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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHRISTINA SKYE

DRAYCOTT EVERLASTING

*Christmas Knight
& Moonrise*

*Love transcends time
in a fan-favorite classic and
a new darkly seductive
tale at Draycott Abbey*

DRAYCOTT EVERLASTING

Christina Skye

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HOPE O'HARA CLENCHED her fists to keep from trembling.
Scotland. Brooding and magical.

Green hills rippled before her, densely wooded above a pristine loch. Sunlight cast a glow over sharp slopes, chasing away wisps of early morning mist.

High hills full of legends and ghosts.

A tremor raced through her, swift and sharp. Suddenly Hope had the sense that something rare and momentous was about to happen, something meant only for her to see and share.

Sunlight shifted.

Mist swayed.

Since her eighteenth birthday her uncle had urged her to visit this green glen. Hope was sorry her visit had come only after his death. There had always been some delay or prior commitment. And then it had been too late.

Her eyes blurred for a moment as she remembered her uncle's noisy laughter and interminable bad jokes. During a book research trip Dermot O'Hara had fallen in love with Glenbrae, assuring Hope that she would, too. How right he had been. She only wished he were here to share it with her now.

No regrets, girl. His booming voice seemed to sweep out of the shadows to comfort her. Get on with living.

When Hope saw the rugged tower house that loomed beyond the banks of the loch, her pulse tripped. Against all logic or explanation, each stone felt familiar. Just as before, she had the sudden sense that time was reaching out to her, offering all its mysteries.

If only she were brave enough to take them.

A beam of Highland sunshine peeked through the racing mist, burning over the tarnished letters on the front door.

Glenbrae House.

So beautiful. But why was it somehow...familiar?

A chipped flagstone path ran past the first early roses, an explosion of pink, peach and fuchsia.

Below the thatched roof, sunbeams lit hundreds of fragile leaded-glass panels. It was like a dozen other old buildings Hope had seen since coming to Scotland two weeks before. All had been full of broody atmosphere tinged with magic.

But Glenbrae House was different. Personal, almost. She felt as if she were at home.

As if in a trance, Hope walked closer, feeling her heart race. The original house was thirteenth century, the estate agent now waiting in the car had explained, a traditional Scottish tower structure built for a local branch of the MacLeod clan. When the family fortunes had declined in the last century, a band of pre-Raphaelites had

bought the property and turned the lower floors into painting studios.

They had felt the magic, too. Hope had seen some of their luminous illustrations of Glenbrae's weathered gray walls exploding with summer roses. Warriors rode through the deep woods, and faeries seemed to peek from beneath green bowers.

Legends lay everywhere. Magic touched every shadow.

In silence the house called to her.

How could she resist?

She brushed back a vine and pushed open the front door, half expecting to see ghostly figures drift past her shoulder. But her footsteps echoed through the empty rooms. Only dusty motes danced over the scuffed wood floors.

Lonely, the house seemed to whisper. So lonely.

But it took little imagination for Hope to envision bolder days when hardened travelers in heavy kilts gathered by open fires that blazed in the great hall. Here battles were plotted and history planned. Even the smoke on the stones whispered to her, holding cherished fragments of Scotland's stormy past.

Ghosts, some would call them. But Hope had never feared ghosts. Since childhood she had walked with ghosts, and history had been her greatest love, along with the beautiful books that captured its legends. And right now she stood shivering, breathless, drowning in history.

Because every corner of Glenbrae House felt like home.

The house seemed to shift and whisper, breaking the silence. Perhaps because she had become accustomed to the sounds of loneliness at an early age, she found herself listening to those low whispers. The shadows did not scare her, nor did the grime she saw.

She had once been awkward and quiet. Even as a child she had been too grave to suit those her own age, and she still didn't fit in. While others her age were busy lining up stock options, mutual funds and a collection of summer homes, Hope was still wandering. Six months in the Aegean and a season in Milan. Even a year spent teaching basic English in a lonely mountain village in western China.

Always searching. Always looking for magic and the right place to put down roots.

Now there was no family to hold her. Mother, father, uncle—Hope had lost them one by one. She only occasionally remembered her mother's breathless laugh or her father's slow smile. A boating accident had caught them during a summer storm on the Aegean the year that Hope turned thirteen.

She had been convinced she could not survive, but she had, largely through the unswerving optimism of her boisterous uncle. Dermot O'Hara had soon become father and mother, guardian and friend. He had made her laugh and he had taught her to dream.

And Hope dreamed now.

Of sunny rooms and Christmas carols on a snowy night. Of a house that would soon become a home.

Not that the job would be easy. Glenbrae House had stood empty for almost twenty years, and sunlight dappled the chipped, gouged floors. Marks of disrepair were everywhere.

