

The Highlander's Inn

By Susa Morgan Black

Chapter One

She stood on the sidewalk, facing the inn and waited. Villagers crossed the street to avoid her, tourists walked around, giving her a wide berth. Women shuddered and pulled their children away, men hid their faces and hurried on. The old woman's face had a wild eldritch beauty. She dressed in an ebony ankle length gown, long raven tresses streaked with gray peeping out from the large, loosely woven black shawl pulled over her head and held close around her thin body. She could have lived in any century in Scottish history for all her clothes told about her. The word that came to mind on seeing her, was *witch*. She stood outside the inn, her pale face grim, arms folded across her bony chest, and waited.

A woman's wan face appeared in a diamond-paned window of the upper story at the inn. She nodded briefly to the ominous woman, and pulled her face away. The old woman clasped her shawl tighter under her chin, and moved off. People parted, stared and shivered as she traveled down the main street through Bendubh, and disappeared into the woods.



If stones could talk, what a story there would be to tell, Shona thought to herself.

The Highlander's Inn was old, the stones weathered and worn through centuries of use. Shona looked up at the three-story building before entering, noting the small diamond shaped multipaned windows with old fashioned green shutters, and the steep tile roof that at one time would have been thatched with straw.

Shona allowed her focus to blur. Calming the chatter of her mind, she could imagine rolling time backwards with this building as a fixed point like a rock in the middle of a river, as history flowed around it. She could see centuries of people in their rough garb coming and going, horses and carriages arriving and departing over the cobble stone streets, shaggy kilted highlanders come down from their mountain retreats, soldiers dismounting and entering the establishment for a drink, nobles taking their leisure at the inn on a break in their journey, women passing by, going about their business in long skirts and warm woolen shawls, local laborers stopping for ale and beer after a hard day's work, ragged children dashing in between carts and horses begging for coins on the street. Shona sighed and allowed her eyes to focus once more.

The traveler's brochure on Bendubh, Scotland, explained that the Highlander's Inn was next door to the village smithy, and both buildings were well over 500 years old. The current proprietor, Mr. Raibeart Stewart, was a working blacksmith as well as innkeeper.

The inn catered to both tourists and blacksmith apprentices, capitalizing on the huge comeback of traditional skills and handicrafts throughout the Western world.

“This is the perfect place to do the research for my book on blacksmiths!” Shona thought to herself. Her Scottish grandfather had owned the last operating blacksmith shop in the City of Oakland, California.

“I can’t believe I’m really here.” Shona whispered to herself. She had saved the money and taken a leave of absence from her job as a nurse in Oakland to finally come to the lands of her Welsh, Irish and Scottish ancestors, to write. It was a long time dream come true.

Shona sighed happily and shrugged her duffel bag back onto her shoulders, picked up her luggage, and entered the inn.

The inn was paneled in a dark wood, gas light fixtures were wired and refitted with dim electric bulbs. A long wooden counter beneath the stairwell fronted a massive wooden cabinet divided into cubby holes for the guest’s mail. Next to the cabinet was a board with metal hooks containing twenty room keys. A door on the other side of the cabinet, under the stairway, led to the plainly marked proprietor’s office. A pretty young woman stood at attention behind the counter, waiting to serve Shona.

“Can I help you, Miss?” She asked politely in a distinct Irish accent.

“Yes, I’m Shona Alexander, and I’ve booked a room here for three months.”

The woman studied the schedule book and shook back her long blonde hair which had swung in front of her pale face. Shona imagined her Irish ancestors must have mingled with the Vikings, for she certainly looked like a Nordic beauty.

With a puzzled look in her large, pale blue eyes, the young woman said, “I have you down for tomorrow night, Miss Alexander. All our rooms are booked for tonight. Your room will be free by noon, tomorrow.”

“I have a receipt here in my purse, I booked this room well in advance.” Shona fished in her purse and retrieved the receipt. “Here it is, see - paid in advance for three months, starting today.”

The young woman looked at the receipt and nodded. “I’d best get the proprietor. There seems to be a mistake.” And she disappeared into the manager’s office behind her.

The man that emerged was huge, almost a giant. He had to duck under the lintel to avoid hitting his head. “This must be Raibeart Stewart,” Shona thought to herself noticing the bulging muscles across his chest strain the cloth of his jacket. “He definitely has the build of a blacksmith.”

