



The Love Leap

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Category: Romance

Description: A romance author.

A Highland sailor.

A leap through time.

Everything seems to be going hilariously wrong for bestselling author Amelia “Mills” Sutherland on her first trip to Scotland. When she’s about to give up, she stumbles on Aven Valley’s last cottage on the cove and meets the irresistibly charming sailor, Callum MacDowell. Just as things start spicing up, a mystical portal in Loch Ness zaps Mills and Cal back to Aven Valley, 1645! Soon, they’re stuck navigating clan rivalries, baffling customs, and the awkward challenge of pretending to be a married couple. Will Mills and Cal make it through until the next full moon and find their way home? Can they tackle the dangers of clan feuds and cultural faux pas? And will Mills’s newfound bravery be enough to seize the unexpected love waiting for her all along?

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Chapter One

The cobblestones of Inverness glisten beneath my heels like rain-drenched sea glass, each stride drawing me closer to the greatest romance of my life.

My suitcase wheels grumble behind me, as stubborn as my mother when I announced this trip. But here I am, drenched and shivering in the cold Scottish rain, a cocktail of jet lag and anticipation coursing through my veins that no airplane coffee could replicate.

As I approach Brady's front walkway, my knees buckle, and I have to stop. It feels like they've been introduced to a cheap blender after my vertigo-inducing taxi ride from the airport with Hamish, a hulking Highlander whose musical preference can only be described as Bagpipes-Meets-Ultimate Frisbee.

His infectious laughter and kindness had me telling myself, "This is the perfect start to what's going to be an epic adventure," even though my gut was doing somersaults of doubt.

As I pause at the corner, memories of Lila and our innocent Facebook sleuthing wash over me. A few days ago, we stumbled upon a photo that Brady posted. It was just an offhand shot of his BMW, parked at the end of this street. But, in the window's reflection, a small detail caught my bestie's sharp eye. A fleeting glimpse of an address revealed itself. It felt like we had unearthed a treasure, another piece of the puzzle adding to Brady's captivating mystery and allure.

Shaking off the memory, I let myself get swept up by the adrenaline rush. The thrill

of standing here is intoxicating. I'm finally in front of that picture-perfect scene: 22 Greyfriars Lane. Brady's car sits nonchalantly on the street, just like in his photo. His slender stone townhouse looms ahead, exuding a shabby-chic charm that sets my heart fluttering with joy.

But something feels off. I'd imagined the window boxes overflowing with purple heather and yellow avens flowers. Instead, they're dreary and empty, shedding raindrops onto the slate ledge beneath them.

"Never mind. It's all good, Amelia," I whisper to myself, an old childhood habit that rears its head when I'm under stress or swamped by emotions. I tighten my grip on my suitcase handle.

"Spontaneous," I remind myself, "you're being spontaneous."

Two days ago, the idea of jetting halfway around the world to surprise my online match had seemed wildly romantic.

As the Scottish spring rain seeps through my so-called waterproof designer jacket and my cream-colored wedges play a precarious game with cobblestone crevices, I'm starting to question my decision. Suddenly, "impulsive" seems too mild of a word; "deranged" feels more fitting. If my editor were here, she'd likely be cheering for "bonkers."

But Brady's words from our last call echo in my mind:

I wish I could see your face when you read my words, Amelia. The way your green eyes light up when something moves you—it's like watching the northern lights dance.

How could I not come?

After six months of messages, calls, and sonnets—actual handwritten sonnets that now sit folded in my purse—I couldn't resist. When your online match turns out to be a Scottish historian who quotes Byron and Herrick, makes terrible puns about historical figures, and hints that he wants to see you in person, you book a plane ticket. That's just basic facts.

I take a deep breath, tug my black dress and beige jacket straight, and march up the three stone steps to his door. The blackened brass knocker is shaped like a lion's head, its muzzle worn smooth from years of use. I opt for the more modern doorbell instead, which emits a muted chime somewhere inside the house. My heartbeat seems determined to outpace it.

Footsteps approach from the other side, and I quickly run my fingers through my damp hair, which has probably transformed into its natural state of rebellious waves.

The little mirror in my compact confirmed as much at the airport. "Chocolate brown bird's nest" would be the accurate description. But Brady has only seen me through unfiltered video calls, at times in PJs, so at least his expectations are already managed.

The door swings open.

And there he is. Brady Reeves.

Taller than I expected—our video calls never captured his full height—with that perfectly styled jet-black hair and those gray eyes that seem even broodier and more piercing in person.

He's wearing black Oxford shoes (of course, fashion-conscious and brainy), gray dress pants, and a black cable-knit sweater that looks so appropriate for a rainy Scottish afternoon that I almost laugh.

Except I don't laugh because his face drains of color when he sees me, and not in the romantic "overwhelmed with joy" way I'd pictured. More in the "seeing Voldemort at a family reunion" way.

"Amelia?" His voice cracks on the last syllable of my name.

My carefully rehearsed greeting dies in my throat.

"Surprise?" I offer weakly.

His eyes dart over my shoulder to the empty street behind me, then down to my suitcase, before snapping back to my face.

"What are ye?—"

"Brady?" A woman's voice calls from somewhere inside the house. "Who is it, love?"

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The way his entire body stiffens could win awards for physical manifestations of panic. His hand tightens on the door edge as if he's considering slamming it shut.

“Oh, it's nobody, love,” he calls over his shoulder, voice suddenly higher. “They must have the wrong address.”

Nobody?

Love?

I feel a cold sensation spreading through my chest that has nothing to do with the rain. As the words register, I notice other details I missed in my initial excitement: the women's boots by the door, the two umbrellas in the stand, the framed photo on the wall behind him showing Brady with his arm around a smiling blonde.

“Amelia,” he hisses, his voice dropping to a whisper. “What are ye doing here? My wife is inside.”

The word hits me like a slap. “Wife?”

He grimaces, running a hand through his perfect hair. “I thought ye knew. I thought we were playing it casual.”

My mouth opens, closes, opens again. Words swim around my brain like frightened fish, none willing to be caught. “You have a wife,” I finally manage, my voice small and unfamiliar.

“Look, this isn’t a good time. Perhaps we could meet for coffee tomorrow and?—”

“You never mentioned a wife, Brady.” My voice grows more pungent as anger begins to replace shock. “Not once in six months.”

He shrugs, and the casual dismissal of my feelings makes something crack inside me.

“Aye. I thought it was implied. These online things, dating apps, they’re just a bit of fun, aren’t they? A fantasy.”

“You wrote me sonnets!” The words burst out of me louder than intended, and he winces, glancing nervously over his shoulder. “You left me audio messages reading me those sonnets!”

His lips twist into what he may have intended as a charming smile but now looks calculating.

“Oh darling, I can keep writing them if you want...”

I stare at him, really seeing him for the first time. The perfect hair, the yellow gold and diamond-paved Rolex, the practiced smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. I’d thought his messages showed depth and passion. Now I wonder how many other women have received his sonnets.

“You told me you were alone,” I say quietly. “You told me you were looking for someone to share your life with.”

“And I meant it, in a way.” He leans against the doorframe, lowering his voice. I can practically see the conniving part of his brain working overtime. “There are different kinds of sharing, aren’t there? Different parts of a life?”

I feel sick. Every late-night conversation, every shared secret, every whispered plan about showing me his favorite places in Scotland. All of it's tainted now.

"Brady? Is everything all right?" The voice is closer now.

"Fine, darling," he calls back, his accent suddenly thicker, more performative. "Don't bother coming out."

He turns back to me, eyes pleading. "Amelia, please. She doesn't deserve to be hurt."

"And I did?" The words taste bitter.

For a moment, something like regret flashes across his face. Then he straightens, pulling on a mask of polite detachment. "I never promised you anything concrete. We were having a bit of fun. If you expected more?—"

"Stop." I hold up a hand. "Just stop."

I take a step back, dignity fighting with humiliation. All those hours on video calls, sharing my deepest thoughts, listening to his stories about growing up in Edinburgh, his dreams of writing a definitive history of Scottish folklore. None of it was real?

"I'm sorry you came all this way," he says, not sounding particularly sorry. "If I'd known?—"

"You'd have prepared a better lie?" My voice is steady now, fueled by growing anger. "Or would you have written me a sonnet about how your marriage is just a technicality?"

His eyes narrow slightly.

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“There’s no need to be dramatic.”

“Dramatic?” I laugh, the sound sharp and unfamiliar. “I flew four thousand miles because I thought what we had was real. Because you made me believe it was real.” My voice catches. “But I’m the dramatic one?”

Rain streams down my face, mingling with what might be tears. I can’t tell anymore. I back away, pulling my suitcase with a jerky motion.

“Goodbye, Brady.”

“Amelia, darling, wait—” He reaches out, perhaps remembering the manners his mother taught him, making one last performative gesture for the Canadian tourist he’s strung along.

I turn on my heels—my ridiculous ‘seize the day’ cream wedge heels with red plaid ribbons, which I chose because they make my legs look good and because I thought I’d be walking into a romantic reunion, not a fucking farce. The sudden movement on slick stone is disastrous.

My ankle twists, sending me stumbling forward. I catch myself on the wrought-iron railing, but my dignity is beyond saving.

As I scramble to my feet, cheeks on fire, I catch a soft intake of breath from the entrance—definitely not Brady’s. I glance up to find a short woman with ash-blonde hair neatly tied back, her hand resting on Brady’s arm, bewilderment etched across her face.

“Brady?” she inquires, her gaze flitting between his startled expression and mine. “What’s happening here?”

Before he can even form a word, I intervene. A nervous chuckle slips out as I grip my suitcase with a fervor that reflects my determination to protect this woman. I want to shield her from the lightning-fast cuts slicing through my heart with the precision of an expert chef.

“Oh, hello. B-beautiful afternoon,” I stammer. “I’m just here on a mission to spread the good word. Have you met Jesus? Because if you haven’t, I’ve got some pamphlets that say he’s still taking appointments!”

The woman dismisses me with a shake of her head. “We’re not interested,” she states flatly, walking away.

As he’s about to turn and follow her, I lean closer, my voice dipping into a hushed undertone meant solely for his ears. A faux smile pulls at the edges of my mouth.

“Just a quick observation, I say, drawing out the pause for comedic effect, “We may not have met in person before this moment, but now that we’re here...it seems your humble shoe size is quite in sync with your even humbler...additional features.”

I let the insinuation linger like a mystery, shooting him a pointed glance before spinning on my heels and marching away with as much grace as I can muster amidst the internal earthquake.

I bite back angry words. I’ll keep my cool in this total trainwreck, but if these shoes could talk, they’d be belting out: “You two-timing, poetry-spewing, jackass of a man!” at full volume.

Behind me, Brady’s stunned splutter rings out, punctuated by the satisfying thud of

the door closing with finality.

The rain pelts me with an icy vengeance, but at least it's washing away the putrid stink of Brady's lies. Behind me, there's a marriage he nearly tricked me into wrecking.

Ahead? A marathon flight back to Toronto, chock-full of self-doubt and journal entries scribbled with fresh, bitter life lessons.

But right now, it's just me. Soaked to the bone. Utterly humiliated. But stubbornly determined to never again hand over my heart to some two-timing, gaslighting jerk-face.

Chapter Two

I trudged down the cobblestone street, trying to clear my head, rain attacking me from every angle as if the Scottish weather itself has joined Team Brady in the Let's Fuck with Amelia Championships. My suitcase wheels catch on uneven stones, jerking my arm with each revolution like little reminders of my stupidity.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

The word pounds in rhythm with my heartbeat and the raindrops. Who flies across an ocean to surprise a man she's never met in person?

Oh, that's right. Me.

Romance novelist extraordinaire who can't even recognize when she's living in a plot too clichéd for her own books.

My free hand swipes at my face, raindrops mixing with tears I refuse to acknowledge.

The cobblestones beneath my shoes blur into a watery gray canvas.

Damn these impractical, “seize the day” wedge heels. And damn Brady Reeves, with his perfect hair and his perfect wife and his perfect little life that had just enough room for me as his digital mistress.

“Afternoon. Excuse me,” I mutter, carefully sidestepping an elderly man with a walker who’s giving me the pitying look reserved for skinny cats and drowned tourists. His concerned eyes follow me as I stumble past. I must look like a hot mess—mascara streaming down my face, hair plastered to my skull, designer jacket now functioning as an expensive sponge.

The irony isn’t lost on me. Amelia Sutherland, author of four moderately successful romance novels, just walked face-first into the world’s least romantic scenario. If I weren’t the protagonist of this particular tragedy, I’d be taking notes for my next novel.

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My next novel.

Oh, crap.

My stomach clenches as Margot's voice echoes in my head:

“Darling, Highbury House is getting antsy. They've been more than patient, but if we don't deliver this manuscript by October, they're pulling the plug.”

My literary agent of eight years isn't known for sugar-coating things, especially when staring me down in her sleek Toronto office like a principal scolding her delinquent student.

“You need inspiration? Fine. Find it. Seduce a stranger. Join a cult. Go to this writers' conference in London,” she said, sliding a brochure across her desk. “I don't give a shit, but for the love of God, write something.”

I flipped through glossy images of writers looking pensively out windows in a converted Victorian manor house. “London in June. That's...”

“Perfect timing to jump-start the new book and have a complete draft by October.”