In the great hall, high, cantilevered beams bore tracks of soot from centuries of

peat smoke. But instead of grime, Hope saw hard-eyed warriors who warmed their hands by the roaring flames.

The great house whispered, teasing with ancient secrets. Outside, the wind rustled the hedges and shook the rose shrubs as springtime fragrance spilled through an open window, heady and rich.

Around the loch, wildflowers dotted the hills and danced in the sun. It would be hard work to bring the grounds back to their pristine beauty, but Hope had never been afraid of hard work.

Of other things, but not work.

She stared out the window at the shifting silver water of the loch, feeling Glenbrae's beauty seep into her weary, wounded soul.

She had traveled long enough. Maybe here along the rocky banks of Loch Glenbrae in a fortified thirteenth-century stone tower house with eight-foot-thick walls and a roof that probably leaked, she could finally put down roots.

With her uncle's death had come a small legacy and the promise of more in the future. Hope knew he would like nothing more than for her to be settled here between the peaceful green hills.

Above her head, a bar of sunlight swept the turret stair. Her breath caught as light brushed the dim outline of a painting worked over the plaster at the turn of the stairs. A warrior in flowing hauberk and chain mail glared down at her, pride and arrogance set in every angular feature.

A MacLeod, no doubt. A warrior by the look of him. A man of duty and granite honor.

With the changing light, he seemed to waver, an apparition from a Highland dawn.

Somehow, he, too, seemed familiar.

Hope told herself it was imagination, run amok after hours of travel over pitted roads. But the loch-gray eyes seemed to follow her movements, questioning her right to enter his shadowed domain.

She stood rooted to the spot, fighting the challenge of that keen gaze.

Even as her logic counseled her to flee, her heart stirred. She was crazy to be here, crazy to spin fantasies of belonging in a house at the edge of nowhere. The repairs alone would cost a fortune.

But Hope felt linked with this house, as if she were no longer free to leave the beautiful old halls so much in need of tender hands and loving repair.

She stretched trembling fingers to the dim painting, half expecting to feel warm skin and rigid muscle through the cold textures of plaster and paint.

But there was no warmth, of course. No life behind the cold eyes.

Yet still the painting held her.

"Let me go," she whispered.

Around her the shadows moved. The room carried the echo softly.

"Then at least give me your whole name. Which MacLeod are you?" Softly, her words swept the empty room.

WhichMacLeodwhichMacLeodwhichMacLeod.

A car horn blared outside. Hope shivered and turned toward the door.

The agent had another house for sale on the far side of the valley. Something new

and tidy, closer to the village and in need of little upkeep.

Yes, that was the sensible thing. But she didn't want to be sensible.

Wind scurried over her shoulder, tugging at her hair. Threadbare lace curtains fluttered at a broken window.

Then the front door slammed shut, closing her in, shuttering the room in darkness. With a gasp, Hope spun around. Light played over the figure above the staircase, where the keen, misty eyes glinted, filled with challenge—and just a hint of humor.

“Very funny, tough guy. Just don't think you're going to scare me into leaving.”

The scent of roses filled the air, and Hope imagined how the house would look filled with candles and warmed with laughter. She knew from personal experience that there was no inn within thirty miles of Glenbrae. And she would have all these empty rooms...

An inn. A period inn that clung defiantly to its history and authenticity. Tartans on the walls.

Laughter amid shadows and crackling fires on a gusty night, a haven for weary travelers.

Her breath caught. She rubbed the bank check in her pocket, the first installment of the legacy from her beloved uncle.

Don't talk to me about miracles, girl, Dermot O'Hara had always said. Go out and make your miracles happen all by yourself.

Hope could work a miracle here. This ruined, beautiful house in a quiet corner of the Highlands was a place to make dreams and put down roots. And maybe here she would finally heal from the heartbreak of losing her family.

Wind whispered down the high chimney, stirring the fine hairs at her neck. Almost like a greeting, Hope thought.

She sent a saucy glance to the painting. The warrior's eyes seemed to glint back at her, bright with challenge.

Hope laughed softly, swept by a sudden illogical sense of adventure. “Better make some room, MacLeod. Looks like you're going to have to share.”

CHINTZ CURTAINS TWITCHED at the front window of a tiny cottage just beyond the loch.

Three white-haired heads bobbed at the leaded panes.

“I told you so! See how she's following the path.” Perpetua Wishwell, the eldest of the three sisters, pointed over the glen. “Look, she's going inside.”

Her sister, Honoria, the middle sister and the plumpest of the three, gave a quick laugh. “She's taken down the sales sign. She's going to stay. I can almost feel it.”

“She looks very nice.” Morwenna Wishwell gave a thoughtful frown. “American, do you think?”

Honoria nodded briskly. “From a place called Chicago. I think she's the one we've been waiting for.”

