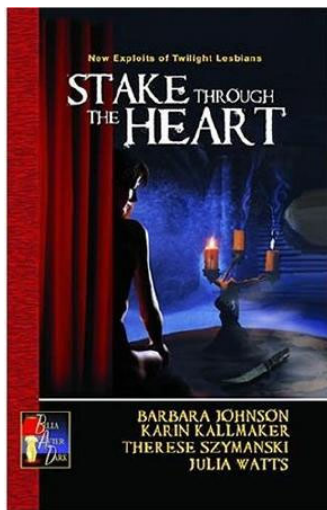

**Excerpt from *Stake through the Heart:*
New Exploits of Twilight Lesbians**



STAKE THROUGH THE HEART IS A LESBIAN EROTICA ANTHOLOGY OF FOUR NOVELLAS BY KARIN KALLMAKER, BARBARA JOHNSON, THERESE SZYMANSKI AND JULIA WATTS.

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CASTLE WRATH
BY KARIN KALLMAKER

CHAPTER ONE

*I am an heiress...a dark woman
follows me...steak and
stilton pie...arrival in Inverness*

The important thing is that you believe what I'm telling you because, frankly, it's unbelievable from the get go. It's not like it's a long story, or anything, and I still don't know how it ends, but it's completely and totally true.

I took this writing class and they said the important thing was to write what you know and leave out the boring bits. That's two important things, I realize that now, but here's what I know and I'm leaving out the boring part about how it all came to pass: I inherited a castle in Scotland!

You don't want to know about my grandfather's great aunt's adopted son's nephew-by-marriage who died

without issue and the long series of accidents that lead to me being the heir—trust me, it's a forty-part episode of *Masterpiece Theater*. But here I am on a train in the Scottish countryside, trying to imagine the fate that caused all those deaths that let this incredible thing happen to me. It's a bit freaky thinking about karma and fate and payback so I'm not thinking about it.

What I'm thinking about right now is that I can't understand a thing anyone says and I'm hungry. Plus, there's this tall, dark woman who keeps staring at me. I think I saw her at the train station in Glasgow. I had to run for the train and she seemed to be following me because she was running too. She's attractive but hardly my type—too old. Too serious, I'll bet. I trod on her foot when the train started to go and she said "buggery bollocks" and I said I was sorry so I don't know why she's staring at me.

I wonder if she's the other heir.

Sorry, I hadn't gotten to that part. I didn't mean to leave it out as it's not at all boring. See, there are two heirs. We have to live in the castle for thirty nights and then one of us will inherit and the other gets a ticket home.

The other heir, P. Tennielle of Manchester, England U.K., is some kind of artist. She must be successful—after all, she has a web page. The "P" stands for Portia, how British is that? The photos of her were badly lit but the staring woman could be her. What a way to start off, me tromping on her foot. But she doesn't know it's me of course as I don't have a web page yet. Right now, to her, I'm just a clumsy American, not B. Brannigan of Lodi,

California U.S.A. The "B" stands for Brittany, by the way. Maybe when we meet officially at the solicitor's office in Inverness she won't remember me. That is, if that's her.

My best friend, Susie Bling (I know, that's hysterical, isn't it?) is nearly an attorney and she said the will is completely screwed up and would never fly in the U.S. except it was written over 300 years ago—before the U.S of A. even existed!—after some sixth earl of someplace was "attaindered." I tried to look that up online but after about two minutes I needed a latte, know what I mean?

I'm hoping stilton is a cheese and that food bought on the train isn't going to put me in the toilet for the next 24 hours. But lots of people in business suits are digging in so I'm taking my chances. Shillings and pence aren't troubling me. Even if I don't get the castle, I get ten thousand pounds which will pay for this really *spiffing* trip to England—Scotland's in England, or is it the other way around? I can never remember. Anyway, I can do pretty much as I like, including not counting my cell minutes, and still have a bundle for some necessities when I get home again.

Steak and stilton pie is tasty, and that's a relief. The tall, dark woman got off the train at the last stop before Inverness and that was a relief too. I guess when I edit this I'll just take her out. It's incredible what I see out the window—cows and country houses, stuff like that. If it weren't for the train I was on I'd expect to see Conestoga

wagons.

I don't suppose they ever used Conestoga wagons here.

