

# Chapter One

My name is Allegra Fairweather and I'm a paranormal investigator. Do you have trouble with ghosts? Witches? Shapeshifters? I'm the woman to call. Just don't call me a Ghostbuster. The last guy who did that ended up flat on his back with my boot at his throat. Okay, I overreacted, but I'm tired of my profession being confused with a movie—and a comedy at that. Real paranormal investigation is a serious and dangerous business.

I had recently traveled from my home in San Diego to the chilly shore of Scotland's Loch Furness. Usually I don't travel halfway across the world on a whim, but Douglas MacGregor had a rather intriguing problem and I couldn't resist poking my nose into his business. My first grade teacher told me no good ever came from being nosy. She was wrong. I've made a nice career out of it, thank you very much.

After parking my rental car, I did a quick reconnoiter. Loch Road ran the length of the village, curved right and then followed the shore of the loch like a lazy snake. My eyes were drawn to the broad expanse of water that nestled between the surrounding hills. Today it was calm. The entire scene—glassy loch, quaint villages and the few isolated cottages that lined the shore—was as pretty and peaceful as a postcard.

Turning my back on the scenic splendor, I took a brisk walk up Loch Road. The village of Furness boasted a general store, a post office, a greengrocer, a butcher and

no less than three pubs. I guessed there wasn't much to do here but drink, which wasn't a happy thought considering most paranormal activity is reported by drunks. That's a statistical fact, by the way.

Hoping Douglas MacGregor wasn't having a love affair with the bottle, I continued down Loch Road until I came to the address he had given me. My heart sank. Mac's, Loch Road, Furness, was the address of the largest pub in the village.

Centuries old, its facade had the kind of dark glamour that would not have been out of place in a novel by Charlotte Bronte. I, however, was no Jane Eyre. Feeling more like Wyatt Earp, I pushed open the doors and strode inside.

The tables and chairs were empty but the old wood gleamed a welcome. I could imagine this place full and noisy. Especially when I caught sight of the bar.

Everything from the enameled handles for pulling beer to the wooden shelves lined with bottles and glasses made me feel as though I had taken a step into Scottish history. The bartender was the sole incongruity.

Caught in the act of polishing beer glasses, he looked like the worst kind of Wild West cliché. Or so I thought until he raised his head and turned my way.

In a heartbeat I registered his dark hair, electric blue eyes, and the hint of a fine body beneath his sweater. It was a tasty package. Moving right up to the bar, I held out my hand and introduced myself. He responded in an accent that was as thick as it was sexy.

"Pleased to meet you, Allegra. I'm Douglas McGregor."

Looking into his sober blue eyes I sensed that alcohol had nothing to do with the paranormal activity he had

witnessed. He might serve alcohol but I guessed he didn't imbibe too much.

Putting down the glass he was polishing, he offered me a drink.

Usually I drink pina coladas, preferably on a warm beach at sunset, but right now I was prepared to drink anything to ward off the chill. "Whiskey," I told him. "Neat."

When he started talking different brands, I said, "Any kind, you choose."

After pouring us each a drink he came around the bar and headed to a corner table. I followed. As he set down our glasses I noticed he was an inch or two shorter than me. That wasn't unusual. At six foot and one half inch I was taller than a lot of men. But Douglas made up for his lack of height with a perfectly proportioned body.

He must have noticed me checking him out because he ran his eyes equally appraisingly over me from top to toe. Apparently, unlike some men, he wasn't put off by a tall woman with very short red hair and an athletic body.

I have no qualms about mixing business with pleasure, and this job was beginning to look as though it would have some interesting perks. But, leaving pleasure out of the equation for the moment, I got down to business.

Douglas had been referred to me by one of my clients—I never advertise, operate solely on word-of-mouth. When he emailed me requesting information about an unusual rose growing on the shore of Loch Furness, I was immediately interested. Although he was unable to provide a photograph, I suspected it was the legendary Dedfield Rose, otherwise known as the Flower of Death. Since I'd always wanted to see one in the flesh, so to

speak, I cashed in my frequent-flyer points and jumped on the first plane to Scotland. Call it a research trip—that's how it would appear on my tax return.

Besides, I'd just earned heaps of cash dealing with a Bigfoot who'd made a career out of terrorizing Canadian shoe stores. Most females, even female Bigfoots, like shoes, but it's impossible to find a pair in their size. With a little help from a shoemaker who had no qualms about copying the latest Jimmy Choos, I sent Bigfoot back into the wilderness with handfuls of shopping bags and a wide grin on her hairy face.