Morwenna toyed with a silver pin of a cat staring up at a full moon. “It's the correct planetary alignment. The moon in Libra—a very good time for establishing roots and turning a house into a home. What do you think, Perpetua?”

The tallest of the three, Perpetua tapped one finger against her rather pointed

chin. “She looks too slender. Too young. What if the house proves too much for her? The past hangs heavy there. And we all know that the thatched roof leaks terribly. She might not be up to this.”

“She is,” Honoria said quietly.

“What about the dilapidated kitchen? One sight of that stove would make a strong man run for cover. And we still don’t know her name.”

“Hope O’Hara,” Honoria answered quickly.

“Irish?”

“Irish, German and Spanish,” her sister corrected. “Even some obscure Russian ancestor who settled in a place called Duluth.”

“Never mind Duluth.” Perpetua frowned. “If you ask me, she’s too fragile to tackle the manor. One good wind will knock her down.”

“Nonsense,” Honoria snapped. “I’ve done her chart. She belongs in the manor house. I did her transits after I got her birth date from that nice young man who was driving the loan car for the estate agent.”

The shrill blast of a horn cut through the air.

The sisters pressed closer to the window. Morwenna murmured a low, inaudible phrase and stroked the silver cat pin. “She is very vulnerable right now. She’s lost her uncle, I believe. And her parents, too. But there’s something else...something physical that troubles her deeply.”

“What sort of trouble?” Honoria demanded.

“I can’t see.”

“Hmm. What she needs is a vacation,” Honoria said sagely.

Morwenna’s eyes turned speculative. “What she needs is a man.”

“A man?” Perpetua’s eyes narrowed, almost catlike.

“A man of honor, of course. An ally and companion. Someone who doesn’t mind hard work.

Restoring Glenbrae House is going to be a labor to task Hercules, believe me.”

“Unfortunately, Hercules is unavailable at the moment.” Perpetua smiled faintly. “But hard work would mean nothing to the right man. A man who doesn’t know the softness of a woman’s laugh or the heat of her skin. A man who has been too long from home, too long on the move.”

“You have someone in mind?” Honoria said eagerly.

“Possibly.” Perpetua’s head tilted. Light gleamed over her snowy hair. “Yes, quite possibly the perfect man.”

Morwenna sat up straighter as an image swept into her mind. “Not him. The man’s dead inside.”

No answer.

“Perpetua, you’re not listening to me. Ronan MacLeod is a soldier. Any woman in his life will be merely a night’s diversion.”

“That might change,” Honoria said slowly. “With the right woman beside him. Someone to soften the past.”

“It would take a ton of steel wool to soften his past.” Morwenna shook her head. “All he has known is war and loss since the first moment his father put a bow in his hand, cuffed him and told him to meet his mark or he’d see that the whole village went

hungry that night.”

A frown crossed Perpetua’s smooth brow. “A crude man, Angus MacLeod. Such a pity the mother died so young. But that changes nothing. Ronan MacLeod is the one.”

Morwenna’s fingers moved restlessly. “He’s as hard as the steel of that weathered broadsword he values more than life. And the things he’s done...”

Perpetua shrugged. “He is a man of honor. On that, you’ll agree.”

Morwenna nodded reluctantly.

“And he is capable of the most arduous campaign.”

Another nod.

“Then it’s settled. Ronan MacLeod will do very well for our Miss O’Hara.”

“But they’ll be like oil and water. He’s positively medieval. And she’s so— modern.”

“I think we should have a look,” Perpetua said abruptly. In silence their fingers linked. “In and out quickly, mind you. We don’t want him to sense anything,” Perpetua whispered.

She raised her hands to her sisters. The thrush song faded away and silence gathered, deep and oppressive. Around them the room receded as the shadows thickened.

A figure slowly took shape in the semidarkness. His eyes were hard, the flat gray of a mountain loch in winter. Sunlight gleamed from the plate armor at his chest and his dented broadsword.

Behind him stretched muddy paths and the thatched roofs of a country town.

Glenbrae Village, as it had been in early spring, seven centuries in the past.

Perpetua murmured in satisfaction. “Careful,” she cautioned as their thoughts began to link and expand outward. “If he senses us, he’ll put up resistance, and that will make our next contact much harder.”

Honorina frowned. “He’s smarter than he looks. And he’s more dangerous. Dear me, maybe we should reconsider our plan...”

RONAN MACLEOD SLID from his weary horse and rubbed the back of his neck. Endless hills stretched before him like restless seas, rich and green.

Endlessly different from the landscape he had known for the past years as a Crusader in the burning sands of the East. “Do you sense that we’re being watched?” he asked his page.

“Aye, my liege. The whole town has come to watch the King’s Wolf ride in.”

“Not that,” MacLeod said slowly. “Closer. And yet not close at all. It is most... strange.”

