

BLOODLINES

Touch Not the Cat

A Genealogy Mystery Novel



**McKerley
& Schippers**



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by Would You Believe That Publishing

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This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

www.touchnotthecat.com

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Thomas McKerley & Ingrid Schippers
July 22, 2011, The Hague, the Netherlands



PROLOGUE

Monday 13 September 2010, 11:00 am, the woods of Wake Forest, North Carolina, USA

“Cameron!” bellowed Detective Steve Hicks of the Raleigh Police Department, his deep voice dampened by the thick foliage of Wake Forest.

“We know you’re here, give yourself up!”

The lean five-nine policeman in his mid-thirties moved like a hunter, taking slow deliberate steps, totally alert to his surrounding environment.

“We don’t want anyone getting hurt,” he tried again.

Hicks and his partner, Homicide Detective Cathy Stewart, were carefully picking their way through the woods some twenty yards apart, completely on their guard, their semi-automatic pistols held firmly in front of them.

The two cops were dressed in casual civilian clothes, with regulation arm and leg coverings, which served them well in the rough forest terrain.

A tip that Bobby Cameron had been seen camping out among the trees of Wake Forest had made Hicks and Stewart investigate further. It had taken them only a few minutes to find a small canvas tent lazily pitched beneath some trees, just off the edge of the woods. The tent was littered with empty energy drink cans, candy wrappers and a cheap sleeping bag.

“Great,” Detective Stewart had muttered. “Nothing like a vicious criminal on a sugar high.”

Now both detectives were inching their way forward over the moss and fallen leaves. The only sound they could make out was the gentle rain dropping on the thick, umbrella-like foliage above them.

“Cath!” Hicks suddenly whispered, instantly seizing Cathy’s attention. He gestured with his index finger that she should circle a little further to the right. Cathy nodded in agreement. Her gun felt a lot heavier now and her palm was starting to sweat. Focusing on her breathing to stay calm, she continued to take slow small steps forward. Her eyes squinted, rapidly scanning as much ground as she could cover. Cathy had never shot anyone dead, she wondered if that was about to change.

Police sirens sounded in the distance. Cathy had wisely called for backup when they’d discovered the tent a few minutes ago. She hoped this was extra troops and smiled at the comforting feeling it gave her. She knew Cameron was one evil son of a bitch. Three days ago he had held up two gas stations in Raleigh. At one of them, he’d killed two people: a station attendant and a sixteen-year-old kid who had been driving alone for the first time with his new driver’s license and just happened to be there.

“Drop the gun, bitch,” commanded a soft voice behind her. “Drop it now.”

Cathy froze. With a slow deliberate movement, she held the gun away from her body and tossed it a few feet to her right.

“Okay lady, turn around and face me. Nice ‘n slow, you’re doin’ swell.”

Cathy turned, trying desperately to control her shaking body. She could feel her stomach churn and felt the miserable urge to relieve her bowels. *Come on now, Cat*, she thought in an attempt to keep herself together, *they never show cops shitting their pants in crime series*.

It was the first time in her ten-year career that she had felt the warning fear so strongly of something about to go very wrong.

Cameron was kneeling behind a fallen tree, pointing his sawn-off shotgun directly at her. A broad-shouldered man in his late twenties with a neck almost the width of his jaw, an ugly crooked nose protruding from his face, he resembled his mug-shot exactly. Looking at him with as much indifference as she could muster, Cathy noticed Cameron was as nervous as she was. The single-barrel gun in his hands was shaking and his control seemed to waver.

“Step closer, I wanna see more of you,” he ordered.

Cathy obeyed and walked slowly towards him. The muscles on his thick arms were straining to break free from the sleeves of his T-shirt and she noticed a purple tattoo on his right forearm.

“That’s far enough,” he growled. Cathy was now some five yards from him and, falling back on her training, did exactly what she was told, but very slowly, fighting to buy time.

“Too bad we don’t have more time to play,” Cameron slurred sadistically.

Where the hell is Hicks? Cathy thought, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

“Two against one ain’t fair, lady. Time to even things up. Sure hope you believe in Jesus.”

In an instant there was a loud crack. Simultaneously, Cathy saw the red flame of the shotgun and felt the thud on her chest.

The spattering of lead pellets tore into her flesh, knocking her clean off her feet, landing her against a nearby tree. *Bang!* She heard a second shot and wondered if she had been hit again, but it all transcended into a haze.

Slumped against the tree trunk, she looked at her chest, dumbfounded. The white blouse quickly started to turn scarlet and she could smell the singed cloth. She stared unbelievably. The surreal sound of Steve's alarmed voice came floating in from a distance, while she watched a butterfly land on her knee. *How beautiful and delicate*, she thought, observing the dark red wings with black edging. *So calming*. Then she noticed she was having difficulty breathing.

At that moment Catherine Stewart knew she was going to die.



CHAPTER 1

**Wednesday 9 September 1885, Ballindalloch Castle,
Banffshire, Scotland**

“Why did your mother die, Alex?” The eight-year-old girl looked directly at Alexander Stewart, her blond curly hair dancing around her head in the mid-afternoon sunlight.

The way she posed the question made the boy, who was only two years older than the inquisitive girl, feel especially awkward, almost angry. It was anger however, he was not allowed to express. For even though he and the girl shared the same nursery now and were brought up in the same house, there were many things the girl was allowed to ask him, that he was not allowed to ask her in return.

