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THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

OUTLANDER

A NOVEL

Outlander

Diana Gabaldon

Book 1 in the *Outlander* Series

To the Memory of My Mother,
Who Taught Me to Read—
Jacqueline Sykes Gabaldon

Prologue

People disappear all the time. Ask any policeman. Better yet, ask a journalist. Disappearances are bread-and-butter to journalists.

Young girls run away from home. Young children stray from their parents and are never seen again. Housewives reach the end or their tether and take the grocery money and a taxi to the station. International financiers change their names and vanish into the smoke of imported cigars.

Many of the lost will be found, eventually, dead or alive. Disappearances, after all, have explanations.

Usually.

Part One - Inverness, 1945

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A New Beginning

It wasn't very likely place for disappearances, at least at first glance. Mrs. Baird's was like a thousand other Highland bed-and-breakfast establishments in 1945; clean and quiet, with fading floral wallpaper, gleaming floors, and a coin-operated hot-water geyser in the lavatory. Mrs. Baird herself was squat and easygoing, and made no objection to Frank lining her tiny rose-sprigged parlor with the dozens of books and papers with which he always traveled.

I met Mrs. Baird in the front hall on my way out. She stopped me with a pudgy hand on my arm and patted at my hair.

"Dear me, Mrs. Randall, ye canna go out like that! Here, just let me tuck that bit in for ye. There! That's better. Ye know, my cousin was tellin' me about a new perm she tried, comes out beautiful and holds like a dream; perhaps ye should try that kind next time."

I hadn't the heart to tell her that the waywardness of my light brown curls was strictly the fault of nature, and not due to any dereliction on the part of the permanent wave manufacturers. Her own tightly marceled waves suffered from no such perversity.

"Yes, I'll do that, Mrs. Baird," I lied. "I'm just going down to the village to meet Frank. We'll be back for tea." I ducked out the door and down the path before she could detect any further defects in my undisciplined appearance. After four years as a Royal Army nurse, I was enjoying the escape from uniforms and rationing by indulging in brightly printed light cotton dresses, totally unsuited for rough walking through the heather.

Not that I had originally planned to do a lot of that; my thoughts ran more on the lines of sleeping late in the mornings, and long, lazy afternoons in bed with Frank, not sleeping. However, it was difficult to maintain the

proper mood of languorous romance with Mrs. Baird industriously Hoovering away outside our door.

"That must be the dirtiest bit of carpet in the entire Scottish Highlands," Frank had observed that morning as we lay in bed listening to the ferocious roar of the vacuum in the hallway.

"Nearly as dirty as our landlady's mind," I agreed. "Perhaps we should have gone to Brighton after all." We had chosen the Highlands as a place to holiday before Frank took up his appointment as a history professor at Oxford, on the grounds that Scotland had been somewhat less touched by the physical horrors of war than the rest of Britain, and was less susceptible to the frenetic postwar gaiety that infected more popular vacation spots.

And without discussing it, I think we both felt that it was a symbolic place to reestablish our marriage; we had been married and spent a two-day honeymoon in the Highlands, shortly before the outbreak of war seven years before. A peaceful refuge in which to rediscover each other, we thought, not realizing that, while golf and fishing are Scotland's most popular outdoor sports, gossip is the most popular indoor sport. And when it rains as much as it does in Scotland, people spend a lot of time indoors.

"Where are you going?" I asked, as Frank swung his feet out of bed.

"I'd hate the dear old thing to be disappointed in us," he answered. Sitting up on the side of the ancient bed, he bounced gently up and down, creating a piercing rhythmic squeak. The Hoovering in the hall stopped abruptly. After a minute or two of bouncing, he gave a loud, theatrical groan and collapsed backward with a twang of protesting springs. I giggled helplessly into a pillow, so as not to disturb the breathless silence outside.

Frank waggled his eyebrows at me. "You're supposed to moan ecstatically, not giggle," he admonished in a whisper. "She'll think I'm not a good lover."

"You'll have to keep it up for longer than that, if you expect ecstatic moans," I answered. "Two minutes doesn't deserve any more than a giggle."

"Inconsiderate little wench. I came here for a rest, remember?"

"Lazybones. You'll never manage the next branch on your family tree unless you show a bit more industry than that."

Frank's passion for genealogy was yet another reason for choosing the Highlands. According to one of the filthy scraps of paper he lugged to and fro, some tiresome ancestor of his had had something to do with something or other in this region back in the middle of the eighteenth—or was it seventeenth?—century.

"If I end as a childless stub on my family tree, it will undoubtedly be the fault of our untiring hostess out there. After all, we've been married almost eight years. Little Frank Jr. will be quite legitimate without being conceived in the presence of a witness."

"If he's conceived at all," I said pessimistically. We had been disappointed yet again the week before leaving for our Highland retreat.

"With all this bracing fresh air and healthy diet? How could we help but manage here?" Dinner the night before had been herring, fried. Lunch had been herring, pickled. And the pungent scent now wafting up the stairwell strongly intimated that breakfast was to be herring, kippered.

"Unless you're contemplating an encore performance for the edification of Mrs. Baird," I suggested, "you'd better get dressed. Aren't you meeting that parson at ten?" The Rev. Dr. Reginald Wakefield, vicar of the local parish, was to provide some rivetingly fascinating baptismal registers for Frank's inspection, not to mention the glittering prospect that he might have unearthed some moldering army dispatches or somesuch that mentioned the notorious ancestor.