The page shrugged, well used to his master’s flights of fancy. “I see nothing but muddy streets full of curious villagers, my lord.”

Ronan MacLeod surveyed the rugged green slopes. Long years of warfare had given him an instinct for danger he had learned never to ignore, but the muddy streets posed no threat that he could detect. There were no armed Saracens crouched behind the half-timbered walls. No plotting courtiers hid behind the baker’s ovens.

Yet still the odd sense of uneasiness persisted.

He smiled bitterly at the grim little hamlet before him. Who would not feel unease in such a place?

Glenbrae looked primitive and rude after the colorful cities he had passed in the East on his way to the Crusades. He had heard the bells of Paris toll from the greatest of the cathedrals. He had eaten the finest of roast swan with his fellow knights in Champagne and Burgundy. He had hawked on the slopes of the Pyrenees and savored the colors of a hundred kinds of silk in the teeming markets of Damascus. Through it all, he had fought for a king and felt a thousand times as if he were drowning in the blood of war.

Now Ronan MacLeod had come home—home to a narrow, muddy little hole in the hills known as Glenbrae.

If one could call a dozen stone cottages huddled in the shadow of a glen home.

He pulled a roll of parchment from beneath his hauberk and fingered the red ribbon threaded through the document. From the ribbon hung a wax seal with the image of his sovereign lord, Edward. “For loyalty in right trusty service in many hours of dread, I, Edward, by God’s grace King of England, do entrust this deed conveying all revenues and rights of fee for the village of Glenbrae.

By royal grant may Ronan MacLeod, my faithful man, collect woad-penny, agistment, foddercorn and chiminage, from now to his hour of death.”

Fine words for a village clinging desperately to life, one step away from starvation.

MacLeod rubbed the only coins in his pockets, two silver French deniers. As they clinked hollowly, he tried to find excitement and satisfaction in a body hardened from months of travel and years of war.

He did not look up as three dirty-faced children scrambled over the pitted street and stumbled to a halt before him. “’Tis the knight,” one muttered in the rippling Gaelic of the far North.

“Aye. Blackhearted, he is, so my da says. And the knight does eat the hearts of wee children to break his fast.” The boys drew closer together, their eyes huge. At any second they expected the hard-faced Crusader to pounce upon them with his sword.

Ronan stared back, fingering his belt. Word of his hair-raising exploits in battle had spread along every dusty road from Damascus to Ghent. Even the court in London buzzed with the tales. And with each telling, the deeds became darker until the man called MacLeod became a monster with no shred of human feeling left.

Such tales had suited him full well, in truth. He seldom had need to raise his sword because his own black reputation had already done the work of conquest for him.

The scar that ran across his forehead usually did the rest.

The King’s Wolf, so he was called. A soldier who acted first and spared no time for regrets. A man who would master any woman foolish enough to tempt his embrace.

In spite of his grim reputation, the women had always found him, all too eager to taste the passion of a hardened soldier.

At first MacLeod had been happy to oblige. He had kissed them, stirred them, ridden them to noisy pleasure. He had seen the calculation in their eyes and felt it answer something in his own tortured heart.

But the novelty had faded. He began to feel defiled with each cold encounter, and the bitter taste in his mouth drove him to an uneasy abstinence. It had been longer than

he could remember since he had touched a woman's cheek, cupped the curve of a hip or breathed the fragrance of roses in silken hair.

MacLeod scowled at the frightened urchins huddled before him. "Begone," he growled, tossing down a crumpled bit of linen in which he had wrapped a pigeon pie. Warily the boys studied the castaway food, suspecting some subtle treachery. The youngest of the three, little more than a bundle of bones, snatched up the pie and ran away, followed by his shrill companions.

A fine homecoming indeed, the warrior thought darkly. Across the muddy road, he watched a pickpocket slip clever fingers into the leather pouch of a well-fed merchant. From the roof above rang an incomprehensible shout as brown sludge descended from a chamber pot, spraying the street.

Home. MacLeod began to wonder if the heathen East did not have its attractions after all.

There was no escaping the curious gaze of the villagers busy about their work. He saw how the fathers stiffened at his approach and nudged their daughters out of sight. Even here the legends had spread.

But it mattered not. He was their lord. They would obey him and offer him the respect he deserved.

Whether they gave him any warmer sentiment was of no importance.

His young page shuffled restlessly.

"What is it, Will?"

"The manor house—it's just over that hill. You wished to arrive before nightfall."

In truth, the Crusader could summon little excitement for his new house or anything else. He had learned young that enthusiasm was an emotion best left to women and fools. But he felt a shred of sympathy for the weary boy beside him, who had been traveling for long, chill hours without complaint. "Do you know the way then, whelp?"

"Just past the wheelwright's shop. I was told there is a path that leads through the orchard. The house is just beyond."

