

# CHAPTER

# 1

## MACDUFF'S RUN SCOTLAND

The portrait of Fiona MacDuff shone on the wall of the private gallery like a star lighting the darkness.

*Yes!*

Russell Davron stood for an instant focusing the beam of his flashlight at the painting, admiring the technique of the artist as well as the beautiful face of the woman he had managed to capture with such accuracy. The long, wavy red hair, the hazel eyes shining with such vitality and humor, the hint of recklessness in the curve of her lips. Fiona MacDuff had been dead for centuries, but she looked as if she could step out of that portrait and take life by storm, molding it to whatever she chose. It was no wonder that John MacDuff, Earl of MacDuff's Run, chose to keep her portrait here at the gallery of his primary residence rather than at one of his other estates. While researching the painting, Davron had wondered why MacDuff hadn't sold it during the years when he'd been tottering on the verge of bankruptcy. Of course, the painting was unsigned, which made it less valuable, but somehow Davron doubted if that had even made a difference to him. Because even now after MacDuff had managed to save his family fortunes, that portrait still had a place of honor in this castle. In good times and

poor, the earl hadn't been able to let his Fiona go. Davron was beginning to see why . . .

"Why the *hell* are you just standing there?" Stefano Luca hissed as he came up behind him. "Take the painting and get out of here. That relief sentry should be reporting in another ten minutes. He's going to wonder where the other guard has gone. If you've made trouble for me, you'll pay, Davron."

Davron felt a chill as he moved quickly toward the painting. He had a very good idea what payment Luca would demand if anything went wrong. Luca wasn't the same man who had recruited him all those years ago. Or perhaps he was and Davron had chosen to ignore it because it was safer and more profitable to close his eyes. "I only took a minute," he whispered. "I'm sure you disposed of that guard's body with your usual skill. We'll be gone long before they find him." He carefully took down the painting. He probably should have been more cautious. These days it wasn't safe to argue or displease Luca in any way when he was this on edge. It would be wise to try to soothe him. "And I was only appreciating our lovely *Fiona*. I'm sorry I argued with you when you told me that she was worth retrieving. I was thinking only of the monetary value." He didn't add that this was also what Luca was usually concerned about. "Your eye is obviously better than mine. You must have seen something else in her."

"Stop *talking*. Just get it out of here." Luca was stepping closer to the empty wall where the portrait had been hung. "Stash the painting in the truck. I'll be there in a minute. I just have one more thing to do here."

And Davron had an idea what that last thing would be. Luca was carrying the stainless-steel container he had lately started to bring to every job like this. But it was no longer empty as it had been in the truck. He jerked his eyes away from the canister. Well, what did he care? Luca might be a bit mad, but he'd furnished him with a fine living for years and Davron had learned to live with the ugliness and fear that went along with it. All Davron had to do was take care of business,

obey orders, disable all the security systems at the galleries, and act as a beast of burden when Luca made his choices. It seldom involved anything in the least violent. Luca liked to handle that himself.

As he had done tonight.

But Davron couldn't resist looking curiously over his shoulder as he moved quickly across the gallery toward the door.

Blood.

It was no surprise. There was usually blood these days, Davron knew. Luca liked to leave a signature. This time he had a brush in his hand and was dipping it into the container and then painting the wall with a huge bloody cross. It was probably the blood of the guard he'd stabbed outside the gallery. Davron had wondered why Luca had sent him ahead to grab the painting while he cut the man's throat.

He'd needed time to take the blood.

The cross was finished now, and Luca should be following him soon. But he wasn't coming. He'd reached into his pocket and was pulling out something and fastening it to the center of the bloody cross.

It was a photograph, Davron saw in surprise. This was a new addition to Luca's usual routine. Davron couldn't make out the details of the photo from across the gallery but it was definitely the photograph of a woman.

A woman with long, wavy hair that he thought might be as red as Fiona MacDuff's in this portrait he was carrying.

But Davron couldn't really be sure with all that blood flowing over the photograph...



KENDRICK CASTLE  
WALES

“Wake up, Jane.”

It was Michael's soft whisper, Jane MacGuire realized drowsily as

she opened her eyes. It was still dim in the tent, though she could see a slit of daylight at the opening. Her brother, Michael, was no longer curled up in his own sleeping bag across the tent but sitting next to her, fully dressed and with legs crossed. Was something wrong? Probably not. She could see that his chestnut-brown hair was a little ruffled, but those amber-colored eyes were sparkling with the boundless vitality usually present only in a ten-year-old. Still, better check. “Hi. You okay?”

“Sure.” He lit his flashlight and smiled cheerfully down at her as he saw that she was fully awake. “You were just restless so I thought I should wake you up. Did you have a bad dream?”

“I don’t think so.” She yawned, sat up, and looked at her watch. “I don’t remember if I did.” But it was six thirty and almost time to get up anyway. All the volunteers and students participating in this archaeological dig at the grounds of Kendrick Castle usually met down at the mess tent for breakfast at seven thirty. Michael always looked forward to mixing with them and finding out what they’d discovered the day before. It had become almost a ritual during the three weeks she and her brother had spent together sharing the work of the dig and the other experiences connected with it.

But that wasn’t supposed to happen today.

She frowned as she gazed at Michael’s jeans, blue T-shirt, and white tennis shoes. “Hey, why are you dressed to go to work? Your mom and dad are going to be here this afternoon. And after we have tea, they’re going to take you back to London for the weekend. Did you forget about it?”

He grinned mischievously. “Gee. Yeah, that’s what happened, Jane. I just can’t keep track of everything on my social calendar. It didn’t occur to you that that’s hours away from now and I can hang out with my friends and maybe do some digging?”