My fingers were numb from the air conditioning, but I felt a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognized as panic disguised as determination. I nodded, mentally calculating how to turn this pressure into something productive.

“I'll make it work.”

That night, as my anxiety threatened to bloom into a full-scale existential meltdown, I reached out to Lila. Since our first year at U of T, when she found me crying into my philosophy textbook at an unholy hour, we've been practically glued together. She didn't say a word then; she just handed over her sacred stash of emergency chocolate like it was no big deal.

Now, she traipses worldwide as a travel photographer, yet as it is with soul sisters, there's never a time zone too remote or obscure for either of us to pick up each other's panicked calls.

Lila's face popped up on my laptop screen in all its freckled glory. Her fiery curls were wrestled into an unruly bun on top of her head, and she was wrapped in a scarf so bright it could have been woven from rainbows.

"Mills!" She greeted me with infectious cheerfulness that shone through the pixelated screen. "What's up?"

"Just wrestling with my usual demons: self-doubt and deadlines," I admitted with a shrug. "You know how it is."

Her laughter echoed around my quiet living room. "Alright! Where are you thinking of heading next? Somewhere exciting enough to kickstart that brilliant brain of yours back into gear?"

"London," I mumbled, sprawled on my couch with a glass of mediocre pinot noir balanced on my stomach.

"London?" Her voice wobbled slightly, and she sounded tired, understandable, considering she'd just returned from an intense photography expedition in Southeast Asia.

“Mills...that’s so...predictable. Every writer desperate for inspiration heads there.”

I sighed but couldn’t help the grin tugging at my lips. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Lil.”

“Listen,” she leaned in, her eyes sparkling with a sudden idea. “I’m not saying don’t visit the UK. But how ’bout somewhere that might shake things up?” She paused for dramatic effect. “Like Scotland? Specifically, Inverness.”

I choked on my wine. “Where Brady lives? Are you bonkers?”

Lila plowed on, her voice a vibrant splash of color against the grayscale backdrop of my thoughts. “London is England’s literary heart, sure. But Scotland? It’s got this raw, untamed spirit. And Inverness—with its highlands, lochs, and legends—it’s gritty and real in a way London hasn’t been since Dickens wrote about small orphans.”

She waved her turquoise-painted nails at me through the screen, an impish smirk on her lips. “Your stories are filled with bold heroines who seize life by the freakin’ balls and don’t let go. We both need to live more like them!”

Her words resonated with me, circling in my head as I fiddled nervously with my laptop’s edge. “And what? Just show up uninvited at Brady’s place?”

Her laughter filled my speakers—a sound so infectious it managed to coax a reluctant smile onto my face.

“Well, he should have extended an invitation by now! You’ve been chatting for months! And besides,” she added slyly, “since when do you need an invite to write your own story?”

A sigh slipped past me, but I could feel Lila's suggestion igniting something inside me—a rush of adrenaline that was both terrifying and tantalizing.

“Alright,” I conceded after a moment of contemplation and gulping down my last splash of red wine. “Thanks, sweetie. I’ll think about it.”

We both knew that meant I was already mentally packing my bags.

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When Margot vidcalled the following day, I mentioned Brady, our online relationship, and my conversation with Lila. Her eyes lit up like I'd just handed her an instant bestseller.

“A Scottish historian? Who writes you sonnets? Amelia, this is gold! Your friend Lila’s right. Go there. Meet him! Use him. Write about it.”

I'd laughed it off initially. “I can't just fly to the Scottish Highlands because I'm blocked.”

“Why not? You've written four books about women who take chances. Maybe it's time you take one.”

Ouch. But Lila and Margot hadn't been wrong. My heroines were always braver than me—bold women who recognized red flags and walked away from toxic relationships, who chased their dreams across continents, who found true love because they were brave enough to believe in it.

In the meantime, I'd been marooned in my tiny Toronto apartment for a couple of years, engaged in a romance with my laptop and an ongoing parade of food delivery men passing me tepid Pad Thai before making a swift exit.

Brady seemed like the perfect solution. Our relationship had started innocently enough: first, his polite message on the dating app LoveLeap.com, then witty banter about Scottish folklore (research into my ancestry and a book idea I'd ultimately abandoned), and video calls that stretched into the early hours. I'd fallen for his intelligence, how he quoted obscure poetry, and how every syllable sounded like a

promise.

I'd fallen for a lie.

I find momentary shelter under the burgundy awning of a closed café, breathing in the lingering scent of coffee and pastries while trying to formulate a plan. My phone, which I fish from my soaked purse, shows 13% battery and approximately seventeen notifications from Margot.

Perfect.

The last message just reads:

Did you do it? Did you meet him? I'm dying here.

My thumb hovers over the screen. What would I even say?

Met him. Also met his wife. And I'm not a home wrecker.

I shake my head, typing nothing in the end and shoving my phone into the depths of my purse. Truth is, I jetted across the Atlantic for two things: Brady and my next bestseller.

I thought that meeting him would be like turning a key in some rusty old lock inside me—releasing all these pent-up emotions and inspiration that had been gathering dust since my parents' last catastrophic showdown at my cousin's wedding.

Nothing entirely extinguishes your faith in fairy tale endings like seeing your divorced parents lobbing duck confit vol-au-vent at each other a quarter century after their divorce.

I glanced down at the suitcase resting smugly at my feet—a snarky reminder of where spontaneity has landed me.

In an act that would make even seasoned online daters cringe, I browsed many Inverness hotels but never made any reservations. In the romantic ‘Surprise!’ scenario I’d crafted in my imagination, Brady and I would share a bed tonight.

But it wasn’t just lust-fueled recklessness. No, I let myself believe again. I let myself fall under love’s mesmerizing spell, thinking it might be different this time. That Brady was worth throwing caution out the window for. That love was still something worth pursuing despite its past betrayals.

With a heavy sigh, I pull up the travel app on my phone only to wince at the results—it seems late May isn’t exactly off-peak tourist season in Inverness. All the budget-friendly options are fully booked, and what’s left would decimate my emergency credit card.

My phone battery is on life support, there are zero taxis nearby, and I need to find a way to the airport. The rain pours down from the awning above me, creating a watery barrier between me and the rest of the world. My fingers are numb with cold, but there’s an uncomfortable heat in my chest—humiliation slowly morphing into anger.

No.

No way!

This isn’t going to be my story’s ending. I didn’t fly four thousand miles just to let a married man turn me into a sopping mess on a Scottish sidewalk.

Plan of action:

1: March to the bus station.

2: Charge phone.

3: Rebook flight home.

If I can manage all that, maybe I can spin this disaster into writing gold because, let's face it—my career is hanging by a thread.

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Flashes of my parents' disastrous marriage flicker through my mind. Mom with her endless stream of boy-toy boyfriends. Dad with his perpetual disappointment. Neither could stay put long enough to build anything lasting.

I was five when they tossed me headfirst into their marital whirlpool. That's when I learned love could be as fleeting as cherry blossoms in spring and as destructive as a tornado on steroids.

In those moments of darkness and chaos, I'd rescue my cherished toy sailboat from its perch on my dresser and let it sail across the sea of my sky-blue comforter in an imagined escape from their domestic hurricanes.

I'd picture myself aboard that tiny ship, sailing towards tranquility far removed from the tempestuous storms at home, the salty breeze filling my lungs with hope and freedom. Each imaginary wave kissing the hull was an assurance—a sanctuary where love couldn't shatter or distort itself into something cruel and unrecognizable.

Maybe one day, I thought, I'd find a real-life first mate to help me navigate these stormy waters. But until then, it was just me and my tiny sailboat against the world.

I roll my shoulders back, straighten up, and grip my suitcase handle with newfound determination.

“Get a grip,” I tell myself. “You've written heroines out of stickier situations than this.”

Of course, those heroines were fictional, their fate controlled by the tap-tap-tap of my

keyboard.

Real life is messier.

Real life involves bad hair days, waterlogged heels, broken hearts, and the knowledge that people will weave elaborate lies about the drenched people who surprised them on their doorsteps with the same precision they used to trick you online.

Real life doesn't come with time machines that whisk you away when everything goes sideways—though God knows it should.

With renewed purpose, I step back into the rain towards the bus station—a few streets over, according to my map app.

My suitcase trails behind me in a steady rhythm as determination replaces despair. Somewhere inside this disaster lies the story I need to tell—I just have to survive long enough to write it.

Chapter Three

The Scottish rain has evolved from merely unpleasant to actively vindictive. It drums against my shoulders with increasing urgency, as if trying to push me into the ground and bury me without a funeral.

My phone's map app flickers between helpful and useless, the blue dot of my location jumping erratically across the screen. It appears to be just as bamboozled by life's shenanigans as I am.

Lovely. Even GPS has abandoned me.

I squint at street signs that might as well be written in ancient Pictish for all the good

they're doing me, my vision blurred by raindrops clinging to my eyelashes.

"Excuse me," I call to a passing woman hunched beneath an umbrella that resembles a massive red mushroom house from *The Smurfs*. "Where can I find the bus station?"

She gestures vaguely down a narrow side street, muttering something that sounds like "second left, then right at the kirk" before hurrying away.

I have no idea what a kirk is, but I'm assuming it's some building and not, say, a rare Scottish woodland creature waiting to complete my humiliation by stealing my luggage.

I drag my increasingly waterlogged suitcase down the cobblestone alley, its wheels no longer rolling so much as scraping in protest. The case contains three "date night" outfits I'd carefully selected for impressing Brady, each one now destined to become evidence of my spectacular misjudgment. It also holds my laptop with the fifteen pages of my new manuscript—the only fifteen pages I've managed to write in eight months.

Fifteen pages that Margot declared "technically words, but lacking the essential ingredient of not putting readers into a lifelong coma."

My right shoe squelches with each step, the insole apparently having decided to drink half of Scotland's rainfall. I should probably find a place to sit down and adjust it, but that would require stopping and stopping might lead to thinking, and thinking would definitely lead to ugly crying.

Public sobbing is not on today's itinerary.

The memory of Margot's voicemail from last week surfaces: "Mills, my darling, now Highbury wants an outline by Friday. I've told them you're deep in the creative

process—please don't make me a liar. Again.”

How do you tell your indispensable agent that you've lost faith in the very concept your career is built on?

“Hey Margot, funny story—I no longer believe in love, so writing about people falling into it and living happily ever after now feels like crafting elaborate fairy tales about unicorns farting rainbows and responsible politicians saving the day.”

My “Happily for Always” saga had been successful—four installments detailing the smooth-sailing journey of Roxy Fairfax, a highly regarded London Matchmaker, as she helps her clients and herself find love in the most unexpected places.

Readers were captivated by Roxy. My editor and publisher were enchanted by her. Yet, I found myself growing weary of her and her ceaseless hopefulness, her resilience to rebound from heartache with a witty retort and a fresh red rose in her hair.

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Book five is now nine months overdue.

I slip on a particularly slick patch of stone and barely catch myself on a lamppost, my free hand splayed against the cold metal. A teenage boy passing by raises his eyebrows but doesn't stop—possibly recognizing that I've reached a boss level of disaster, where helping might unlock an unwanted side quest.

“Just living my best life,” I mutter as he hurries past.

The narrow street opens into a slightly wider road with actual traffic—a promising sign of civilization and potential transportation options. With its remaining 9% battery, my phone informs me that the bus station is allegedly just two blocks away. Whether these are Canadian blocks or Scottish blocks remains to be determined, but having a destination feels like progress.

I think back to when I finally decided to buy the plane ticket. It was 2 AM, I was staring at a blinking cursor in my blank manuscript, and Brady had just sent me a voice message reading Keats in his smooth Edinburgh accent.

“Mills, I wish you could see the moon over Inverness Cathedral right now. It made me think of this...” And then his voice, seducing me with words written two centuries ago as if they were fresh and meant just for me.

The same voice that an hour ago had said, “My wife is inside.”

I'd booked the flight that night, fueled by career desperation, sexual attraction, and the hope that maybe, just maybe, being in Scotland, breathing its air, walking its

streets, surprising the man who made poetry sound like a living language—would unlock whatever was frozen inside me.

“Find your inspiration,” Margot had said during our last video call. “Your first books had spark. They were romantic, funny and sexy. This new stuff reads like you’re trying to convince yourself that love is real. Readers will notice.”

She leaned closer to the screen, her chunky orange necklace clicking against her desk’s polished surface.

“This Brady guy—he’s doing something for you. You mentioned him three times in five minutes. Use that. Forget about London and Roxy Fairfax for now. Go have a fling with your Scottish historian. Write about it. Let love light you up again.”

So here I am. Lit up like a short-circuited Christmas display in the Scottish rain.

My phone buzzes, and I squint at the rain-splattered screen. It’s Lila.

“Hey. How are you? Please tell me you’re still at the airport?” her voice crackles through the speaker as she adds:

“Don’t go to Brady’s house.”

I stop walking to wipe raindrops off my forehead and eyes. “Oh, sweetie. I’m so glad you called! Hearing your voice right now is the only thing keeping me from hurling myself into Loch Ness.”

“Don’t do that, and don’t go to that address,” she presses on urgently. “He’s married, Mills.”

A bitter laugh escapes me before I can stop it. “I know.”

There's a pause on her end. It's shock. Or sympathy. Maybe both. Then she launches into an outraged tirade that would make any sailor blush.