"Then let us go and discover this fine grant the king has made to his best assassin."

Four men in tattered tunics sat along the path, their fishing lines angled into the clear water. At the sight of MacLeod, they scrambled awkwardly to their feet.

MacLeod recognized the fear in their eyes. Yes, his legend had certainly spread here.

He rubbed his jaw and studied the layout of the pool. "Is there someone to organize the villeins for work here?"

His page's head bobbed. "The abbot has a way with the locals. Anything you want, he can arrange."

"Then we'll start here," MacLeod said firmly. "We'll add an outer ring of water and a new set of dikes. I'll have sluice gates to control the flow of pike and eels. Tell the abbot the men of Glenbrae may fish here on Mondays. On all other days the pond is open only to women who are with child."

His face hardened. "From the looks of those I saw on the road, most will have little hope of living through the winter otherwise."

The page nodded. He, too, had seen the gaunt faces and undernourished bodies.

“Shall I tell them it is at your order, my lord?”

“No. Tell them it is the command of their sovereign. Let King Edward take the credit and their gratitude.”

The page made no protest, well used to his master’s eccentricities. As they trudged on, villagers gathered silently along the muddy path. The men looked apprehensive, and the women did not meet his gaze.

Not that MacLeod expected anything different. He was a native son gone too long among the Sassenach enemy. By the people of Glenbrae, he was neither trusted nor remembered.

Up the hill the warrior saw the dark stones of a grand tower house. Wooden shutters covered the dozen windows on the lower floors. Where the shutters lay open, MacLeod swore he saw true glazed casements, a sign of wealth beyond what he had expected.

Smoke curled lazily from the tall brick chimney, and the warrior felt a sudden tug at his heart. He had never had a proper home. After the long years of war, all he could remember was dusty roads and the sight of the next hill rising before him.

Yet the prickling sense of uneasiness did not leave him, even here in the shadow of the grand tower house by the loch of Glenbrae. Home or not, something waited.

And MacLeod sensed dangers yet to come....

SUNLIGHT STRUCK Perpetua’s heavy amber pendant as the images from the past swirled around her and slowly faded. She stood up, color spilling over her plain gray dress. “Oil and water, no doubt about it.” Mischief lit her striking green eyes. “But the fireworks between them should be absolutely delicious.”

CHAPTER ONE

Glenbrae House

Late November, seven months later

HOPE LISTENED TO A thrush trill. Outside her window the last hardy roses burned in glorious color, their sinuous vines coiling up Glenbrae House's stone walls.

Blue and white porcelain gleamed on the mantel above the fireplace, and bright chintz chairs warmed the corners beside the window. Sunlight glinted off the polished floor, just as she had pictured it on her first visit.

The inn she had dreamed of that sunny afternoon was finally nearing completion. Unfortunately, luring paying guests to the quiet valley had not turned out to be so easy.

Hope frowned at her easel. Her latest attempt to reproduce the figure painted on the stairwell was faring no better than her other efforts. The man's face was too flat. Too cold. With no hint of life.

Even now, months after moving into Glenbrae House, the brooding image on the stairwell continued to fascinate her. Hope decided he was a medieval warrior sent on the king's service.

Something covert, no doubt, involving jewels or secret documents to be transferred to a safe hiding place out of reach of the king's enemies.

With eyes like that, the man knew the weight of dangerous secrets. He bore the hard responsibility of human life and death. Each hard choice was marked on the canvas of his proud face, hidden in the depths of his shadowed eyes.

Hope sighed and put away her brushes. For the past weeks, every picture she painted seemed to incorporate the medieval figure above the staircase. Even her dreams were touched by images of a broad-shouldered figure with keen silver eyes. Sleeping hadn't been easy, to say the least.

Considering the sad state of her finances, sleeping wasn't likely to get any easier. Not without a genuine, honest-to-goodness miracle.

But Scotland seemed to be a place for miracles.

A door slammed downstairs. Footsteps tapped over the polished floor from the kitchen, and a voice called up, "I have the chocolate tea cakes. And the Wishwells have sent over more homemade wine."

A delicious aroma of chocolate and roasting almonds drifted up the stairs. Hope remembered that she hadn't eaten since breakfast.

She stretched, then slid her brushes into a glass of clean water, studying her mysterious subject.

"Gotta go, MacLeod."

For a moment she could have sworn a gust of wind swept over her neck. Impossible, of course. The windows were sealed and the room was comfortably warm.

Too much imagination, she thought wryly. That was another thing that Scotland's brooding landscape seemed to foster.

"Coming right down, Gabrielle," she called.