Hoping Douglas's problem would have an equally happy outcome, I asked, "Have there been any new developments since you contacted me?"

He thought for a moment before replying. "Old Mrs. Ferguson's had some more nightmares about drowning."

"Let's focus on the rose for now," I said, making a quick note to interview Mrs. Ferguson later. "I'd like to see it immediately."

I got to my feet and followed him out of the pub and onto the main street.

When he spotted my rental car, he said, "Do you mind driving? My car's off the road at the moment."

"Sure," I said. "Get in." By the time I slid into the driver's seat he was sitting beside me buckling his seatbelt.

I drove along Loch Road until Douglas told me to pull over near some scrubby vegetation. The Dedfield Rose was nowhere in sight. Hoping I wasn't the victim of a hoax—it's happened before, believe me—I glanced questioningly at Douglas.

"The rose is this way," he said, getting out of the car and moving down a path that led through low-lying scrub

to the gray water of the loch.

The Dedfield Rose was surrounded by a barren circle of damp earth, as though the other plants feared to get too close. And who could blame them. The rosebush was twisted into a shape so grotesque and painful I almost expected it to groan. A chill whispered across my bare neck, making my shoulders spasm in an involuntary shudder. Something evil had happened here. You could hear it in the absence of birdsong, smell it in the stench of decay coming from the tightly closed buds. I touched one. The petals were cold as death. When I squeezed gently, bright red drops oozed onto my palm. They stank like fresh blood.

Douglas said, “I tried to send some away for analysis, but...”

He didn’t need to explain. The drops were already evaporating. It took less than a minute for them to disappear completely. The only evidence that I had ever held them was little circles of wrinkled skin on my palm.

I pulled out my notebook and scribbled down the features of the rose. It might seem strange that I use a pen and paper instead of an iPad or whatever, but I find that when dealing with the elusive world of the paranormal, handling solid writing implements is oddly comforting. Like an anchor for a boat that’s bobbing around in a choppy sea.

After trying and failing to photograph the Dedfield Rose—its image refused to be captured—I spent some time looking around the area until Douglas said, “I’ve done a bit of research since I emailed you. There’s a passage in one of the history books about dozens of Dedfield Roses springing up before the Battle of Furness in the eighteenth century.”

“Uh-huh?” I murmured, still studying the land around the rose.

“During the Jacobite rebellion,” Douglas went on. “The battle was a disaster, huge casualties on our side.” He walked around the rosebush, leaving footprints in the wet soil. “There’s going to be another disaster. More death. That’s what the Dedfield Rose means, doesn’t it?”

“According to the legend, yes,” I said evenly, “but since there’s only one bush here it’s unlikely there’ll be a disaster on the scale of the Battle of Furness.”

Douglas took a deep breath. “I love this village. And the villagers should be able to sleep safe in their beds. Allegra, I don’t have a lot of money, all I can offer you is free bed and board. Will you stay and solve this case?”

“Well...” I hesitated.

Oh, who was I kidding? I’d decided the minute I stepped on the plane that I’d do everything possible to save the village from whatever disaster the rose heralded. Yeah, I’m that kind of girl.

I met Douglas’s eyes. “Done.”

We shook on it, and then he said, “We should be getting back to the village. It’s almost evening. Mac’s will be starting to fill up.

He was right. I heard the hum of voices before we entered the pub. As I pushed open the door, a middle-aged waitress hurried past carrying a tray of drinks.

“Where’ve you been, Douglas?” she muttered. “I’m run off my feet.”

“Sorry Bess. I’ve been showing Allegra Fairweather the rose.” He introduced us.

Bess MacGregor was his cousin. She made an effort to smile and shook my hand but I could tell by the way she looked at me that she had no time for the paranormal.

If she ever came face-to-face with it she would probably give it a piece of her mind and send it on its way.

In some respects I envied her ignorance. I've been face-to-face with the paranormal more times than I care to remember and I can assure you that practicality and tough words are useless. Especially when you're dealing with evil, which is all too often the cause of paranormal activity.

As Douglas headed behind the bar he told Bess, "Allegra is here at my invitation, please show her the same courtesy you'd show any other guest."

"Aye, don't speak of the paranormal in my hearing and we'll get along just fine." Bess offered me a truce-like smile and asked if I intended to eat dinner at the pub.

Douglas overheard. "Of course she is. She has bed and board here until the case is solved."