“Perhaps you mean to ask *how* she passed away, Miss Katherine,” he said evenly, hardly able to contain his feelings of hurt. The pain of his mother's passing was still vivid. Every morning he missed her soft, warm fingers going through his curly black hair to wake him up.

“Oh, I know *how* she passed away,” the girl replied, “she died of a fever, but I wonder why? I mean, poor people who live in horrid conditions and who do not have enough to eat die of fevers, but your mother had enough to eat and lived in a proper house, so why did she have to die?”

The proper house, as Katherine so simply put it, was actually an ancient castle.

In her young and innocent world, nobody ever died. She had heard the servants whisper about a stillborn baby boy, but it never even occurred to her that she had lost a brother because she had never come to know him. Brought up in a lifestyle of plenty together with her five older brothers, Katherine was mainly focused on things she could have in life. Her daily schedule consisted of being woken up by servants each morning, bathed and dressed by a maid and fed in the nursery. The family butler, Simpson, headed up the household staff and organized the meals and schedules. In his own way he took excellent care of the Macpherson children.

“You cannot see your father today, Miss Katherine,” he would gently explain to the little girl. “He has guests.”

She would often pass the day with servants and tutors without even having seen her parents, except perhaps for a short while during afternoon tea on the days that they were home. Only at main festivities, like birthdays and New Year’s Eve, would the whole Macpherson family sit around the long mahogany table together and have an elegant dinner or a festive celebration. The only weekly family ritual was to go to church on Sunday. The castle and grounds would empty as everyone walked to Inveravon Parish Church, dressed in their best clothes. As leaders of the community the Macphersons occupied the row of pews closest to the pulpit, with Alexander and his father somewhere behind.

Katherine had known Alex all of her life, it had only been recently that he had joined her and the other Macpherson children in their private living quarters.

Upon the tragic death of Alexander’s mother, who had been one of the servants taking care of Katherine and her brothers,

Lady Macpherson had taken pity on the only child of their gamekeeper. With his father busy maintaining the Ballindalloch estate, Alexander often had to take care of himself and seemed isolated. He had to walk the two miles to Inveravon’s public school six days a week, no matter the weather conditions. When Elizabeth had found the boy desolate and exhausted one morning on his way to school, she’d decided to speak to Alexander’s father Robert, and propose to take the boy into the Macpherson household to be properly raised. Alex was only to spend the evenings and holidays with his father. Robert Stewart had gratefully accepted the offer.

To Alexander, the arrangement only added to the confusion following his mother’s death. Both his parents had always emphasized he was lucky to be raised on the Ballindalloch Estate, but should never forget his proper place in the household. It was a social difference Alexander Stewart had never fully grasped.

Growing up, he noticed he was sometimes quicker to understand the subtleties of life than some of the Macpherson boys. Also, the other children were never reprimanded in Alexander’s presence, but he was reprimanded on a number of occasions without any thought as to who was there.

This confusion turned Alexander into an introverted boy. He felt misunderstood and guarded himself against saying what he really felt; afraid his words would be discarded as nonsense or simply ignored. It brought him to believe he did not belong. Yet, somewhere deep inside him, lived a boy who stubbornly knew he was being underestimated. This was frustrating and sent prickles of anger up and down his spine at questions like the one Katherine had just asked him.

Still, Katherine was the only one from whom he could endure this sort of treatment. When one of the Macpherson

boys addressed him, which they rarely did, except maybe for James, Alexander would sometimes not even answer and simply shy away. He was also all too happy that Laird Macpherson ignored him completely – except, of course, when he was spending time with Katherine. The master of the house would always find some chore for Alexander to do and send him away.

This contradiction of not belonging and yet feeling the pull of wanting to bond with Katherine, left him wandering between two worlds.

CHAPTER 2



**Saturday 25 June 2011, 11:30 pm, Raleigh,
North Carolina, USA**

The tall frame of David Stewart was sitting behind his desk in the study reading the most recent email from Wayne Stewart. He had hooked up with Wayne through a website, “Genes Reunited”. David had posted a request for information on his Stewart lineage, detailing what he had learned from his grandfather some years ago about their family’s Scottish connection to an Alexander Stewart. It had been a deep and emotional exchange of memories with his grandfather at his father’s funeral that had triggered David’s need to find out more about his Stewart connections.

He learned his great-great-grandparents, Alexander and Sarah, sailed from Scotland and they married in Boston. Gramps had given David the wedding certificate, as a keepsake. It was on his desk.

CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE
– STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS; BOSTON CITY

DATE: July 22, 1898

Place	Name	Age	Residence	Witness	Registrar
Park Street Church	Alexander Stewart	23	Waterside	Sean Devine	W. Hall
Boston Common	(single)		Backbay		
In the Form of the	(Journalist)		Boston MA		
Presbyterian Church	Sarah Gibson	29	Boston, MA	Annie Smith	
Of USA	M.s. Gillespie (widow)				
July 19 th 1898	(Seamstress)				

He had discovered the details of Alexander’s arrival in the USA, when he and Cathy went on a weekend break to New York and visited Ellis Island. The database however, had only provided basic details; name, age, sex, occupation, country of origin and date of arrival, 12 November, 1895.

Wayne’s email stated *he* also descended from Alexander Stewart and Sarah Gibson. For evidence and information he had granted David access to his personal family tree on the website, which had helped him discover the place of birth of Alexander Stewart; Ballindalloch, in the County of Banffshire.

