

CHAPTER ONE

“I expect this will be a bit more provincial than you are accustomed to, Deary. I do hope you like it, though,” the older woman explained stepping across the threshold.

Krista didn't care. All she wanted was food, a hot shower, and a warm bed. Stepping over the threshold out of the cold, damp darkness, she found herself enveloped by warmth and light.

The other woman, Gwen, deposited the bags that she was carrying on the floor by a large wooden table. Krista dropped her suitcase and shrugged off her backpack, absorbing the welcome warmth.

The kitchen was massive. Hand hewn stone floors, worn smooth over time added to the welcoming charm of the room. Braced at the top of the stone walls, the wood planked ceiling soared at least ten feet high. An open fireplace, large enough to accommodate half a dozen grown men, occupied half of one wall. Inside an enormous black cauldron hanging from a cast iron hook, making her think of witches brewing potions.

“This is larger than our apartment in the states,” she replied slowly taking in the beautiful antique appliances. The cabinets were handcrafted with granite counter tops and a copper sink.

“People pay small fortunes for this back home.”

Gwen laughed, green eyes sparkling. She was the same height as Krista and had her snow-white hair braided and pinned into a neat bun. The layers of wool made her appear heavier than Krista's one hundred and forty pounds.

“All the timber and stone was cut locally almost five centuries ago. That was when the first MacLeod's settled here and built this estate. Plumbing and electricity have been added over time

but the original structure has remained the same.

“This is perfect. I love it,” Krista said appreciatively. “Are the appliances in good working order?”

“Oh yes, they work quite well.”

“You’re not going to believe the rooms in this house.”

Sean Acheson emerged from another part of the manor he’d been exploring with Gwen’s husband, Darby. A huge smile lit up his brown eyes, reminding Krista of why she had been attracted to him in the first place.

He was a few inches taller than the women but nowhere near Darby’s six feet plus frame. Thanks to the rain his sandy blonde locks were unruly and his jawline was beginning to sport reddish brown stubble.

Perhaps with his inheritance eliminating their financial problems, they could begin to repair their marriage. Krista prayed that this really would be a new beginning for the two of them.

“Everything is in working order and we took the liberty of stocking the pantry with the basic necessities until you get settled and can get to the market,” Gwen began. “There are clean linens on the beds and all of the towels and bath cloths have been freshly laundered, as well. Would you like us to take the rest of your bags up to your room?”

“Thank you so much but you’ve done more than enough. I’m sure that we can get settled in,” Sean said.

“Well then,” Darby said, “we’ll say goodnight and let you get some rest. Gwen left our number taped on the refrigerator if you need anything.” The older man was tall, broad of shoulder, and a hint of gray dusted the temples of his reddish blonde hair.

Darby and Sean shook hands while Gwen wrapped Krista in a hug before the older couple took their leave. Krista knew it was silly but she couldn't help but feel like she'd just arrived home following a long absence.

The caretakers were warm and friendly. Even though she had not ventured out of the kitchen yet, Krista felt like she had finally found a piece of herself. One that she hadn't known was missing until walking into the manor. It was an odd feeling and she was afraid that she was going to wake up and find that it was just a dream.

Once Gwen and Darby were heading down the drive to their own cottage Sean grabbed Krista and spun her around in a playful bear hug.

"You are not going to believe the master suite. You could fit our entire apartment in there and still have room to spare. The king size bed looks like a child's and there's an enormous bathtub that we can both fit into comfortably and relax at the same time. It also has a walk-in shower with multiple heads and settings. Let's go try them out."

"Do you want to eat first?" Krista asked laughing. It was the first time in forever that they were together without being at each other's throats and she wasn't about to do anything to spoil it.

"No, let's get a shower, then we can eat. Trust me, we can both shower without having to take turns getting under the spray. We wouldn't have to touch at all. Would that make you happy?"

Krista didn't take the bait. She didn't want to fight and she didn't want to spoil the moment. Instead, she smiled and said, "Lead the way."

She followed Sean out of the kitchen grabbing their bag of toiletries. He led her down a short hallway then turned to ascend a winding staircase.

Portraits and paintings of various ages and people adorned the dark oak walls. Curiosity began to

override her fatigue. There were too many rooms waiting to be explored. The temptation to peek into each and every door intensified with every step she took. She struggled to squash the impulse, fully expecting Sean to have other types of explorations in mind.

At the top of the stairs, he turned and followed the left-hand hallway to the last door on the right. “Darby said that this has always been used as the master suite. If you don’t like it we can choose another room later. I just want you to know that I am glad you agreed to come to Scotland with me. I know that you’ve had your doubts about our marriage but I intend to make this work.”

“So do I,” she answered truthfully.

He was so much different when he was happy, easy to be with, fun, accommodating. Krista knew that no one was happy all the time. Sean was a different person altogether when he was in a bad mood, to the point of being frightening. She wished that she could get inside of his mind; just so she would have a better understanding of what influenced his moods and actions.

At times he could be so cold and hurtful that she feared for her safety. Later, once he calmed down she felt stupid for feeling that he was a threat. Still, she would feel better knowing how to read him better. It seemed that ridiculous things would set his temper off

“The floors could stand to be refinished,” he said breaking into her thoughts. “And the rugs are a bit faded. You are going to drool over the bath, though. Darby said that all the fixtures are original, except for the shower. That’s a modern addition.”

“Now you’re just dragging things out to make me squirm,” she teased, poking him in the ribs.

“Not yet, but I do plan to make you squirm and more before I let you out of this room,” a mischievous grin pulled at the corners of his mouth.

Krista’s body responded, anticipation tingling through her like electricity. She honestly couldn’t

remember the last time he'd made her feel this good.

“Prove it,” she said, pressing against him and slipping her arms around his waist.

He turned, pinning her against the doorframe, cupping her rear and pulling her against him. A wolfish gleam lit his eyes as he covered her mouth with his, slipping his tongue past her lips to tease her's.

Holding her he opened the door and backed her into the room. Gently kicking it closed, he maneuvered her across the floor to the massive four poster canopy.

In the time needed to reach the bed, clothes were discarded in a frenzy. Each desperate for bare skin, they rolled across the bed, limbs tangling and hands exploring. They touched, tasted, and teased.

Krista let go, absorbing the fire threatening to consume her. She couldn't remember the last time they had been together like this. It had been so long since she had felt any kind of connection with him. Now she felt as if she were drowning and he was the only source of air available.

They moved in sync, lost in each other and the sensations of their entwined bodies, finally reaching an earth-shattering crescendo.

Sean collapsed rolling to his back, Krista still wrapped in his arms, she ended up draped across his chest. Limbs heavy and breathing hard they lay there sated and content, listening to the rain pound against the leaded glass.

Eventually, Sean's breathing slowed and deepened. Krista drifted off to sleep wrapped in his arms, content and happier than she had been in a very long time.