Her bank account might be at rock bottom, but thanks to the generosity of her neighbors and the skill of her young Parisian chef, they would always eat well. Baskets of tomatoes fresh from the vine had appeared at the front door all summer, followed by armloads of cheese and homemade delicacies. None of her neighbors would accept a pence in payment; by some baffling, unspoken knowledge, all of them knew of Hope's financial predicament.

At first she had tried to refuse, only to discover that the "extra" produce was left anyway. The more she refused, the more was given. Even now the quiet generosity of the Highlanders left her in awe.

If only she had as many paying guests as she did vegetables from her neighbors' fields...

She sighed, walking to the window. The last of the hollyhocks peeked among the hedges. The magical scene almost helped Hope ignore the way the thatched roof tilted.

The expert she had called in several months ago had told her that even the best thatch had to be replaced every twenty years, and Glenbrae House's roof had not seen replacement for half a century. Unfortunately, bills for a dozen other repairs already awaited payment, from hinges for the leaded windows in the study to new plumbing in the guest rooms and carpeting for the front salon.

All bad enough.

Now a new roof. Where would it end?

Hope shoved a strand of chestnut hair off her forehead and followed the scent of tea cakes to the kitchen. Today her French chef sported computer-chip earrings and a huge necklace made of silicon wire.

"Nice earrings," Hope said, settling at the broad table and gratefully accepting a steaming cup of Earl Grey tea from her young chef. Although barely twenty-one, Gabrielle was an extrovert with a world-class network of contacts stretching from the Arctic to the Amazon.

"In honneur of the Glenbrae Investment Club, I try out some new recipes for their favorite food."

"Zucchini again, I take it?"

Her chef nodded happily. "Curried zucchini soup. And the corn bread with the so very hot chilies, from my friend in New Mexico."

It was a lucky thing that their spry septuagenarian neighbors had stomachs of iron and opinions to match. They liked their food hot and their arguments noisy. Most nights their investment meetings turned into loud and personal shouting matches, though somehow no feelings seemed to be hurt.

Hope seemed to know exactly when to interrupt with pitchers of fresh lemonade and Gabrielle's steaming soup, flanked by wedges of hot corn bread.

"They make much money, these investors of Glenbrae?" the Frenchwoman asked, setting down her cup of tea.

"Rich as Croesus, I believe. Last month they received dividend checks that made me drool. They keep insisting that I should let them establish an account for me."

"And why do you not?"

"You know very well why, Gabrielle." Hope studied the cozy kitchen, where sunlight glinted off hanging copper pots and herbs strung from beams in the ceiling. "I

have no money for anything extra. This beautiful old house is all the gamble I can afford. And if I don't have paying guests soon, even this gamble will be lost."

The young Parisian slid off her white toque and tapped her jaw. "I have been thinking about this and then the perfect idea comes to me. It is a thing that will make Glenbrae House as popular as the beautiful Draycott Abbey. I visited only last year, you know. Marston, my butler friend there, tells me the tourists come every week by busloads."

"Draycott Abbey. That's in England, isn't it?"

The silicon chips danced madly as Gabrielle nodded. "All granite and glass, a most beautiful place.

Marston says it draws visitors like a magnet, mainly because of its ghost."

"Ghost?"

"A very eccentric and dashing figure with a reputation most evil. The tourists love it because he walks the battlements."

Hope hid a smile. "Did you actually see him?"

"No, but some have," Gabrielle said defensively. "Very many of them."

"That's all very well for Draycott Abbey, but we don't have any historic treasures here. Even the history of Glenbrae is sketchy."

Gabrielle smiled shrewdly. "But you have other things just as good as history. Soon you will have the tourists in busloads, too. Just like Draycott Abbey." Gabrielle slid another slice of cake onto Hope's plate. "And it is only one little lie."

"Giving me more cake isn't going to change my mind." Hope sighed. "I should at least be starving by now, considering that we're perched on the brink of complete ruin."

"Good day or bad, one must eat," Gabrielle announced with Gallic pragmatism. "Hours pass and you eat not one scrap. Always you work, you pace, you paint." Gabrielle toyed with the chunky silicon earrings at her cheeks. "But now I see the answer most perfect."

All Hope could see was an endless future of rising debt and leaking thatch. She moved her spoon, drawing crosses in a butter-light ridge of icing. "I'm afraid to ask." As a cook, Gabrielle was a genius, but her common sense was noticeably weak.

So Hope refrained from reminding her friend that her prior efforts to forcibly detour tour buses past the inn had resulted in a massive traffic jam and a threatened civil action by the county constable.

"No more problems with the police, I assure you." The chef's dark eyes gleamed. "Pigs, that's what they are. But now from miles around people will fight to spend the night beneath our roof. All it takes is one small addition, one thing every tourist wants."

"Free breakfast?" Hope added a row of dollar signs to the buttercream crosses.

"You are too practical. What people want is excitement, passion. Danger mixed with romance."