Had it not been for Wayne, David would never have been able to identify his ancestor among the hundreds of Stewarts born in Scotland in the early 1870’s.

The discovery had started a flurry of correspondence between the two men. Wayne even suggested that David join him for “Tartan Week”, an event organized since 1999, by three New-York-based American-Scottish organizations. Its prime purpose was to celebrate Scottish roots, using as a key subject the Scottish Declaration of Independence. This was drawn

up and signed at Arbroath Abbey, Scotland, on 6 April in the year 1320. For this reason, “Tartan Week” always included that date.

Only few Americans knew that the Arbroath treaty had served as a model for the American Declaration of Independence and that almost half the signatories were of Scottish descent. David had smiled over Wayne’s enthusiasm for his Scottish ancestry. He was keen to find out more about his own Scottish background, but it had never occurred to him to go to these events. He hadn’t even visited any of the Scottish gatherings organized in North Carolina, so why go all the way to the Big Apple? As a result of his email exchanges with Wayne, he did become a member of the American Scottish Foundation.

Wayne’s family tree, had given him some new information. David had known he descended from Robert, son of Alexander Stewart and Sarah Gibson. It was news to him though that they had another son, Michael, from whom Wayne descended. David noted with curiosity, this boy was born in or around 1893 in Boston – about five years before Alexander and Sarah were married and two years before they even arrived in Boston. He decided he’d look into that later.

So now all David had left to do was to print the birth certificates of these Stewarts of Ballindalloch. As he hit the print key on his laptop, the digital clock on the corner of the table read 11:30 pm. He stretched his long arms and legs and ran his fingers through his hair.

He was feeling rather pleased with his latest results. The noise of the HP printer filled the room as it spat out two documents.

Had his wife not been working a night shift at Raleigh PD, he would have gone to her to boast about his discovery.

But perhaps it was a good thing she wasn't home. She would find a way to ridicule it anyway.

He picked up the documents and stared at them.

*Alexander Stewart, Male, born, Wednesday, 25th April, 1875, at Ballindalloch Estate, Banffshire.
Father: Robert Stewart (Gamekeeper)
Mother: Jane Stewart m.s. Black
Registrar: A.J. Mackie*

*Robert Stewart, Male, born, Tuesday, 27th November, 1855, at Ballindalloch Estate, Banffshire.
Father: John Stewart (Gamekeeper)
Mother: Margaret Stewart m.s. Campbell
Registrar: J. McLaughlan*

So, the Highlands of Scotland are where my roots lay, he thought. The birth certificates made it conclusive.

In 1855, as he'd learned, a UK law was passed to make it mandatory that all births, deaths and marriages had to be registered. For anything earlier than 1855, the only possible resource for further research was old church registers. That gave David another good reason why he should visit Scotland.

Wayne Stewart had also mentioned that he'd actually visited the estate and its castle, as Ballindalloch had been opened to the public in 2005.

A Scottish castle, David thought. *Imagine that!* Although it was getting late, he needed to make one more check. He picked up his glass and drained the last of his Glenlivet. Using

the Google search engine, he typed, "*Ballindalloch Castle*". He clicked on the official home page and the screen opened;

WELCOME TO BALLINDALLOCH CASTLE
– Home of the Macphersons for over 400 years.

"What the..." he mumbled, leaning over towards the screen as if that would help clear his head. "Macpherson!" he said out loud into the empty room. He was stunned. *Wait till I tell Cathy about this. Maybe now she would take genealogy a little more seriously!*

Eager to find out more and fully awake now, David started to browse the website. It was clearly designed for the tourist industry. He read over a brief description of the history of the castle, going back to the 16th century, and noticed the section "Ghosts".

The alleged ghost tickling the tourist imagination was a Gordon Macpherson. According to the story, he mysteriously disappeared in 1895 while fishing in the Spey River that flows through the castle grounds. To this day, the website stated, Gordon was haunting Ballindalloch.

David wondered if his ancestor, Alexander, had still been there at the time of the disappearance. It was the same year that Alexander Stewart arrived in America.

When David finally went to bed, his mind overly active with all he'd uncovered, he convinced himself to keep his mouth shut and not mention anything to Cathy for the time being. First, he would call this castle and suggest a visit to consider Ballindalloch as part of a travel guide he was commissioned to write. That would give him the opportunity to find out if they had records going back to Robert and Alexander Stewart's

time. Maybe the present laird could give him the name of the local church holding the Stewart family records.

His last thought before falling asleep was about a movie he had seen: *Six Degrees of Separation*. It was about a conman who charmed an Upper West Side family into believing he knew them very well through their son. The story line was based on the theory that between every two people on earth, there are never more than five people connecting them. *Basically, we're all related*, David figured, fading into his twilight zone between dream and slumber.

David woke to a quiet Sunday morning. Cathy was in bed, her back to him, asleep. She had come in after her night shift while he was still sleeping. Years of experience had taught her how to slip into bed unnoticed. He gently pushed off the duvet and climbed out of bed, trying his best not to disturb his wife.

A few minutes later, wearing only his boxers, he carried a piping hot black coffee into the study. He sat down and thought about calling Ballindalloch Castle – or should he first send an email?

It's 6:30 in the morning here, he thought. 11:30 there. He picked up a print of the castle's home page with a picture of the present laird, an Angus Macpherson, looking back at him. David dialed the number listed under "Contact us". After just a few rings, he heard a voice answer with a very recognizable Scottish lilt.