“I’m Raibeart Stewart, the proprietor of the Highlander’s Inn. Can I help you, Miss?” The voice that seemed to come from the depths of his barrel chest was soft and deep, with a thick Scot’s brogue. Raibeart Stewart had the kind of face that brooked no nonsense. It was a handsome face in a craggy, lionine way, with his large aquiline nose that joined his forehead almost without a break. His eyes were a piercing hazel, his lank chestnut hair cut to his collar, was brushed back off his face. There was a touch of humor to his wide, thin mouth, and a slight crinkle to his eyes that mitigated the fierce countenance he presented to the world. It was a formidable, but likable face, Shona thought appreciatively.

Shona explained her predicament and showed him her receipt.

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss Alexander. There’s been a mix up. Let me see if I can book you in for the night at the hotel in Craighorn, about a half an hour’s drive south of here. We’ll pay the bill there, and knock off a day’s lodging here in compensation for the inconvenience to you.”

Shona sighed and said impatiently. “Look, Mr. Stewart. It’s late, I’m dead tired, and I can’t drive any more tonight. I don’t care if you put a cot in the kitchen, I just need some place to lie down.”

Stewart said patiently, “We’re really not prepared to do that, Miss Alexander. However, if we can find a booking for you in Craighorn, I will drive you myself, and pick you up tomorrow morning.” He turned to the receptionist, “Riona, give Craighorn Hotel a call, won’t you, and see if you can book Miss Alexander in.”

“Yes, sir.” Riona reached for the phone on the counter. Behind her something clattered to the floor. She turned around to look, and stiffened, eyes wide. It was an old, rusty iron key and ring, which had fallen from hook number 20 on the board. Shona noticed that Mr. Stewart had stiffened as well.

“Put it back, Riona.” he said calmly.

Riona hesitated, afraid to touch it. Mr. Stewart impatiently stooped to gather it up, and replaced it on its hook. Hands shaking, Riona once again moved to pick up the telephone, and once again, key number 20 clattered to the floor. Riona’s eyes rolled up in her head, and she fell limp, barely caught in time by Mr. Stewart, who uttered “Damn!” in consternation.

Shona’s professional instincts prompted her to take over. “Do you have a couch in your office?”

“Yes.” Stewart answered shortly as he kicked the door open wider and carried Riona inside. Shona followed him as he carefully settled Riona on the couch. “I’ll call the doctor.” He said.

“No need, Mr. Stewart. I’m a nurse.”

Stewart’s eyebrows rose up in surprise and he asked, “What do you want me to do?”

Shona placed a pillow under Riona’s hips to elevate them above her head and said, “If you don’t have any smelling salts, ammonia will do. And bring a clean cloth.”

“Right” he said and left, returning a moment later with a bottle of cleaning ammonia and a rag. Shona poured a liberal dose of ammonia on the cloth, and held it several inches from Riona’s nose, not wanting to burn her sinuses while reviving her.

Riona, awoke with a start and stared at Stewart with horror. “The key!” she whispered in a shaky voice.

“What key?” asked Shona, then remembered the key that had mysteriously fallen off the board twice by itself.

“It is nothing. She is a simple Irish country girl and a superstitious fool.” Robbie says gruffly. “Is she going to be all right?”

“Her pulse is back to normal, and her eyes are normal. She had some kind of shock. Something to do with the key that fell. I’d let her rest here for a bit before she goes back to work. Is that a room key?”

“It was at one time, we don’t let it anymore. It isn’t properly fitted out - there’s no plumbing or electricity. We just store old furniture in there.”

“Well, that room would be fine with me, if you could just stick a cot in there.”

“I’m really not prepared to let that room.” Stewart was adamant, his mouth set in an obstinate line, his fierce eyes narrowed.

“Listen Mr. Stewart, I have a receipt here for a room at your establishment that I booked well in advance. If you don’t provide me with a room tonight, I shall report you to the authorities tomorrow.” Shona could be stubborn herself when she had to be.

The big Scot was angry. He wasn’t used to being defied, or having a brash American woman order him about. It would serve her right if she had the shit scared out of her before morning.