Of course he hadn’t forgotten. Michael never forgot anything. And sometimes what was behind that little boy’s sunny smile was not at all what it seemed. “Don’t be a smart aleck.” She reached

out and tousled his hair. “You wake me up and then make fun of me?” Her gaze was suddenly searching his face. “And, as I said, I don’t remember having a restless night.” She paused. “Did *you* have a nightmare, Michael?”

“I never have nightmares. Maybe I was a little restless.” His smile faded. “Because when I woke up, I got to thinking that it would be great if you could come back to your apartment with us instead of staying here at the dig for an extra day. Why couldn’t you do that?”

“Because I have work to do.” But she could do it if she chose. She had been very tempted. This opportunity to see Eve and Joe would be very brief, and then they’d be gone again. They had been in Maldara, in Africa, for the last four weeks because of Eve’s forensic sculpting project. Eve Duncan was one of the foremost forensic sculptors in the world, and this job had been both difficult and heartrending for her. Not to mention taking place in a country recently torn by civil war that was a hazard in itself. That had been the primary reason Joe Quinn, Eve’s husband, had insisted on putting his own career as a police detective on hold to stay with her. They were only returning for this weekend visit because they hadn’t liked the idea of leaving Michael for this long. Then they would have to return to Maldara for another two weeks for Eve to finish her reconstructions before they’d be able to stop by here again to pick up Michael and return home to Atlanta.

And then Jane would lose them all for heaven knows how long again, she thought glumly. Because her paintings were principally sold by a gallery in London, she’d rented an apartment there and didn’t get back to Atlanta nearly as often as she’d like. Which meant she didn’t get to spend nearly enough time with her family. Every minute with them was precious to her.

But Eve and Joe’s time with Michael was also precious after all those weeks away from him, she reminded herself. She ignored Michael’s pleading expression and forced herself to shake her head.

“I haven’t finished the sketches of the dig that I promised to give to Lady Kendrick to put in their advertising brochures. She *needs* them, Michael. Kendrick Castle is like dozens of other properties here in Wales that are struggling to keep from going bankrupt. Lady Kendrick’s made a big success of this architectural dig, but a little publicity will help her. My working just one more day on the sketches should do it.” She got to her knees and started gathering up her clothes to take down to the shower room in the common area of the dig. “I promise I’ll be there in London tomorrow. Besides, don’t you think that your mom and dad deserve to have you to themselves for at least one day? There’s a slight chance they might have missed you. After all, you’re their only son.” She added teasingly, “Though I don’t know why they’d ever miss a brat like you.”

He didn’t return the smile. “But they’ve missed you, too.” He frowned. “You do that all the time, Jane. You’re always telling me how important family is and then you take a step back as if you don’t belong. I don’t like it.”

“Don’t be silly. What an imagination.” She looked over her shoulder. “I just have a few things to—” She broke off as she saw his expression. She hadn’t realized that he had noticed her slight withdrawal every now and then. But she should have known that he would see and be bewildered by it. He was the most loving child she had ever known, and his instincts were remarkable. Okay, she had always tried to be honest with him and she wouldn’t let this be an exception. She turned to face him. “We are family and that *is* what’s important,” she said quietly. “But sometimes family members come together at different times and periods in their lives and it makes them different, too. I came to Eve and Joe when I was about your age and they took me in off the streets and gave me a home. But I’d already gone through too much to ever be a child again.” She met his eyes. “Yet that didn’t stop me from being able to be their friend and it didn’t change the love I felt for them. It just made it a little different.” She smiled gently. “But then you

were born and you gave your mom and dad the son they'd never had and me a brother. We all had you from the very beginning. Win-win situation."

He shook his head. "Not if you keep stepping back."

Good heavens, he was stubborn. "I just want them to enjoy every minute they have with you this weekend. Sometimes life seems to fly by, and your mom and dad work so hard. Your experience with them is totally different from mine, and I want you to all explore it for this little while." She smiled. "Hey, I can afford to step back and give my friends and family a little extra time together." She reached out and touched his cheek with her index finger. "When you've all given me so much. Understand?"

He nodded soberly. "I always understood, Jane." He made a face. "But all that does sound pretty sappy, and you're wrong. You should go with us. I don't want to leave you here alone."

"I won't be alone. Not all the volunteers go home on weekends. There will still be plenty of campers here."

He kept frowning. "It's not the same."

"No, it won't be. I'll miss you, but I might actually get some work done. And you'll have a terrific time with Eve and Joe tonight." She gave him a quick hug and jumped to her feet. "Tomorrow, I promise, I'll hog all the attention the minute I walk into that apartment." She undid the ties on the door and opened the tent to the sunlight. "Now let me get dressed so we can go down to the mess tent and have breakfast. Can't you see it's going to be a beautiful day?"

Michael looked outside at the ancient towering castle in the distance, then at the stone bridge over the brook that led to the slowly waking camp—a veritable tent city on the hills surrounding it. He slowly nodded. "Yeah, maybe." His brow was still wrinkled in thought. "Didn't you tell me that Seth Caleb was going to come and stay with us here for a few days? Why don't you ask him to come down today? He could keep you company until it's time for you to go to London tomorrow and maybe come with you."

She stiffened. Where on earth had that come from? Michael hadn't mentioned Seth Caleb since she'd told him a few weeks ago that he'd been forced to cancel his plans to visit. She hadn't told him that she'd been profoundly relieved to send a message to Caleb and tell him there was no need for him to come after all. She'd promised Eve she'd ask Caleb here to act as bodyguard to protect Michael from a kidnap threat that had not materialized. "You can't just drag Caleb down here from Scotland because it suits you, Michael. I know you like him, but he has a life."