The previous stops taught me that when it was time to get off the train you'd better be near the doors and ready to jump, luggage and all. They barely came to a full and complete stop. As I attempted to alight with some kind of dignity I tripped on the smaller of my two suitcases. A nice older gentlemen caught me. Scottish men went up in my estimation after two wearing T-shirts with "Caley Thistle" volunteered to manage my bags all the way to the taxi stand, giving me a chance to get my skirt back into place. I didn't understand a word they said except the invitation for "a pint" which I had to turn down. There was the solicitor waiting, for one thing, and they were cute but not my type. The matching shirts celebrating foliage screamed "gay" to me. Their scruffy ruggedness would turn heads in San Francisco, but I prefer creatures with clits. And breasts. And good fashion sense. And brains. Financially self-sufficient is always a plus, believe you me. But this story is not about my user ex who still owes me rent money.

Inverness sounded so romantic, but my first impression when we reached the street was that I was freezing. The sweater that had seemed oppressively hot when I left home felt like tissue paper. I hoped there was a Target or Old Navy.

"Where to, miss?" At least I think that's what the cab driver said. I read the address for Roderick Macklin Stuart, LLB, off the letter I had carried with me from the moment

I had opened it in my tiny studio apartment. The cab driver responded, I am not making this up, with, “Will you hi-glock-lo-Monday-knee?”

I made a little sound and he said, “Right, then,” and off we went. Bang out of the station he made a right turn into certain death. I was a very long way from Lodi, indeed.

Inverness was a charming city, like something off a postcard, and I could hardly believe I was being driven through it in a black cab like Supernanny’s. There was a cathedral silhouetted against the afternoon sky and a beautiful river that split the city in two. I had a list of places I wanted to see tonight and in the morning, but I did need to sort out a place to stay and buy my transit ticket to Durness via Wick as well. I tried to get my old camera into position to take some pictures but the cabbie swooped so quickly along the roadway that I knew my cell phone’s little built-in digital couldn’t cope. As soon as I was paid by the solicitor for the funds I’d already spent to get here, I was going right out to buy a real digital camera, if not here in Inverness, then when my bus got to Wick tomorrow.

My journey included such romantic names, even the ones I couldn’t pronounce, like Craig Phadraig, Clò Mór, Kinlockbervie and Tongue. Well, I can pronounce Tongue. I’ve been told I use it well too. All of the cities sounded charming and somewhat mysterious, but my final destination, the Castle Wrath, at the tip of Cape Wrath, on the Kyle of Durness, chilled the blood in my veins. I’m sure the location is charming—okay, I’ve used charming three times in two paragraphs. I’m sure the location is quaint, but a bit colder than I expected. I had looked up Cape Wrath

on the Internet and it's the heart of walking tours in the Highlands. That just makes me want to put on a tartan and dance. I wondered if there'd be men in kilts.

Then I wondered if Scottish butches wore kilts. It seemed like they ought to, and just thinking about it passed the rest of the scary cab ride. A kilt with a nice big cod piece, only they're not called cod pieces on kilts, are they? But then what I was really thinking about wasn't called a cod piece on a butch either.

In a much less stressful state of mind, I paid the cabbie and examined my surroundings. The buildings were quaint (darn it, now I'd have to think of another adjective) and undeniably old. The steps I made my way up, thumping my cases after me, were grooved and worn. On the right was another set of obviously modern stairs, wooden, with a handrail in bright yellow, tacked on to please some building inspector, no doubt. Halfway up the old steps I slipped on the slick stone and nearly bashed my knee. I didn't glance over at whomever was going up the sensible wooden stairs. I just wanted a sense of style. There was a metaphor somewhere in beginning this grand adventure by climbing steps older than the Revolution.

"Are you alright?"

I glanced up and there she was, the buggery-bollocks woman from the train. She *was* following me. But I'd seen her get off the train. Perhaps this was a twin? What was her game? "I'm fine," I finally answered.

"What a coincidence. You were at the station in Glasgow, weren't you?"

"And on the same train." I wondered if she'd admit it.

"Well, if you arrive in Glasgow and are going on to Inverness, there's just the one train. The odd part is you standing here on the same steps as me. Are you a reporter?"

"No." I got back into motion and finished the climb and yet, standing next to her she was still twelve inches taller. I wondered how tall that made her, somewhere around six feet I'd guess, only in meters. "I have an appointment."

"I'm Portia Tennielle." She held out her hand. "You're an American, you're at this address, at this hour, so you must be Brittany Brannigan."

Buggery bollocks, it was her.

CHAPTER TWO

*Time for tea... Two pints too
many... An indiscreet
question... Alternative transportation*

“I saw you get off the train,” I said, trying to sound casual.

She opened the heavy door of the building for me and I realized I could walk under her extended arm with ease.

“Yes, I needed to drop my friend and pick up a car.”

“Are you familiar with the area?”