"I woke up with this nagging doubt," she continues. "So I dug deeper, did a reverse image search, and found his Other Facebook," she spits this out like it's a curse word, "the one he doesn't use for dating sites."

Her words hit like a thousand punches to the gut. Not once did I spot the wedding ring that Lila found so easily in his personal Facebook photos. Not once did I question why his apartment always looked so impersonal in our video chats.

Because it wasn't his home, I now realize, but an office he deemed safe for our online chats, away from prying eyes and curious colleagues.

"He's the worst kind of player," she asserts with a bite in her voice that makes me wince. "And Brady isn't even his real name. I'm so sorry, Mills."

"What?" I choke out. "What's his real name?" Despite everything, the question slips out before I can stop myself.

There's a pause on the other end of the line before Lila sighs softly.

"Do you really need to know? He's not worth another second of your time. From here on end, we shall call him Shitty McLiar."

I groan, pressing my hand to my forehead. "God, I feel like such an idiot!"

"No way! You're not the one at fault here," she insists fiercely. "He's the jerkface who lied and cheated. If I ever get my hands on him..."

Her threat dissolves into mutters of creative punishment involving testicles and rope

burns that make me chuckle loudly despite everything.

“Are you okay though?” Her voice softens then, anger giving way to genuine concern.

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My response is more of a snort than anything else as I glance at the drizzling gray sky above me. Not exactly an image of ‘okay.’

“I’m lost, and not just figuratively. I wish I could bend time and have you materialize right here,” I admit to the open air, longing for my words to possess some magical power to summon her. “We’d wash down our sorrows with a bottle of Cabernet and two tubs of Ben & Jerry’s...”

“I feel you, sister.” Her voice is filled with genuine compassion; suddenly, it’s like she’s sitting beside me. I can practically see the twinkle in her hazel eyes reflecting concern for me. But the harsh reality comes crashing back, and it’s just me: alone, soaked from the Scottish rain and nursing a shattered heart.

“So,” she says after a silence. “You coming home?”

“I dunno,” I take a deep breath. “I’m trying to get to the airport. But...I might stay the night? You still okay with babysitting Chanandler Bong? I might stay. I might need more time to unravel this book...and myself.”

“Anything for you,” she says brightly, “Even though he is the most high-maintenance feline I’ve ever encountered. Woke me up this morning by planting his furry body on my face.” There’s a brief silence before she adds, “More action than I’ve had in months if I’m honest.”

A giggle bubbles up from my chest. “You’re a gem,” I manage to squeeze out between laughs. “I owe you one. But I should probably hang up before my phone dies a painful death. I’ll call you back once I’ve solved the meaning of life...or, you know,

after a warm meal and a bubble bath.”

The promised bus station finally appears ahead. It’s a modern glass structure that looks almost obscenely dry from where I’m standing. I quicken my pace, the prospect of shelter briefly outweighing my awareness of how I must look: a soggy éclair with raccoon eyes and a hairdo that’s transitioning from “stylishly curled” to “recently shocked by electric eels.”

Inside, the fluorescent lighting is merciless, highlighting every mud spot on my once-cute travel outfit. A man in a tweed newsboy cap behind the information counter observes my approach with the wary expression of someone who’s had to deal with too many tourist emergencies for one day.

“When’s the next airport bus, please?” I ask, summoning every last bit of my strength to lace my words with courtesy despite the bone-deep exhaustion tugging at me.

He glances at the clock, then back at me, a highland accent coloring his words. “Last bus to Inverness Airport left twenty minutes ago, lass. Next one’s tomorrow morning at 6:20.”

Of course it is. Why would anything about this day work in my favor?

“I could take a taxi...” I think out loud, mentally calculating what remains of my credit card limit.

“Aye, but with this weather...” He nods toward the windows where rain continues to pour. “They’re all backed up. Could be an hour wait, maybe more.”

I close my eyes briefly, searching for patience, humor, or any emotion other than the overwhelming urge to scream into the void. When I open them, the clerk observes me with an expression that has softened from wariness to pity.

“Rough day, aye?” he ventures.

A laugh escapes me, sharp and brittle. “You could say that. I came to meet someone who...wasn’t what I expected.”

“Aye,” he nods. “One of those Internet predicaments?”

“That obvious, is it?”

He offers me a smile as he shrugs and adjusts his cap. “The luggage, that expression of a lassie whose world’s just come crashing down, the desperate rush to flee the city...Aye, I’ve seen it all before.”

Great.

I’m not just a cliché; I’m a recognizable cliché with its own taxonomic classification in the Inverness transit system.

“Where were you planning to stay tonight?” he asks, his tone shifting to something more professionally helpful.

“I had... arrangements,” I say delicately. “They’ve fallen through.”

“Aye, lass.” He drums his fingers on the computer keyboard. “With the Spring Bank Holiday upon us, lodgings are likely to be scarce, but there’s a wee hostel up the road a bit. It’s nae exactly luxurious, but it’s neat as a new pin and the owner happens to be my cousin’s wife’s sister. I can give her a ring if you’d like?”

The unexpected generosity from this stranger nearly shatters my already fragile composure.

See, there you go, Mills! Not every man is a self-centered jerk. I blink back the sudden tears, giving him a quick nod. “That would be... thank you. Thanks so much. Could you maybe give my phone a little juice, too?”

His smile is warm as he rummages around to reveal an assortment of cords and chargers. “Absolutely. A year’s worth of lost and found coming to your rescue, lass.”

While he dials the number, I connect my phone and take a moment to assess myself in the dimreflection of a nearby vending machine. My chocolate brown hair clings around my face like wet seaweed, contrasting with my ghostly complexion marred by smudged mascara under my green eyes. My once-prized jacket—once justified as an ‘investment piece’—now looks like it belongs at the bottom of a swamp rather than on me.

I am the very picture of what I am: A woman whose romantic fantasies have just crash-landed into harsh reality.

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But hey, I'm also a writer. And writers use everything.

I retrieve my waterlogged notebook, flipping through it until I find a page that's still somewhat dry. With a pen borrowed from the information desk, I jot down: "Scene: Woman learns online boyfriend is married. Setting: Rain-soaked Scotland. Humiliation ensues, but then...?"

The 'but then' part eludes me for now. In my novels, this is where my heroine hits rock bottom before something miraculous alters her course completely—a typical Roxy Fairfax move that turns disaster into opportunity with sheer determination and some unlikely twist of fate.

Real life isn't so generous with its narrative arcs though.

The clerk returns with good news: the hostel has one bed available in its four-person female dormitory, mine if I want it.

"Great," I manage to say with what must be the most unconvincing smile. "And I'll take a ticket for the first bus to the airport tomorrow."

As he processes my payment, his eyebrows furrow at the sight of my well-worn Canadian Tire Mastercard—it's not my go-to card, but it's the only one not maxed out at the moment—and I keep scribbling notes.

Maybe this is what I need—a hard fall before I can write with genuine authenticity again. Perhaps Roxy needs to experience a disappointment in book five. Maybe readers are ready for a heroine who doesn't rebound instantly, who concedes that love

is often complicated and painful, and sometimes it just doesn't pan out.

Or maybe it's time for an entirely new series.

The clerk hands me my ticket and directions to the hostel. "It's close by, but with this downpour..." He reaches under his counter and pulls out a neon yellow plastic poncho. "On me. You look like you need a win."

Accepting the poncho with a soft smile and more gratitude than such an item probably warrants, I murmur another thank you.

Stepping back into the deluge outside, I drape the poncho over my drenched hair and clothes and tuck my partially charged phone and notebook securely in my purse. My dress and shoes are soaked beyond redemption, but there's still hope that at least my laptop nestled inside my suitcase might survive this storm.

The rain has settled into a steady, determined stream—the kind that suggests it's prepared to continue until the end of time.

I orient myself using the clerk's directions and set off toward the hostel. Despite everything—the humiliation, the discomfort, the crushing disappointment—I feel a familiar stirring in the back of my mind. That scratch of curiosity, the question that drives every story forward:

What happens next?

For the first time in months, I'm genuinely interested in finding out.

Chapter Four

The hostel's directions include a shortcut through a narrow passage between stone

buildings, which the bus station clerk assured me would save fifteen minutes of walking.

What the kind clerk failed to mention was that this “charming historic alleyway” transforms into something from a Victorian murder mystery once you’re actually inside it.

The walls press close on either side; their rough stone surfaces slick with rain and centuries of grime. Ahead, a single lamp casts just enough light to ensure I can see how utterly alone I am in this damp corridor.

“This would never happen to Roxy Fairfax,” I grumble, dragging my suitcase through a puddle that’s deeper than it looks. My fictional heroine would have already stumbled into a handsome local who just happens to own a luxury B&B with an available suite. She’d be wrapped in a cashmere throw by now, sipping whisky while her clothes tumbled in a designer dryer.

Instead, I’m squeaking my way through an alley in a neon yellow poncho that makes me look like a deranged crossing guard, heading toward a hostel where I’ll sleep in a bunk bed surrounded by strangers.

The passage widens slightly, revealing what appears to be the back gardens of several homes and a sloping field beyond. The clerk’s hasty map suggests I cross this open area to reach a set of steps leading to the street where the hostel is located. Simple enough—that is, if I can manage to navigate the increasingly muddy path without losing a heel or what remains of my dignity.

After wandering across the open field for what feels like half a century, the rain has softened to a steady drizzle. I pause to adjust my grip on the suitcase handle, which has grown slippery with moisture. In the near distance, I can make out lights from houses. Just a few more minutes through this overgrown area, and I’ll be back in

civilization.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for this final push. Once dry in my bunkbed, I'll swap my airplane ticket for a new one home, where I'll lick my wounds and figure out how to salvage both my pride and my career. Maybe Brady and this whole Scottish disaster will make it into my next book.

Roxy could have a sister who makes terrible decisions, a warning sign pointing toward what happens when you abandon common sense for poetry and a sexy accent.

It might work.

My editor Melissa has been pushing for more “authentic complications” in my writing. Nothing says authentic complication quite like discovering your online boyfriend is actually someone else's offline husband.

I step onto what I think is a graveled path but turns out to be a treacherously thin layer of stones over pure mud. My suitcase wheels immediately sink two inches, and I have to yank to free them. The movement sends me stumbling backward, my poncho flapping around me like awkward yellow fairy wings.

That's when I hear it—a low, rumbling sound that doesn't match the patter of rain or distant traffic.

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I freeze, straining to identify the noise in the dim evening light. It comes again, louder this time. A sort of huffing snort that raises the hair on the back of my neck.

Slowly, I turn toward the sound.

Standing in the grasses of a pasture I hadn't realized I'd wandered into is what can only be described as a wall of fur with horns.

A massive Highland cow, its shaggy, rusty red coat dripping with rain, regards me with what even I can recognize as territorial displeasure. Steam rises from its considerable bulk in the cool air, giving it an otherworldly appearance: part mythical beast, part real fucking problem.

It glares at me like I'm about to become its unwilling co-star in *Cow Wars: Revenge of the Bovine*.

"Good cow," I murmur, fully aware my words hold as much weight as a feather in a tornado.

"Sweet, innocent little moo-moo!" I coo, cranking my voice to saccharine levels, praying this bovine beast appreciates flattery.

It doesn't.

The creature digs into the muck with one hoof, its horns—majestic arcs that would make any Viking helmet envious—angling subtly in my direction.

My mind races through everything I know about Highland cattle, which amounts to exactly this:

-they're on postcards

-they're on tea towels

-they're supposedly docile.

This one appears to have missed the “docile” memo.

We stare at each other, this highland cow and I, locked in a moment of mutual assessment. I consider my options: slowly back away? make a run for it? stand perfectly still and hope the cow loses interest?

Before I can decide, the universe makes the choice for me.

My phone, buried in my purse under the poncho, chooses this moment to emit a beep—a cheerful three-note sound from the Farm Animal Soundsapp I forgot I'd installed. The sound shatters the standoff like a gunshot.

The cow's head jerks up, eyes flashing with what I can only interpret as bovine outrage. With surprising speed for something so large, it lowers its horns and charges, hooves churning the muddy earth into a spray of debris.

“Oh, no, fuckity, NO!”

The words burst from me as I dive to the side, poncho billowing around me like a parachute that's forgotten its purpose.

The cow thunders past, missing me by inches, its bulk displacing the air with enough

force to make my ears pop. I scramble to my feet, heels slipping in the mud, adrenaline surging through my veins like electricity. The cow skids to a stop, wheels around, and fixes me with a stare that communicates clear intent for a second attempt.

Great. So this is how I die. Not in luxury senior living, surrounded by admirers of my literary genius, but trampled in Scottish mud while wearing the world's ugliest poncho.

Before I turn to run down the hill, my eyes snag on a towering figure in the field. He's a beacon against the tempestuous sky, his muscular form slicing through the rain-soaked chaos.

"Buttercup! Steady on, ya big beastie!" he bellows, his voice thick with Scottish undertones that somehow make all of this seem less terrifying.

In seconds, he's corralling the cow away with an ease that's almost enviable.

"You alright there, lass?" he calls out over the howling wind.

His words instantly get snatched up by a huge gust of wind as my heel catches on something—a rock, a root, my own colossal bad luck—and suddenly, I'm falling backward, arms windmilling uselessly against gravity, tumbling down what turns out to be a much steeper hill than I'd initially thought.

