



Prologue

Kincardine, Scotland

August, 1809

Garrick McGuinness's hands trembled as he checked his timepiece for the fifth time in nearly as many minutes.

Midnight. *Thank God.*

As he hurried toward the garden gate where Arabel would be waiting, he slipped the watch into his coat pocket, right next to a pressed sprig of heather. Arabel had plucked it from the field where he'd first made love to her less than a fortnight ago, then wrapped it in a bit of the green ribbon she'd worn in her hair. If she knew he carried it with him, she'd laugh at him for being sentimental.

But he was certainly that, all right. And deeply in love. Tonight, after they'd eloped and started their new life together, she would be his completely, and they would no longer have to love each other in secret.

This wasn't how he'd wanted to marry her, but their plans had been rushed. So rushed, in fact, that he didn't have time to buy a ring. But the new job in Inverness as head groom for Laird Donnelly was waiting for him, along with a private cottage where they would live. With orders to be at the estate within the sennight, there was no time to linger.

Yet Arabel had been firm in her resolve to wed him. She would be waiting by the gate as planned, eagerly watching for him to take her to the blacksmith's shop in the village, where a gig had been hired for them. She'd be wrapped up in her fur cape, with her rug of Rowland tartan to spread across their laps to keep them warm and her packed satchel at her feet. Ready to travel, ready to start their life together. By this time tomorrow, they'd be wed, and the entire world would be theirs for the taking.

Her family would never accept him. They both knew that. They'd only been able to elope tonight because she was staying here at Castle Highburn with her aunt and uncle for the summer, instead of with her family at their estate. The Rowlands were a proud and arrogant lot, with enough wealth and power to buy respect, if not earn it. But Arabel couldn't care less how little fortune he possessed—*little?* He laughed. *None.* She loved him, and as long as he had her heart, he could believe anything was possible. Including that a beautiful creature like her could love him.

When he turned the corner of the garden wall, he saw her. The light of the full moon shined upon her as she waited, staring down the lane in the direction where she thought he would approach.

He grinned. She was restless and couldn't stand still, and he understood that perfectly. The same anxiousness to be off simmered inside him.

"Arabel," he called through the darkness, as loudly as he dared.

Startled, she wheeled around, and dread pulsed coldly through him at the sight of her. Something was wrong. Instead of her travel outfit, she wore a muslin dress, with only a wool shawl wrapped around her shoulders to warm her against the cold. There was no packed satchel at her feet.

Had she changed her mind? They had no choice but to elope. Surely, she understood that . . . didn't she?

Yet she stood where she was, making no move to run to him. With each step he took toward her, his heart pounded harder, so hard that when he stopped in front of her and she didn't lift a hand to reach for him he winced at each painful thud.

"Arabel, what's wrong?" Concern thickened his voice. Had her parents learned of their plans?

"I can't," she whispered. Tears glistened in her eyes. "I can't go with you."

Then his heart stopped completely, and he flinched at the lurching pain. "But we agreed to leave tonight. We have to be to Inverness in three days." He reached for her. When she stepped back, cold panic surged through him. *Dear God.* . . . "What's happened?"

"My family arrived this evening," she told him in a nervous rush. "No one knew they were coming. Papa and Mama in the carriage, then my brother David—"

"Shh," he whispered reassuringly, cupping her face in his hands to calm her. He kissed her until her panic eased from her in a trembling sigh. "Tell me again. Take your time."

Fighting down a desperate urge to yank her fiercely into his arms to protect her, he gently touched her chin to make her look at him. But she closed her eyes, as if physically pained. The moonlight revealed her pale face, with tears spiking her lashes.

"It's Samuel," she choked out. She pressed her fist against her chest, as if to physically fight back the pain as a silver tear slipped down her cheek. "Garrick, he's in trouble."

Her brother? He stared at her, an odd mix of relief and bewilderment cascading through him. "What has he done?" . . . *now*. The unspoken word hovered in the shadows as surely as if he'd uttered it. Her brothers were always getting into one kind of a scrape or another.

She hesitated, then whispered, "He's been gambling."

That was nothing new. Samuel and David often played more at cards than they could afford.

He forced a smile at her concern and gently stroked his knuckles down her cheek. Angus Rowland would pay his son's debt and chastise Samuel enough to keep him at home on the straight and proper path for at least six months before his son racked up his next debt, just as he'd always done. As predictable as the seasons. "Your father will take care of it."