She nodded. The door closed behind us with a dull thud. “My family had holidays in the Highlands when I was a girl.”

I really didn’t think I’d be the one who got the castle in the end, and her familiarity with the area cemented my feeling. No doubt she would know how to keep ancient boilers running, what to do during a hurricane and which walking paths would end in bogs. I hoped to finish my

month without getting bog on my shoes.

I followed P. Tennielle down a long narrow hallway to the very last door, which turned out to be a stairwell. My suitcases grew heavier with each tread, but I made it to the top of the stairs without bursting a vein. I would not show weakness in front of the taller, thinner, older, and undoubtedly wilier woman. She had to be at least thirty-five but she went up the stairs as if they were flat, her steps light and quiet.

That the building was only two stories made my day. The upstairs hallway seemed to be on a slight downhill slope and my suitcase kept wanting to roll into the wall. There was hardly enough room to make our way between stacks of moldering boxes piled high enough to put me in mind of Miss Havisham’s house.

“Come in, come in,” a cheerful voice called. I followed Portia around another pile of boxes to find a small man at a crowded desk rising to greet us both. There were two chairs so free of dust and clutter that I was convinced the piles of boxes and papers near them had been on them until the moment our arrival had been detected.

We were offered tea and I accepted, hoping for some of the little cakes I’d had during my brief stopover in London.

“The kettle will only be a few minutes to the boil.” Mr. Stuart set his spectacles down on the ink-stained blotter. “So Miss Brannigan—”

“Ms.,” I emphasized. “But everyone calls me Brit.”

Portia snickered. “How apropos. You could end up

one.”

“Would I have to become a British citizen to inherit?”

“No, not—”

“I like being an American. We have our messed up moments, but I’d really not want to change.” For a castle of my own, I might consider it, though.

“The land can be inherited by a foreigner, isn’t that right?” Portia gave Mr. Stuart a smile I couldn’t quite fathom. “The language in the will was meant to allow British and Irish heirs, who were deemed foreigners at the time.”

“That’s quite right, but—”

“Then that’s good news for the California girl, isn’t it?” I smiled brightly at both of them. “I mean, if I do inherit, which isn’t at all settled, is it?”

“Not settled, no—”

“But the title can only be taken on by a British citizen.” Portia transferred that enigmatic smile to me. Her web page had really lousy photos. They had captured her good looks, certainly, but she also gave good brood.

“Title?” I didn’t remember anything about a title in the letter.

“The earldom isn’t on the roll anymore, of course, not since the Jacobite—”

“Of course not,” Portia agreed. “It’s more of a prestige claim.”

The kettle boiled.

Mr. Stuart bustled about and I was saddened to see no

sign of little cakes. There was, however, a package of cookies.

He plopped several teabags into a bright blue teapot. “So Ms. Brannigan, what is it you do in America?”

Susie and I had rehearsed my response. “I’m in retail at the moment, and attending university.”

“Oh?” Portia sat still and upright, hardly moving even when she spoke. “What field of study?”

“American literature and filmmaking. I intend to be a writer.”

She gave me a nod that could have meant she was impressed, but also could have meant she thought I was full of it. I had no idea what she was really thinking until she said, “How interesting.”

It made me want to hoity her toity. Right then I decided I wasn’t just going to roll over and play Misty for her. “It’s challenging. I like a challenge.”

“Living in Los Angeles must be an advantage, then.” Mr. Stuart carried a tray over to his desk, which had—I’m sure not coincidentally—a clear space just large enough for it. “Miss Tennielle, would you be mother?”

“I’d be delighted.” Portia began fussing with the cups.

“I don’t live in Los Angeles. I’m from Lodi, which is in the northern part of the state.”

“Oh, San Francisco!” Mr. Stuart beamed at me. “I was there a very long time ago. Delightful city.”

I wasn’t going to explain that San Franciscans would vote Republican before they’d claim Lodi as part of their

mecca, so I nodded. “I’m going to school in Berkeley. Across the bay.”

“That’s a very good university,” Portia said. “Sugar?”

I hoped my hesitation went unnoticed. “Yes.”

“One or two?”

“One.”

“Biscuit?”

“Yes, please.” I was no novice, and I knew that meant biscuit meant cookie. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She handed me a delicate teacup balanced on an equally delicate plate. The ritual was repeated with Mr. Stuart, except his tea went into a mug that looked as if it might be washed annually. By the time that was all concluded I had decided there was no need to point out that I was attending the Bay Area Academy of Literature and Film, not the University of California. I hadn’t said I was *at* Berkeley, only going to school *in* Berkeley, which was absolutely letter-perfect truth.