Each backward roll is a crash course in pain—elbow meets earth, hip slams into stone, and my dignity takes a brutal hit from reality. My suitcase whizzes past me; my purse swings wildly like some sort of weaponized accessory, smacking me in the face every now and then for good measure.

Eventually, I skid to an ungraceful halt at the base of this hill-from-hell; face mashed against what feels like nettles and limbs arranged like an abstract art piece.

For a moment, I just lie there conducting a mental check-up—everything hurts, but it's more bruise-y than broken-y.

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My poncho has somehow transformed into a makeshift mummy costume around my lower half.

Lifting my head enough to survey my surroundings reveals I've crash-landed into what looks like a Gothic church overlooking the coast—complete with stunning stained glass windows, pointed arches, and an old stone wall about three feet away from my current position of defeat.

A sound escapes me—a mix between laugh and sob—as the realization hits: I was chased by a cow...and lost spectacularly. Rolling onto my back, laughter bubbles up from deep inside me, uncontrollable and tinged with hysteria.

“Girl meets boy, boy turns out to be married, girl gets chased by angry cow,” I wheeze.

The moment I stand, I feel like an exhibit at a mud sculpture festival. My hair is a wet mop, my poncho is torn, my suitcase dented.

My cheeks are scorching with embarrassment. I need to get out of here before anyone sees the walking disaster that is me right now! Gathering my scattered belongings, I look up the hill. No sign of Buttercup or her Scottish savior, thank goodness.

Just as I'm about to make a hasty exit, there's movement at the top of the hill and there he is again—the tall, muscular figure checking on me. Panic surges through me; there's no way I can face him looking like this! Hastily, I yank my poncho hood over my head and bolt from the scene.

I stumble upon a picturesque stone gazebo nestled among rose bushes—it's perfect. Once inside, I kick off the soaked wedge heels and pull my beloved combat boots and socks from my suitcase. Finally, dry feet.

What do you know? One small victory today.

Chapter Five

Perched on a stone gazebo bench facing the ocean, I contemplate tossing this hostel booking into the waves below, hailing an Uber to the airport, and catching the next flight out of this Scottish disaster.

Who needs a hostel bed when I can sulk in my own apartment by tomorrow night, wrapped in my favorite blanket and drowning my sorrows in the most budget-friendly Okanagan wine available?

Lila would skip over with snacks and a sympathetic ear, and Margot, well, she'd understand once she heard all about Shitty McLiar.

I flick over to my phone's maps app, confirming the little blue dot is firmly planted in a village called Aven Valley, and open my Uber app. But my stubborn streak makes me hesitate. Also, my fingers are too numb from the cold to tap anything accurately.

I let my mind wander back into the past—back to when Brady and I first connected on the LoveLeap app. His profile photo showed him standing in front of an ancient castle, his jet-black hair tousled by the wind and his eyes radiating warmth. His bio was refreshingly genuine in a sea of clichés:

Historian with a weakness for good whisky, bad puns, and women who challenge my theories. Let's debate the historical accuracy of *Outlander* over coffee?

Our conversations started as playful banter about Scottish history (my knowledge limited to what I'd gleaned from historical romance novels; his seemingly endless) and quickly evolved into daily exchanges about everything from existential philosophy to our shared love of obscure indie bands from the early 2000s.

Brady's words echoed in my mind: "It's like you've been living in my head all along." Those words had thawed something within me—a frosty barricade around my heart erected after witnessing my parents' bitter divorce when I was just five years old.

I shared these memories with Brady during one of our late-night conversations, feeling safe in the anonymity provided by distance. He responded with empathy and vulnerability about his own family issues—all part of our growing intimacy.

Even the photos of his shoes had been perfect for each story he told me. The weathered walking boots in photos from supposed hiking trips where he claimed to do his best thinking about us. The sophisticated Oxfords paired with stories about academic conferences where he'd found himself wishing I was there to share the experience. Each image was carefully selected to build the character of Brady Reeves: Thoughtful Academic and Perfect Potential Partner, and I stupidly thought it confirmed my Shoe Theory was flawless.

My Shoe Theory might sound a bit silly, but it's been my fun guiding light in the chaos (okay, shitshow) of modern dating. It started as a giggle-worthy distraction from adulting but soon became my trusty love compass.

The theory was born out of countless dates in Toronto's bustling coffee shops, where I'd find myself studying my date's shoes while they grabbed our lattes. Lila, always ready with a witty jab, loved to poke fun at the theory at first, but now even she can't deny its uncanny accuracy.

The crux of the theory is that a man's choice in footwear is like an open book about his character. It's not just about whether he chooses loafers over sneakers or cowboy boots over dress shoes; it's that his shoes are a sneak peek into his personality, his values, and even his lifestyle.

Even my mom, who typically scoffs at such whimsical notions, has begun to acknowledge its merit—though I suspect she's just humoring me to avoid another post-divorce therapy session.

I started gauging men based on their shoe choices in my mid-twenties because it seemed like an express route to understanding who they truly are beneath their polished exteriors. It felt like having cheat codes for the complex game of modern relationships. And let's be real: we could all use some guidance navigating those unpredictable waters.

I remember sitting in Moonbean Coffee in Kensington Market when Ryan sauntered towards me with our coffee. His shoes were glossy black patent leather, probably costing more than my monthly rent.

As he launched into an unasked-for monologue mansplaining his investment portfolio, I silently assessed him: Status-obsessed with an intense fear of imperfection. I cut that date short under the guise of a non-existent deadline.

As I left, though, a pang of loneliness settled in my chest. Back in my apartment, I sought solace in a cheap bottle of wine and a bag of Cheetos, each quick sip and crunchy bite a futile attempt to fill the ache of solitude.

Two weeks later, I found myself in a different café with Daniel, his feet adorned in shoes that looked like a canvas splashed with paint. Artistic and spontaneous, I mused, Values creativity, and doesn't shy away from self-expression!

He persuaded me to dye my hair a vibrant shade of red, a daring change that felt thrilling at the time. We shared intense moments of passion and laughter for five months until he vanished without warning or explanation, leaving only the ghost of our connection behind.

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The silence on his end was deafening; my once lively social media feed now felt like an echo chamber. Every strand of my now-fading red hair was a bitter reminder of him. His absence hung over me like a fog, making it hard to see anything else.

Over countless coffee dates and several years, the Shoe Theory refined itself. My last date two months ago was with Jacob, with his scuffed-up brown motorcycle boots for every occasion. He dumped me because I was “an overachiever.” The tag of Miss Perfectionist hung around my neck like an oversized statement necklace, more cumbersome than glamorous. In the comforting embrace of my tiny Toronto apartment, I took solace like countless heart-shattered women who had lived there before me.

Nestled in a worn-out armchair that had seen better days, I wrapped myself in an old quilt, its fabric softened by time and tears. With a dog-eared copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and my furbaby Chanandler on my lap, I sought refuge in Austen’s world, far removed from mine. Each weekend became a ritualistic retreat into this literary sanctuary, where Darcy’s wit was sharper than any betrayal, and Elizabeth Bennet’s resilience inspired me to face another week.

My vulnerability lay bare within these four walls; it was raw and real but cushioned by the familiar scent of well-loved books and the faint echo of laughter from *Friends* reruns playing on low volume. It was comforting, though a far cry from the cozy comfort of a partner who adores you for your beautiful mess, not just your accomplishments.

By our 29th birthdays in April, Lila and I were starting to give up on finding the right partner, so we spent our Saturday nights playing with my Shoe Theory like a Magic 8

Ball. It was more accurate than the ball, and became our fun inside joke. Lila even started consulting me before her own dates.

“He’s wearing flip-flops to a restaurant, Mills. Red flag?” she’d question.

“Catastrophe in the making,” I’d giggle. “Unless you’re literally dining on a beach, he’s telling you he doesn’t think you’re worth the effort of real shoes.”

I realized that my Shoe Theory was both a game and a coping mechanism, really, born from the wreckage of my parents’ bitter divorce, which left me more than a little jaded about love’s staying power. And it seemed that my Theory was surprisingly bulletproof—that is, until Brady sauntered into my life.

A man I’d never even shared oxygen with!

What a dumbass I’ve been.

Chapter Six

Gazing around, I let out an exasperated sigh. At least this seaside village that I’ve tumbled into is undeniably gorgeous.

I let my eyes wander over the rain-drenched yet awe-inspiring emerald landscape, and for the first time since I arrived, I take a lungful of air, allowing the magic of this land to wash over me.

Its scent is like a spell, intoxicating and heady. The sharp tang of pine needles hits first, mingling with the sweet perfume of heather in full bloom. It’s a floral medley that would make any perfumier green with envy. Then there’s the salty kiss from the nearby coast weaving its way into the mix.

Every breath feels like I'm taking in more than just air—it's as if I'm inhaling tiny fragments of Scotland itself, each molecule carrying whispers of ancient tales and timeless beauty.

After an eternity of gloom, the sun has broken free from its cloudy prison. Its warm rays caress my face, casting a golden glow on everything around me. A sudden warmth fills me—from the sun and within—a spark ignited by possibility. The Highlands aren't just around me. They're inside me now, filling my senses with their wild charm and untamed spirit.

A sigh escapes me as I realize that bolting back to Canada with my ego bruised and battered isn't the solution here. Perhaps this is the time to put myself first. To pamper myself a bit.

Because when you strip away all else, you're your own best friend for life. Only you can truly comprehend your heart's quiet murmurings and navigate through the labyrinthine corridors of your mind.

“That was shockingly wise, Mills,” I mutter to the open landscape, suppressing a chuckle. Who knew a stone gazebo near the sea could save me a fortune in therapy bills?

I launch a search on my phone instead of canceling my flight, typing “lodging in Aven Valley,” correcting typos as they crop up due to numb digits and shaky hands.

Despite my sketchy signal strength, results pop up with unexpected speed. Bypassing hotels and crowded B&Bs, I look for something serene—any improvement on a bunk bed in a hostel. Somewhere no one will pepper me with jovial questions about my trip or, worse still, notice my puffy eyes and dirt-smudged face.

That's when I see it. “Rosewood Cottage: Last cottage on the cove.” The thumbnail

photo shows a stone building partially covered in climbing roses, set against a backdrop of steel-gray sea. Something about it catches my attention, a pull that's hard to define but impossible to ignore. I tap the listing.

More photos load slowly, each one revealing another facet of what appears to be a 200-year-old cottage that walks the perfect line between charmingly rustic and possibly haunted. Thick stone walls with deep-set windows. A wooden door painted a fading blue.

The description is sparse but oddly poetic: "Rosewood Cottage. One Rosewood Lane, Aven Valley, Moray Firth. Seaside solitude in historic surroundings. Self-catering. Few neighbors. No disturbances. Just you, the sea, and whatever ghosts you bring with you."

That last line should probably send me running to the hostel, but instead, it makes my lips curve into my first genuine smile of the day. At least the owner is honest about the cottage's atmospheric qualities. And right now, "few neighbors" sounds like heaven.

I scroll to the availability calendar, expecting it to be booked solid—places with this much character usually are. To my surprise, it shows immediate availability for the next month, and they offer payment plans. Either it's finally my lucky day, or there's something seriously wrong with this place that isn't evident from the photos. Given my current streak, the odds favor the latter.

But the price per night is reasonable—suspiciously so for a waterfront property, and my budget appreciates that. The location is remote but not completely isolated, about twenty-five minutes from downtown Inverness, according to the map. Far enough from the city that I'm unlikely to have any accidental Brady encounters, yet close enough to civilization that I won't be stranded entirely if this is a mistake.

My practical side pipes up with objections:

What about saving money?

What about basic common sense that says don't book a remote cottage in a foreign country when you're already having the worst day of your adult life?

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But another voice, quieter but more insistent, whispers that this could be exactly what I need. Not just a place to stay but a place to hide.

To heal.

To finally write something honest instead of the packaged, crowd-pleasing narratives I've been producing.

My thumb brushes over the Book Now button, and a jolt of anticipation courses through me, almost as if the decision carries its own electricity. There's something momentous about this decision, as if the cottage is a doorway to a time I can't quite see from where I'm standing.

I tap the button before I can talk myself out of it. I still have a bus ticket for tomorrow if the place is a total dump. The form asks for my details—name, email, and payment information. I fill it all in, my fingers warming slightly with the activity. There's a space for "Special Requests." I hesitate before typing: "Arriving today. Sooner rather than later, if possible."

After hitting submit, a confirmation screen appears almost immediately: "Welcome to Rosewood Cottage, Amelia. Your sanctuary awaits. Check-in after 2 p.m. Directions and key instructions are attached."

It's already 2:42 pm, according to my phone.

Okay.

I am a woman with a plan now. I'll secure an Uber, navigate my way to that quaint little cottage, and soothe this bruised ego with a generous glass (or two) of Chardonnay.

I've been twiddling my thumbs for fifteen minutes as this stupid, misinformed Uber app leaves me hanging in uncertainty.

"Hang tight!" it chirpily informs me for the fourth time. "We're finding your driver."

A spry older man sporting snow-white hair and a grin so contagious he could be Dick Van Dyke's Scottish cousin strolls by.

"All well there, lass?" he inquires.

"Absolutely," I lie through gritted teeth, pasting on a smile. "Just waiting for my Uber."

His laughter is hearty and genuine as he responds, "No Ubers in Inverness, lass."