"He'd come if you asked him." Michael was still looking out at the castle. "And I bet Mom and Dad would be glad to see him. Mom likes him a lot. She told me once that he'd saved her life when she was pregnant with me. He probably did all that really neat stuff he can do with controlling the blood flow in—"

"Caleb can be very appealing," she interrupted to stop the flood of words. She hadn't even known that Michael was aware of exactly how rare a gift Caleb had. She was sure that Eve had not gone into details to Michael about Caleb's rather bizarre abilities. Had Caleb told the boy himself? Possibly. You could never tell what Caleb would do. Or maybe Michael had just sensed it in his unique way, which was as unsettling as it was accurate. "But you don't impose on people because they're interesting to be around." She gave him a gentle nudge. "Go on down to the mess tent while I go shower and get dressed. I'll meet you in fifteen minutes."

"He wouldn't think you were imposing." Michael was moving reluctantly toward the door. "He really likes to be around you. I can tell. And he's lots of fun, don't you think?"

She looked away from him. "'Fun' is not exactly the word I'd use."

Blazing heat. Electricity. Sexual eroticism in all its forms. She could almost see Caleb standing naked before her. She drew a deep breath. *Don't think of him.* Difficult. When he always seemed to be—

Her phone was ringing. Saved by the bell. She glanced down at the ID.

Michael had stopped at the door and turned hopefully back to her. “Caleb?”

“Did you think wishing would make it so?” She made a face at him. “But at least you’re in the right country. It’s Lord MacDuff calling from MacDuff’s Run. I haven’t talked to him for over six months. I thought he was still in Spain.” She punched the ACCESS button. “Hello, MacDuff. When did you get home?”

“Just a little while ago. I flew in early this morning.” MacDuff’s tone was very casual. “I thought it was time I’d touched base with old friends and I thought of you. How are you, Jane?”

“Fine. I’ve spent the last few weeks at a dig here in Wales with my brother, Michael. Eve and Joe have been in Africa while Eve did several reconstructions, and I grabbed the chance to take Michael to this castle in Wales. We’ve been playing in the dirt and searching for ancient Roman artifacts. It reminded me a little of that dig we did at Cira’s castle in the Highlands.” She chuckled. “And it’s been almost as unproductive. We should have known your very extraordinary ancestress wouldn’t hide her treasure in such an ordinary place. The Roman troops here in Wales were much more boring, and we’re not expecting treasure. But searching for it has been great fun, and Michael and I both learned something from doing it.”

“That’s good. Even if those little bits of artifacts you probably found aren’t on the scale of our Cira’s treasure, knowledge rules, doesn’t it? So are you both going back to Atlanta soon?”

“Michael will be going back in a few weeks with Eve and Joe. Then I’ll have to go back to London and get ready to do an Italian tour. I spent most of the last six months painting in the Italian lake country. They seem to like my work in Rome.”

“They like you everywhere. I bought one of your landscapes in Portugal. Though I prefer your Scottish paintings.”

She chuckled. “Of course you do. You’re a Highlander.”

“Seth Caleb isn’t a Highlander, and he likes your Scottish landscapes, too.” He paused. “Is he in Wales with you?”

Curious . . . She was silent a moment before she answered, “No. I haven’t seen Caleb for months.” And this was not like MacDuff. He was a consummate sophisticate who would normally never be so rude as to display this curiosity. Particularly since Jane was sure she hadn’t succeeded in hiding from him how tumultuous those last months with Caleb had been for her. He knew her too well. “Is everything okay, MacDuff?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” he asked lightly. “I’m home here at MacDuff’s Run. It’s my favorite place in the world, and there’s no place I value more. Just wanted to check in with you. Take care, Jane.”

The next moment, she realized he’d pressed DISCONNECT.

Strange . . . She slowly lowered her phone. The call had been short and filled with questions. He’d done a good job of seeming casual, but she still felt as if she’d been interrogated.

“Is Lord MacDuff okay?” Michael asked.

“He said he is,” Jane said. “He likes being back at MacDuff’s Run.” But that had been a little unusual, too, that he’d called this early on the same day he’d gotten back to the estate instead of settling in and waiting until later in the day or even tomorrow. “He’s always loved the Run. I can’t blame him, I really like it, too. It’s like stepping back in time into a scene from *Rob Roy*.”

“But you’re not going there to see him, are you?” Michael asked quickly. “Who needs *Rob Roy*? You need to stay here. After we come back from London, we’ll just ask Caleb to come visit so that you won’t be bored. That will be much better.”

“What?” She stared at him. “You’re being weird. Where did that come from? I haven’t been bored for a minute since we’ve been here. I think we’re a great team.” She frowned. “I thought you thought so, too. Haven’t you been having a good time? Was I wrong?”

“No.” He was suddenly across the tent and sliding his arms around her waist, hugging her. “It’s been awesome. *You’re* awesome. I just didn’t want you to have to put up with a kid like me for the last couple of weeks you’re here. Like I said, Caleb is kind of fun.”

There was that word again. She immediately crushed down the previous vision it was bringing to mind. “I’m very happy to be putting up with you.” She cradled his face in her two hands to look down at him. “It’s always too long between visits for me.” She gave him another hug and then kissed the tip of his nose. “Caleb would just get in the way.”

“But you won’t go to Scotland to see Lord MacDuff?”

“No, I will not.” She chuckled. “For your information, I wasn’t invited. Not everyone wants my company, Michael. You’re stuck with me.”

“Good.” But he was smiling mischievously again as he backed away from her. “Caleb would want your company, though. And I bet he’d like to go to the dig with us and see how all those old Romans lived. He thinks stuff like that is cool, and he’d be great at it. I could call him for you.”