"Not this time." She wrung her hands. "Oh, Garrick, it's so much worse than before."

He stiffened. "How so?"

With a soft sob, she shook her head, unwilling to tell him. A flash of anger sped through him that she'd keep secrets from him. That she'd put her family before him, tonight of all nights. "I can't say—I promised. If word gets out about what he's done . . ." She pulled in a shaking, ragged breath. "But it's awful, and he needs me." She opened her eyes and stared at him through the midnight shadows, the tears in her eyes glistening like quicksilver. "I cannot go with you."

His heart lurched, and a shuddering pain shot through him. Surely, she couldn't be changing her mind. Not now. "We have to leave, Arabel. We have a new life waiting for

us.” He took her shoulders in his hands, and she trembled beneath his fingers. “*It has to be tonight.*”

Her mouth fell open at his unintended ultimatum. “It isn’t that simple,” she breathed out. She appeared more vulnerable, more fragile than he’d ever seen her, and the change terrified him. “They need me.”

“*I need you.*” And a helluva lot more than her brother did. She’d feel guilty for leaving. She wouldn’t be Arabel if she didn’t, a woman so dedicated to her family that he often teased her that she would bleed Rowland tartan green and blue if she pricked a finger. But they had no choice. They had to elope, and there could be no delay. If they didn’t go tonight, he’d lose the job with Lord Donnelly, and her family might very well make good on their plans to marry her off to Ian Campbell, the Duke of Argyll’s youngest son.

“Your brother is a grown man,” he reminded her, more harshly than he intended in his increasing desperation. “He can face the consequences of his own actions.”

Raw grief darkened her face. “Garrick, please! I can’t . . .” The soft plea and fresh tears broke his heart. “I can’t elope with you.”

His body flashed numb. Even as he held tightly to her, he felt her slipping away. “Not tonight?” Then, fearing her answer even as he pressed, “Or not ever?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, anguish marring her beautiful face.

Desperate to keep her with him, he wrapped his arms around her waist and tugged her against him, kissing her with such intensity that she shivered. With every beat of his heart, he willed her to love him, to choose him and the life they could have together.

She melted in his arms with a whimpering sigh, then parted her lips and allowed him to plunder her mouth. Her kiss tasted of the highlands, of heather and peat smoke, of the wild glens and the wide sky. He drank her in, unable to satiate his need for her.

“Come away with me,” he implored against her temple. If he could only keep her right there, safe in the circle of his arms, they would be fine. She would never retreat into the house with her family, he would never lose her—“We love each other.”

She shook her head sadly, her normally bright eyes dim and downcast. “That doesn’t matter.”

“It’s *everything.*”

“Not everything,” she whispered.

He froze, his blood turning to ice.

“I am a Rowland,” she whispered softly, but her words reverberated inside him with the force of cannon fire. “If I turn away from them when they need me, who will I be then?”

“A McGuinness,” he bit out, his wounded pride rising unchecked to the surface. “Like your husband.”

He saw her stiffen and watched as determination settled over her. He knew then that he would never be able to convince her to elope. Not tonight.

“Then do your name proud,” she countered, her words a soft challenge to his quiet demand. “Stay here with me and help me get through this. Once Samuel is out of trouble, we’ll be married.”

“If I stay, I’ll lose the job with Donnelly. You know that.” And remaining here wasn’t an option. The moment her family discovered their plans, he’d lose his position in the stables with her aunt and uncle, and she’d be married off to Campbell. “The only way we can be together is to leave tonight.”

With a faint shake of her head, she put voice to her fears, “And if my family refuses to ever see me or speak to me again? If they’re so angry that I left in the middle of the night like this, right on the heels of Samuel’s troubles, that they force us into an annulment?”

"They won't. Not once they learn that I've bedded you." He hated himself for transforming those special hours into something so base, yet he had no choice. She was slipping away, and he would do anything to keep her with him.

"And if they don't care about that?" she whispered hoarsely.

Something ripped inside him. Was she not even going to attempt to fight for their future? Or had she already resolved herself to breaking off with him? Clenching his jaw, he bit out, "Did *you* ever care, Arabel?"

The surprised expression on her face melted into anger. "How can you say that? I *love* you—"

"Yet you gave yourself knowing that I would never have your family's consent to marry you, that the only way we could be together was to elope and live somewhere away from them," he accused. "What else am I supposed to think now?"

"That my family needs me." Even in the shadows he could see the gleaming tears in her eyes. "That I'm in an impossible situation."

