

THE ARMS OF DEATH



LOCH LONACH MYSTERIES *BOOK ONE*

by Maggie Foster

"...The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard
by Thomas Gray

CHAPTER 1

Wednesday

“TRUTH!” The word thundered through the hall. It splashed against the walls, roiled down the aisles, ebbed and flowed among the seats, then slowly settled to the floor.

Ginny Forbes stood just inside the auditorium, letting her eyes adjust to the dim lighting. It was Day Three of the Genealogy Conference and the lecture was well attended. She located the mass of chestnut curls she was looking for and slid into the empty seat beside him. “Again?”

He nodded.

Professor Craig brought his fist down on the lectern with a bang. “Truth!” He paused dramatically, raking the audience with his eye.

Hal leaned toward her, whispering out of the corner of his mouth. “Never forget you are dealing with human beings.” Ginny stifled a giggle.

“Never forget you’re dealing with human beings.” Professor Craig’s voice rose. “You cannot strip them of their history, their religion, their passions.”

His own passion could have burned the air. A crusader. A warrior in the cause of truth, one who neither asked nor gave quarter.

“Human beings try to hide their shame, but it is *there* you must look for answers.”

Ginny snuck a glance at her companion. His profile was barely visible in the half-light, but she could see how intensely he was watching the speaker.

She had known Hal since college, drawn together by their interest in Texas history, but she couldn’t say she knew him well. Not enough to know what he was thinking, for instance. He was (usually) irrepressible, light-hearted and gregarious, but there had been something wrong since Sunday.

Professor Craig continued. “If your missing ancestor was a working man, you’ll have to dig for the mundane, for how he kept a roof over his head and fed his children. If he was a miscreant, so much the better. Human error has a way of leaving its traces in the records of time; law suits, witch trials, local gossip.” He paused for breath, his energy undiminished.

“I have found secrets proclaimed on tombstones, recorded in portraits, scribbled next to Bible passages. The human soul cries out for understanding. You must look for evidence of that soul.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed as she studied the man on the stage. Physical characteristics, too, played a part in human psychology. At five feet eight inches, Donald Craig needed a riser behind the lectern to be seen by his audience. His ego, however, filled the room.

Craig’s voice, carefully schooled through years of practice, drew his listeners closer. He fixed first one then another with a sharp eye.

“You come to learn what it takes to be a genealogist, one who can hold his head up in public and publish with pride. If so, this is what you must do.” He paused, his body stilled. “Lay bare the truth.”

His voice rose incrementally. “When you know what mattered to the people you are studying, you will know why they did what they did, said what they said. Why they fought on one side of a conflict or on the other. Why they married a cousin or a stranger. Why they traveled four thousand miles to settle the New World or never left the village in which they were born.”

Ginny’s grip tightened on the armrest, caught up in his zeal in spite of herself.

“Only when you know your subjects as well as you know yourself; what drove them on and held them back, what made their hearts beat faster and broke their will to live, what they did from conviction

and what from compulsion, only *then* will you know why they acted as they did.

“That is where you will find the truth, in their blood, toil, tears, and sweat; in the public harangues and private griefs; in the lives and loves and losses of our ancestors and their neighbors.”

He stretched up to his full height, his ardor flooding the hall. “New evidence may come to light. Fashions in historical interpretation may change, but of you they will say, ‘Here is a man who understood his subject, one who could read human hearts and see what was written there.’” His voice rang out.

“THAT is our goal, to stand with Thomas Jefferson and declare with pride that, wherever it may lead, we are not afraid to follow TRUTH.”

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Ginny joined in the applause, watching as the crowd dispersed, all but the tight little knot of questioners that remained after every lecture. She could sympathize with them. Whenever Professor Craig spoke she came away fired up, determined to work harder, to dig deeper.

The problem, as she very well knew, was that truth could be hard to recognize. Human beings have the most remarkable talent for deception, and for self-deception.

She looked around for her seatmate, but Hal had slipped out the other end of the row and vanished without a word. She frowned to herself, then shrugged. Oh, well, she would see him at the party.

She made her way into the lobby of the Convention Center and looked around at what insiders had dubbed *“the Grotto.”* The normally dignified atrium had been transformed into a medieval fairground.

Suspended across one end of the hall was a banner inscribed, “Out of the ‘45: The Highland Connection,” which was this year’s genealogy convention theme. On the other was a computer-generated slide show, endlessly cycling through the list of offerings, locations, and requirements. The walls were decorated with tartan banners, interspersed with oversized clan badges and photographs of scenic Scotland.