“Michael.” She was trying to hold on to her patience. “Believe me, Caleb would not find anything interesting about how those ancient Romans lived. And you might think he’s perfect, but he’s not great at everything.”

“Well, maybe not everything.” His lips were still twitching as he turned away. “Just a thought. I’ll see you at breakfast.” He ran out of the tent.

She shook her head ruefully as she reached for her toothbrush. Lord, she was going to miss him when he went back home to Atlanta. Yes, living with Michael was filled with all sorts of challenges, but he was also loving and brimming with curiosity and humor, and she was crazy about him.

But he was very persistent, and that persistence had fastened on Caleb this morning. She’d thought she’d squashed it before she got the call from MacDuff, but that only seemed to have revived it. Because he definitely hadn’t wanted her to go to MacDuff’s Run. Oh, well, not to worry. Once he was with Eve and Joe, maybe he’d forget everything but them.

No, he wouldn't. Sure, that was what an ordinary kid might be expected to do. But Michael didn't forget anything; he just filed it away and brought it forward when he found a use for it. As he'd done when he'd brought the conversation back to Caleb to try to keep her from going to MacDuff's Run.

It was odd that it had seemed to be so important to him . . .



MACDUFF'S RUN  
SCOTLAND

"She's fine," MacDuff said curtly as he turned to Scotland Yard inspector Rob Tovarh, who was standing at the gallery entrance. "And I could tell she knows nothing about this particular bit of nastiness." He gestured at the bloody wall. "I shouldn't have even let you talk me into calling her. Jane is too honest not to blurt something out if she'd had even a hint about the *Fiona* being missing. It's crazy to assume she'd have anything to do with the theft of my painting or the killing of that guard."

"You'll forgive me if I call your attention to the fact that she has very much to do with it, my lord," Inspector Tovarh said mildly. "You said that Jane MacGuire is the image of Fiona MacDuff, the woman in the painting." He nodded at the photograph pinned in the middle of the cross painted on the wall. "And her photo is hanging there instead of your painting. I'd argue that there had to be a reason why any killer would do that. It was only sensible to bring her into it." He shook his head. "But may I remind you I also asked you to bring her here to be interrogated?"

"She's in Wales with her younger brother. There's no reason to involve her," MacDuff said as he strode over to the wall where Fiona's portrait had previously hung. "The bastard was fond of blood, wasn't he?" he muttered as he gazed at the photograph. "Shock value?"

“Probably. But he definitely wanted you to make a connection between Jane MacGuire and the painting. What is she to you? A relation?”

“Friend. I’ve known Jane for years. She was only seventeen when I first set eyes on her.” His lips twisted. “Though I admit I’ve tried to claim her as a relative since that first meeting. I’d lived with that painting all my life, and after one look at Jane I knew that she was our kin. I even offered to send detectives to investigate and establish a claim for her.” He grimaced. “But Jane would have no part of it. She’d been adopted by people she loved when she was only ten and she said that she had no need of any other family.” He shrugged. “I was a bit insulted at the time. Not many people would turn down a connection to the MacDuffs.”

“Aye, very odd.” Tovarth nodded. “But people have a habit of changing as time goes on. There’s always the chance she might have later decided she wanted the portrait.”

“And killed my guard to get it?” MacDuff said impatiently as he whirled to face him. The inspector was a tall, well-groomed man in his thirties and had seemed to be both meticulously polite and efficient since he’d arrived here. But at the moment, even his politeness was annoying MacDuff. “Don’t be a fool. I would have given her that portrait if she’d asked. I owe her a hell of a lot more than that. I tell you she had *nothing* to do with this. I only agreed to make that call because I was afraid something might have happened to her. That photograph was obviously meant to send a message.”

“You might be right,” Tovarth said. “That blood on the photo does look to be a threat. But it’s my business to be suspicious of everyone until they’re eliminated.”

“As far as I’m concerned, Jane *is* eliminated. She was never a suspect.” MacDuff gave him a cool look. “Now drop it, Tovarth.”

“Certainly, sir,” the inspector said as he met MacDuff’s eyes. Then he abruptly shook his head. “Or perhaps not, my lord. I realize you’re very upset, and you’re a man who is accustomed to running

everything and everyone around him.” He smiled. “Perfectly natural. You’re a very important man, or the Yard would never have sent me here even though you requested we become involved. Earl of MacDuff’s Run, former war hero, influential mover and shaker in the halls of Parliament. You deserve to have your opinions listened to with respect. I will gladly do so.” He paused. “As long as our investigation doesn’t bring up any information regarding Jane MacGuire that the Yard might find disturbing. Then I will *not* drop it. I feel obligated to do my best to give you all you need from us.”

MacDuff frowned. “I’ve just told you what I need you to do. Jane’s not to be—” He broke off, and suddenly a warm smile lit his face. “You’re right. I’m being an overbearing ass. You’re only doing your job. That guard was with me for years and I’m angry that he was butchered. Plus that painting meant a lot to me. So does my friend Jane. Shall we start over?”

“Starting over would be a waste of time, my lord.” Tovarth gestured at the forensics team, who were streaming into the gallery. “You’ve already helped enormously by identifying the photo and calling Jane. As I said, I respect your opinion. I just wanted to point out that you might consider I’m paid to have opinions of my own.” He went on quickly, “However, if we’re to assume Ms. MacGuire might be a possible target, we should act accordingly. Does she have adequate protection? Perhaps I could assign a man to—”

“I’ll take care of it,” MacDuff said. He took a step closer to look at the photo. It was a casual close-up of Jane, a warm smile on her face, the wind blowing her red hair. Vibrantly alive and every bit as beautiful as Fiona in the painting she’d replaced. She was wearing a white shirt, and there was a lake in the background. How often had MacDuff seen her like that during the time when they’d been hunting for Cira’s treasure? Perhaps it had even been taken there at Cira’s Loch Gaelkar. It might narrow the field to find the sons of bitches who had done this if he could trace the location. He turned back to Tovarth. “You just concentrate on finding who killed my

guard Jack Binarth. He had a wife and family. You're Scotland Yard; use all those DNA databases and Interpol connections you have at your disposal to get me a name."