Of course not. Brady tricked me, a highland cow tried to eat me, and now even technology has betrayed me.

So, after Mr. Van Dyke directs me towards the shortest route to Rosewood Lane, I trudge along in my putrid yellow poncho, dragging my soggy bundle of clothes towards the last cottage on the cove.

My dress is plastered to my legs with a combination of rain and mud that's going to be hell to peel off later. But for the first time since discovering Brady's deception, I feel a flutter of something that might be excitement.

Or terror. They feel remarkably similar sometimes.

As I set off down the hill, my mind skips ahead to the cottage. Will it be as atmospheric in person as it appears in photos? Will the “few neighbors” promise hold, or will I discover that the owner lives uncomfortably close? Most importantly, will it have a roll-top bathtub where I can soak away the day’s disasters?

These practical questions shroud deeper ones that I’m unprepared to delve into. What am I genuinely seeking in this secluded cottage? A getaway? Inspiration? A fresh start for my off-track life? And what happens if I don’t find it there?

One step at a time.

1. Find Rosewood Lane.
2. Get to that cottage without turning into Elsa.

Step Three is to figure out who on earth I am when not defined by my work or relationships, especially those that have crashed and burned. Between crafting tales about women discovering themselves and losing myself in Brady’s deceit, the genuine Amelia Sutherland has gone missing.

Maybe she’s tucked away in the corners of Rosewood Cottage, just waiting for me to find her. Or perhaps I’ll have to rebuild her from scratch, each muddy detail and battle scar a testament to my determination.

Either way, I’m all in. A shaky grin tugs at my lips as I mentally challenge the old cottage.

Alright, last cottage on the cove, let’s see what you’ve got.

Chapter Seven

Rosewood Cottage is even more bewitching than its pictures let on. It's a charming stone sanctuary perched at the edge of the sparkling sea. Its windows wink at me in the fading afternoon light as if playfully saying, 'Well, now. Took you long enough!'

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“Hello there, adorable cottage,” I murmur to the old building, a reluctant grin tugging at my lips despite the day’s chaos. The key is tucked under a potted plant and seems just as surprised by my arrival as I am by its existence; it twists easily in the lock with a satisfying click.

Crossing the threshold feels like stepping into a different epoch; history permeates the air, mingling with the briny aroma of the sea. It smells like new beginnings.

I yank off my poncho, ditch my boots at the door, and let my toes sink into the plush welcome mat. My luggage thuds on the floor behind me, and I’m drawn deeper inside by the enticing scent of antique wood and something vaguely floral.

The entranceway opens to a living room that could only be described as magical. A massive stone fireplace claims one wall, its sturdy wooden mantel decorated with dried white Heather, shells, sand dollars, and tiny mementos that hint at years of treasured memories.

Above me, timber beams stretch across the ceiling in a rustic display of architectural allure. I make a quick tour, discovering a washer and dryer behind a closet and a small bathroom with a shower off the living room.

Next up is the kitchen. It’s tinier than what I’m used to, but bursting with personality. The statement piece in this room is the black woodstove—it’s sleek and modern yet still exudes a vintage charm. It stands tall next to a hefty wooden table that seems designed for hearty meals shared over laughter and seafaring tales.

The walls are adorned with open shelves showcasing rows of mismatched china

plates and teacups, each piece narrating its own silent story. Vintage copper pots dangle from hooks above the kitchen stove, their surfaces glistening under the warm glow of overhead lights.

A quick scan upstairs unveils a cozy alcove filled with bookshelves carved directly into the cottage's stone walls—an unexpected library brimming with volumes from classic literature to local Scottish folklore. The sight makes my heart do the cha-cha in my chest. This place knows exactly how to make a writer feel right at home.

I discover the main bathroom tucked away between a pair of bedrooms upstairs. It's a simple white room, but it's been transformed into a sanctuary of calm.

Ah, just as I'd hoped! A claw-foot tub reigns supreme in the middle of the space, its gleaming white enamel surface striking against the worn wooden floors. A round window hangs above it, just big enough to let in a beam of natural light that I imagine pirouettes on the bath water's surface, making the entire room glimmer like some concealed gem.

The decor is unmistakably Highland. There are tartan throws draped over armchairs, miniature stag heads mounted on walls, and vintage maps showcasing Scotland's craggy landscape. The sight is so distinctly Scottish that I'm instantly flooded with images of warriors in kilts and haunting bagpipe tunes.

Every corner and crevice tells a tale about this place's history and charm. From the weathered wooden floorboards under my feet to the cherished black-and-white family portraits gracing the walls, everything appears touched by some magical spell that has frozen time.

My fingers dance along surfaces, tracing patterns on embroidered cushions, savoring the cool smoothness of ceramic teacups, and appreciating the rough texture of hand-carved wooden furniture. The allure of Rosewood Cottage is irresistible. It envelops

me in a warmth that feels like the world's most soothing hug. I'm head over heels for it. Yes, it's small, but within its snug walls, I see infinite opportunities for comfort and inspiration.

Sauntering into the primary bedroom suite, I can't help but notice how the roofline dips, almost as if it's curtsying in my honor—or perhaps it's just gearing up to play a prank. Because, of course, when I get too comfortable lounging on the trunk at the foot of the bed and stand up too quickly, it decides to have a tête-à-tête with my skull.

“Seriously?” I chastise my reflection in the full-length mirror while cautiously probing the fresh goose egg forming on my forehead. Spinning around, I collapse onto the bed, conveniently forgetting about our sloping adversary overhead. Our second introduction is significantly less charming than our first one.

I dial Lila's number, squinting one eye shut to focus on the screen. “Hey,” I greet her when she picks up.

“Hi babe,” Lila's voice filters through the phone, soft like a warm hug. “Feeling better?”

“Well,” I begin, wincing as my fingers brush against the tender spot on my forehead. “I've moved into this charming cottage, but I've had a bit of an altercation with a particularly stubborn old ceiling.”

Lila chuckles sympathetically from the other end of the line. “Oh, Mills! Always finding new ways to bump your head! Let me guess...you were wearing those ridiculous platform boots again?”

I glance down at my bare feet, numb from the cold wooden floorboards. Combat boots may be a staple in my wardrobe, but I know they're not ideal for navigating low ceilings in ancient cottages.

“Absolutely not. I was sporting stylish wedges, but they met their demise when a cow pursued me in the rain,” I confess sheepishly.

“You’re lucky you got away unscathed!” She snorts.

“Well...I’m concerned that I might have suffered a concussion,” I admit, gnawing nervously on my lower lip.

A pause follows before Lila breaks it, her voice tinged with mock seriousness:

“Are you seeing stars? Is there an animated bird chirping above your head? Are you picturing Shitty McLiar standing in traffic in his tightie whities?”

At the thought of Brady, my heart clenches painfully, and I fall silent.

“I swear, Mills, I’m making a voodoo doll of that jerk as we speak!” she vows fiercely. A playful note in her voice tugs a reluctant chuckle from me despite the sting of the whole Brady situation.

“Or perhaps,” she adds. “I’ll expose him on social media until he wishes he was hiding in some desolate cabin in northern Canada.”

“Just let it go. But thanks, Lil,” I manage with a sigh. “I needed this.”

“It’s what friends are for,” she replies. “Now go ice your head and put on something warmer than that flimsy dress! You must be freezing.”

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As the evening coolness begins to nip at my skin playfully, I find myself rooting through my damp clothes, desperately searching for something dry. It's a fruitless quest; each item is as soaked as the last, except for my socks and trench coat in a bag. With a sigh, I unpack everything, arranging my shoes meticulously and hanging up the soggy garments to air out. Then, tucked away in the back of the closet like a shy debutante at her first ball, I spot a clean white nightgown.

The gown is high-necked and adorned with delicate lace, radiating an aura of Victorian innocence that immediately transports me into the pages of a Jane Austen novel. A soft chuckle escapes me as I pull it over my head.

“Move over, Lizzie Bennet, there's a new heroine in town.”

Before heading to a village store and the kitchen to whip up something to eat, I decide to first wrestle with an equally daunting beast: the dreaded Chapter One. The pristine white space glaring back at me from my laptop screen feels as formidable as any unexplored heroine, taunting me from its perch on my cozy armchair. But even as I cradle a steaming cup of Earl Grey, my gaze keeps wandering from the impatient cursor to the raw beauty unfolding beyond Rosewood Cottage's window.

The rugged coastline whispers tales of hidden treasures beneath its rocky surface. I can almost feel the cool dampness of sand between my toes and hear the satisfying crunch of sea glass underfoot that tomorrow is sure to bring.

And then there's Loch Ness. Draped in mystery and steeped in folklore. Ancient waters that stoke the embers of my curiosity.

Despite this overload of sensory inspiration, not a single groundbreaking sentence dares to grace my Word document. The cursor flashes at me from the untouched page like a ticking time bomb, waiting for inspiration to ignite it.

In an attempt to distract myself from this creative drought, or perhaps in some primal quest for sparking creativity, I find myself drawn towards the living room fireplace. I crumple some newspaper for tinder and meticulously stack two logs on top. But despite several attempts that involve matches and whispered spells learned from countless camping trips in Ontario's backcountry, nothing takes hold.

No spark ignites.

No flame dances.

"Brilliant." I mutter a couple of curse words under my breath. "An author who can't even spark a measly fire."

So. My bold attempt at survival will end not in a blaze of glory, but with frozen extremities and a bruised ego. As the living room clings to its icy temperament, I shuffle towards the window, hugging myself for warmth.

Gazing at the blue-green waters at Moray Firth, a man perched precariously on an overturned sailboat captures my attention. His sandy blond hair dances playfully in the wind while his broad shoulders hint at unspoken power—all encased in a skin-tight black wetsuit that hugs his backside like it's holding on for dear life. He could easily be mistaken for a magazine cover model for wild Scottish adventures.

"Looks like you've got yourself in quite a pickle, Highlander," I shake my head as I whisper to the cold glass separating us, intrigued by his unfortunate situation.

This wasn't exactly the solitude I'd envisioned, but then again, today has been

anything but predictable. At least this view is easy on the eyes—a minor consolation for my throbbing forehead and wounded pride.

Poor guy, he must be freezing out there on Moray Firth.

I snatch up the key, slip on my trench coat and sneakers, and make a mad dash outside.

Chapter Eight

The motorboat's engine roars to life, a throaty growl that shatters the tranquility of Moray Firth. I'm at the helm of this tangerine beast, steering it like a drunken sailor towards the capsized sailboat and its rather attractive Highland occupant.

“Hang on!” I holler into the wind, my voice wobbling with barely concealed panic.

Seriously, who am I trying to kid here? My maritime experience extends to one high school book report on Moby Dick.

As I kill the engine and drift dangerously close to his boat, Mr. Highland Hottie emerges from behind his overturned vessel. His sandy blond and ginger hair is slicked back from his face, and he sports a sexy grin.

“Hey there!” His words are velvety smooth, wrapped in a thick Scottish accent that reminds me of caramel whisky poured over ice. “Fancy joining me for a swim?”

I blink at him, gripping the wheel for dear life as our boats rock in sync with the waves. “I thought you were... in need of rescue,” I manage to say.

He laughs—a rich sound that ripples across the water's surface. “Rescue? Nah, just doing some repairs. But thanks for playing knight in shining armor.”

My cheeks flame up like a campfire is licking them. Gathering what little dignity I have left while commandeering a motorboat in my nightgown, I offer him a ride back.

“As long as ye promise not to throw me overboard,” he jokes before effortlessly righting his sailboat and securing it with an anchor.

With cat-like grace, he leaps onto my boat, and suddenly, he’s right there, so close that the warmth of his breath skates across my skin. It’s a gentle caress, an intimate whisper of air that twirls around me, sending delightful shivers cascading down my spine.

I lift my gaze to meet his, rolling my eyes in a practiced show of indifference. But inside, I’m anything but indifferent to his presence.

“Really? Isn’t that a bit cliché? Like every rom-com where the woman falls into the hero’s arms during their first encounter?”

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Great job, Mills. My internal monologue is now on full display for the entire village to hear. By now, my cheeks are probably glowing brighter than a Las Vegas neon sign. I pull my lips between my teeth to stop saying more.

He smirks at me before extending his hand. As our fingers intertwine, my knees turn to Jello, wobbling like I just got off a rollercoaster. I can't believe this! I just scoffed at the cliché of falling into a hero's arms, and here I am, starring in my own rom-com bloopers reel.

"Callum MacDowell," he introduces himself, his delicious accent wrapping around his name like strings of red licorice. There's mischief in his captivating sapphire-blue eyes, an irresistible allure that makes his handsome features even more striking.

Full and tantalizing, his rosy lips starkly contrast to the rough, blond-ginger stubble that dusts his jawline. His hair is a tousled mess of sandy blonde streaked with gold, catching the late-setting sun (seriously, who knew it could still be light out at 9 pm?), and there's no hiding the muscular build beneath that wetsuit.

Now here comes the kicker: Callum is barefoot. Not a shoe in sight. This throws my otherwise foolproof Shoe Theory into absolute chaos.

So far, I've deduced that the brogue-clad gents are typically deep thinkers with a soft spot for poetry and philosophy. Sneaker buffs? They're youthful spirits brimming with spontaneity. Men who opt for pointed patent leather dress shoes like Shitty McLiars tend to be detail-obsessed status seekers. And don't get me started on those motorcycle boot wearers—they're risk-takers oozing passion from every pore.

