and made to feel like family.

But that didn't mean she still didn't know how to fight.

"I want you to leave." She thrust her trembling fists on her hips. "Right now."

He didn't move. His gaze never left hers.

"Wait, wait." The portly man reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to mop his forehead. "We're here to offer you quite a sum of money."

“Reid.” The other man swung his gaze from hers, making her feel as if she could suddenly draw in a breath. For the first time, his voice wasn’t soft or quiet. It was hard. Brutal and tough and abrupt.

Her heart hammered in her chest in a frenzied jitter.

“Yes, sir?” The little man jumped and his nose went red.

“Leave.” His gaze went back to her.

Her breath caught in her throat.

“Sir, it’s best I negotiate with—”

“Now.”

The portly man ran off as if a fire had been lit under his high-class shoes.

Four months. Four months had passed, and she’d thought Will’s predictions had come true. She’d thought she was free and that she and Elis were safe. She’d thought—

“I suppose I can’t make ye claim your name,” he said, his face impassive. “I certainly can call ye what ye truly are, though.”

She glared at him. For all the pain he’d caused his da. For all the silent pauses when Will looked like he’d lost his heart. For all the times she’d wished Elis could somehow replace what her friend had lost. “You’re Lorne Ross.”

“Aye. And ye,” he slid his hand back into his pocket, “are a gold-digger.”