The space was crowded to bursting point, walled with booths and vendors hawking their wares, the center of the lobby filled with tables and chairs, fountains and potted plants, escalators and location maps. Hostesses stood ready at all the access points, to assist the attendees; security guards kept a discreet watch; strolling, scanning, alert to any hint of trouble, and around the whole seethed the mass of conference goers.

Great schools of grandmothers in bright blue (the color of the official souvenir tee shirt) swam from point to point, vying for dominance with the vivid red tartan of the (unofficial) backpacks, and the greens and yellows of identification badges. Many wore tartan, some full kilts, all in honor of the conference theme. Ginny, too, was wearing a tartan sash, in recognition of the Scottish blood she carried in her veins.

A cheerful wash of conversation filled the expanse, waves of sound surging, then receding as new voices were added or moved away, the whole like a living thing, pulsing with excitement, punctuated by official announcements and the voices of hawkers that pierced the whole, then vanished, then pierced again.

The air was thick with a pungent miasma composed of no longer fresh clothing; fading perfumes, hair sprays, and breath fresheners; and the riotously juxtaposed odors of a full-fledged food court, an addition since last year’s conference, and, yes, haggis had been included on the menu. Ginny found the whole scene vaguely absurd.

She joined the lunch line, then set her meal down and pulled up a chair. The chopped beef combo from Big Billy’s Barbeque was not exactly haute cuisine, but it was going to be a long day and this was marginally better than the pre-packaged sandwiches they’d had the year before. At least it was hot.

She let her eye wander over the crowd. At a rough guess, six hundred people stood talking or

examining the wares and that didn't count the hundreds more who were behind closed doors in twenty-five lecture halls, seven workshops, and three computer labs. A very good turnout.

Ginny smiled as she caught sight of a familiar shock of blonde hair. "Caroline! Over here."

The other girl turned, then hurried over and sat down.

"Ginny, thank Heaven! I was beginning to think I was the only person at this conference under the age of sixty."

Ginny laughed. "Not true. Hal's been coming. That makes three of us. And Alan, of course."

Caroline groaned. "Doesn't that man have anything better to do?"

"I think he has a crush on you."

Caroline looked around in haste. "He isn't here now, is he? I don't want him to see me."

"Then why did you come?"

"I got shanghaied." Caroline jerked her head at one of the booths. "I owed Willa a favor so I'm covering while she's at the dentist."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "The heraldry booth? How could you?"

Caroline shrugged. "Everyone wants a coat of arms to hang in the front hall and Wilhelmina de Groot is not one to turn down easy money."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. The clan badges were authentic, and the tartans, although not ancient, were legitimate. The Family Coats of Arms for sale were another matter entirely. Petty larceny to be specific. Ginny had protested against issuing a vendor license, but had been voted down.

"Aren't you eating?" Ginny asked.

Caroline shook her head. "Here? No. I'd be afraid of winding up in that ICU of yours." She reached over and helped herself to a pretzel from Ginny's bag. "What's an organizing committee member doing wasting her time on lunch instead of attending one of the seminars?"

"We just finished."

"Have I missed anything?"

"Nope. The subject was supposed to be '*Friend or Foe?: Primary Evidence from the Revolutionary War Era*,' but he's in there banging on the pulpit again."

Caroline laughed. "Let me guess. Professor Craig."

"Right."

Caroline shook her head. "Doesn't he realize that no one ever knows the whole truth?"

"It's worse than that. He thinks the truth is the only thing that matters. Did you hear what he did to Mrs. Campbell?"

"The Tartan Dragon? What could he possibly do to her?" The nickname reflected both Fiona Campbell's disposition and her resemblance to a Viking longship when she blew into a room, sails full, hurricane force winds pushing all opposition aside.

Ginny glanced around, then leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Well, as you know, she sets great store by her position as head of the Genealogy Society and has been really looking forward to being The Woman in Charge of Everything for a week."

Caroline nodded. "And?"

"And I don't need to remind you what a chauvinist the Professor is."

Caroline lifted an eyebrow, her voice suddenly wary. "What did he do?"

"She dyed her hair, so she would look good for the conference and he called her down on it, right in the middle of the opening ceremonies, in front of everyone."

Caroline paused with a pretzel half way to her mouth. "You're kidding."

"I wish I were. The man has no tact. Or maybe it's no compassion."