"Ballindalloch Castle, who's calling please?"

In his most polite business tone to hide his little frisson of excitement, David asked, "May I speak to Mr Angus Macpherson please?"

"Hold on till I check if he is free. What's your name?" he was asked, without ceremony.

"David Stewart, phoning from the United States, looking for help on some family matters," was the best he could come up with.

"And how would you spell that?" asked the Scotsman.

"S-T-E-W-A-R-T," David said, remembering that Stuart was another common surname. He heard the old-fashioned sound of a phone being placed next to a receiver, and waited. When Angus Macpherson's rather loud but polite voice came on the line, David explained, "I'm calling for two reasons. First of all, I'm about to write a travel guide on Speyside and their whisky. I'm considering visiting your castle as I may want to include it as a tourist attraction." He paused to listen how Angus Macpherson would respond.

"Well then, you've certainly come to the right address, Mr Stewart," Angus boomed. "Ballindalloch opened her doors to the public a while ago and we get many American visitors. Also, we are indeed right in the middle of the Speyside whisky trail. In fact Cragganmore Distillery is but a spitting distance from here."

"*That* is very interesting, Mr Macpherson, I don't mind a good glass myself."

"The other reason I'm calling is actually of a more personal nature. I've been researching my family history and discovered I have an ancestor who was born at Ballindalloch – a Stewart."

"Have you now," the Scotsman at the other side of the ocean answered. "A Stewart you say. Would you know his first name and roughly when he was born?"

"Alexander Stewart, born in 1875."

"Really," the voice on the other end said. "Really now."

"Yes sir, I believe so, that is, if I have the correct year."

"It's amazing. I recall we had a Wayne Stewart visiting us from the States a while ago, also a descendent of this Alexander Stewart. Your ancestor is a popular fellow."

“Yes I know Wayne,” David said. “In fact, he was the one who gave me the Ballindalloch details. Otherwise, I’d never have been able to figure out my Stewart’s birth place.”

“Let me see what I can dig up for you, Mr Stewart, so to speak. I must still have the information I gave to the other Mr Stewart somewhere.”

“Thanks, that would be great, Mr Macpherson. You know, it’s a bit funny my wife’s maiden name is Macpherson, Catherine Macpherson. Quite a coincidence, huh?”

“I have to admit, Mr Stewart, there are quite a lot of us walking the face of this earth. But you know, if your wife is a Macpherson, she’s considered a cousin, a clan member so to say. No matter where you live or where you come from, when you’re a Macpherson, you’re among cousins. There are several Macpherson clan gatherings worldwide, also in the USA.”

“Yes, indeed, we have many Scottish games in North Carolina,” responded David.

“We will be having our annual Macpherson clan gathering in Newtonmore,” Angus continued, “some thirty miles from here, on the sixth of August. Tell you what, why don’t you and your wife come visit us around that time? I can help you with information on Ballindalloch for your book and your Stewart’s research, and your wife can meet lots of her Macpherson cousins. We will have many guests arriving for the event, so let me know in time if you will. Try to arrive here a couple of days before the gathering. If you email a picture of your wife, I’ll put a small message in the program about her. We always do that with our overseas cousins who visit us.”

“I’ll suggest it to my wife, Mr Macpherson, although I’m not sure if she’ll be able to free up time to join me. Also I have other meetings to plan. I know I need to be in London sometime in August.”

“Well,” Angus said, “if it clashes with your other appointments, your wife is more than welcome to attend on her own. You could meet up with her later. We’d take really good care of her, so you would have nothing to worry about.”

David laughed, and then said, “my wife is quite an independent lady sir, but I will ask her and let you know.”

Angus, now sounding very keen to get Ballindalloch in this American guide, said, “If you decide to come over, fly into Dyce Airport at Aberdeen and I will make sure our driver picks you up. You and your wife will be our guests and once again, I would be delighted to help you with your guide.”

The phone call left David contemplating how he could pull all this off, knowing Cathy would be her usual skeptical self.

A few days later, David received an email from Angus saying he had more information on the Stewarts.

It was too late to call Scotland, but the following morning, after Cathy left for work, David phoned the castle on the number listed in Angus’s email.

Angus answered almost immediately.

“You have information for me?” David asked, excitedly.

“Yes, your Alexander Stewart was indeed the son of the gamekeeper of Ballindalloch. He lived here until 1895. He then moved to the USA and I don’t know what happened to him after that. We do have old records that you’re welcome to explore and other old documents that are in storage. We could also introduce you to the local church, and some of the school records might be interesting for you. Inveravon Church¹ and School² are but a fifteen-minute walk from the castle, using the Lady’s Walk³. “By the way, I’ve also sent you and your wife a formal invitation to Ballindalloch Castle for the clan event.

You'll be our guests. And should your wife arrive earlier, the castle will be at her disposal as if it was her own."

When David finally finished the call, it was with an amazing sense of achievement.

His next big decision was; when and how to tell Cathy about the impending invitation?

CHAPTER 3



Tuesday 12 July 2011, 10.00 pm, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Cathy arrived at the downtown apartment just off Blue Ridge Road, close to the Museum of Art. The door of the first floor abode was open and barrier-taped. She ducked under the "do not cross" strip and went inside to the brightly lit room. She recognized the two forensics guys who were busy dusting for prints and snapping photographs. The body on the floor, lying on its side, looked petite. She couldn't see the face, which was angled towards the wall.

