

CHAPTER 1



Oscar, Viscount Mansfield, stared out the window of his traveling coach marveling at the rugged and almost mystical Scottish landscape. The boy in him wanted to jump out, grab a wooden sword and rescue a beautiful damsel from a fierce, fire breathing dragon. The man in him happily imagined his rewards for such a heroic deed and those thoughts kept him pleasantly entertained the rest of the way to his destination.

As his coach pulled into the circular drive, Oscar readied himself to face an altogether different kind of dragon. “Oscar, my boy. Oh, it is so good to see you.”

“Hello mother, I’ve missed you, too.” And he had. He gave her a warm hug in greeting.

Margret Markum the Viscountess of Mansfield was a happy, caring woman and a loving mother to two irrepressible scamps. She had been staying in Scotland, the land of her birth, visiting family and friends for two years now. They hadn’t seen each other since she had come home to celebrate the birth of her grandchild. Oscar’s twin sister, Olivia, the Countess of Warrington, had given birth to her first child—a healthy, sassy little boy named Simon Everett.

The home of lord and lady McAlister was very impressive. It was a

lovingly restored midlevel castle. Built of rough blue stone, it had two tall circular towers gracing the east and west wings. A thick wooden drawbridge spanned a decorative pond lined with cattails, purple hyacinth, and sweet-smelling water lilies, and led to the massive carved-oak front doors.

Oscar's adventurous inner boy wanted to climb those towers and explore the secret nooks and dungeons. He wondered if the castle had a dungeon, and the thought made him grin. His mother led him into the house, and as impressive as the outside was, the inside was even more remarkable. Whitewashed walls were hung with antique tapestries and framed paintings. The furnishings were well constructed and polished to a lustrous shine, and everywhere he looked he saw carved oak, from the casings around the doors and windows, to the moldings along the ceiling and the baseboards along the floors. It must have taken a team of carpenters years to create it all. But the real jewel was the great hall.

Oscar took a moment to study the room as they passed. The ceiling was high and from the exposed ribbing hung enormous cast iron chandeliers. The windows were large and provided not only an abundance of natural light, but a spectacular view of the Scottish wilderness. The main focal point of the hall was an enormous fire place he could stand in without even having to duck and was large enough to roast an entire ox using whole trees for kindling. His eye traveled up to focus on the intricate plaster work covering the ceiling. He wanted to lie in the middle of the floor and study it for an hour.

Oscar's mother had to take his arm and pull him away to show him to his bed chamber. Like the rest of the castle it had a medieval feel while boasting modern conveniences such as a water closet, gas lights and bell pull for ringing up servants. He stood at the window marveling at the rugged beauty of the forest of trees and the craggy, mist shrouded mountains in the distance.

"I'm so glad you've come. There is so much I want to show you here," his mother said, coming to stand beside him to share the view. "There is natural beauty here as well as an untamed wildness I believe you will come to love."

Oscar tore his eyes away from the scenic splendor and surveyed his mother. He didn't trust the hint of humor in her voice, but when he looked at her she was the very image of innocence so he was sure he must have imagined it.

"Well, dinner will be served soon and some guests will be arriving so you have no more than an hour to make yourself presentable. I'll leave you to it then." With a kiss on his cheek she departed.

An hour later he had washed, shaved, and combed his hair. He walked down the stairs dressed in his best evening clothes and followed the sounds of merriment to the great hall. His mother met him at the doors. "Oscar my love, how handsome you look." He bowed his head to kiss his mother's cheek, and she took his arm, and led him into the great hall. She first introduced him to the McAlisters, her good friends and hosts.

Laird Malcom McAlister was a tall, cheerful, mountain of a man, with a thick, red, well-tended beard showing distinguished streaks of gray, and a booming voice full of good-natured humor. Oscar shook his hand, the other man's hand swallowing his. He met the beautiful Lady Elizabeth McAlister, a petite woman with dark brown hair and smiling eyes who welcomed him warmly to their home.

His mother next introduced him to another man in the group. He was tall though not as tall as Laird McAlister, and also barrel chested. His beard was more stubble, like he hadn't shaved in a couple of days, but was clean and groomed and it was a good look for him. Oscar absently rubbed his own clean-shaven jaw wondering if such a beard would look as good on him.

This man was introduced as Duncan McAlister, the laird's brother. Oscar shook his hand then happened to glance at his mother. Was she blushing? By God, she was. Oscar looked more closely at the man wondering if he were the reason his mother had stayed so long in Scotland and if he were responsible for his mother's rosy cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. Good for her, he mused. She had been widowed for far too long and she needed a new husband.