But what does barefoot say? It's like stumbling upon some rare species in the wild, intriguing but utterly baffling at the same time. How does one categorize such an oddity? Is he some laid-back pacifist or just eccentric? A nature enthusiast or simply forgetful?

I admit this is my oversight. I never accounted for the barefoot type in my grand Shoe Theory. But honestly, who could've seen this coming? Meeting a shoeless man on a boat out in Moray Firth? It's thrown me for a loop.

Struggling to keep my cool, I stutter out an introduction, praying that I don't topple into his arms or the water. His head tilts in curiosity.

“What brings a lass like you onto the Firth at this hour?”

“I'm a Canadian author,” I admit with a casual shrug as I sit down, start the engine, and steer us back to the shore. “Vacationing at Rosewood Cottage just over there. Noticed your sailboat capsize and thought you might need some help.”

His eyebrows jump up, surprise painting his features before it morphs into a warm grin.

“Canadian? Really now? You've got quite the adventurous streak!” The lilt in his voice rises like a melody before he adds in a lower, huskier tone, “Must say, I have a soft spot for yer country...and books. I love books. Especially ones about history.” The way he says it makes me feel like we share something precious—a mutual love for stories and the past—making him even more captivating.

As we touch down back at the dock, Callum lifts his duffel bag from the weather-beaten dock and slips his bare feet into navy blue loafers. Watching him, relief washes over me.

Loafers. Unpredictable and thrilling.

A surge of quiet laughter bubbles up within me. Knowing where he fits into my Shoe Theory brings a comforting ease.

I notice him shiver slightly in his wetsuit, and out of nowhere, an unexpected spark ignites in my chest before cascading down to my stomach and pooling warmth lower still. It's as surprising to me as the man himself.

“You must be freezing. Want to come inside? Maybe use the shower?” I blurt without thinking.

He meets my gaze with a crooked grin. “Why not?” He shrugs nonchalantly as we leave behind the crisp Scottish air for the welcoming warmth of Rosewood Cottage.

Once inside, I guide him down the narrow hallway to the petite bathroom at the back of the cottage. “The shower's in here,” I say, pushing open the creaking wooden door to reveal a quaint space with mismatched tiles and a pink-painted roll-top bath doubling as a shower.

When he's out of sight, I tidy up the living area. The worn-out couch cushions need puffing up, and stray mugs litter the coffee table. I can't help stealing glances towards the bathroom door as I close my laptop and neatly arrange my books.

When Callum steps out from the steamy bathroom, only a thin towel clinging dangerously low around his waist, all my focus evaporates instantly.

His tousled hair is damp from lingering water droplets, and his blue eyes seem even brighter against his flushed skin. My heart flutters wildly in my chest as I watch the rivulets of water trace a tantalizing path down his chiseled abs. A sudden urge rises within me to reach out, follow those rivulets with my tongue, and taste his salty skin.

Instead, I offer to make dinner—partly out of guilt, partly because abs like those deserve a meal cooked by someone as grateful as me.

Caught in an emotional whirlwind, I feel somewhat relieved when Callum says he wants to change into a casual outfit from the duffel bag he'd left at the door. His rugged charm only increases when he greets me again in worn jeans and a crisp white T-shirt.

Stumbling upon a few unexpected supplies kindly left by the cottage owner feels like striking gold at the rainbow's end. Coffee and tea sit on the counter under soft kitchen lights while fresh veggies and a bottle of wine fill the fridge. A packet of pasta and a tin of sauce wait patiently in the pantry, promising a simple yet satisfying meal. I'd heard about Scottish hospitality, but this is above and beyond. I'll definitely give the owner a glowing review.

A warmth spreads through me, gratitude mingling with relief. With these ingredients, I can whip up something impressive; show him that I'm not just some dimwit Canadian girl trying to rescue someone who didn't need rescuing.

"Need help with anything?" he offers.

"No, no," I assure him, hacking at a tomato with all the grace of a butter knife. But my eyes are traitors, stealing glances at him as he gets busy building a fire in the wood stove. Each log he places is an exhibition of raw strength; every bend an open invitation to admire him unabashedly.

He catches me off guard with his next remark:

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“Nice nightie.” His lips curl into a mischievous grin that sets my heart racing. Damn it! While tidying up and sneakily admiring Callum’s physique, I completely forget about my nightie!

“Thanks,” I say playfully. It’s part of my ‘Stranded in Scotland’ collection.” My chest and cheeks grow hot under his gaze. Yet there it is again—an appreciative spark in those mesmerizing eyes, reflecting the roaring fire.

Our spontaneous dinner is a delightful medley of flavors and shared laughter. With each bite and playful jab passed between us, we ease into the rhythm of each other’s company. As we fall into easy conversation, Callum reminds me he wasn’t in any real danger out on the water after all.

“Well. I was attempting to save you,” I blink, lips curling into a mock pout.

He shoots me a playful wink. “Aye, ye certainly did. In that unique, Austen-esque fashion.”

“What? Do I come across as a Jane Austen character? Hm...I do have English and Scottish ancestors...”

“Amelia,” he pauses, his gaze teasingly intense. “I’ve known you what? An hour? And already, I can tell you’re unlike any woman I’ve ever met.”

His words hit me like an unexpected wave, and I’m grateful for the sturdy chair under me. My legs feel like they’ve morphed into jelly.

“Oh, come on. You must have encountered someone like me before,” I pull in a shallow breath.

“Trust me. If I had ever met someone even remotely as fascinating as you,” Callum fires back with a grin that reveals his dimpled cheek, “I’d remember.”

“Now, tell me more about this novel of yours.” He playfully mimics my Canadian accent on ‘about,’ his Scottish lilt, giving it an enticing twist.

“I’m trying to write a new romance series set in the Highlands. One that’s honest about how messy love can be. And, for your information, I don’t sound like that!” My feigned annoyance barely masks my amusement.

His laughter echoes around the room, his eyes gleaming. But then, it’s as if someone hits the mute button on a remote, and everything goes quiet.

We’re caught in a bubble of silence as our eyes lock. The air practically vibrates with an intensity that could give the crackling fire in the woodstove a run for its money.

Callum leans back in his chair, a reminiscent smile on his lips. “Well, if you need inspiration, Amelia,” he starts, the soft Highland lilt of his voice caressing my name, “I spent all of my childhood right here in Aven Valley.”

He runs a hand through his tousled hair and continues, “The air was always sweet with the scent of blooming heather, and the distant lullaby of crashing waves echoed across Moray Firth and through these hills.” His gaze turns distant, like he’s lost in the memories.

“I was barely taller than a bagpipe when my Da first took me sailing on those waters,” he adds, chuckling at the thought. His hands move in animated gestures as if he could recreate that tiny boat bobbing precariously on waves right here between us.

“Da said I took to it like a seal to water. By five years old, I was steering our wee boat all by myself.” His tone shifts slightly then, becoming more serious but still brimming with passion. “That love for sailing...it grew with me. It became more than just a pastime—it was an obsession. By twenty-one, I’d built Aven Valley’s first sailing club.”

His words hang between us—not arrogant or boastful, but filled with genuine love for his town and its connection to the sea.

As Callum’s voice wraps around each word of his tale, I feel warmth threading something new around my heart. But then a familiar warning bell rings in my mind, pulling me back. I’m getting too close, too fast.

Remember Brady? Remember the heartache? The thought lingers like a shadow over this moment, reminding me of the risks of letting my guard down. It’s a silent reminder that as much as I want to embrace this new connection, I can’t ignore the lessons of my past.

I take another sip of wine, its coolness against my lips starkly contrasting with the heat between us. “Here’s to hoping tomorrow brings less excitement,” I say quietly, breaking our intimate silence and clinking my glass against his.

“Or maybe just the right kind,” he counters smoothly, his gaze never wavering from mine even as the electricity dances between our bodies.

Looking down at my bare feet, I find myself missing my shoes—the ones that usually dictate my days: heels for power walks through publishing meetings and sneakers for those much-needed escapes in nature. The cold wood floor beneath me is an acute reminder of how far away from home I am and yet how oddly grounded I feel here.

“Suppose I should get going. Crack of dawn sailing tomorrow,” Callum announces,

gathering his plate and glass. He rinses them under the tap before turning to me with a grateful nod.

“Back on the water so soon?” I ask.

“Aye, it’s how I make a living—I didn’t just build it. I run the sailing club next door,” he responds nonchalantly, as if having your own sailing club in your backyard is just another Tuesday.

“And you live...” I suddenly realize he’s likely a neighbor, and warmth spreads across my cheeks once more. His eyes twinkle with amusement as he watches me piece together this puzzle.

“You’re a local? On Rosewood Lane?” My words come out in an awkward chuckle. He leans casually against the cottage’s quaint wooden door—a door so low he has to duck slightly to avoid bumping his head.

“Three Rosewood Lane is home for me.”

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“That figures,” I say, feeling like a fool for inviting my neighbor over for an impromptu shower earlier.

“I enjoyed our meal together...and your company,” he adds, his gaze boring into mine with the intensity of morning sun cutting through Scottish fog.

A wave of desire crashes over me then—one that involves pressing myself against him and exploring every inch of his muscular form right there against that door. But before I can act on it, he swings the door open and steps out into the night air, leaving me alone in my granny-chic nightgown with nothing but my racing thoughts for company.

Chapter Nine

As I wriggle into my go-to jeans, the ones that somehow make me feel both adventurous and stylish—a fashion unicorn—I’m once again ambushed by the low ceiling. My head narrowly dodges the sloping beam, and I shoot it a stern glare.

“Not today,” I warn it, flexing my toes defiantly inside my socks. “Today is a fresh start. Nothing’s going to rain on this parade, especially not me.”

Victorious over architectural eccentricities for now, I scamper downstairs, each of my steps making the old wooden floorboards croon like an ancient sea shanty. The kettle lets out its shrill whistle as I wrap my fingers around the chipped floral mug—the one that only gets more charming with every imperfection.

Then comes a knock—bold and assertive rather than a timid tap you’d expect from a

shy neighbor. I bet it's...

“Callum,” I sigh, wrestling with the old door that clings to its frame like it’s auditioning for Survivor. After a tug-of-war, it finally gives way with an exaggerated groan, releasing a puff of dust.

As morning sunbeams tiptoe over the horizon to bathe Moray Firth in a soft golden glow, there stands Callum MacDowell, all tousled hair and sapphire-blue eyes—looking delicious enough to spread on toast.

His robust figure against the backdrop of dawn makes him seem like he was born from this very landscape, as if these cliffs carved him and these waters smoothed his edges.

He cradles a basket of steaming scones from the local bakery. The buttery aroma wafts up, tickling my nostrils and making my stomach do a happy flip.

“Stick with Cal, lass?” he suggests, the corners of his mouth curving up into a cheeky grin. “Given your heroics out on the Firth, I believe we’re on nickname terms now.”

“Lass? Seriously? Are we time-traveling back to 1645 now?” I blurt out with indignation before I can stop myself.

“It’s my way of showing affection,” he admits, a blush creeping across his cheeks that leaves me momentarily breathless.

“Alright then... come on in, Cal,” I manage to choke out once I’ve regained my senses, beckoning him inside. As he steps past me into the cottage, his scent—a heady blend of sea air and raw earthiness—hangs behind him like an echo. There he is again, right up in my personal space. But shockingly enough, I contemplate letting him cross not just one boundary but two.

“And if you want, you can call me Mills,” I add, taken aback at my willingness to offer a nickname so quickly.

Cal is quiet for a breath. Then he hands over a brown paper bag with a shy sense of anticipation. “I got these for you from Mary’s. Adorable little shop in the village. Couldn’t help but notice yer feet were turnin’ an alarming shade of blue last night.”

I reach inside the bag and pull out the most delightful pair of gray and red tartan slippers. They’re so cozy-looking yet elegant, it feels almost sinful to even think about wearing them. But the floors are cold, and these are calling to me, so I bend down and slip them on my socked feet.

“Aw. They’re a perfect fit! Thanks.” The words catch my throat. Without thinking twice about it, I lean forward and kiss his cheek. “And the scones smell heavenly. Can’t wait to give them a taste test.”

“Me too, I’m famished. Been out on the water coaching wee ones all morning.”

Of course. He sails. He has hip bones like Michelangelo sculpted them. And he works with small children, too.

I inhale and let out a shaky breath. “Well, grab a seat. Let’s dig in,” I manage.

We settle by the window, taking in the endless expanse of the sea. He reaches for the teapot, stopping my clumsy attempt. “Here, let me show a Canuck how to make a proper cup of tea,” he teases, his fingers skillfully swirling the pot three times clockwise.

“Is there a secret handshake too?” I joke, watching him pour out the amber liquid with an almost ceremonial precision.

“Only if you’re serious about your tea,” he replies, a playful twinkle in his eye.

As much as I want to fight it, Cal makes it so easy to let my guard down. I think back to Brady and the heartache he caused me.

This budding attraction feels too good to be true. I should know better than to let myself get swept up in it all again... But then again, who said anything about a romance? This is just friendly banter. Right?

As we savor the scones, I feel myself unraveling like a much-folded map, spilling the beans about my career and current creative rut, which feels as precarious as the cliffs beyond Rosewood Cottage. I admit to Cal about the pressures from my publisher and how lately, the blank page seems to smirk at me in mockery.