Caroline shook her head sadly. "He doesn't have to be so rude."

"No," Ginny agreed, then smiled. "But there's no denying she looks very silly." She ate another bite of her sandwich, then continued. "On some level he's right about being honest. There's no thrill in the

world like finding the missing piece of a genealogical puzzle and having all the little bits of contradictory evidence fall into place. That can only happen when everyone tells the truth.” She found Caroline’s eyes on her. “It’s happened to me twice and both times I felt like God on the eighth day.”

Her friend raised an eyebrow. “You’ve never told me how you got roped into this geriatric hobby.”

Ginny feigned surprise. “Haven’t I? I thought I’d told everyone.”

“Nope.”

“I inherited my grandmother’s nose for gossip. She was always talking about who had done what to whom, and, of course, she knew everything there was to know about the clan.”

“And?” Caroline prompted.

“Well, I had to do a report for school one year and Nana decided to help. By the time we got through, I had a truly amazing amount of dirt on all our ancestors. We put together a family tree, with commentary.”

Caroline’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of commentary?”

“The kind my teacher didn’t approve of.” Ginny grinned. “She insisted I learn how to put the details in context. I learned an awful lot that year.”

“But how did you end up doing this?” Caroline gestured around them.

“The stories were so colorful I couldn’t ignore them. Gossip was the starting point and the rest, as they say, *is history*.”

“Oh,” Caroline groaned, “that was awful!”

Ginny ducked the flying pretzel and grinned. “Are you sure you’ve never heard that one before?”

“Maybe I blocked it out of my mind as too horrible to remember.”

“A pun is a terrible thing to waste.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Ain’t I just?” Ginny peered at Caroline’s wristwatch. “I’d better get back to class.”

“I’ll walk you over.”

The two young women rose and started back into the main body of the conference hall.

“I suppose you’ve been here all week?”

Ginny nodded. “But I have to leave after this session. I’ve used up all my time off.”

“Which means I’ve got no one to sit with at the lecture tonight.”

“You could sit with Alan,” Ginny teased.

Caroline made a face. “I hate you.”

“He’s a nice guy.”

“He gives me the creeps.”

“I don’t think he’s actually dangerous, just inept.”

“You wouldn’t think that if he were following *you* around. Besides, you’ve got Hal to protect you.”

Ginny nodded half-heartedly. “Yes, I suppose so.”

Caroline stopped walking. “What did you mean by that?” She caught Ginny’s arm and pulled her to a halt. “Is there something wrong between you two?”

Ginny shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“What’s up? Come on, Ginny. Give!”

Ginny squirmed, unsure what to say. “Well, he’s been acting strange.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Bad mood. Unsociable. Like he’s worried about something, but he won’t talk about it.”

“How serious are you two?”

“He hasn’t asked me to marry him, if that’s what you mean.”

“But would you, if he did?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Don’t you like him?”

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “What’s not to like? Tall, dark, handsome, rich.” Her mocking smile faded into something more genuine. “It’s just that I liked his mother so much. When she died, it was almost like losing my own.”

“So?” Caroline demanded.

“Well, I’d hate to think I was a marrying a man because I liked his mother. I want to be sure it’s really Hal I’m fond of.”

Caroline shook her head. “You’re weird, you know that?”

Ginny nodded. “You’ve mentioned it once or twice.”

“Well, if you decide against him, I get first dibs, okay?”

“It’s a deal.”

Caroline’s smile faded. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. When can we get together?”

“I have to work the next two nights, then there’s the fund raiser on Friday and I’ve promised to help Hal with that.”

“What about Saturday? We could go get margaritas.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Good. I’ll call you.” Caroline started off.

“Wait!” Ginny caught her elbow. “Aren’t you going to give me a hint what this is about?”

Caroline grinned. “Nope. You’ll just have to wait until then. ‘Bye.” She hurried off, leaving Ginny wondering what her friend could be up to this time.

An hour and a half later, Ginny made the rounds of the hall, saying her official goodbyes to the other volunteers. She was glad she’d been able to manage at least part of the week. Worthwhile, even if she had to make up a shift or two at work.

She joined the lecture-sated throng headed towards the main door, wondering how many of these ancient faces might have secrets they would rather not share with Professor Craig. She smiled to herself at the absurdity of the thought. A more unlikely group of miscreants she could not imagine. They could be tedious, ignorant, even foolish at times, but in her experience, genealogists were by nature harmless. She would find no school for scandal here.

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