"Hi Tracey, Tom, what have we got here?" She walked towards them over the shiny wooden floor, careful to avoid smatterings of blood.

Tom, the older of the two men, took the lead, "Hi, Cat. We have a lady in her late seventies, attacked severely, I'd guess with some kind of blunt instrument. You can see at least three abrasions on the left side of her skull and face."

Tracey, a giant of a man with a gentle face and a soft deep voice that didn't seem to match his dominant appearance, pointed out to Cathy where blood had splattered around the front door of the small lounge.

“The perp probably hit her there the first time.”

Cathy noticed an open black leather handbag lying in the corner, some of its contents scattered on the floor.

“Hi Cat,” said Barbara, who had just walked in the room carrying a Starbucks coffee. The patrol officer was a short woman with bright red-dyed hair. Her eyebrow and nose showed marks from former piercings she’d had to surrender when she joined the force.

“Were you the first on the scene, Babs?”

“Yeah, we received a 911 about nine. I was here within fifteen minutes, but too late. I had a quick look around the joint for any possible weapon, but didn’t find anything.”

“Who made the 911, a neighbor?” asked Cathy as she glanced again at the body.

“Mrs Arnold herself,” Barbara answered, pointing at the dead body. “The apartment next door is empty, but I spoke to a young couple on the second floor and they confirmed her name. She lived on her own. They didn’t hear anything out of the ordinary.”

“Okay Babs, go check with the other neighbors and let me know if you come up with anything.”

Cathy squatted beside Mrs Arnold, who was lying on her right side. She was a small woman, fully dressed in a blue skirt that passed well beneath her knees. Her white blouse was dotted with blood stains. In a quick but strong flashback, Cathy was pulled into her own memory of a blood-stained blouse after Cameron had shot her.

“You okay, Cat?” Barbara’s voice came through.

Cathy realized she had been staring at the blouse and tore her gaze away from the bloodstains, focusing on the rest of the victim. In her right hand, Mrs Arnold was clutching a telephone. Cathy looked at her grey hair mingled with blood

and closed her eyes. An image of the old lady’s face in shock when she was attacked appeared in her mind’s eye. The horror of it was very vivid, almost as if she were still alive. It was paralyzing; Cathy struggled to open her eyes to get out of her trance. Finally she managed and started to blink rapidly.

“It was a hammer,” she mumbled.

“What was that, Cat?” asked Tracey.

She stood up. “It was a fucking hammer, a claw hammer. I think it was a heart attack that killed her, not the blows. The perp was a young male, wearing a hood. You know the kind, a sport top with a hood. And he’s left-handed.”

Tracey couldn’t help but smile at Cathy’s matter-of-fact comment on something that was yet to be established.

“Well you could be right about the hammer,” he said.

“Can I have your report tomorrow morning, Trace?”

“You betcha. It will be late morning, though.”

Fuck, this is the last thing I needed. All this on top of the Hooper case, she thought.

Next morning, Cathy was scurrying around in the kitchen, trying to make herself coffee, but the meager four hours of sleep she had since her nightshift ended still played tricks on her. Frustrated, she slammed the door of the kitchen cupboard that held the instant espresso, making David wince behind his morning newspaper. He knew better by now than to interfere with his wife’s mood swings. Had he known she’d wake up like this, he wouldn’t have placed the invitation on the breakfast bar for her to spot. *Too late, cannot take it away now.* Cathy’s hawk-like senses would notice immediately. In fact the silence coming from the kitchen told him she had probably just found it.

“I think this is for you, David,” she said, looking at the contents she had removed from the envelope addressed to David Stewart and Catherine Macpherson, “unless you can explain why I would receive an invitation to some clan gathering.”

“What invitation?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

“This!” she answered, waving the paper impatiently at him, making his newspaper move in the slight breeze. “I think it’s an invite to a party in Europe. It’s probably from one of your genealogy pals.”

The formal-looking invitation from the Clan Chief Angus Macpherson looked highly professional. It had an embossed letterhead and was trimmed in tartan.

“That’s the Macpherson tartan alright,” David said, looking at the invite.

“Are you sure? It’s different from the tartan my Pop use to show me.”

“Some have several tartans, like a formal dress or say for hunting.”

“Do you think they’d let me wear my jeans and sneakers if I wore socks in their formal dress tartan?” Cathy sniggered.

David ignored her smart-ass remark.

Maybe I shouldn’t tease him about it so much, Cathy thought, but she really couldn’t see the point of all this ancestry stuff.

The invite depicted a castle, reminding Cathy of a picture in one of her childhood books, *Fairy Tales by Grimm*, with lots of small towers emerging from a giant structure and numerous buildings knitted closely together.

“Ballindalloch Castle⁴”, it read underneath, “The home of the Macphersons since 1546.”

How would you pronounce that name in Scottish? Cathy wondered, *Ballindallotsch or Ballindallock?*

She shifted her attention to the separate handwritten letter that was in the envelope. It explained the background of the annual gathering. A third item, a flier, outlined the event’s purpose which was to gather the Macpherson family members from all over the world in order to get better acquainted and celebrate the existence and history of their clan.

“What makes these people think we would want to attend their clan gathering, David? Hmm, I wonder . . .”

“Look, Cathy,” David retorted impatiently, “Will you for once bury your cynicism and listen? Yes I did have contact with Ballindalloch, and yes maybe it would be a good idea for us to go there.”

Cathy looked at him angrily and said, “Well then, you’d better give me one frikkin’ good reason.”