“Writer’s block?” Cal empathizes, his mouth dusted with crumbs. “Farming can be like that too. When the land doesn’t give you what you expect.”

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“Hold up. You’re a farmer, too?”

“Born and raised,” he elaborates, his voice carrying the weight of years spent in service to family and land. “I still lend a hand to my Pops most mornings, then take up teaching sailing in the afternoons.” The simplicity of his words, painting a picture of a life filled with hard work and familial dedication, momentarily soothes the sting of Brady’s betrayal.

The subtle lift of my eyebrows must give my surprise away because Cal’s lips curl into a teasing grin.

“A bit taken aback, are we?” he teases. “My parents own that hilltop farm—the one with the cow that seemed to take a liking to ye.”

“Wait... What?... That was your place?” I stutter out.

“Indeed,” he responds, his tone shifting to genuine regret.

“And about Buttercup, we’re truly, truly sorry. She’s never behaved like that before. After you dashed off, I made sure she was safely back in her stall.”

“Buttercup?” I can’t help but let out a snort at the name. “Well, that’s fitting,” I tease. “But how did you know it was me?”

Cal’s laughter ripples through the air. “Well, it’s not every day a Canadian sashays into a Highland field and... woos... my cows like you did,” he says playfully. “You stood out. Plus, word travels fast in small villages.”

“Oh no. You haven’t heard about Brady Reeves making me look like a complete nincompoop, have you?” I’m sure Inverness is too big, but I need to ask.

My question hangs in the air like a fragile bubble ready to burst. Then Cal shakes his head slightly. “I haven’t, but I find it hard to believe anyone could make ye look foolish, Amelia.” His words are heavy and meaningful, creating a charged silence between us.

“Well,” I admit in a whisper, “he made me feel like one.”

Cal must pick up on the slight wobble in my voice when I mention Brady’s name. He threads gentleness into his next question: “So, he wasn’t exactly your prince charming?” There’s an understanding in his tone that acknowledges the hurt without demanding details.

I offer a nod. “I was on the verge of hightailing it back home...” My voice trails off as I wave my hand vaguely at our surroundings.

“And yet,” he gently completes my thought, “instead of fleeing, you found solace here, in Rosewood Cottage.” His gaze is so electrifying that it sparks warmth throughout my body.

“So... that’s not so bad then,” he says with a flirtysmirk. I smile and sip my last splash of tea, trying not to look up at his eyes again.

“Ye know,” he begins again after a moment of silence. “It takes some serious grit to stick around Aven Valley after tangling with both heartbreak and Buttercup.”

He runs a hand over his scruffy chin. “Most would’ve thrown in the towel and bolted home. But you... you’re different. That’s something to be admired.”

“That’s... unexpectedly kind,” I admit, my words a soft murmur.

An unfamiliar tremor ripples through my heart. I’m on the verge of launching into my signature sarcasm, but I find myself pausing, teetering on this precipice between vulnerability and joy.

“Surely, though, it takes more than slippers and baked goods to heal a wounded heart,” Cal says.

His grin is pure infectious charm, the kind that should be accompanied by a flashing caution sign.

“So. Let’s go mingle with my cattle, lass,” he suggests, rising from his seat.

I cross my arms, skepticism weaving its way into my thoughts. “Hold on. The last time I encountered one of your barnyard friends, it nearly flattened me! Your plan doesn’t sound much more comforting than staying here, eating scones all morning.”

He leans in just enough for me to catch his inviting scent—woody earth, spices, and a hint of salty sea breeze.

“Ah, but this time, you’ll have me as your guide. So you’re safe. And trust me, I’m far less crumbly and infinitely more captivating than any scone.”

A smirk tugs at my lips, but I bite down on them to keep from laughing out loud.

Oh, I’m willing to wager his buns are anything but crumbly. Probably more like firm, and astoundingly lickable.

“And,” he throws in with a dash of theatrical confidence, “no one else can show ye the enchanting secrets of these Highlands quite like Yours Truly.”

Unable to hide my amusement any longer, his words pull a soft chuckle from me.
“Well, perhaps a tour of this quaint town is just the spark my imagination needs.”

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“See? What’d I tell ye? I’m practically overflowing with genius ideas!” Cal says, flashing me a devilish wink that promises nothing short of trouble.

“Come on now, cowpoke,” Cal eggs me on with his sexy Scottish lilt and dimpled grin. I trail after him, leaving behind the inviting warmth of Rosewood Cottage and stepping into the briny tang of Moray Firth’s salty air.

We stroll through the quaint village, where cozy shop windows tempt me with promises of tasty Scottish cuisine. The briny maritime scent intertwines with fresh bread wafting from a nearby bakery while the morning chill playfully nips at my cheeks. I’m thankful for my snug sweater and beanie.

“Here we are,” Cal declares as we reach his farm on the hilltop. Its ancient stone walls stand tall and proud against the canvas of an immaculate blue sky. A half dozen scruffy, rusty-red highland cows graze lazily in the pasture around us.

“Dinnae worry. I’ll only call over the docile ones. Watch this,” Cal says before placing two fingers in his mouth and letting out a piercing whistle that echoes across the open field. The cows, previously scattered randomly around their pasture, perk up their heads and start ambling towards us at a leisurely pace that screams ‘no rush.’

“That’s Bonnie leading the pack,” he points to a particularly rotund cow, “then comes Thistle, Heather, Morag, Mae...”

I watch in fascination as each cow seems to acknowledge her name with a glance our way before continuing her unhurried journey toward us. “That’s incredible!” I gush. “Teach me?”

With eyes crinkled at the corners in amusement, Cal shows me how to position my fingers for an effective cattle call. Once I produce a sound that doesn't result in panicked bovine scattering—success!—I decide it's time to bring a touch of Canada to the Scottish Highlands. Cupping my hands around my mouth, I let loose a loon call, so loud, it reverberates eerily across the landscape.

Cal listens to my loon call for a minute before doubling over with laughter. “Well now,” he manages between fits of chuckles, “that'll be useful when we're out on Loch Ness! Might just frighten Nessie herself!”

Perched atop the hill, we survey the sprawling patchwork quilt of green MacDowell fields below us; our shared laughter swept away on the breeze as we take turns practicing our loon calls. Cal's attempt sounds more like a distressed trumpet than anything else, much to the apparent offense of two highland cows peacefully grazing in the distance. Their heads swivel towards us, and they start lumbering our way at an alarming speed.

Yikes, looks like it's time for a strategic retreat.

My heart starts doing a frantic cha-cha in my chest as I spin on my heel and sprint down the hill. Cal lopez beside me, grinning like a maniac at the cows charging our way.

“They've got it out for me!” I squeal, throwing terrified glances over my shoulder.

“Hardly. We're faster than them. I swear you're safe,” he chuckles, but he offers me his hand.

“I think they can smell fear,” I pant out, accepting his hand between laughter and desperate gulps of air.

“Or maybe they just have a nose for cute Canadians,” he quips back, squeezing my hand.

Once we’ve put some distance between us and our bovine stalkers, he turns to me with a smirk. “Ready for something a bit more fun?”

I squint at him suspiciously. “That depends on your idea of fun.”

His smirk stretches into a full-on grin. “Milking,” he declares proudly as if that single word solves all the world’s problems.

“Oh joy,” I groan, trailing after him into the barn.

He demonstrates his milking prowess on a cow named Daisy, hands moving with an ease that comes from years of practice. Then he turns to me expectantly. “Your turn.”

“Daisy, don’t make this weird,” I tell her, attempting to mimic Cal’s actions. Instead of a steady stream, I only manage to squirt out a few sad drops, some even missing the bucket thoroughly. The sound of Cal’s laughter is like fuel on my competitive fire.

“Amelia Sutherland doesn’t back down from challenges,” I announce with determination.

“Aye. And she shouldn’t,” he agrees, still chuckling at my expense.

Eventually, after more than a fair share of giggles and spilled milk, I get the hang of it and find a decent rhythm. We’re sitting side by side in the barn, our laughter bouncing off the wood walls, creating an unexpected symphony of shared joy that feels oddly intimate.

He suddenly stops laughing, his eyes touching a depth I hadn't noticed before.

"Come on," he says softly. "There's something else ye need to see."

Chapter Ten

Cal guides me out of the barn and down a lush green slope towards the main street that runs through the village. As we turn a corner, we stumble upon an unexpected sight: the skeletal remains of what used to be a medieval church. The once mighty stone structure now stands as proof of time's unrelenting march forward; its former glory weathered away by centuries.

"Wow!" I gasp in awe, quickening my pace to explore further. The ruins beckon with an ancient charm that's impossible for me to resist.

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“This is... incredible!”

“Aye, it’s a favorite stroll for me,” he says as we walk the perimeter of the church ruins.

“We aren’t allowed inside the ruins, but over there...” He points towards an open black iron-wrought gate leading into what looks like a graveyard nestled within the church grounds.

“... we can get a closer look at the gravestones. Unless yer scared of wakin’ up some spirits,” he teases with a playful wink.

I toss him a smirk over my shoulder as I stride ahead of him. “Ghosts? Bring them on! It’s the living who tend to cause real trouble.” My voice bounces off the silent stones as I delve deeper into history’s embrace.

The graveyard feels like I’ve stumbled into a parallel universe. Each headstone murmurs ancient narratives, their chiseled tales faded by the relentless march of time, yet still echoing the lives of those long gone.

“Look at this one!” My voice slices through the communal silence. I’m crouching next to an intriguing slab half-buried in the earth.

“Does this say Bestie Skinner, dedicated to her late husband, Merchant John Kenzie?”

Cal drops beside me, his knees crunching on the gravel as he squints at the inscription

before affirming softly, “Aye, it does.”

My finger traces over the worn letters with curiosity and respect. “I wonder what their story was,” I ponder aloud, my voice barely more than a breathy murmur. The stone reveals more:

John Kenzie, Former Merchant, died February 1328.

My eyes pop wide open in disbelief. “Wait! Are these stones honestly that ancient?”

Cal’s chuckle ripples through the quiet graveyard like a pebble in still water. “This village has seen many more moons than that.” His voice softens into something almost poetic.

“Every stone and blade of grass here has a tale to tell. Of those who dared to love, who laughed in the face of sorrow and wore their heartbreaks like badges of honor... They’re all right beneath our feet.”

I gape at him, words trapped somewhere between my brain and my mouth. He’s not quoting poetry like Brady; he’s making his own up on the fly. It’s like he instinctively knows what matters to me. It’s terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

So, as usual, I use humor to sidestep my jitters.

“Okay, so they’re old. But let’s not forget I’m not exactly a spring chicken either.” I offer a shaky grin, hoping it disguises the emotional tornado inside me.

Cal’s face lights up with an infectious smile as he offers me his hand and pulls me to my feet. “Maybe not in years, Mills. But ye’ve got this spirit... this energy that’s just bloody irresistible.” His accent wraps around his words like a lover’s caress, hitting me like a slapshot to the heart. My cheeks blaze like they’re two seconds from

spontaneous combustion, but no snappy comeback comes to mind to cover my surprise.

“You’re seeing things,” is all I can mumble before nervously placing a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“What if I am?” He counters, sincerity washing over his ruggedly handsome face.

“What if I see someone who’s been dimming her own shine for far too long?”

I pull in a shallow breath as the words hang between us, heavy and potent. My eyes well up with tears I’m not ready to shed, so I drop my gaze to my feet and blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

“Are you implying you’ve discovered my secret hoard of glow sticks back at Rosewood Cottage?” Then I’m off, putting distance between us before he can react to my awkward attempt at humor.

A peculiar sensation nips at my consciousness, subtle yet as tangible as the Scottish earth beneath our wandering feet. There’s been a shift, an unspoken change in our dynamics. For the first time, I feel seen, truly seen, and it leaves me breathless.

We venture further into the ancient graveyard, its secrets whispering through the wind. Cal reaches out to pluck a delicate avens flower from its solitary perch. He turns towards me, a soft smile teasing his lips as he presents it to me. I thank him with my smile and point to my hair—a silent suggestion of where it should reside.

Cal steps into my personal space with an ease that sends electricity coursing through my veins, and I welcome it. He leans in and tenderly tucks the flower behind my ear. “Ye know,” he begins casually, his eyes flickering over the surrounding gravestones, “it’s intriguing how these stones signify people who were deeply rooted here, but left

only faint imprints behind.”

I look up at him, catching the glint of something more in his eyes. “Have you always been this philosophical, or is it the Highland air?” I tease.

He chuckles, a low rumble that mixes with the breeze. “Actually, I wasn’t always the wise sage of Aven Valley. Back in school, I was just that ‘simple farmer’s kid’ who everyone thought wouldn’t amount to much.”

“Seriously? I can’t picture you as anything less than Captain Callum, Commander of the Seas.”

He rolls his eyes playfully, but there’s a hint of nostalgia in his voice. “You’d be surprised. I was all gangly limbs and big dreams. Got teased a lot. Thought I’d show them all, by building something special here.”

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“Your sailing club?” I ask.

“Aye,” he offers a small nod, steering me towards a weather-beaten tombstone dressed in a cloak of moss. “As a wee lad, this place was my playground. It got me thinking... everyone carries stories worth hearing while they’re still breathing.”

