

## CHAPTER ONE

Slowly, the crackled brown doors of Alladale screeched closed behind them. Outside, the day was sunny and bright but still cool. It radiated endless possibilities. The handsome couple walked away with their heads bowed. They gently clutched hands. The brown-haired woman looked at the chocolate-eyed man who walked beside her and smiled. She turned for a last look at the mansion that held such a long and illustrious history. The man with dark eyes and red hair patted her arm as they strolled away. He did not turn for a second look because he was relieved they were leaving.

Briefly, Caroline Emma Corbett Reid longingly remembered another set of chocolate eyes that belonged to a blond-haired man. For a moment, a lump rose in her throat. She felt accustomed now to swallowing that pain. Quietly, she groaned. Max continued to rub her arm just as Thomas had once done. She hastily gazed at the lake that she and her husband had loved so dearly. Now, only the thought of her beloved husband lying at the bottom of it came to mind. There was no more love for this place where they previously had celebrated life with toasts of champagne. She would never celebrate in this home again because it now belonged to a new couple. The Dargies had been their best friends for the five years they had owned this proud and haughty house. She sighed wearily.

"It won't be long, my dear Caroline, until we are home." Her companion smiled with understanding, and she considered his words. *He has become his brother, my Thom.* She lowered her head so that he couldn't see a tear slide slowly down her right cheek. There didn't appear to be a reason to inflict her never-ending pain on him. He carried enough of his own.

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Inside Alladale, the Dargies slowly closed the door of their new home then kissed. Sadness filled the room, but the tall man with red hair whispered, "How about a glass of champagne, my love?"

He motioned to the butter-colored chair by the window. The woman, with long, shiny red hair, remembered many other champagne toasts in this room over the years. Many

such memories rushed through her head. As if they stood before her, she pictured Thomas with Caroline Reid and Duncan Abernathy. Those three were her best friends for many years. That is until Thomas and Duncan died at the hands of two murderers, and Caroline could no longer stand to live here.

On this sunny early spring day, life thrived. Slowly, the purple-striped crocus began to burst open under the window. Many such flowers were rising steadily from the frozen ground of Scotland. The young red-haired woman, Molly, hung her head. A single tear slipped down her cheek. Her beloved fiancé Malcolm, a mountain of a man, quietly approached her. He wrapped his hefty arms around her small, graceful body.

She sighed. "I love Alladale, ya know? It's just that I see them everywhere. This window is *their* spot. How can we raise a salute to our new life in the same space where they daily did the same? How can we assume *their* roles? Alladale, this ancient place, she knows the rightful owners are Caroline and Thomas Reid. We can't replace them. Alladale will never allow us happiness." Molly waved her right hand in the dazzling window space, indicating the room that featured creamy beiges and greens. She looked heartbroken.

Caroline had tried to remain in the home her husband adored, but it was too painful. After a few weeks, she sold her mansion to the Dargies and flew back to Charleston.

Malcolm looked deeply into the deep green eyes that he adored. He chose his words carefully because they were necessary. "We are not replacing them, Molly, my love. No, we are celebrating two great lives. Lives of two people whom we once loved. Wouldn't they demand that we do this? Was there ever gloom and doubt around them? No, they were shining stars. It is our place to ignite the space here, at Alladale, with happiness. That's what they would want. Aye? The love they shared for each other and this great place, well, it remains. I feel it. Do ya not? Two of our friends gave their lives for this, although our Caroline still lives."

He smiled heartily at his young love while with his left hand, his gesture swept the whole room. She was twenty years younger. Never in his life had he loved anyone like he loved Molly.

She looked up at him. "Aye, but there was a time, at the end. Ya know what I mean? When the village turned on our friends, and we were all they possessed here in Scotland. Caroline and Thom suffered great doubt and sadness during those last days. They weren't always rock stars willed with limitless joy. They, too, bore their pain. I can hardly stand to consider their final days, especially those of Caroline. That bastard! What manner of

evil torments one as loving and kind as she? How could he kill Thomas and throw his body into *that* lake?" With great emotion, she gestured toward it. "Malcolm, I love ya more than life. Although ya have always stood by me, how can I possibly fill the shoes of one as noble as Caroline? I don't believe that I can."

Malcolm handed a glass of bubbling cold champagne to her. Slowly, Molly dabbed her eyes as she accepted it. Still, she stared, deeply troubled, at the lake. The ice-cold liquid slid down her throat too easily. Sadly, she contemplated the many cocktails the four of them had shared in the past. Right here, in this spot, they had toasted a wonderful day or a remarkable sunset. Many things that at the time seemed insignificant.

Currently, all of those things flashed in her mind, but the fact remained, their best friends were gone. When all the other villagers turned their backs on the Reids, she and Malcolm stood beside them. Few locals would now want to celebrate with *them* because they had chosen to side with the couple from the US. Yes, even the young boy, who was one of their own, Duncan, had been snatched from their exclusive group by that same madman. She shuddered at the thought of what had occurred that day.

"Are ya cold, my love?" Her husband grabbed a cream-colored cashmere blanket from the beige chair and spread it softly around her. Caroline's scent wafted from it.

"Malcolm, I smell her perfume. It's as if she is standing beside us. Do ya remember when Caroline said that she thought of Alladale as a jealous mistress? Do ya think it's true? Is she *your* mistress now, Malcolm?" Molly raised her emerald eyes to stare at him.

Such heavy thoughts from his fiancée weren't what he wanted on this day of new beginnings. Once they had purchased the enchanting property named Alladale, Malcolm thought they would experience immediate happiness. That only joy and peace would surround them. His love was destroying their dream with these unnecessary remembrances of dead friends. Yes, three of their best had departed. Thom and Duncan had met tragic and horrible deaths. Caroline had returned to Charleston, South Carolina. He and Molly had benefitted from the horrendous actions of others, but wasn't it he, Malcolm, who killed their friends' tormentors? Malcolm believed that he deserved this place, which he once lusted to own.

"My dearest, we must move on. It isn't that I'm calloused or hard, but this place is a difficult, heartless mistress, and she is mine. I believe this grand dame would hate ya standing here on a lovely spring day lamenting those who have left or been taken. Ya must consider the lives of the hundreds who fought to control her throughout a long and tortured past. All are gone! No one can, nor will they *ever*, control this place. Alladale,

well, she's Alladale." He accidentally poured a tiny amount of cold champagne down Molly's back when the small glass tipped in his large hand when he reached for a kiss. She laughed softly.

"That's one way to draw me back to the present. Did ya do that on purpose?"

Malcolm tagged her left arm and nimbly ran outside while she followed right behind him. Even though the morning was bright and sunny, the temperature was brisk. He ran toward the lake. The blue waters shone clear on a day without wind. When he realized his folly, he quickly stopped. Together, they stood before the very spot where the authorities had removed his best friend's frozen body. Now, they both shuddered.

"See, Malcolm, there's no escaping Thom, Caroline, and Duncan. What were we thinking? Must we be forced to face each day remembering those we once loved and considering how far short we fall from them? No matter how hard we try, we will never meet their standards. We'll be a constant disappointment to Alladale. Maybe we should sell it."

"Ya stop it right now, Molly. I'll *never* sell Alladale. I will not entertain such an idea. For over five years, I have dreamed of someday owning this land and mansion, controlling this proud and pompous soul that dominates the land here. No, I'll never sell Alladale."

Again, Molly gently trembled as she considered his words. *Does he mean that he chooses his mistress over me?* With great sadness, she bowed her head. Malcolm could never take back those words from the still air that insulated them.

Together, they returned inside. Maybe the couple had suffered beyond their endurance?