"Don't tell me you're hiring Tom Cruise to work in the kitchen. Or maybe Mel Gibson. I doubt that I could afford either one for a sous-chef."

"It is a joke, no? I do not hire these men. Me, I find something much better for you than any man. I find you—a ghost."

"I've sensed magic and stirring history in Glenbrae, but never any ghosts."

“It is the perfect thing to make the tourist’s heart drum like thunder, non? First, they hear the bang-bang in the night.”

“That would be the water pipes going,” Hope muttered.

“Then they see a shape, all cobwebs and mist, gliding up the stairway.”

“That would probably be our dust motes.”

The chef ignored her. “Now they are frightened, trembling. They clutch their hearts and race forward, desperate to see more. Then they hear the throb of laughter, low and terrifying. Closer it comes, rippling down the stairs.” Gabrielle’s voice rose. “Now they shiver with fright, eager to tell all their friends about the haunted-house tour in Glenbrae. Soon you will be very rich.”

“I don’t know about that....”

“You Americans love the thought of a ghost in the bedroom, non? Voilà, in a week you have more visitors than beds to hold them and no more problems of money for you.”

Hope sat back slowly. “You’re saying that Glenbrae House needs a ghost in the bedrooms?”

“Of course not.” Gabrielle smiled sagely. “What we need is the idea of a ghost, one to summon only while the guests are here.”

“Out of thin air, I suppose.”

“But no. Out of the old curtains, of course.” Gabrielle sat forward eagerly. “And just today in the village I meet a friend whose specialty is Macbeth. I am certain he can help us.”

“Really, Gabrielle, I don’t think you understand—”

The Frenchwoman strode to the side door leading out to Hope’s herb garden. “You will please to come in now, Mr. Jeffrey.”

A gangling youth in a rumpled white shirt and threadbare flannels rose from behind the ragged hollyhocks and rocked anxiously from foot to foot. “Don’t blame Gabrielle,” he said, picking up the conversation as if he’d been part of it all along. “This was all my idea. I’ve been doing some amazing lighting effects for the drama project I just completed. ‘New Concepts in Hamlet and Macbeth.’ Might even be put down for an honors when I’m done.” He frowned, as if thinking of something unpleasant, then shrugged. “Not that any of that matters. The thing is, with backlighting and a double-colored floodlight, angles can be made to recede and corners can be blurred.”

Hope didn’t see the connection. “They can?”

“Of course.” His cultured voice burst with enthusiasm as he ambled into the kitchen. “Special effects are everything today. You take a pinch of dry ice here and some chemical smoke there.” He waved one hand. “Voilà.”

“Then you have a fire hazard on your hands?” Hope said dryly.

Jeffrey slid into the seat opposite, eyeing Gabrielle’s last wedge of almond cake. Hope was fairly certain she heard his stomach rumble. She decided that he could use a good meal, since he looked dangerously thin. “Be my guest,” she said, sliding the plate closer.

She had to appreciate his bitter effort to resist. “Oh, I couldn’t. We barely know each other, and Gabrielle made it for you, after all.” He looked at Hope’s chef with

doglike devotion.

Hope filed that look away for future reference. “But I insist. I couldn’t eat another bite.”

Hunger finally won out over good form. Half of the slice was gone within seconds, the other half consumed more slowly, while the young drama student’s pale blue eyes closed in silent rapture. He scraped the last piece of icing off with his thumb, then linked his fingers eagerly. “It will work.

Trust me, I’m an expert at ghosts.”

“You’re a parapsychologist?”

“No, a lighting specialist. Our test performance of Macbeth went off without the slightest hitch. Mr.

Willett-Jones said I was the best thing since dry ice.”

“Mr. Willett-Jones is your professor, I take it?”

“Hardly. He’s the drama critic for the Observer. It’s a small paper, but it has a good deal of clout in dramatic circles.”

Hope wondered if Jeffrey’s parents knew about those “dramatic circles.” Or if they cared. The boy looked as if he was wearing his last shirt, and he clearly hadn’t eaten properly for quite some time.

“Jeffrey is good, I swear it,” Gabrielle said firmly. “When he makes the lights follow his ghost onstage, my skin creeps most terribly. Even I believe it is real.” From the sternly pragmatic Gabrielle, this was praise indeed.

As the two stared at her, Hope had the perilous feeling she had lost the argument before it had even begun. “I’m afraid it’s out of the question. I won’t lure visitors to Glenbrae under false pretenses.”

“You don’t understand.” Jeffrey rocked forward on bony elbows. Though worn, his shirt was custom-made, with fine hand seaming inside. “All these old wrecks have ghosts. Glamis has dozens of them, and Windsor is chock-full of odd knocks and bangs.” Jeffrey looked very pleased with himself. “I remember my mum always used to say—” His smile abruptly faded.