"I have every intention of doing that, sir." Tovarth hesitated, his gaze following MacDuff's to the photo. "But I'd prefer to also arrange protection for the lady. There's a certain savagery connected to the way the killer used that blood. You're sure that you have someone competent enough to handle it?"

"I said I did," MacDuff said curtly. He drew a deep breath. *Keep calm. You asked them for help, now use them.* Tovarth was now impressing him as being sharp, determined, and only wanting to do his job. And he was right: The killer had made sure of situating Jane's photo so it appeared to be almost drowning in blood. He had received a chill himself when he'd first seen it on his arrival this morning. "No problem, Tovarth." He was reaching for his phone as he spoke. "I have a man in mind who is most certainly capable of handling any threat to Jane MacGuire."

"Indeed? May I ask his name and qualifications?"

Firm, but polite, MacDuff thought. Tovarth wasn't going to give up his input on the case if he could help it. "His name is Seth Caleb. He's an old friend of Jane's." He smiled crookedly. "But I really wouldn't delve into his qualifications if I were you. He doesn't encourage curiosity."

"Seth Caleb?" Tovarth stiffened as he repeated the name, his eyes suddenly intent. "The Hunter? You're bringing *him* here?"

"You've heard of him?" MacDuff could see that he had. It shouldn't have surprised him. He was aware Caleb was probably known by most of the leading police and intelligence agencies in the world. And despite his passion for privacy, Caleb was a figure who caught the imagination and held it. The excitement in Tovarth's expression told its own story. "I take it Scotland Yard would consider him acceptable to watch over Jane?"

"I've heard of him. There are rumors that he sometimes works

with MI6.” He made a face. “Or that MI6 sometimes works with him. He has the reputation of liking to be in total control.” He added, “And I don’t know if my superiors would consider him to be acceptable or not. His reputation is . . . questionable. We do know he has had amazing success hunting down and disposing of murderers, felons, and terrorists who have caused us a good deal of trouble over the years. But some MI6 in authority regard Caleb as more of a renegade ninja type. I think it best that I stay and meet him, if you don’t mind.”

It wasn’t hard to guess that it was more pure curiosity than professional efficiency that was driving the request, MacDuff thought. Some of the details that Tovarth had heard about Caleb must have been damn intriguing to arouse that response. He shrugged. “I don’t care as long as you stay in the background. Though I don’t believe you’ll have a choice. We’ll both disappear for Caleb as soon as he sees that photo.”

“I’ll be discreet.” Tovarth paused, his glance sliding away from MacDuff’s. But after a short pause, he suddenly asked, “Is there any truth in what they say about him? There are a few ridiculous stories circulating at MI6 that he has some kind of weird psychic control over the blood flow of anyone near him. That he can even induce fatal heart attacks if he chooses. Foolish, right?”

MacDuff just looked at him.

Tovarth added quickly, “I know that most countries and law-enforcement agencies are exploring their own psychic investigative programs, but I’m afraid I’m too pragmatic to accept it. Still, it’s interesting. Particularly since there’s another rumor I’ve heard that Seth Caleb can do some other rather bizarre mental hijinks with changing perception. Some of the MI6 agents actually seem to be very wary of him.” He paused. “Have you heard about that?”

Anything MacDuff answered would only whet the inquisitiveness that was nagging the inspector. “One always hears a good many stories about Caleb. You can be sure quite a few of them are true.

Why don't you ask him?" Then as MacDuff began to dial Caleb, he had second thoughts. His own coming meeting with Seth Caleb might be explosive enough without bringing another element into the mix to annoy him. "No, don't ask him. That would definitely be a mistake. He might be in the mood to demonstrate. And I've changed my mind, it's best you don't even stick around to meet him."



11:45 A.M.

"Where is it?" Seth Caleb slammed the door of his Range Rover and started across the courtyard toward the stone front steps, where MacDuff was waiting. "Why didn't you call me before this?"

"You knew three hours after I did. I was in Madrid and had to fly home in the middle of the night when the police notified me," MacDuff said grimly. "Have a little courtesy. I didn't have to call you at all. I was very tempted not to." He turned on his heel and entered the house. "And where do you think it would be?" He gestured down the hall. "The gallery. The photo on display isn't the same as the copy I emailed you. You won't find it quite as gory. The inspector insisted on having forensics take the original to headquarters to test it. So I had them make me a copy."

But Caleb was already striding down the hall, intense, totally focused. "You knew you had to call me. You knew what I'd do if you didn't."

He was almost giving off sparks, MacDuff thought. But when didn't he appear to be on the verge of an explosion? MacDuff had always found him amusing, interesting, and ultra-complicated when he wasn't near that volatile flashpoint that could be triggered in a heartbeat. After he reached that point, he was still interesting but no longer amusing and completely deadly. Today MacDuff had no intention of containing that volatility even if he could. "Yes, I didn't

need you barging into my home and disturbing my staff when you heard about it. They're already upset about Jack Binarth's death. He was a good man." He watched Caleb as he entered the gallery and halted in front of the bloody cross. "And he didn't have to die. The medics said he'd already been knocked unconscious before his attacker cut his throat. It was either a warning...or the killer just wanted the blood for his damn exhibit." He leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms, his gaze on Caleb. He was staring at the photograph, and MacDuff could see by the taut line of Caleb's shoulders and back that he was getting very close to that explosion. Push him a little bit more. "Which do you think? You're an expert in that area. I thought I'd get your opinion."