Mr. Stuart sipped from his cup, thanked Portia again, and said, “I suppose we’ll have to do a spot of business, though it’s not often I have tea with two beautiful women.”

So much for Scotsmen being dour, I thought. “I can safely say that I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“The terms of the will are quite clear.”

I snorted, then turned it into a cough.

Mr. Stuart blithely continued, “Both of you are the surviving claimants along competing lines and therefore must first prove your intent to claim your inheritance by

occupying the castle for a period of thirty nights. Time spent elsewhere would constitute a relinquishment of your claim. At the end of thirty nights, you need to present yourself in person, with a statement of intent to press your claim. If you both press your claim, a tribunal of three judges will decide between you, based on your plans for the caring for the family heritage in keeping with the desires of..."

He went on for some time. I emptied my cup of tea, refused a refill and another cookie as he continued to read. In the interests of skipping over the boring bits, I'll move ahead to when he said, "If you'll provide me with your travel expenses so far, I am authorized to write a bank draft."

Thank goodness he'd brought it up. I'd not wanted to appear a money-grubbing American by broaching the subject myself, even if it was over twelve hundred dollars so far. It was a lot of rent money. I handed over my neatly organized pile of receipts. "There'll also be a hotel tonight and bus tomorrow."

Portia had only a single page. "Just the rail ticket, single. I've borrowed a car from a mate."

I hoped my needing to spend more wouldn't be held against me later. I'd shopped hard for the flight, and the rail pass I'd bought before leaving the States had been cheaper than flying the entire way to Inverness, honest. I started to explain all of that but Mr. Stuart waved his hand around in a shushing gesture.

"I'm authorized to provide a small advance for the

remainder of your journey, to use as you like. You may arrive in Wick and not wish to drive out to the castle if there's weather or fog, and may need to stay at the Durness for the night. I'm told it's a lovely old hotel, and the closest to the cape, only eight kilometers away."

I was a little jolted to think that the nearest civilization was eight miles away. I'd lived in a city all my life. Well, some people don't think Lodi is a city, but it is.

Mr. Stuart carefully wrote out the checks to each of us. Portia departed after the appropriate sentiments, then Mr. Stuart told me where to find the bank that would let me cash the check. Fortunately, it was the same bank that would honor my American bank's cash machine card. I rose from the chair armed with the check, Mr. Stuart's map of the countryside near Castle Wrath and a thick folder with a copy of my ancestor's will and other documents concerning the inheritance.

Refusing help with my cases, I got myself down to the ground floor and discovered Portia waiting for me.

"If you'd like a pint, we could make a few plans." She held the door and I tried to look nonchalant as I steered toward the modern set of stairs. "My car is just round the corner. We could go to the bank together first, before it closes for the day."

"That would be wonderfully convenient." I figured a friendly approach was the best approach. "If it's not a bother."

"Not at all. Let me help with that case."

She was all courtesy and charm, but I remained wary.

Her “mate’s” car turned out to be a dignified but still racy black Jaguar with a “boot” already full of Portia’s cases. Mine fit on the miniscule back seat, however, and once they were settled, I gladly oozed down into the passenger seat—on the wrong side of the car—with a sigh of relief. Portia was a less frightening driver than the cabbie, and as long as I didn’t watch when she made a right turn, I did okay.

At the bank I cashed the check and the teller helped me figure out the conversion to dollars, then accepted a deposit to pay down my credit card balance for the expenses. That still left me with a nice bundle of very pretty notes. In a month I’d have a whole lot of very pretty notes. Beer and dinner were looking very good to me. My adrenaline was waning, now that I was here and Mr. Stuart had put my mind mostly at ease. I’d had a secret worry that I’d find it was all a convincing joke.

“Have you a preference where we eat?”

“No, not at all. Something authentic, that would be good. I had a pie on the train.”

“There’s a pub just up Loch Ness way. It’s very scenic.”

Loch Ness was on my list of things I hoped to see. I didn’t believe there was a monster or any silliness like that, but I was curious about a place that could spawn so many juicy stories that in turn inspired a whole lot of scary movies. There’d have been no creature from any lagoon, let alone a black one, without Nessie. “That sounds delightful. Is Urquhart Castle near?”

She gave me a surprised look. "Yes, it is, though I believe it closes for visitors at sunset. It's a ruin, you know."

"I know." The sky was already deepening into twilight.

"I'm impressed you know the geography so well."

The Jaguar purred along a narrow road and I tried not to watch her hands on the wheel. She was very attractive, I had to admit that. But it didn't mean she was gay, though I was getting pings.