“Even if I wanted to try it—which I don’t—there’s no way your scheme could work,” Hope said quickly. “It wouldn’t be convincing.”

Jeffrey roused himself from his reverie and jammed long fingers into his hair, frowning. “Wrong again. Gabrielle showed me around this morning while you were working, and I’ve got the whole place mapped out. I already have a list of the materials I’ll need.”

Hope swallowed. “Materials?”

Gabrielle beamed. “He is very organized, you see.”

Jeffrey tried to hide a flush at her praise. “All your visitors will see is a lovely hint of ghostly garments drifting down the stairs. Add some wonderfully maniacal laughter and it’s guaranteed to bring down the house.”

He moved closer to Gabrielle. Together the two stared at Hope.

“Now, just wait a minute. Even if this apparition did work, how would you get the word out? You can’t post a sign in the village announcing that Glenbrae House now has a resident ghost.”

Gabrielle cracked eggs, then added vanilla and cream for a rich chocolate sauce.

“Just today Jeffrey and I pass a group of tourists on the way to hike in the hills. I hear them complain there is nothing to see in Glenbrae. But I explain very carefully about the secret of our little village.”

“And just what is that?”

“The secret ghost of Glenbrae House, of course.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, shadows filled the great hall.

Plumes of smoke drifted along the oak banister. Only the wood paneling and stairway were visible in the semidarkness.

“Not like that. Slower. Glide.” Jeffrey’s voice was muffled as he crouched behind a velvet sofa, toying with a complicated electrical panel. “You’re supposed to be terrifying, remember? A bloody apparition from beyond the grave.”

Hope tugged at the microfiber shrouding her head and did her best to glide. “There’s no way that this can work, you two. I wouldn’t fool a blind man.”

“But you are wrong,” Gabrielle said. “In the darkness your sleeves glow like fire itself, and you are the picture of a ghost. Just keep coming. Jeffrey has run the wires under the carpet so you will not trip.”

“There’s another problem.” Hope paused on the stairs. “All this electrical equipment and wiring you mentioned is going to cost a lot of money—money that I just don’t have. I can’t afford to pay you, either. Maybe it would be better if we forgot the whole idea right now and—”

“No problem,” Jeffrey said eagerly. “I have a van full of equipment on loan from the university until the end of term, free and clear. It’s almost as if fate has stepped in. Actually, I think Glenbrae House was meant to have a ghost.”

Hope closed her eyes and prayed that Glenbrae House was not meant to have a lawsuit filed by an irate tourist.

As Jeffrey worked over a different row of buttons, the light intensified. Hope’s diaphanous gown rippled.

“Now start the tape recording, Gabrielle.”

A bloodcurdling howl erupted from the floorboards outside the kitchen. The effect of the shriek, combined with the ghostly illusion, was quite remarkable.

“I’m going to hit the lights. Hope, you can start moving along the landing.”

Dutifully Hope stepped forward, awaiting her cue. In the sudden darkness she could almost imagine the hushed silence of the house as it had been centuries before, lit only by candles and overseen by its stern-eyed master, the MacLeod.

An odd prickling sensation ran down her neck.

“Go,” Jeffrey ordered in his best stage director’s voice.

Hope glided down the stairs as Jeffrey had instructed, her hands floating out beside her.

“Perfect. Gabrielle, hit the third button.”

A pale gleam emanated from the ceiling, taking shape at the curve of the stairway, where two long sleeves, a ghastly fluorescent head and a trailing gown drifted over the steps.

No wind touched the room.

No noise marked the apparition’s descent.

Hope finally reached the turn of the stairs, feeling her way with her fingers in the

darkness. She could barely breathe beneath the cowl Jeffrey had draped over her head, and she could see almost nothing. At the third step, something caught the hem of Hope's ghostly gown, and when she grappled for the wall, something pricked her finger hard.

She bit back a hiss of pain. "Jeffrey, I don't think—"

"Great. Just fabulous. Now do the rest, the way we rehearsed."

"But I still don't think—"

"Go on."

Sighing, Hope raised her arm. As the lights changed, her ghostly shape took full form in the darkness. Then the silence was split by a shattering scream, and the ghostly head separated from its body and flew toward the ceiling, accompanied by ghoulish laughter.

Outside, the front steps creaked. "Miss Hope?" The oak door opened slowly. "Is anyone here?" A white-haired head appeared in the gloom of the front hall.

Wildly Hope clutched at the yards of fabric trapping her face. She tried to answer, but every sound was muffled by her costume. After a moment she recognized the voice.

Morwenna Wishwell. An inveterate meddler, but a wonderful neighbor.

With sickening clarity Hope envisioned her first lawsuit: a spry old lady shocked into an early grave by the sight of a headless apparition fluttering over Glenbrae's oak banister.