

"It's no what ye think, Ian," Jamie said shortly.

"Oh, it's not, aye? And Jenny worrying that ye'd make yourself ill, living without a woman so long!" Ian snorted. "I'll tell her she needna concern herself wi' your welfare. And where's my son, then, down the hall with another o' the harlots?"

"Your son?" Jamie's surprise was evident. "Which one?"

Ian stared at Jamie, the anger on his long, half-homely face fading into alarm.

"Ye havena got him? Wee Ian's not here?"

"Young Ian? Christ, man, d'ye think I'd bring a fourteen-year-old lad into a brothel?"

Ian opened his mouth, then shut it, and sat down on the stool.

"Tell ye the truth, Jamie, I canna say what ye'd do anymore," he said levelly. He looked up at his brother-in-law, jaw set. "Once I could. But not now."

"And what the hell d'ye mean by that?" I could see the angry flush rising in Jamie's face.

Ian glanced at the bed, and away again. The red flush didn't recede from Jamie's face, but I saw a small quiver at the corner of his mouth. He bowed elaborately to his brother-in-law.

"Your pardon, Ian, I was forgettin' my manners. Allow me to introduce ye to my companion." He stepped to the side of the bed and pulled back the quilts.

"No!" Ian cried, jumping to his feet and looking frantically at the floor, the wardrobe, anywhere but at the bed.

"What, will ye no give your regards to my wife, Ian?" Jamie said.

"Wife?" Forgetting to look away, Ian goggled at Jamie in horror. "Ye've marrit a whore?" he croaked.

"I wouldn't call it that, exactly," I said. Hearing my voice, Ian jerked his head in my direction.

"Hullo," I said, waving cheerily at him from my nest of bedclothes. "Been a long time, hasn't it?"

I'd always thought the descriptions of what people did when seeing ghosts rather exaggerated, but had been forced to revise my opinions in light of the responses I had been getting since my return to the past. Jamie had fainted dead away, and if Ian's hair was not literally standing on end, he assuredly looked as though he had been scared out of his wits.

Eyes bugging out, he opened and closed his mouth, making a small gobbling noise that seemed to entertain Jamie quite a lot.

"That'll teach ye to go about thinkin' the worst of my character," he said, with apparent satisfaction. Taking pity on his quivering brother-in-law, Jamie poured out a tot of brandy and handed him the glass. "Judge not, and ye'll no be judged, eh?"

I thought Ian was going to spill the drink on his breeches, but he managed to get the glass to his mouth and swallow.

"What—?" He wheezed, eyes watering as he stared at me. "How—?"

"It's a long story," I said, with a glance at Jamie. He nodded briefly. We had had other things to think about in the last twenty-four hours besides how to explain me to people, and under the circumstances, I rather thought explanations could wait.

"I don't believe I know Young Ian. Is he missing?" I asked politely.

Ian nodded mechanically, not taking his eyes off me.

"He stole away from home last Friday week," he said, sounding rather dazed. "Left a note that he'd gone to his uncle." He took another swig of brandy, coughed and blinked several times, then wiped his eyes and sat up straighter, looking at me.

"It'll no be the first time, ye see," he said to me. He seemed to be regaining his self-confidence, seeing that I appeared to be flesh and blood, and showed no signs either of getting out of bed or of putting my head under my arm and strolling round without it, in the accepted fashion of Highland ghosts.

Jamie sat down on the bed next to me, taking my hand in his.

"I've not seen Young Ian since I sent him home wi' Fergus six months ago," he said. He was beginning to look as worried as Ian. "You're sure he said he was coming to me?"

"Well, he hasna got any other uncles that I know of," Ian said, rather acerbically. He tossed back the rest of the brandy and set the cup down.

"Fergus?" I interrupted. "Is Fergus all right, then?" I felt a surge of joy at the mention of the French orphan whom Jamie had once hired in Paris as a pickpocket, and brought back to Scotland as a servant lad.

Distracted from his thoughts, Jamie looked down at me.

"Oh, aye, Fergus is a bonny man now. A bit changed, of course." A shadow seemed to cross his face, but it cleared as he smiled, pressing my hand. "He'll be fair daft at seein' you once more, Sassenach."

Uninterested in Fergus, Ian had risen and was pacing back and forth across the polished plank floor.

"He didna take a horse," he muttered. "So he'd have nothing anyone would rob him for." He swung round to Jamie. "How did ye come, last time ye brought the lad here? By the land round the Firth, or did ye cross by boat?"

Jamie rubbed his chin, frowning as he thought. "I didna come to Lallybroch for him. He and Fergus crossed through the Carryarrick Pass and met me just above Loch Laggan. Then we came

down through Struan and Weem and ... aye, now I remember. We didna want to cross the Campbell lands, so we came to the east, and crossed the Forth at Donibristle."

"D'ye think he'd do that again?" Ian asked. "If it's the only way he knows?"

Jamie shook his head doubtfully. "He might. But he kens the coast is dangerous."