

He was hunkered down on a rock watching the rapidly moving fins of a large fish holding itself still in the busy current of the tiny river, when something hit him a sharp blow in the small of the back, overbalancing him. With a yell of denial and useless, flailing arms he fell, bruising himself on unyielding granite as he went, straight into the ice-cold, mountain-fed water.

The stream was mostly shallow; it was just his bad luck to have landed in deeper water between two of the rocks that formed its bed, and it took him a second or two to extricate himself and clamber up onto them, soaking wet and cursing furiously.

To add insult to injury, someone was squatting on the bank above him calmly investigating the contents of his rucksack.

“Oy!” Ryan yelled. “What the hell d’you think you’re up to?”

The other man paused and looked down at him, flared nostrils signalling disdain.

“If you don’t want to be taken for a poacher,” he suggested, “then don’t hang around one of our salmon rivers. It gives us the wrong idea.”

Shivering now, Ryan shook his head vigorously, scattering fat droplets. “Well,” he snarled, “now you’ve established there’s nothing illegal in there, perhaps you’ll give me a hand out of here.”

“In a minute,” the other said with aggravating arrogance, “I haven’t finished yet,” and he opened one of the outer pockets. “Hmm, nice camera. Yours, is it?”

“Of course it’s bloody mine,” Ryan snarled, splashing his way ashore.

“Then isn’t it lucky I didn’t chuck this in after you?” his assailant said blandly.

Ryan glared upwards and took an unwary step. A stone rocked under him and he went down a second time, fortunately only to his knees.

There was a snicker from the bank.

Infuriated, Ryan leapt upwards in one smooth movement, intending to bowl his tormentor over. Tall people are not always the swiftest of movers, and once he stood this bastard proved to be all of six foot two if not more. Despite that he moved like greased lightning to evade the attack and all Ryan achieved was adding mud to the water about his person.

The man grinned down at him. “Nice try,” he said lazily, “but I should pick on someone your own size if I were you.”

Ryan glowered up at him as he struggled to his feet yet again, suffused with an immense fury. The arrogant sod was not that much bigger than he. Who the hell did he think he was?

“Gimme that rucksack,” he said through gritted teeth, and went to snatch it from his attacker. Unfortunately, the other man had too good a grip on it and he only succeeded in shaking free the sleeping bag which had been loosely stuffed back into it, and which promptly slithered down the steep bank.

Ryan let out a yelp of protest and made a grab for it, rescuing it from total immersion but not in time to prevent at least the top ten inches from being soaked.

“Now look what you’ve done, you bastard!” he yelled, waving it angrily.

Clearly controlling a laugh the other man said, “Oh dear! What a shame. Never mind, it could be worse. I can take you up to the house and get it dried for you.”

Since he had intended to spend his last night in Scotland in the comfort of a hotel Ryan was able to reject this offer with every evidence of venomous dislike.

“No, but seriously, you could make yourself ill sleeping in that. It may be August but the nights can be bloody cold up here.”

Well aware of that, Ryan was about to make another angry reply when he realised very much to his surprise, that the man was genuinely concerned. Mollified without quite knowing why but still reluctant to be beholden, he said sulkily, “It’s all right. I was going to a hotel tonight anyway.”

“Well, get out of those wet clothes at least. You’re starting to turn blue and it doesn’t really suit you.” In spite of it being August the day was not that warm and the wind was biting cold.

“If you’d just hand me the rucksack as I asked ...”

“Certainly. I’d change into the moleskins if I were you,” the man suggested affably, peering into it,

“and that nice woolly shirt. After you’ve used this, of course,” and he handed Ryan his towel, holding it out between finger and thumb as though its grubby state offended him.

Too busy occupied with trying to peel cold and sodden denim from his anatomy, Ryan ignored this provocation. Five weeks spent walking and camping out, getting your laundry done whenever and wherever you could, tended to leave you with clothing that looked a little more grey than it should. The bloody towel had been a decent pale green when he’d started out, and once he could stop shaking with cold he fully intended to prove his point by taking a hearty swing at that arrogant, self-satisfied, smirking face. However for the moment he was only interested in getting out of his wet clothes and into something dry and warm.

He sat down on a nearby rock to take off his walking boots, wincing as his bared backside encountered a sharp stone.