"Are you enjoying this, MacDuff?" Caleb's voice was silky smooth. "I wouldn't advise you to go down that road. Unless you're accusing me of doing this?" He suddenly swung to face him. His dark eyes were glittering, his lips tight. "And I thought you knew me better than that. I'd expect to hear that stupid bloodlust bullshit from someone less intelligent, but you've known me long enough to realize that's not who I am. Why are you trying to make me angry?"

"Because *I'm* angry," MacDuff said harshly as he straightened. "I don't like what happened here last night, and I don't like it that Jane was showcased as a part of it. And the minute I saw how that bastard used that blood, I thought about you. Hell, yes, I know you're no vampire wannabe, but I also know you have that bizarre talent of controlling the blood flow of anyone near you. With a result that can be either healing...or fatal."

"Then I'd hardly need a knife to cut that guard's throat, would I?" Caleb asked mockingly. "Why be angry with me?"

"Because Jane told me that several years ago your sister Maria was killed by some weird cult that was trying to duplicate that talent you possess in such abundance. They thought it might be an inherited talent and drained her of her blood. Jane said that you went on the hunt for the members of that cult and destroyed them." His eyes

were narrowed on Caleb's face. "And I'm wondering if they were all destroyed. I was thinking that perhaps someone who knew about your relationship with Jane might have thought putting pressure on her would be a way of getting to you. What do you think?"

"I doubt it." Caleb added harshly, "For Pete's sake, do you think I haven't been monitoring that cult to make certain it never becomes active again? I have another sister, Lisa, who could be targeted. There's no way I'd let anyone get near her. There's been no sign of those snakes raising their heads again."

"Doubt?" MacDuff repeated. "But you're not sure?"

"No, dammit, I'm *not* sure," he said fiercely. His eyes went back to the photo on the wall. "I'm not sure of anything right now. But it's not likely, and I'll make sure. However, I think we should look in another direction. It's much more likely that Lisa would be targeted than Jane if that was the purpose. After all, Lisa is a descendant of the Ridondo family. That's why they chose to kidnap Maria. They evidently thought I might be too much of a challenge." His lips twisted. "So think of another motive. Providing that you didn't just bring me to your palatial estate to accuse me of killing your old retainer. I don't believe that was your sole motivation."

"I didn't accuse you, I was just questioning. It seemed a logical supposition. I'm still thinking about it. I admit I'm relieved that Lisa is more likely to be a victim of those ghouls than Jane." He gestured at the photo. "But that's a clear threat. I *won't* have anything happen to Jane. I thought you might feel the same way." He paused. "Unless your relationship has definitely faded into the horizon. She told me several months ago that she wasn't seeing you any longer."

"Did she?" Caleb's voice was noncommittal. "I admit she's having a few problems with me. But situations have a way of changing, don't they? I drop in on her occasionally to remind her of that." He turned away from the photograph. "And this situation has just had a radical change. It's time I reminded her again." He stared MacDuff in the eye. "Instead of worrying about a cult, we should wonder

why that painting was taken. I understand that it had an intimate connection both to Jane and to your family. Did Fiona MacDuff really look exactly like her?”

“Yes.” His brows rose. “You’ve never seen it?”

“No. Jane has always been a little wary and had a tendency not to permit me too close to that part of her life. Though she did make the attempt at one time.” He smiled wryly. “So I can hardly blame her if I scared her off. But I admit I did want to see it. I called your agent last year and told him if the painting ever went on sale, I’d meet any price.”

“You wanted to own it?”

“It was Jane.” He shrugged. “Everything about her . . . interests me. Yes, I wanted to own it.”

And not only the painting, MacDuff thought. Caleb’s voice was cool, but the intensity in his expression was electrifying. “Past tense?”

“No, not past tense. When I get it back from those thieves for you, maybe you’ll be so grateful that you’ll be willing to sell it to me.” He gave one more glance at the photo over his shoulder as he headed down the hall toward the front entrance. “I’ll let you know about the cult. Keep me informed if you get any other information from the police. You won’t have to worry about Jane. I’ll take care of her.”

“I talked to her only this morning. Hadn’t you better ask me where she is?”

“No, I know where Jane is,” Caleb said. “I always know where she is.”

The front door slammed behind him.

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Caleb was pulling out his phone and dialing his sister, Lisa Ridondo, the minute he got in his Range Rover.

He’d be lucky if she answered him, he thought. And if she did,

she'd probably only do it to make him suffer. Well, let her get her pound of flesh. She deserved it. He'd been ignoring her calls and messages for the last few months and she'd been totally bewildered. She'd gone from not understanding, to hurt, to anger, to bitterness, and then back again. There wasn't the slightest doubt she thought she'd been treated abominably.

And she was right, he thought wearily. And this conversation might not ease the pain he'd caused, nor the pain he'd felt himself.

Providing she even answered his call.

She picked up the call on the next ring. "You son of a bitch." Her voice was shaking with anger. "What were you trying to do to me?"

"I told you that I would have to take steps if you didn't make me that promise. It was necessary."

"The *hell* it was. You cut me off. You've always been there for me. You're my *brother*. Ever since I was a little kid, I always knew if I reached out you'd be there. You taught me everything I needed to know. Whatever went wrong, you'd make it right. Then you just . . . left me."

"And now I've taught you the final lesson," he said softly. "That it doesn't go two ways. I could tell that you were going to try to step in and follow in my footsteps and practice a little control of your own. That wasn't acceptable, Lisa."