"The same impossible situation you're putting *me* into," he bit out, giving in to the dark impulse inside him to hurt her as much as she was hurting him. "Or do I come in second to them?"

"It isn't like that, and you know it." Pained frustration permeated her trembling voice. "I love you, Garrick. I never would have given you my innocence if I had any doubts about us."

"And why did you, exactly?" he demanded. He wanted to hear her say the words, *needed* to hear her say them . . . *Because I want to spend the rest of my life with you, because when I am with you what my family wants doesn't matter, because I want to make a new family with you . . .*

Instead, she struck out in a rasping breath—"Why did you take it?"

His heart stopped beneath a searing flash of pain. He knew then that he'd lost her. Yet the desperation inside him refused to surrender. Not until she'd broken him irreparably. "Stand up to your family, Arabel. For once, put yourself before them."

"Please don't make me choose between you and my family," she pleaded, all of her trembling so hard that her voice shook.

Through the humiliation flaming inside him, he rasped out, "You already have."

He spun on his heel and stalked away, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"No! I just need time—" She started after him. "Garrick, don't leave, not like this!"

"Go into the house with your family, Arabel." He threw a furious glance over his shoulder, not slowing his strides but freezing her mid-step. Then he muttered beneath his breath, the anger and anguish clawing at his chest, "Where you belong."

"Garrick, please!" she called out, not daring to run after him. "I need you to understand—I need *you*."

But at that moment, he needed time and distance away from *her* to tamp down his anger, clear his pounding head, and decide what to do about his future and her. And to salvage what was left of his heart.

He inhaled hard and deep, and his lungs burned with the cold night air as he kept walking into the darkness. But he felt none of it. The pain inside him was too brutal to allow for any other sensation.

"That you, McGuiness?" A man stepped out of the shadows near the stables.

So did a second. Even in the darkness, Garrick recognized them. Branan Wilson and Torquil Brown, fellow grooms who had always caused problems for him.

"Aye, that's him," Brown answered. "Who else would be sneakin' 'round here tonight?"

Garrick pulled back his shoulders, clenching his fists for a fight. He didn't reply as he stood his ground and the two men approached like circling dogs.

Brown spat on the ground. "Worthless son o' a McGuinness."

"Ye dinna belong here," Wilson sneered. "Ne'er have."

Garrick's eyes narrowed to slits. "Then make me leave."

Wilson nodded. "Plan to."

The two men grabbed him by his arms and shoved him back against the stable wall. He fought against them but couldn't break free. They were solid muscle and gristle, as tough as Scottish thistles.

A flint struck from a few feet away, and a small flame blazed. With his arms pinned against the stone, unable to move, Garrick watched as Duncan MacTavish, the estate agent, carried a lantern toward him.

"Attemptin' to steal Rowland's daughter, eh?" MacTavish's weathered face was set hard. The man had never liked him, but he'd been forced to keep Garrick in employ because Malcolm Rowland, Arabel's great uncle, did.

"Not stealing," Garrick dared to counter. He smiled with all the confidence that only a twenty-one year-old could possess in the face of destruction. "Going willingly."

"Not wit' ye, lad," MacTavish corrected. "Not tonight, nor e'er."

Knowing not to answer, Garrick clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw worked. Every muscle in his body tensed with fury.

"Got orders from Laird Rowland," MacTavish explained. A sneering smile curled his lips. "Not t' let any trouble happen on m' watch. An' you, lad, are nothin' but trouble." He grabbed Garrick by the hair and yanked his head down until their eyes were level. "Ye think Angus Rowland would let his daughter spend her days rottin' away in some tenant cottage, slavin' like a servant to fix yer meals an' scrub yer floors?" He shoved back Garrick's head as he released him. "After tonight, the lass'll never give ye a thought. Especially once yer long gone from here an' she's wedded to a laird, as her papa wants."

Her father might have wanted that, but Arabel knew her own mind. "She'll never turn her back on me."

"How do ye kin we knew ye were meetin' her tonight?" Rowland laughed, such an evil and vicious sound that it slithered down Garrick's spine. "She set her family on ye."

"No, she wouldn't do that," he countered. But doubt twisted his gut, because only a few minutes ago he'd also been certain she would marry him.

"The Rowlands sent me to deal wi' ye, an' 'tis 'xactly what I'm doin'." MacTavish gestured to the two grooms. "Make certain he ne'er sets foot here again."

The lantern extinguished as the first punch slammed into his gut.