Bess shrugged as though she couldn't care whether I ate or not and headed for the kitchen. She returned with a huge plate of roast lamb and vegetables.

Yum. I found an empty table and ate quickly washing my meal down with a small lager. While I ate I considered my next move. It seemed obvious that I should interview Old Mrs. Ferguson about her dreams.

When I had drained the last drops of lager from my glass I got her address from Douglas and headed down Loch Road in search of her cottage.

With the descent of night, a deeper chill had settled over the village. Glad that I had worn my warm jacket, I proceeded to the end of the village shops. Douglas had told me that Mrs. Ferguson's cottage was three dwellings past the last shop on the right, which was exactly where I found it.

I pushed open her gate and walked up the garden

path. There was a light on inside and the sound of a television. When I knocked, the noise of the television died, and an external light went on over my head.

I half expected Mrs. Ferguson to ask who I was before opening the door but instead the door flew open, revealing a tiny woman with a wide smile. Although her face was deeply wrinkled with all of her ninety-nine years, her brown eyes were as bright and lucid as a woman a quarter her age.

Looking up at me as though she was checking out Everest, she beckoned me inside.

As I entered her cozy living room, I offered my hand, "Allegra Fairweather."

"Aye, and I'm Emily Ferguson, but you knew that. Take a seat by the fire while I make tea."

"Can I do anything to help?" I asked, wondering how she managed to look after this place all by herself. Douglas had told me she lived alone but not how she managed to do all the chores a cottage and garden entailed.

"I dinnae need help," said Mrs. Ferguson. "Make yourself at home. I won't be long."

Moving closer to the open fire, I noticed that the room was spotlessly clean. Not only were all the little ornaments on the mantelpiece neatly arranged and dusted, the cushions on the armchairs were plumped and inviting.

Resisting the urge to sink into one of the chairs, I took a quick look at the pictures hanging on the walls. As well as several watercolors of the loch, there was a plethora of photographs of a corps de ballet.

"I'm third on the left," said Mrs. Ferguson, walking back into the room bearing a tray laden with two cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, a milk jug and a plate of cookies.

After setting it down, she came to stand beside me.

“I wasn’t good enough to dance any of the great roles,” she said, looking longingly at the photographs, “but I was good enough to earn my living in the corps de ballet until Edwin Ferguson came backstage. He wasn’t a great fan of ballet but it did combine his great passions—classical music and a fine pair of feminine legs. It was my legs that brought him backstage. Six months later I became Mrs. Ferguson and returned with him to the village of his birth. I’ve been here ever since—almost eighty years.”

I didn’t ask when Mr. Ferguson had died. Instead I focused on the delicately embroidered words of a framed sampler.

“What language is that?” I asked her.

“Gaelic,” she replied. “It’s a wee spell for protecting the house.”

“Does it work?”

“Aye.” A secretive smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Sit ye down and have some tea. Do you take milk? Sugar?”

Usually I didn’t take tea at all. I preferred coffee strong and black. But when in Rome...

I told her I’d take the tea black. Balancing the cup and saucer in one hand, trying not to miss the convenience of a mug, I took a cookie from the plate she offered. The cookie tasted of real butter and rich dark chocolate. I licked my lips. No store on earth sold cookies this good.

“Did you bake them yourself?” I asked.

Mrs. Ferguson leaned toward me and whispered, “Can ye keep a secret?” I assured her I could. “The brownies made them.”

I thought I understood. Girl Scouts here were

sometimes referred to as Brownies. I said as much to Mrs. Ferguson but she instantly corrected me.

“Brownies,” she said, “are wee folk—you might call them elves—who live in my house and do the chores while I sleep.”

It would have been easy to dismiss Mrs. Ferguson as senile, but as a paranormal investigator I’ve seen things even I found hard to believe. So I took her at her word. Clearly *someone* was keeping this cottage spic and span. Maybe it *was* elves...I mean brownies.

“More tea?” she asked.

I declined the tea but accepted another cookie. Between mouthfuls I asked her to tell me about her dreams.

“How much has Douglas told you?” she asked.

“Just that you had the same dream three nights in a row. Something about drowning.”

The sparkle left her eyes. “Aye, that’s true,” she said. “I dreamed I was floating in the loch. The water was blissfully warm, which it never is in reality. I felt so secure and comfortable. Completely at peace. Then the water started to froth and bubble. All of a sudden it turned ice cold.