He turned to Riona, who was sitting up and had obviously recovered. “Open up No. 20 for Miss Alexander. Give it a good dusting. I believe there is already a bed in it, although I don’t know what condition it’s in after all these years.”

“Number 20?” Riona’s voice shook. “You want me to go in there?”

“What’s wrong with the room?” Shona asked, “You act as if it’s haunted!” She noticed Riona’s face turn white and said, amused, “You *do* think it’s haunted! Tell me about it!”

“Nonsense” harrumphed Robbie, “We don’t let it because it has no amenities.”

“Why not? Why would a prosperous inn like this one waste a perfectly good room?”

“Because the silly towns people and maids refuse to go into the room!” Robbie roared angrily, and turned his back on both the women and walked out, leaving Shona and Riona to stare at each other.

“I’d best get on with it, Miss.” Riona said with a sigh, and picked herself up off the couch. “Thank you for taking care of me. You just wait in the bar, and I’ll send someone down for your bags when I’ve prepared the room.” Riona could see that she was shaking with fear.

“Is the room so awful then, Riona?” Shona asked, amused.

“I don’t know, Ma’am. I’ve never been in it. No one will go in there at all. Not even Mr. Stewart, himself.” And she left.

The bottom floor of the inn consisted of a small dining room with large glass double doors that looked out to the well maintained kitchen garden. There was a foyer with a huge brick fireplace, couches, and tables for the inn’s guests to take their leisure in. The kitchen, the manager’s office and front desk, and at the end of the building - a public bar completed the bottom floor, while the top two floors contained the inn’s guest rooms. Shona had already noted that the smithy, with it’s attached cottage, was next door.

“I guess things haven’t gotten off to a very good beginning with Raibeart Stewart.” Shona thought to herself regretfully, “I hope I haven’t alienated him to the point that he won’t be willing to help with my book.”

The pub was a dark timbered tavern with diamond shaped lattice windows and a wide brick fireplace. The marred oak tables looked as if they had been there for centuries. The bar took up one entire wall, with a mirrored rack for all the different bottles of wines and liquors, one whole shelf with almost every brand of single malt Scotch made in Scotland. The walls and ceiling beams were festooned with historic Scottish weapons. The glasses hung from wooden racks above the counter, and there were ales and beers on tap as well. Along another wall was a dart board and blackboard for score keeping. Several lads stood or sat near the game area and competed for drinks and change. Shona sat down on a bar stool.

“Can I help you, Miss?” Asked a tall, gaunt bartender from behind the bar. He had flaming red hair combed straight back and fixed in a long ponytail. His boney face was as friendly as Mr. Stewart’s was fierce.

“Sure, I’ll have a Glenfiddish, neat, please.”

The man’s red eyebrows went up in amusement. Shona suddenly wondered if the ladies in Scotland ever drank hard liquor in bars, judging by his quizzical reaction.

“That’s a strong drink for a wee lassie like yourself. Are you sure you can handle it?” He grinned at her.

Shona was anything but wee, with her thin 5’ 10” frame. “I’m American.” she said by way of explanation.

“American, is it? That explains it, then!” His grin grew wider as he poured her drink and handed it over. Shona pulled out some pound notes and placed it on the counter.

The sound of a high pitched wail pierced the air, and everyone in the bar froze. It sounded like it had come from upstairs. Shona left her drink on the bar and dashed upstairs, sure it was Riona who sounded like she must have opened number 20 and encountered it’s mysterious ghost head on. Or perhaps headless, for that matter.

On the third floor, Shona saw several people peering into a door. They parted for Mr. Stewart, who boldly entered. Shona followed him in and saw Riona pressed flat against the wall, wide eyes staring at the bed, gibbering with fear. Her pail of water had spilled, the mop and duster lay askew on the floor.

“Get her out of here, Collin.” Stewart ordered. “Take her downstairs, into my office.” The bartender, Collin, who had followed Shona up the two flights, gently guided the shaking Riona downstairs into the manager’s office, where she collapsed on the couch, unable to speak a cohesive word. Collin leaned over her, his face strained with a look of concern.

“What’s going on?” He asked his boss, looking up at Stewart, who had followed him down stairs.

“Where’s that damned nurse?” Stewart muttered, ignoring Collin’s question, and looked around the anxious faces of various staff and guests, noticing that Shona’s wasn’t among them.