After introductions had been made and pleasantries exchanged all around, Lady Mansfield took his arm and led him off again. "Mother,

I don't trust that grin on your face. What are you planning?" He trusted the affronted look she gave him even less.

"Oscar really, I just thought you would enjoy a nice holiday when I invited you to come visit." Her eyes flicked across the room then back to him with a very satisfied smile. "I wanted you to enjoy the beauty that can be found only in Scotland."

With a resigned sigh, he looked to where his mother had indicated and froze. Scottish beauty indeed. The woman standing across the room, engaged in conversation with several other young women quite took his breath away. Her hair was a deep shade of auburn, halfway between red and black and piled on top of her head and held in place with diamond pins that shone and sparkled in the fire light. Her skin was golden and sun kissed, not at all the milky complexion so common in English girls. He didn't mind her tall, athletic looking figure and small breasts. At all. While most of his friends were of a mind, the more the better, all Oscar cared was that they were sensitive to his touch. Personally, he was an ass man.

She radiated energy and vitality barely contained by her jade green evening gown. He might have stood there all evening just watching her sip from a glass of champagne and speak animatedly with her friends and laugh aloud at a quip one had made, if his mother hadn't shaken him out of his daze.

"My God mother, who is she?"

"Her name is Bridget. She is the daughter of Laird and Lady McAlister." He forced his eyes away from the siren across the room and focused on his mother. "Is she why you sent for me? Are you match-making again, mother?"

"Darling, with your sister married now and me so far away you are all alone in that big rambling house. You need companionship, and I need more grandchildren. It is your duty to provide an heir to the title and of course he will need playmates, lots of them so you should be getting started before you're too old to sire them."

Oscar chuckled over that. "I'm hardly in my dotage mother. I'm still young enough to sire all night long and into the next morning."

She swatted his arm with her fan and said, "You speak to your mother like that?"

"You started it," he replied with a grin.

She shot him a disapproving look that was ruined by the silent laughter tugging on her lips and the sparkle in her bright blue eyes.

"Saucy boy," she replied before tightening her arm on his and leading him to the woman as one might march a naughty boy to atone for his wrong doing, and like that naughty boy he went along reluctantly.



Bridget stood near the window where she could at least see freedom. She enjoyed visiting with her friends when they came to dine and their conversation was lively and amusing, but her head was hurting. The heavy mass of her hair weighed her down and her hated corset was pinching her.

She wished tonight was a normal evening where she could dine in a comfortable dress, then relax in a hot tub with a good book. But her parents were hosting the titled, rich son of their friend so a little pomp was called for. She resisted a sigh when she realized they were now sending away for suitable men for her to marry after she had turned down every offer she had received since she turned fourteen.

Were her parents really so determined to marry her off they would consider sending her to England? These dark thoughts weren't like her and she tried to shake it off and focus on the conversation. Her friend Emily was telling a funny story about her own latest suiter. He was a portly nobleman with bad teeth, a fondness for gory tales about his beloved hunting dogs tearing apart some helpless creature, and had the tendency to talk to her breasts. Bridget laughed and commiserated with her, though not about her breasts. One good thing about having small ones was men tended to look her in the face.

Bridget felt a shiver run down her spine and turned her head to glance around the room. Who was that? She turned back to her friends and tried to pretend she hadn't noticed him. He must be the

awaited son of Lady Mansfield. While she quite liked "Aunt Margaret," she had reservations about the son. According to rumor, he was close to thirty and hadn't settled down yet. He was, also according to rumor, a trivial fop with a lack of maturity.

However, if that was the son, he was handsome, she could give him that at least. From the corner of her eye she saw Aunt Margaret heading her way with the son beside her looking like he was about to have a tooth pulled. He was probably as fed up with well-meaning matchmakers as she was.

They reached her little group of misses and Bridget turned to greet them. Her smile was genuine for Aunt Margaret and only faltered a little when introduced to Lord Oscar Mansfield. She held out her hand to him like a man and he smiled as he shook it. His hand felt warm and strong in hers and she pumped it once then released him.

Good lord he really was nice to look at. Not overly tall, so with her height they were nearly on the same level. His hair was so dark as to look black and worn long on top with wavy curls that had a tendency to fall over his forehead. He slid his fingers through those curls to move them back in place. His smile was charming and she felt an answering pull of her own lips.