"I'm not very well traveled and I might not ever get back here, so I wanted to see as much as possible while I can. My grandmother insists she was told a long-handed down story about some ancestress losing her virtue to James the Second there. I'm supposed to look for proof that he stayed at the castle at some point, but I'm not all that hopeful."

"Ah, so you're also on a quest as well as in the running for a castle of your own."

"Is this whole situation bizarre to you?"

"Quite. I had no idea I was connected to a former earldom. It's the kind of thing English schoolgirls fantasize about, an affiliation with nobility."

I wondered what else she fantasized about, but it hardly seemed like the time to ask.

After three pints in a loud pub claiming to be the finest in Drumnadrochit, it seemed like a good time to ask.

We were sitting very close because it was quite noisy. The sausages and mashed potatoes were filling, and I think

warm beer is more potent than chilled.

“I want my first project on film to be a scary thriller,” I was telling her. “The two scariest movies I know are *Silence of the Lambs* and the *Blair Witch Project*. Neither one follows the Hollywood formula for horror films.”

“There’s a formula?” Portia sipped from her beer and I thought how pale and fine her skin looked in the low light.

“Absolutely. You show the girl’s tits or something suggestively sensual, like John Travolta getting a blow job in *Carrie*, and about ten to fifteen seconds later, as the sexual response hits the viewer, the blood slashing spatter begins. Mock ejaculation—catharsis. For the male viewer, that is.” I took a large swallow of my beer. It was kind of nutty and golden tasting. Sort of yummy. “But I think women are different.”

“Oh, so do I.” Portia looked away, but her expression was suggestive.

“Do you?” More pings on the gaydar. “I think we can sometimes be scared by that scenario, too, but we get batbrained terrified when we are given the time to absorb a character’s terror for ourselves. So a big blunt thing falls on Travolta. He was a bad guy— who cares? But Jodie Foster shakes like a leaf for fifteen minutes and the tension is unbearable. I want to make a movie like that, one that connects that way with women.”

“Do you like connecting with women?” Portia turned her head to regard me directly. Her lips looked crimson, her skin smooth and luminous as a pearl. She smiled

broadly when I didn't answer right away and I noticed her teeth were vividly white. “I'm gay. How about you?”

“Me too.”

“Thought so.” She laughed into her beer. “Well, that's going to put someone in a proper twist. I thought I might not inherit because I'm gay, but now that's moot. The next denizen of Castle Wrath will be a lesbian.”

“That's not the sort of thing that English schoolgirls fantasize about?”

“Not this one.”

I couldn't help myself. “What did you fantasize about instead?”

“As a schoolgirl? Footballers. I was very hung up on footballers. Then I saw my first girl in a rugby shirt and that was that. Never looked back.”

I stared into the bottom of that third pint of beer and wondered where it had gone. “Is that still your type?”

“Oh, I've learned not to be predictable in my tastes.”

So I didn't need to be some rugged jockette. I heard the sound of screeching brakes and realized it was my psyche-mobile. I wasn't here to get married, or get laid even, though getting laid had crossed my mind more than once during the third beer. I was here to inherit a castle, if I could. Of course if I could inherit a castle *and* get laid, that would be even better. Married—queers did that here, too.

Even though I thought my mouth had been shut down by the psyche-mobile warning, I heard myself ask,

slurring only slightly, “Now that you’re all grown up, what do you fantasize about?”

“Drive up to Durness with me tonight and I’ll tell you.”

I blinked.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Why stay here overnight and drive up on your own tomorrow? Or were you going to take the rail to Wick and then a bus to Durness?”

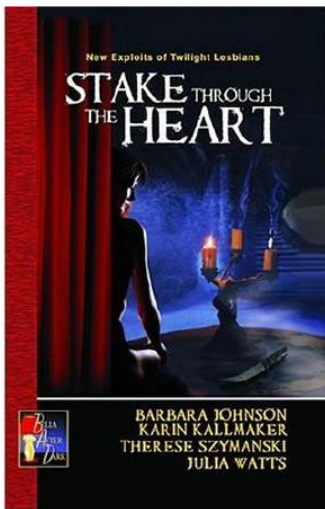
“I’d planned to get a car in Durness—not so far for me to drive on the wrong side of the road.”

“It’d be easier all the way around if you drove up with me, wouldn’t it? I’m driving up tonight.”

It was a friendly offer, and it made a lot of sense. Truth be told, I was a little scared being so far from home, and getting myself all the way to Castle Wrath using the “stop and ask directions” method was making me nervous.

“Sure,” I said. Maybe she wanted a little more of my company too. The thought encouraged me. “That would be great.”

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