“Damn.” he muttered as he bounded back up the stairs.

Shona hadn’t followed the entourage of people downstairs. Even her professional duty to the girl couldn’t draw her out of this extraordinary room. Shona felt slightly disoriented - the same eerie feeling came over her again as had earlier that evening when she squinted her eyes and looked at the inn through the mists of history. She was not sure whether she was imagining the room now, and shook her head, tried to clear her mind before turning in a slow circle, staring about her.

Number 20 was an eighteenth century room, with a canopied four-poster bed, and a wooden rack at the foot, for the neatly folded quilt comforter. A wood framed full length mirror stood against the corner, next to an ancient dresser, with a pair of brass candle holders. There was a porcelain basin and pitcher for washing up, a porcelain chamber pot, brass spittoon, a massive wooden wardrobe, and a large woven rag rug. The tattered curtains were the remnants of fine white lace. The walls held watercolors of castles, gardens, and sailing ships at sea, and portraits of people in seventeenth and eighteenth century clothing. Shona felt as if she had walked through a time tunnel into another world. Dust was everywhere, she could not step a foot without raising a cloud of dust. She felt her skin prickle with delight. All the sound had gone out of the world, and there was the stillness of a tomb that had been disturbed after centuries of solitude.

One of the pictures, a faded painting of a man in an ancient kilt with a saber at his side, and a bonnet with the Jacobite rose, fell to the floor with a crash. Shona jumped and stared at the picture. The glass hadn't shattered, she noted, despite the impact.

"I told you, Miss Alexander, this room is not habitable. I really don't advise you to stay here." Mr. Stewart was leaning against the door frame, filling it with his long, powerful body, arms crossed over his massive chest. Shona stared at him, startled, then unreasonably, resented him for his intrusion.

"Well, it's after midnight, and I'm tired. Unless you want to give up your own room and sleep here yourself?" Shona suggested sarcastically, regretting it almost immediately. She didn't understand why this man rankled her so, almost from the moment they met. Stewart's keen eyes narrowed, and he merely watched her, as if to see what the odd American woman was going to do next.

Ignoring him, Shona walked over to the picture and examined the back of it - the wire was still attached. Then she examined the nail in the wall, which was secure. She shrugged, "It looks like you've got a poltergeist. What happened in here? Is there a story connected with this room?"

Stewart sighed, then patiently recounted, "The picture you're holding is of my seven times great grandfather, William Stewart. He fought for Prince Charles at Culloden in 1746, along with many men who had been recruited by the old Laird in this district. Well, as you probably know, the Jacobites lost the war against the Crown, and were slaughtered. Most of the bodies were burned or buried at Culloden, but my ancestor survived, and managed to bring back the body of the local blacksmith for burial. He was the only one from their regiment to return to Bendubh alive. William married the innkeeper's daughter, Moira MacAllister, and their son, Duncan Stewart, eventually inherited the inn from his grandfather."

"I see." Shona said as she respectfully replaced the picture on the wall. She walked over to the bed and patted the cover, promptly raising another cloud of dust. "Perhaps it is William who haunts this room?" Shona asked.

“I don’t know what the problem is. No one uses this room anymore, they haven’t as long as anyone can remember. It has a bad reputation. Maybe there’s a poltergeist, like you say.” He shrugged. “I suppose you’re going to insist on staying here, ghost or no?”

“Right. I’m a writer, and I’m interested in history, folklore and the supernatural. If I meet a ghost, it would be an educational experience for me, and I’d relish it.”

“You’re a fool, Miss Alexander.” Stewart shook his head.

“Perhaps. But if everyone else runs in fear of this entity, perhaps it will communicate with me if I don’t run, and I’ll be able to find out what it wants. If it is a true haunting, it’s here for a reason.”

“A true haunting?” Stewart asked, eyebrows raised, “As opposed to a false haunting? What do you know of such things, anyway, Miss Alexander?”

“I’ve studied parapsychology in college back in the States.”

At this, Stewart’s mouth quivered with mirth. “Did you now?”

Shona continued, oblivious to his amusement, and enthusiastically launching into one of her favorite subjects, “A poltergeist is not a ghost. It’s unconscious telekinetic energy. The event originates with someone living who can move objects with their mind. It’s the same kind of ability as being able to bend spoons without touching them, only on a grander scale, and the person usually does not realize they are doing it.”