“Okay, I will!” David retaliated. “When I was researching Alexander Stewart, who is the very reason I am here today, if I may remind you, I discovered he was born at Ballindalloch. Coincidentally and here’s why you should be interested, this castle also turned out to be a Macpherson home.”

“So?” Cathy said, “There must be zillions of Macphersons worldwide, and besides, the family I care about are Americans! Jeez, Dave! How far do you want to go back, Adam and Eve?”

“Damn it, Cat. All I’m asking is that you give it some thought. When I made contact with Angus Macpherson, the present owner of Ballindalloch, and told him I was married to a Catherine Macpherson, his reaction was that this must be fate at play. He spontaneously invited us over. I didn’t tell you about it because I’d anticipated this reaction from you! But I’m actually pretty excited about going to a Scottish castle where my ancestor was born.”

“Ah, so Mr Stewart has decided already. Well, let me tell you, I’m not going all the way to Europe for a party, where I’ll come across skirt-wearing men and be expected to take them seriously!”

“You’re doing it again,” David exclaimed in frustration. “Why is it so difficult for you to have some respect for my interests?”

A little embarrassed, Cathy walked away from the breakfast table, looking for the distraction of something to do in the kitchen. *That’s a good question*, she thought, not for the first time.

“I don’t know, David,” she said after a while. “I just think all this family tree stuff is so boring. For some reason, those European roots just don’t do it for me. Does that make sense? I have no other explanation for it.”

Still irritated with her absolute refusal to at least consider going to the clan gathering, he didn’t answer. Instead, he fished another item out of the envelope and held it up with both hands for Cathy to see. “Take a look at this.”

It was a leaflet providing details about something called the “Highland Games,” which were to be held in honor of the Macpherson clan gathering in the town of Newtonmore⁵. Immediately, her internal barometer switched to “ridiculous” again.

“Look at the picture of this massive, skirt-clad guy holding a tree trunk in front of his body,” she pointed. “The guys at the Police Department will get a kick out of this one!”

“Okay,” David said, angrily stuffing the invitation and leaflet back into the envelope and propelling it with precision aim to the side table near the kitchen door, where they usually kept their mail. “Your crazy judgmental attitude is throwing away a great chance for a break which, by the way, I think you

badly need. You’re practically living at the PD and your case load rules your life, not to mention the fact that it almost got you killed last year. Jeez, Cat, what does it take you to stop acting like a diesel engine and barging through life as if nothing else matters but work, work, work. Let me tell you, if I’m so irritating and work is the sole important thing in your life, then maybe we should call it quits. Because this *is* important to *me*! I want to know where I come from, why my family moved to the US, and what drove them away from Scotland.”

David now had Cathy’s full attention. She had been unpleasantly surprised by David’s remark of “calling it quits”. He’d never said anything like that before. What could be so important about his genealogy that he would go to such extremes? Wounded by his use of harsh words, and still feeling she had a right to her own opinion, Cathy gestured at the envelope and said, “How do you know it’s not some Scotch money-making scam?”

“Scotch is a drink. I think you mean Scottish,” David corrected despondently. “Hey, forget it.” He threw his hands up in the air. “I knew you were going to react like this. Never mind, let’s drop the whole idea. Anyway, you need to go or you’ll be late for work.”

“Exactly,” she said sharply.

She picked up her bag and strapped her 9 mm semi-automatic to her body. He watched her doing so and felt a pang of regret and old pain. His Cathy was a very attractive woman, 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a slender athletic body. When she smiled, her dark complexion made her polar-white teeth glisten. He loathed the thought of her being scarred and felt a lump in his throat as he watched her check the gun and push it back into the holster.

“Don’t know what time I’ll be home, depends,” she said and stepped out into the hall.

A split second later, the door opened. Cathy’s arm appeared around the corner, picked up the invitation from the table, and disappeared again.

The possibility of going to Scotland lingered with Cathy all day, disturbing her usual decisive balance. She wondered if perhaps a trip overseas would be just the thing to get her and David back on track.

Maybe I’ll contact this Angus Macpherson guy myself, she thought. “Okay, promise this stays strictly between us, Steve,” she started, when she’d lured her partner out for a quick lunch. “I’ve received an invitation to a Macpherson clan gathering in the Highlands of Scotland, and I’m considering going. What do you think?” She handed the envelope to Steve.

He read the invite. When he glanced at the leaflet on the games, he said smiling, “Jeez Cathy, they could be a bunch of weirdoes. I saw this horror movie years ago about the Highlands in Scotland. They’re all into open sex and dancing naked at night in the back yard.”

“For Christ’s sake, if that’s your range of intellectual discussion today, then just forget it,” she retorted, gathering the contents of the envelope, impatiently stuffing it back, much like David had done earlier in their kitchen.

She had to wonder if this was how she responded to David when he started talking about his Scottish roots.

A full day of filing paperwork and a lengthy meeting with her chief distracted her from further ponderings.

It wasn’t until she got into her car around seven that evening that she thought of driving over to her parents’ house, to present her dilemma there.

Like David and Cathy, her parents lived in the town of Wake Forest, a growing community with 28,000 residents, fifteen miles north of Raleigh. Over time, the town had become exclusive, accentuated by its beautiful historic homes and tree-lined streets.