"What's the name of that great-great-great-great-grandfather of yours again?" I asked. "The one that mucked about here during one of the Risings? I can't remember if it was Willy or Walter."

"Actually, it was Jonathan." Frank took my complete disinterest in family history placidly, but remained always on guard, ready to seize the slightest expression of inquisitiveness as an excuse for telling me all facts known to

date about the early Randalls and their connections. His eyes assumed the fervid gleam of the fanatic lecturer as he buttoned his shirt.

"Jonathan Wolverton Randall—Wolverton for his mother's uncle, a minor knight from Sussex. He was, however, known by the rather dashing nickname of 'Black Jack,' something he acquired in the army, probably during the time he was stationed here." I flopped facedown on the bed and affected to snore. Ignoring me, Frank went on with his scholarly exegesis. "He bought his commission in the mid-thirties—1730s, that is—and served as a captain of dragoons. According to those old letters Cousin May sent me, he did quite well in the army. Good choice for a second son, you know; his younger brother followed tradition as well by becoming a curate, but I haven't found out much about him yet. Anyway, Jack Randall was highly commended by the Duke of Sandringham for his activities before and during the '45—the second—Jacobite Rising, you know," he amplified for the benefit of the ignorant amongst his audience, namely me. "You know, Bonnie Prince Charlie and that lot?"

"I'm not entirely sure the Scots realize they lost that one," I interrupted, sitting up and trying to subdue my hair. "I distinctly heard the barman at that pub last night refer to us as Sassenachs."

"Well, why not?" said Frank equably. "It only means 'Englishman,' after all, or at worst, 'outlander,' and we're all of that."

"I know what it means. It was the tone I objected to."

Frank searched through the bureau drawer for a belt. "He was just annoyed because I told him the ale was weak. I told him the true Highland brew requires an old boot to be added to the vat, and the final product to be strained through a well-worn undergarment."

"Ah, that accounts for the amount of the bill."

"Well, I phrased it a little more tactfully than that, but only because the Gaelic language hasn't got a specific word for drawers."

I reached for a pair of my own, intrigued. "Why not? Did the ancient Gaels not wear undergarments?"

Frank leered. "You've never heard that old song about what a Scotsman wears beneath his kilts?"

"Presumably not gents' knee-length step-ins," I said dryly. "Perhaps I'll go out in search of a local kilt-wearer whilst you're cavorting with vicars and ask him."

"Well, do try not to get arrested, Claire. The dean of St. Giles College wouldn't like it at all."

In the event, there were no kilt-wearers loitering about the town square or patronizing the shops that surrounded it. There were a number of other people there, though, mostly housewives of the Mrs Baird type, doing their daily shopping. They were garrulous and gossipy, and their solid, print-clad presences filled the shops with a cozy warmth; a buttress against the cold mist of the morning outdoors.

With as yet no house of my own to keep, I had little that needed buying, but enjoyed myself in browsing among the newly replenished shelves, for the pure joy of seeing lots of things for sale again. It had been a long time of rationing, of doing without the simple things like soap and eggs, and even longer without the minor luxuries of life, like L'Heure Bleu cologne

My gaze lingered on a shop window filled with household goods—embroidered tea cloths and cozies, pitchers and glasses, a stack of quite homely pie tins, and a set of three vases.

I had never owned a vase in my life. During the war years, I had, of course, lived in the nurses' quarters, first at Pembroke Hospital, later at the field station in France. But even before that, we had lived nowhere long enough to justify the purchase of such an item. Had I had such a thing, I reflected, Uncle Lamb would have filled it with potsherds long before I could have got near it with a bunch of daisies.

Quentin Lambert Beauchamp. "Q" to his archaeological students and his friends. "Dr. Beauchamp" to the scholarly circles in which he moved and lectured and had his being. But always Uncle Lamb to me.

My father's only brother, and my only living relative at the time, he had been landed with me, aged five, when my parents were killed in a car crash. Poised for a trip to the Middle East at the time, he had paused in his preparations long enough to make the funeral arrangements, dispose of my parents' estates, and enroll me in a proper girls' boarding school. Which I had flatly refused to attend.

Faced with the necessity of prying my chubby fingers off the car's door handle and dragging me by the heels up the steps of the school, Uncle Lamb, who hated personal conflict of any kind, had sighed in exasperation, then finally shrugged and tossed his better judgment out the window along with my newly purchased round straw boater.

"Ruddy thing," he muttered, seeing it rolling merrily away in the rearview mirror as we roared down the drive in high gear. "Always loathed hats on women, anyway." He had glanced down at me, fixing me with a fierce glare.

"One thing," he said, in awful tones. "You are *not* to play dolls with my Persian grave figurines. Anything else, but not that. Got it?"

I had nodded, content. And had gone with him to the Middle East, to South America, to dozens of study sites throughout the world. Had learned to read and write from the drafts of journal articles, to dig latrines and boil water, and to do a number of other things not suitable for a young lady of gentle birth—until I had met the handsome, dark-haired historian who came to consult Uncle Lamb on a point of French philosophy as it related to Egyptian religious practice.

Even after our marriage, Frank and I led the nomadic life of junior faculty, divided between continental conferences and temporary flats, until the outbreak of war had sent him to Officers Training and the Intelligence Unit at MI6, and me to nurses training. Though we had been married nearly eight years, the new house in Oxford would be our first real home. Tucking my