“I was sucked down, deep, deep into the black water. I couldn’t see or hear or breathe. I opened my mouth and water gushed into my lungs.”

Flipping open my notebook, I scribbled frantically, taking down every word she said.

“Was that the end of the dream?”

“Aye,” she whispered.

“And you’ve had this dream three times?”

She nodded.

“Exactly the same each time?”

“Exactly,” she said.

I thought about that for a while. “Douglas told me you’ve had other dreams that came true.”

“Only if I have the dream three times.” She continued in a singsong voice, “*Dream times three, true it be.*”

I looked at the tiny woman opposite me. There seemed little chance of her going swimming in the loch, which meant that her dream couldn’t possibly come true. Hoping I wouldn’t offend her, I pointed this out.

Instead of becoming defensive, which I had half expected, she leaned toward me. “Douglas hasn’t told ye much about me, has he?”

I confirmed that he hadn’t and waited for her to go on.

“Let me tell ye about the worst week of my life. Every night I dreamed about pain—down my arm, across my chest—it was agonizing. On the eighth day Edwin died of a massive heart attack. I knew it was coming but I couldn’t persuade him to see a doctor. He said he’d had more than his rightful three score and ten years—twenty-five more to be precise—and it was time to go. He even suggested we die together. We argued over that. I’m not the kind to kill myself. I’ll go when the good Lord tells me it’s time and not before.

“What I’m trying to tell ye is that, although the events in my dreams appear to be happening to me, in real life they always happen to others. Someone is going to drown in the loch. It might be Douglas or Sir Alastair or even ye, lassie, but it won’t be me.”

It wouldn’t be me either. There was no way I’d swim in the loch unless the temperature rose by at least twenty degrees, but perhaps Douglas and Sir Alastair, whoever

he was, were made of sterner stuff.

“Mrs. Ferguson, I’d like to clarify a couple of things about your dream. When you felt yourself being sucked under, did it feel as though someone was pulling you under?”

“Ye mean like hands around my ankles?” She shook her head. “No, nothing like that.”

“What about *something* pulling you under?”

Once again she shook her head.

I decided to go for the direct approach. “Do you believe there is anything living in the loch, Mrs. Ferguson?”

There was a moment of shocked silence then she laughed, “This isn’t Loch Ness, it’s Loch Furness. There’s no monster here.”

That wasn’t quite what I’d had in mind, but I let the subject rest.

“Have you seen the rose by the loch?” I asked her.

“The Dedfield Rose? I’ve not seen it yet but I know what it means.” Her old eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

I squeezed her hand, offering what little comfort I could.

I made some more entries in my notebook but I soon realized Mrs. Ferguson couldn’t tell me any more. It was eight when I left her pouring a bowl of milk for her brownies.

Outside a pale moon competed with the lights inside the houses, but neither did much to illuminate the dark street. The chill in the air was now bone-numbing, and despite the darkness I thought I could see little curls of mist wreathing the nearby gardens. There was something eerie about this village at night. I would be glad to return to the safety of Mac’s.

As I strode toward the pub a breeze began to blow bringing the bitter cold of ice and snowfields into the village. It seemed excessively cold for early fall. Reminding myself that the fall temperatures in Scotland were very different from those of San Diego, I folded my arms around my body and quickened my pace.

The breeze gathered strength. It rushed up behind me and wrapped itself around my legs. I put on a burst of speed and hurried toward Mac's. I had almost reached the door when the howling began. Softly at first and then growing in strength until it filled my head.

I didn't cover my ears. Paranormal investigators don't do that kind of thing. Instead I listened for hidden words. Witches' spells can hide in the wind. Ghosts can use it to voice their pain.

I could hear pain now—deep, primeval and unmistakably feminine. As the wailing of the wind increased, I tried to identify the source of the pain. Love? Anger? Grief? I'm not psychic, but sometimes I can sense these things.

Right now I sensed grief. Vast and overwhelming, as though someone's soul was being wrenched from their body. There was death too. Dark and horrible.

"Who are you?" I asked the wind.

It answered by blowing harder. The wailing changed to a keening that made me shudder. I've heard a lot of horrible sounds in my time, but the only one that rivaled this was the moaning of the White Lady at Willingthorpe Castle. The one case I had failed to solve.

This wasn't the time to dwell on my one failure. I was trying to push the memory of the White Lady out of my mind when the wind abruptly died, plunging the village into brooding stillness. It was the kind of stillness

you get before a snowfall, but I guessed there would be no snow tonight. Something much worse was on its way.