She was silent. "It is if I say it is. I'm not a child any longer, Caleb."

"No, you're a willful, intelligent, beautiful young woman who causes me no end of trouble. Do you think I liked not being able to contact you? I hoped that we might come to an understanding."

"Because you knew how much it would hurt me when you did this."

"Yes, you weren't listening."

"And you had to get your own way."

"That was definitely high on the agenda."

She was silent. "I *hated* you."

“I don’t doubt it.”

“You hurt me.”

“Yes. I knew I would.”

“All you had to do was just let me help you a little. You never let me give you anything. It’s not as if I do that kind of thing all the time. Would that have been so bad?”

“Extraordinarily bad. Because you like Jane very much, and you’ve told her you consider her your good friend. You would have been outraged if anyone had tried to do that to you.”

“Maybe not.”

“Lisa.”

“How do you know?” she said defiantly. “You haven’t seen me in almost a year. Of course, that wouldn’t have mattered if you’d just contacted me, dammit.”

“It mattered. But it’s not as if I didn’t know what you were doing. You were down in the Caribbean working with Margaret Douglas at Summer Island. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yes. It was interesting working with the dogs.” She was silent. “Okay, I might have felt guilty about Jane.” She rushed on, “But I might not. Because I do like her very much, but I love you, Caleb. It could have been worth it.”

“Past tense?”

“Unless I change my mind.”

“Not good enough.”

“I promise,” she said grudgingly. “And that hurt, because I’m definitely the injured party here. I would never have done anything like that to you, Caleb.”

“No, because I am the son of a bitch you called me when you picked up my call,” he said wearily. “You’re lucky I haven’t hurt you before this.”

“Bullshit. You’d never really hurt me. I was just angry.” She added quickly, “But don’t do it again.”

“I’ll certainly try to restrain myself,” he said mockingly. “Now

tell me if you've done anything that would intrigue me since you've been with Margaret. Met anyone new or interesting?"

"No."

"Any side trips?"

"Jamaica."

"Why?"

"Because I'd never been." She paused. "Why are you asking me questions? You're never one for chitchat."

"But I've been without your chitchat for too long. Perhaps I missed it."

"Perhaps," she said slowly. "And why did you call me out of the blue when you let me go for weeks without a word?"

"Same answer." Time to end the conversation. Lisa was getting too curious. "But I'll be happier when you're not island-hopping in the Caribbean. I'd prefer you to stay closer to me."

"Then you'll have to prove it by picking up the telephone or reaching out to me. You can't have it all ways, Caleb."

"I can try." He chuckled. "I did miss you, Lisa. Think about abandoning the puppies at that clinic and coming to see me. I'll call you next week."

"You'd better."

"Count on it." He pressed DISCONNECT.

It was the truth. He had missed her terribly. But he would never have made the move to call her until he was sure she'd had enough time to realize that he had meant what he said. Lisa was emotional, passionate, and usually sure she knew what was best for everyone. It had been too dangerous to take a chance when she'd focused on Jane. He hadn't been absolutely certain that this wasn't still too soon. But he'd had to check on what she was doing and if there was anyone suspect in her life right now. Plus add a few words that might lure her back where he could keep an eye on her.

He was relieved that everything appeared to be safe and entirely normal where she was located right now with Margaret Douglas.

Lisa was very smart, and he'd made certain she could protect herself if a threat presented itself. He'd taught her that she might never be completely secure after her sister had been murdered, but he'd decided there had been no need to frighten her by telling her about a possibility that might have nothing to do with the monsters who had killed Maria. Yet he'd felt as if he had to cross every *t* after MacDuff had been so obsessed about the blood.

The blood.

Not that Caleb wasn't obsessed; the blood had been both his heritage and his curse all his life. It had defined who he was and what he could be. But he wouldn't allow it to dominate him... or anyone he cared about.

So think, get moving. For the time being forget about the blood and go down another direction, as he'd recommended to MacDuff.

He drove out of the courtyard and headed south toward Wales.

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#### KENDRICK CASTLE

"I'm ready." Michael grinned at Jane as he tore into the tent and turned around in front of her. "All clean and spiffy so that Mom won't think you're letting me get away with anything while she's gone."

"And early." Jane glanced at her watch. "We have another forty-five minutes before we're supposed to meet your mom and dad at that tearoom. I'm impressed."

"Well, the guys got bored down at the dig, so I thought I'd come back up here and hang out with you." He plopped down on his bedroll. "So could you tell me why Caleb wouldn't like to dig for those Roman artifacts with us? He likes doing cool stuff like that."

Caleb, again. She'd hoped the past hours with his friends would have distracted him. But evidently he'd only taken a deep breath

and gone straight back to Caleb. “Because Caleb comes from a very old family who lived in northern Italy many centuries ago. It was a small village called Fiero, but the family was pretty interesting themselves.” She added dryly, “However, I doubt if Caleb would think the ancient Romans had anything to teach his family or him.”

“Why not?” Michael’s gaze was narrowed on her face. Then he snapped his fingers, immediately jumping to a conclusion. “That neat blood thing he can do?” He continued eagerly, “Could they all do it? Was it like having the same color eyes?”

She should have known that she couldn’t just hint vaguely at anything with Michael. He had gone exactly where she didn’t want him to go. Okay, be honest, but back up and try to get out of it. “A little bit like that. But it wasn’t every member of the family and eventually it was only passed down very infrequently.” She smiled. “Satisfied? Now can we talk about something besides Caleb?”