When Cathy pulled into the driveway in her black unmarked Crown Vic, her father, James Macpherson, was sitting on the open porch of their tidy little bungalow, a combined brick-and-timber house built around the early seventies. James was wearing denim shorts and a check short-sleeved shirt. He was a lean man in his early sixties, still tall, with a handsome face and a reassuring appearance. Even now, simply looking at him gave Cathy a feeling of safety. He was a retired cop who had taught her a lot about police work that you couldn’t read in an instruction manual or receive in training. James saw his daughter and waved as she stepped out into the hot humid evening from her air-conditioned car and walked towards the house.

“Hey, Pop,” she said kissing him on the cheek. “I take it Mom’s out?” She gave a knowing smirk. James was enjoying a cigarette, something he would never do when his wife was around. He smiled and explained that her mother had gone with friends to visit Eileen Turner, who had been in some kind of accident and was now proudly showing off her broken leg, providing her with the attention she always craved. They sat down on the porch steps.

“Let me show you something.” she said. She dug the Macpherson letter out of her bag and handed it to her father.

James got his bifocals out of his shirt pocket and started to study the contents of the envelope, one by one.

“Hmm, a Macpherson clan gathering, that’s interesting... Wonder why I didn’t get one?”

“Because you’re not married to David Stewart,” she mumbled.

Her father looked at her profile for a moment while she sat on the deck step, her knees tucked under her chin, staring into the distance.

“Is he now researching the Macphersons?” James asked.

“No,” replied an exasperated Cathy. “He discovered an ancestor from Scotland, Alexander Stewart, and believe it or not, Pop, he was born on the grounds of a Macpherson castle, the one on the invite. It drives me nuts and I don’t know why.” She sighed.

“Well...” James began cautiously, searching for the right words. He knew all too well his temperamental daughter was easy to ignite on this subject. “Maybe you should consider accepting the invitation and go meet some more Macphersons. To be honest, your mom and I have been worried about you ever since the shooting. A break from the force could do you good, you know.”

She threw her father a warning look not to go there.

On his guard, he changed his strategy and looking over the edge of his glasses, said, “Unless you think the invite is from a bunch of kooks. They might be into stuff like exhibitionism in the front yard, and howling during a full moon. I remember an old movie, the ...”

“What’s the problem with the men in my life today,” Cathy exclaimed, jumping up from the porch steps. “Steve said almost exactly the same thing.”

“Always knew I liked that guy,” said James, giving his daughter a playful wink.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Pop, I checked it out today on the internet, and Ballindalloch Castle is for real. It’s been the home of a Macpherson family for over four hundred years.”

James smiled affectionately at his daughter. “Your grandad, used to talk about his father, Eddie, who supposedly had some old pictures of a little town in Scotland. Never found any pictures, but then again, my pop was a great storyteller.” She could tell her father was intrigued with the invitation.

“Cathy,” he said. “Mom and I think the shooting has taken more out of you than you realize. Maybe you should call this castle to make sure everything is above board, and if everything fits, go for it. That’s my gut feeling. How great would it be if you’d uncover some family skeletons, Cat?” he added jokingly. “Come on; give me something to boast about to my buddies at the golf club!”

Cathy gave her dad a wry smile, kissed him on the cheek, and was already walking back towards her car when her father called after her, “Can’t wait to tell your mom about this! Her family line probably goes back to some bears in the woods,” James chuckled, playfully clawing at the air.

Cathy had to wonder if this Macpherson invitation was fate showing its hand like some kind of cosmic card game. Besides, she was trying to be honest with herself. Hadn’t she already thought about going away for a week to a spa resort, once she and Steve had lightened up their case load? Also, her marriage had been in a serious dip. Both David and she were working long, odd hours, resulting in them passing like ships in the night.

Their sex life was nothing to crow about either. She couldn’t even remember the last time they had actually made love. Perhaps if they went to Europe for a couple of weeks, it would help their relationship.

Her boss would agree, she knew that for sure. He had constantly been digging at her to take some time out.

Heading home, she felt her spirits lift a bit. During the drive she let her mind wander. Where and when had David and she taken such different turns? Had they missed the boat by not having children? Would having kids have helped their relationship remain more solid? They'd discovered some years earlier that she was unable to conceive. Since then, they had discussed adoption on numerous occasions. Neither of them were ever really committed and continued to simply focus on their work; Cathy in her demanding role as a homicide detective and David as a travel writer. Due to her unsociable working hours and David's constant travelling, they spent little quality time together.

She thought about the need to confront their situation. She was thirty-five years old now, seven years younger than David. It was time to make some big decisions. She certainly felt a deep connection with David and also believed that they still loved each other. However, their relationship desperately needed an upgrade and maybe it was time to do more than just *consider* adopting. A break in Scotland would give them time to discuss their future.

On the evenings when they were both at home, Cathy and David mostly ended their day in bed with a file to read. It used to be snuggling up and talking to each other about their day. Now the norm was to hole themselves up in bed and sift through their work.

"Have you given Scotland another thought?" David asked, sitting up in bed with his laptop resting on their "sweet dreams" duvet cover. "Reason I ask is, I've been offered to write a travel guide on Scotland. You know Ron McIntyre, from the NA Tourist Association? He mailed me. They're going to promote Scotland with some funding from the Scottish Tourist Board. Ron wants to give me the assignment."

Trying to hide his excitement, he continued. "I've suggested including the famous whisky trail in Speyside, where sixty percent of scotch is produced. That would bring me very close to Ballindalloch, you know."

Cathy remained quiet and kept reading her papers, feigning disinterest, not ready to make it too easy for David.