“Would’ve made more sense to get those off before you dropped your jeans.”

There was a quiver of amusement in the other man’s voice and Ryan looked up quickly, intent on some acid retort which died on his tongue as he encountered a smile of surprising sweetness.

“Come on, or the midges’ll think it’s Christmas come early, all that bare flesh on show,” the man suggested, holding out Ryan’s shirt. “There’s nothing they like more than a nibble at a tourist ... especially if he’s an Englishman.”

“Nothing wrong with it if I am,” Ryan said, bristling. “And how about re-stowing that lot?” he added, turning his head and eyeing the pile of clothing scattered around them before glaring at the perpetrator of the outrage.

A pair of guileless sea-blue eyes beneath arrow-head brows looked back at him, a smile in their depths. “I’m a Sassenach myself,” their owner said. “The name’s Ashton.” He held out a hand.

Ignoring it, Ryan said belligerently, “Trespassing, am I? Well I don’t happen to hold with private ownership of the land.”

The lurking grin widened. “You trying to tell me that most of the world’d give a toss for a place like this? The nearest pub’s over five miles away, you know. Doctrine of envy, that’s what yours is - if you can’t have it, why should anyone else?”

Irritated at having opened himself to this slur, Ryan snapped, “Well, I don’t see why the hell you should own it just because you happened to be born into the right family!”

“No more would I - if I had been,” Ashton assured him. “Why, you didn’t think I was the local laird, did you? I’d look a right wally in a kilt. Are you going to pack that lot up or are you planning on getting me to do it for you?”

Ryan had intended precisely that, but something implacable about the set of Ashton’s mouth made him begin gathering up his belongings himself, muttering the while under his breath and wondering greatly at himself for giving in with such unwonted meekness.

Could be something to do with the fact he was a good three inches shorter than the other man, of course and probably three stone lighter, he added to himself, eyeing the muscles that made themselves visible beneath soft cotton and corduroy. He added another couple of mumbled observations to the litany.

“If all those sarcastic comments are aimed at me,” Ashton said, “let me remind you I did say I didn’t own this lot.”

“Well you work here, don’t you?” Ryan snarled. “Take the boss’s money. I couldn’t square it with my conscience, pandering to the rich like that.”

Ashton’s shoulders shook slightly. “Will it help if I tell you I don’t actually work for the laird?”

“What do you mean?” Ryan stared at him, infuriated. It was bad enough to have got the ducking; if this charmless idiot had nothing to do with the place he’d claimed to be protecting then he was going to tear him limb from limb. Or have a jolly good try at it, he amended, ruefully aware of the solid bone and muscle in front of him.

“My own boss is a friend of the laird’s,” Ashton explained. “I think it’s a load of bollocks myself, but there we are. I just do the job I’m paid to do.”

“What are you then?” Ryan applied the filthy towel to his equally filthy hair; it was that or continue to endure water dripping down his neck from his by now over-long curls. He’d have to get them cut before he went to see about getting his old job back or his sergeant would have a fit. “Bodyguard, are you?” he hazarded, raking an eye over the muscular body.

A little less angry now, he let his eye linger, liking what he saw. The man looked supremely fit and was undeniably one of the handsomest Ryan had seen in a long time. A brief pang of lust surged within him, to be ruthlessly suppressed without further thought. Ryan had long ago decided that bisexuality was something he could live without.

“Something like that,” Ashton agreed. “Come on then, the least I can do is drive you into the village.” He started to lead the way across the rough grass and heather. “I’ve got the Land Rover parked up there on the track.”

“But aren’t you supposed to be watching out for poachers?” Ryan asked, getting the straps of his rucksack adjusted to his liking.”

“I was, but my shift ended half an hour ago. I was just on my way out when I caught sight of you down there. Come on, and I’ll buy you lunch in reparation for dunking you.” He grinned. “That wasn’t intentional, by the way. Sorry.”

“Oh well,” Ryan said, inexplicably disarmed despite himself. If the bloke was sorry ... and he did sound genuine about it ...

“So am I to be permitted to know your name now?” Ashton said with elaborate politeness as he unlocked the vehicle for them.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t I say? Ryan, Nicholas, or Nick.”