Michael was studying her. “Why don’t you ever want to talk about him, Jane?” he asked quietly. “He used to be around a lot when I came to visit. I think you’re like Mom and Dad and not telling me everything because you think it might worry me. Why would it worry me? I like Caleb.” He paused. “And I think it’s really important that you tell me about him. You said he wasn’t perfect, but he doesn’t have to be. I think maybe being perfect would be boring. He’s just . . . Caleb.”

She stared at him in shock. Of course Michael had noticed everything about the cautious way he was treated by her and the rest of the family. She supposed she should be grateful he hadn’t zeroed in on her evasions and half-truths before this. How the hell was she supposed to handle this confrontation? “Well, he’s not boring. But as you already know, he’s a bit unusual. Why is it this important to you to know any more?”

“I’m not sure, but it is, Jane.” His brown eyes were fixed intently on her face. “And usually when I feel like this, there turns out to be a reason.”

And how was she to know what that reason was when everything about Michael had always seemed to be a mystery in itself? All she could do was play this one by ear. “Okay.” She dropped down on the campstool beside his bedroll. “You’re clearly fascinated by Seth Caleb, so I’ll give you his entire story as far as I know it. Though I’m not sure that anyone really knows everything about Caleb. He never talks about himself. What I’ve learned was through his sister, Lisa.” Her lips twisted. “And if you think perfection is boring, I guarantee that neither Caleb nor any of his family tree was ever boring. So sit back and I’ll tell you what I know about him. Then you decide for yourself.” Was she doing the right thing? He was a kid. No, he was Michael. Just obey her instincts and hope for the best.

“Before the Ridondos settled in Fiero, they lived in Spain at the compound of the Devanez family. The members of the family were known to have had various psychic talents, like Caleb, that made them very unpopular with their neighbors. So unpopular that they had to flee from Spain to keep from being turned over to the Inquisition for witchcraft. But even after the Ridondo branch moved to Italy, they decided that in order to survive they had to protect themselves from informers to the church by terrifying all the villagers into silence. Two of the brothers Ridondo decided to do that by using their so-called blood arts to make them seem to be demons of darkness. It was easy for them since all they had to do was concentrate on the death-and-pain side of the gift, and not the healing.” She glanced at Michael to see how he was taking all this. No fear. He only appeared totally fascinated. “And Caleb said that maybe they came close to becoming demons in the beginning. The power of the blood talent might have been too much for them to resist. But they must have gotten sick of all that blood and terror after a while, and they moved from Fiero Village into a castle in the country. Time passed, new generations came on the scene, the Ridondos became wealthy and respectable, the blood talent became something to hide. Simple enough, because the talent appeared only rarely in family

members as time went by. But of course that blood taint couldn't be entirely erased. Rumors occasionally surfaced from their old home in the village about the dark past of the Ridondos and their reign of terror. Foolish, exaggerated stories about wizards and vampires and that power that had terrified those villagers for decades."

"Silly," Michael said, disgusted. "They should have known it was only a really cool talent. Bad or good, that was all it was."

"Well, that wasn't the popular opinion even among family members," Jane said. "There were problems through the years. I don't know exactly what they were. It had something to do with the fact that it seemed the physical blood talent was often accompanied by a mental ability to twist and alter the truth, change opinions and perceptions. Evidently that could be even more difficult to accept for anyone in the family who didn't possess it themselves. After a while any child who was born with the blood talent was considered an outcast, a monster to be shunned by the family. Caleb himself was forced to change his name when his parents sent him away to be raised by his uncle in Scotland. He was only a few years older than you at the time." She added quietly, "Not everybody in the Ridondo family thought it was as cool as you do, Michael."

"Stupid." His brow wrinkled in a frown. "So they thought Caleb was some kind of a monster? You know he isn't. Anyone can see that."

"Can they?" She glanced at him. "I just told you a story about his family that was rather terrible in some ways. I wasn't sure I should give you all those details. I didn't want to frighten you." She paused. "Do you believe there are monsters out there, Michael?"

"I know there are monsters." His voice was sober as his gaze shifted to look out the door. "I *know* it. Maybe not like wizards or vampires, but people who are real, real bad inside. That's why there have to be people who can fight them. And I know that Caleb isn't a monster. So maybe he has to be one of the others . . . someone who can kind of . . . balance things."

“You have a good deal of faith in him.” She smiled faintly. “I guarantee that Caleb would laugh if he heard you describe him like that. More of a dragon-fighting knight than a monster?”

He nodded. “But you don’t think he’s a monster, either.”

“No, of course I don’t. Not for a minute. He’s just . . . unusual and definitely marches to his own drummer. But then I’ve seen how often he goes to hospitals to help heal patients when no one else can do it.” She grimaced. “Not that he’d ever let anyone know if he could help it.”

“And that makes you angry. You seem to be angry with him most of the time.” His gaze shifted back to her. “Why?”

“Personal reasons that I have no intention of discussing with you,” she said firmly. “There’s such a thing as allowing people to maintain their privacy. I gave you what you wanted from me today, now drop it.”

“Okay.” He was smiling mischievously at her. “I’ll figure it out.”

She was afraid he would, but she hoped it wouldn’t be for another few years. “But, truth or fantasy, all this talk about Caleb’s family has nothing to do with you. I only told you what you wanted to know about Caleb because it always seemed you wanted to find out everything concerning him. The only important thing you have to remember is that Caleb regards you as his friend.”

“I know he does, Jane.” His smile faded as he added absently, “But maybe that’s not the *most* important thing.”

“It’s all we’re going to discuss at the moment,” she said firmly as she stood up and pulled him to his feet. “It’s time we left to go meet your mom and dad. Stop frowning, you know we’re going to have a fantastic time.”

“I was just thinking . . .” There was a sudden bounce in his step as he moved quickly toward the door. “Of course we are. Being with Mom and Dad always makes everything wonderful . . .”