"I could tie this in with the invite to that clan gathering and combine it with some research on the Stewart family," David continued, pretending he didn't notice her deliberate silence.

"Well, I'm sure the whisky guide will suit you just fine," Cathy murmured, "provided you won't be too intoxicated to write anything."

"Very funny," David said, too put down by her attitude to even comment on it. "What about the clan gathering? Will you come with me or not?" he asked in a soft voice, not giving her the satisfaction of putting up a fight.

With a sigh, Cathy pulled her attention away from the documents she had been studying. "Aw, come on, David," she said. "What am I supposed to do at some gathering all the way in Scotland where everyone happens to carry the same family name?"

Changing into a more serious tone, he said, "Look at you and your never-ending work! Don't you ever think about taking it easy for a while?"

"Says Mr Travel Writer who is preparing his own trips in bed as he speaks," she replied.

"Yeah, but I was never shot for anything I've written." He leaned over, "I know you don't like to talk about it, but what happened last year has injured more than your body." Gently he slid his hand under the hairline of her neck, where he knew she liked to be touched.

“Not now, David,” Cathy said lightly. In a split second she remembered her thoughts earlier that day about their marriage and regretted her obstinacy.

“Seriously, Cat,” David pleaded with a wounded look on his face. “Look at how you reacted just now. We live and work in the same house but in separate worlds. I think it’s time we both put in a little effort here. This trip is important to me and I think it will give a very interesting spin to use my own Scottish roots as a lead to write the travel guide. Just imagine how many descendants of immigrants could relate to that story! And for us, Cat, the fact that *my* ancestors were born in a castle that carries *your* family name. It’s almost as if we’re *meant* to do this together.”

“I know,” she mumbled, still feeling sensations where he had touched her. She couldn’t help thinking how the invitation had occupied her mind as well, in spite of her defiance. She let out another deep sigh. Maybe David was right, and even though she told everyone who wanted to hear, and those who didn’t, that she was over the Cameron shooting, she knew deep down that wasn’t true. Maybe she was indeed running away from something.

“Okay,” she said decisively, putting her files on the bedside table and sliding under the duvet. “I’ll do it. I will go to Scotland with you, provided I can arrange backup for Steve.”

“Thank you Cat,” David said. He felt as if an enormous weight had just been lifted from his shoulders. “Can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. Now you don’t need to worry about a thing; I’ll make all our travel arrangements.”

Cathy was already regretting her commitment. From under the duvet she said, muffled, “Maybe we’ll turn out to be related.”

CHAPTER 4



Thursday 13 June 1895, Inveravon Church and Burial Grounds, Ballindalloch, Scotland

“We are gathered here today to bid our final farewell to Elizabeth Macpherson.” The rich baritone voice of Reverend MacDonald boomed against the intensifying wind.

“We will remember her as the giving, compassionate and much respected Lady of Ballindalloch.”

“We will remember how she supported the Laird and Chief of the Macpherson clan.”

“We will remember how she brought seven Macpherson children into this world and was blessed to raise six of them, God rest the soul of Gordon Junior, with whom his mother is now joined again.”

“It will be remembered how she helped the less fortunate and always took pity on those in need of help.”

“It will be remembered how the Lady Macpherson raised Alexander Stewart as one of her own.”

A large crowd stood assembled on the little yard of Inveravon Church, so many that there was not enough room for all, causing people to stand outside the wall lining the church grounds.

Gordon Macpherson stood at the foot of his wife's coffin, which had been placed in front of the family mausoleum opposite the little church. His eyes were searching the crowd. For reasons he could not entirely understand himself, for they had quarreled almost all their lives, Gordon wished his younger brother William could be here now. But as it was, the letter announcing Elizabeth's passing would not reach Chicago for at least another month. Gordon had thought of sending a telegram, but decided against it, granting his brother, who had been very fond of his sister-in-law, some more time in oblivious ignorance of what had befallen Elizabeth.

Dark storm clouds gathered above the mourners. Gordon's jaw was set and his eyes were now cast resolutely towards the ground. His long black overcoat showed the curves of his short broad body with the harsh Highland wind pushing him in the back, almost as if it was urging him to take one more step forward.

Even though he was only in his late fifties, Gordon's face looked haggard with deep folds around his nose and mouth, and crow's feet darting from his eyes.

He wished that Reverend MacDonald would bring his eulogy to a close, even though he knew the final farewell that was soon to follow by placing the coffin in the family tomb with his ancestors, would be almost too much for him to bear. Gordon willed the tears to stay in his eyes. He needed to set an example of strength for all there to see.

How he was going to survive without Elizabeth, was still far beyond him. His wife who, always modest without outshining his position as Laird of Ballindalloch, had meant so much, not only to the people of Speyside, but especially to the Macpherson clan.

Gordon looked up to see his children standing in a semi-circle around the heavy, brass-handled coffin, each holding a single rose from the castle garden, Elizabeth's garden, to be placed on her coffin as their final farewell. Alexander Stewart stood side by side with Katherine, who now even went so far as to lean her head against Alexander's shoulder, while he put his arm around her protectively.

In spite of his grief, Gordon felt the hot flash of anger rise in his throat. How dare the gamekeeper's son take the liberty of comforting his youngest child like that in front of him and everyone else?

One of the first things he needed to do, Gordon knew, was to settle certain family matters as soon as the shock of Elizabeth's sudden death had subsided.