“Have you seen this before?”

“Yes, I studied it at Rosebridge College in California.” She said condescendingly, “They’ve done experiments with telepathy, telekinesis and such. Usually, this sort of thing happens to teenage girls going through menarche and middle aged women going through menopause - it is caused by the excessive energy at this time of great physical and emotional changes in their lives. The energy is shot off into the atmosphere, and results in furniture moving, things falling or flying through the air, etc. There are many documented incidents throughout history.” She informed him.

“Fascinating.” Stewart’s lips quirked, “So it’s not a ghost, then? That’s comforting.”

“I didn’t say that.” Shona went blithely on, ignoring his sarcasm. “There are other possible explanations that need to be eliminated before you can assume it’s a ghost. For instance, the phenomena could be a psychic impression of an event. It’s like a piece of film that randomly gets replayed in the environment at certain times, or under certain conditions. It’s always repetitive, going through the same sequence of motions and sounds every time, sometimes through doors that have been walled over centuries ago, or up staircases that are no longer there. It’s usually caused by a person or people leaving a strong emotional psychic discharge, as a result of a traumatic experience such as a

murder or a battle. This type of phenomena cannot interact with the observers and seems completely oblivious to us. But I don't think that's what's going on here - because the "film loop" type of ghost cannot cause physical manifestation - they can't move objects. Once you've eliminated all the other explanations, you are left with the probability of a ghost - an actual sentient spirit living on in a disembodied form."

"So what have we here?" Stewart asked doubtfully, beginning to look uncomfortable.

"I don't know. But I intend to spend the night and find out."

"If it is a real ghost, wouldn't that be dangerous?"

"Sometimes. But curiosity killed the cat. I'm really not afraid."

"Seems you aren't. But you may be before this night is out." Stewart warned. "If I can't talk you out of leaving, I'll bring up your bags."

"Bring up my bags." Shona nodded, and Mr. Stewart, with a shrug, turned around and left her.

A few moments later he brought up Shona's bags and deposited them in the room.

"Look, Miss Alexander, whatever you find in here - keep it to yourself." He said sternly, "I don't want to alarm the other guests, frighten the staff, or ruin the trade here by bringing up those old ghost stories. No publicity, all right?"

Shona nodded noncommittally, her eyes on the picture of William Stewart.

Then he left, abruptly saying "Good night." over his shoulder and she heard his heavy tread down the hall. Strangely, Shona regretted his leaving. For all that he irritated her, his large presence made her feel safe from the unknown perils of this strange room. She suddenly felt terribly alone, wondering if she had made the right decision after all.

Mr. Stewart went down into the bar and spotted Riona sitting on a barstool, with Collin looking solicitously after her from behind the bar.

Collin looked up at him, "I thought I'd steady her nerves with a wee bit of scotch, if you don't mind. I know it's against the rules, Robbie, but she really needed it."

"It's all right," Stewart said gruffly, then eyeing Riona who looked slightly tipsy, he added, "Just this once." He turned back to Collin, "How is she? Any more fainting spells?"

"She's coming along just fine. I don't think she'll be much use to you for the rest of the night, though."

“Riona, why don’t you knock off early tonight. You’ve had a bad day. Go on home and sleep it off.” Stewart said generously.

“Th-thank you, sir.” Riona said doubtfully, slipping off the barstool. She looked back at Collin with a certain amount of longing, then, giving Stewart an apprehensive look, she walked unsteadily out of the bar.

Stewart chuckled, “She’s crazy about you, you know.”

Collin grinned ruefully as he handed Stewart a scotch, “I know. Can’t be helped. They always fall in love with the bartender, never the innkeeper.”

“That’s why I hired you,” Stewart informed him, “To distract the ladies, so I can live in peace.”

“I don’t know how much peace we’re going to have around here with that American woman, and opening up number 20.”

“I know. Unfortunately, she’s booked here for three months.” Stewart said dolefully, “Doing some kind of research for a book. I’m moving her to another room tomorrow, and boarding number 20 shut for good. Throwing out the damn key.”

“Well, trouble sure comes in pretty packages. Or hadn’t you noticed, Robbie?” Collin grinned slyly at his boss.

“I noticed.” Stewart said grimly and took a huge swig of scotch.