Ever the gracious hostess, Bridget asked about his journey and the sights he saw on his travels. She did not expect his response. His face took on a boyish joviality as he described his reaction to the majesty and wonder he felt at her homeland. Her smile was genuine now as he praised the wild lands that were a part of her soul. When he spoke of dragons, she laughed and put her hand on his arm. What was wrong with her? She never behaved with so much familiarity with a man who wasn't her family, especially not a man she had only just met.

There was something about him that drew her, but before she could determine what it was about him, dinner was announced. He gallantly held out his arm for her and she resigned herself to dining with him as she let him lead her into dinner. His mother entered just before them on the arm of Bridget's uncle, Duncan, and she took a quick peek to see how he felt about this.

He looked on with a fond smile. She thought he might be aware of

the romance that had been blossoming since Aunt Margaret had first come to stay with them months ago and if so, he seemed fine with it. He was a loving son. That boded well for him. What was she doing? Auditioning him for her future lord and master? She mentally shook herself. She was as wild as her beloved Scotland and she would never be mastered.

Despite her misgivings, Lord Mansfield was a charming and entertaining dinner companion. Most of her potential suitors liked to tell her about their homes, family history, hobbies and expectations, but would quickly lose interest when she tried to discuss her own. Lord Mansfield, Oscar, as he gave her permission to call him, expressed an interest in her home. He inquired if the castle was haunted, whether there was a dungeon and where the dragons were stabled.

She couldn't remember laughing so much or enjoying a dinner more. She couldn't stand to break his heart so she told him the dragons lived in a cave high in the mountains, and would only come down when summoned for battle. She told him the legend of the gray ghost who haunted the battlements and assured him there were dungeons and promised to take him on a tour the next day. He asked her if she liked to ride, then listened as she described the trails she followed and her favorite places to go.

She asked him about his home and his face broke into a grin as he described the manor house, their castle ruins overlooking the sea, and even his own family legends.

"Many generations ago, my however-many-greats grandfather had won the title and land by saving the life of the king in battle. In gratitude, the king and queen had even given him a bride—the daughter of the queen's sister. By all accounts she was a stunning beauty. The king and queen dowered her and made my ancestor a very wealthy man." He paused to take a drink of wine then continued his tale of treachery, murder, and mystery.

"He learned from trusted spies that a neighboring lord wanted his land, his wealth, and his wife."

Bridget was captivated by the story. She found herself leaning toward him during the telling, but didn't care.

“He sent his young wife to stay with her uncle and aunt, the king and queen, while he set up defenses. He knew he didn’t have enough men to properly defend his castle, but he was able to safeguard the treasure for future generations by hiding it. The problem was he hid it far too well and it still has not been found.”

“What happened to him, and to his wife?” she asked.

“The king sent many knights, but they were too late. The castle had been reduced to rubble and my ancestor was killed when the castle fell. His wife had given birth to a son shortly after she had been sent away. He became the new viscount.

“The king ordered the death of the villainous neighbor. His lands were confiscated and given to the son and his mother. She returned to the land and had built the main portion of the manor house I currently reside in. My ancestor had a riddle cast in bronze and buried by a marker stone. The bronze plate was found, but to this day no one has been able to solve the riddle. Her son and his sons and grandsons went on to rebuild the family wealth, but the mystery still remains:

Follow the stone

Look to the ruins

Time can only march forward

You’ll not find it alone”

“Follow the stone... the ruins. So, somewhere on your property is a lost treasure, with a riddle the only clue?” she asked with unladylike excitement. His answer was to cock his eyebrow and grin at her. She began to wonder if he were having her on, but he seemed so sincere. She would have to ask Lady Mansfield if it was true or not.

When dinner ended, they all returned to the great hall for music, dancing, and other entertainment. The musicians struck up a waltz and Oscar engaged Bridget for the first dance. It was awkward in the beginning, and after a failed attempt to spin her into a turn Oscar stopped her. “Close your eyes,” he told her.

“Why?” she asked?

“Because you keep leading. Close your eyes,” he told her.

She did so uncertainly and they resumed dancing. Unable to see,

she had to put her trust in him, and she found it was much easier when she just let go and let him take control of the dance. Never had she danced so well, and she realized with a wry grin that he was right. She did tend to lead and wondered if that was why she had always believed herself to be a bad dancer.

They danced together once more, a lively country dance that ended with flushed cheeks and happy smiles all around. Bridget promised to take him riding the next morning, and with that to look forward to they said goodnight and went off to bed.