His gaze drifts off into the horizon, and his voice grows quiet. “I dreamt of transforming this town into a sanctuary for daydreamers and seafarers alike. Build a gathering spot where people could learn to sail and discover the untouched beauty and legends of Aven Valley.”

“That’s quite a lofty dream for a ‘simple farmer’s kid,’” I say with a wink.

His laughter is modest but confident. He’s aware of his worth, but not showing off about it. “Aye, people thought that. But to me... every rock here, every home, each wind sweeping across Moray Firth... they tell tales of boldness and courage.”

He turns to look at me. “I just thought, if a young boy in a graveyard could hear those whispers of adventure... why shouldn’t the world hear them too?”

The way he intertwines his dreams with the landscape around us is so damn captivating. “So, you’re what? The sea’s siren, calling out to sailors?”

“Something along those lines,” he says with a soft smile. “But without luring them to their doom.”

Cal guides me around other notable graves, spinning their tales with a storyteller’s

flair. We chuckle over some of the more humorous epitaphs and marvel at the enduring spirit of villagers from centuries past. When he doesn't realize I'm watching, I notice his eyes well up with tears at the graves marked by tragedy.

Eventually, we circle back to the skeletal remains of the ancient church just as the sun begins its descent toward the horizon. Its waning light bathes everything in a warm golden hue.

"Hungry?" Cal asks as he turns to me, his expression relaxed.

His question catches me off guard and I let out a soft chuckle.

"Honestly," I confess while patting my rumbling tummy for emphasis, "I could probably devour an entire Highland cow right about now."

His rich laughter rings out, pulling a laugh from me despite the ridiculousness of what I've just said.

"Is that sacrilegious?" I manage to ask between fits of giggles, swiping at a tiny tear that's escaped down my cheek.

He shakes his head, amusement still dancing in his eyes as he steadies himself. "Not at all," he assures me. "Just don't let Daisy hear."

Chapter Eleven

As our laughter fades, Cal gives me this affectionate and warm look that has my heart doing somersaults.

"How about we swing by my parents' place 'fore I take ye to mine for dinner?"

I nod, and suddenly, I'm buzzing with anticipation.

Cal leads me along a well-trodden path toward the stone farmhouse we saw earlier. It looks like it's been plucked straight out of a Grimms' Fairy Tale storybook. As we get closer, he explains that it's been home to generations of MacDowells.

"It was built in 1640, but rooms have been expanded, and Da and I built this wraparound porch last summer," he smiles proudly, opening the front door for me.

"Mum? Da?" his rich Highland accent fills the cozy family room as we step inside. The room has aged wooden beams and a hospitable fireplace that exudes warmth and tales of the past. Large windows punctuate the walls, inviting in an abundance of natural light that dances playfully across the room. The flickering firelight wraps around us like a warm hug, illuminating Caitriona MacDowell's fiery red curls as she emerges from the kitchen with a face glowing brighter than the hearth itself.

In her soft Gaelic lilt, she says something to Cal that sounds like music but is completely lost on me. He replies with an equally melodic phrase and then grins at me like he's just won a prize.

The warmth of their dwelling envelops me like that first ray of sunshine after a frosty winter. Cal's mum asks if we've had our afternoon tea yet.

"I'd be thrilled to partake in your Scottish traditions, Mrs. MacDowell," I respond, doing my best to play it cool despite my excitement bubbling beneath the surface.

She waves me off with a broad smile. "Ah, call me Cait."

"And ye can call me anything but late for supper," adds Colin MacDowell from his chair, lifting a thick white eyebrow and giving me a cheeky wink.

As we settle around the sturdy wooden table, the air fills with the comforting aroma of freshly brewed tea and buttery Scottish shortbread. Cait effortlessly switches between English and Gaelic throughout our conversation—it's clear that their language holds a special place in their family history.

Curiosity piqued, I ask Cal about his fluency in Scots Gaelic. He admits that while he knows enough to get by, he's no match for his parents' proficiency. But there's pride in his voice when he speaks about this linguistic legacy passed down through generations of MacDowells.

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Basking in the infectious laughter and tales being spun around the dinner table, I'm swaddled in a warmth that's as inviting as Cal. We're nestled within the rustic charm of his family farmhouse, and it's here that I witness Cal's unwavering loyalty to his roots. The farmhouse walls seem to pulse with the rhythm of age-old stories, their essence stitched into every creaking floorboard and faded family portrait.

"Here ye go, Mum," Cal says as he effortlessly refills her teacup without missing a beat in the conversation.

"Oh, thank you, ye're a good lad," she replies with a warm smile that mirrors his own. Her eyes twinkle with pride and affection as she looks at him.

Across the table, Cal's father chimes in with another tale from Cal's childhood. "Remember when you tried to ride old Goliath, our meanest steer, when ye were just six?" He chuckles heartily at the memory.

Cal groans playfully, but there's an undeniable sparkle in his eyes. "Aye, Dad," he replies good-naturedly. "I remember landin' on me arse more than anything."

Everyone bursts into laughter again—even Cal, despite his embarrassment—and I feel grateful to have been included in their intimate circle of fond memories.

As I watch their easy banter and mutual respect, it dawns on me that for Cal, family isn't defined by blood alone. It's an unshakable bond cemented by time-honored traditions and shared experiences. It's love served alongside hearty meals and steeped in cups of tea.

After we bid his parents farewell, Cal guides me down the hill and a winding old path that leads to Rosewood Lane.

“Cal,” I start, my voice laced with uncertainty. “What did your mother say in Scots Gaelic back there? When she first met me?”

He rubs at the stubble dusting his chin, a thoughtful look settling in his eyes. “Aye, Mills, I had a feeling you’d be like a dog with a bone about this,” he answers.

I chuckle and give him a playful nudge. “Well then? I didn’t spend my afternoon wrestling with your stubborn cow for nothing. Spill it.”

He translates his mother’s words: “She said, ‘That bonnie lass is easy on the eyes, but I bet she’s got some fire inside her. Someteine’na broinn.’”

Heat crawls up my cheeks, but when I spot Cal doubled over with laughter, my embarrassment morphs into amusement.

“Do you agree with her?” I ask once he’s regained his composure.

“A lady’s always right, especially me Mum,” he replies, but the crinkles at his eyes tell me he isn’t intimidated by my fiery spirit.

As we approach number three on Rosewood Lane, a warm glow spills from its windows into the twilight. His place looks newer than Rosewood Cottage. It’s bigger and taller, with ‘Laird MacDowell’ etched onto a wooden sign out front. Inside, the comforting aroma of simmering herbs wafts through the air.

His home is a contemporary haven with historical undertones. In the living room, tartan throws artfully scatter sleek, minimalist armchairs, and two whole walls are embellished with black-and-white photographs in square frames.

An antique wooden table dominates the kitchen, more like a storybook than mere furniture. Its surface is a canvas of intricate carvings, each narrating a chapter of the MacDowell lineage.

“Wow, this is a masterpiece. Did you build it?”

“Aye. Da and my brother Cam helped with the carvings,” he says, quiet pride and affection in his tone.

Is there anything this man can't do? Next, he'll probably tell me he bakes award-winning scones in his sleep! If I didn't know better, I'd assume he was hiding a superhero cape beside the loafers in his closet.

“Feel free to roam around,” Cal suggests, handing me a glass of red wine before rolling up his sleeves to peel and chop vegetables.

“You sure I can't help out?” I ask, leaning against a kitchen wall. “Or are you carefully avoiding my cooking?” I tease, lifting the wine glass to my lips.

“Quite the opposite,” he says, expertly flipping something that sizzles enticingly in the pan. “Your culinary magic was so impressive it stirred me to reciprocate.”

“Ah, so you're implying I've set an intimidating standard?” I volley back, a grin spreading across my face as I gaze at him over the rim of my glass.

He smirks, meeting my gaze with equal amusement. “I suppose we'll soon discover if I can rise to yer lofty expectations.”

“Should I brace myself for disaster?” I chuckle as he begins sprinkling an assortment of spices into his simmering creation.

“Prepare to be surprised would be a more fitting sentiment, “ he smiles. “After all, surprises are half the fun of any adventure.”

Cal’s meal is done before I have time to flip through half a chapter of his coffee table book about this part of the Highlands, Easter Ross and the Black Isle.

“Hope you’re famished,” he smiles, sliding a plate piled high with food in front of me on his hand-carved table.

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His meal tastes like a fifteen-minute orgasm in my mouth. I realize it's a vastly bad idea to say this out loud, so when we're finished eating, I simply say, "Thank you. That was yummy."

After we scrape the plates and load the dishwasher, Cal puts another log in the woodstove, hands me a glass filled with whisky, and settles beside me on the well-loved living room couch.

"Tell me more of your local folklore. Please?" I ask, partly hoping for inspiration, partly wanting to hear the sexy, theatrical element in his accent again.

His voice drops to a velvety whisper as he begins weaving tales of ancient Scottish lore into the tranquil evening air.

"On moonlit nights, the loch transforms into a portal, whiskin' people away to a different era."

"That sounds rather daunting," I say, more captivated by the warmth and huskiness in his voice than the story itself.

"Or rather, it could be incredibly romantic," he says softly, his eyes locked with mine. I can practically hear his heart skipping a beat. "Picture this: yer in the thick of a historical skirmish, experiencing first-hand the legends ye've only ever known from stories. And a romance that defies time."

His words send a shiver down my spine, and I can feel something new beginning to weave around my heart.

I take a deep breath. “Maybe,” I whisper back, acutely aware of our proximity.

But then memories of Brady’s betrayal surface like evil ghosts from my past. I rise abruptly from my place beside him on the couch.

“I should go,” I stammer out hastily. The room suddenly feels too small and suffocating.

Callum rises too, concern etching across his handsome features. “Amelia. Did I?—”

“No, it’s not you,” I assure him. “I just... It’s late. I need to get up early to write tomorrow.”

Without waiting for his response, I flee into the night, leaving behind comfort, warmth, and something else—something terrifyingly beautiful yet painfully familiar:

The fear of falling too fast.

Chapter Twelve

The wind is practically cackling as it toys with the sail, treating it like a plaything for some impish Scottish fairy. Cal’s at the helm of this tiny white vessel, handling it with an ease that stirs up a pinch of envy in me. His perfectly tousled hair seems immune to the gusts sweeping across Moray Firth.

In my packing frenzy back in Toronto, I neglected to bring a hat. To combat my unruly locks, I wrangle them into a scrunchie and take shelter under the hood of a navy sweatshirt Cal graciously offered me.

His bright blue beanie pairs well with his eyes and disheveled sandy blond hair, keeping him warm and fashion-forward. He’s sporting light denim jeans and a blue

windbreaker that mirrors his beanie. And those well-worn white and blue deck shoes on his feet? To me, they whisper tales of his sailing prowess.

“I’m chuffed ye accepted my invitation,” he hollers above nature’s boisterous symphony, his eyes tinted with an adventurous glint that borders recklessness. His accent is enchanting—musical even—and I struggle not to let it amplify his handsome features or the bewitching rhythm of his words.

I mean, I need to simmer down inside. The wind’s already doing a number on my breath control as it jostles me about.

“There’s no better way to experience the Highlands than being at its winds’ mercy!”

Mercy, huh? Clinging to the boat’s side as another gust threatens to drown my chocolate-brown hair feels more like survival mode than mercy!

“Well,” I shout back, striving to match his enthusiasm without literally—or metaphorically—falling overboard. “Turning it down isn’t an option when someone pops an invite in your letterbox with more panache than a Jane Austen hero.” I flash him what I hope is a confident smile, attempting to mask the fluttering sensation that seems to do a jig in my stomach whenever he’s around.

“Ah, so Mr. Darcy has some competition now?” Cal laughs, taking my literary jab in his stride.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I volley back, maintaining that slight buffer between us. If there were an invisible line marking ‘safe’ from ‘too close,’ I’d be toeing it like an Olympic gymnast—physically and emotionally. He doesn’t push for more, and that’s one of the perplexing things about Cal that keeps me on my toes. One moment, he’s all charisma and disarming smiles, and the next, he gives you breathing room, as if he’s mastered the art of luring you in just enough before letting you float

back out to sea. It's both maddening and captivating.

I look down at my sneakers, noticing how the sea spray has already decorated them with a new speckled design—quite different from their spotless state when I left Rosewood Cottage earlier today. Shoes do have a knack for reflecting life's unexpected detours. And these sneakers? They're unknowingly navigating through unexplored emotional seas.

“Keep your eyes on the horizon. It'll help keep ye steady,” he suggests, interrupting my thoughts.

“Right. The horizon,” I echo as if this line where sea kisses sky is a groundbreaking revelation instead of Sailing 101. But I obey him anyway, fixing my gaze forward. At the same time, my mind flips trying to process today's sensory overload: the salty tang tantalizing my taste buds, the vibration of the boat underfoot, and this odd warmth that seems to ignite every time Cal is around—even with the chilly air around us.

“Ye holding up okay there, Mills?” His use of my preferred nickname feels oddly soothing.

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“Still dry, so it counts as a win,” I retort playfully, cleverly evading his genuine concern hidden behind his casual question. Physically dry, perhaps, but emotionally? Not even close—not with this emotional tempest Callum MacDowell whips up each time he flashes that heart-thumping grin of his.

Cal’s hands are steady on the tiller, his casual confidence making my heart flutter in a way I haven’t felt before. My earlier reservations, once as solid as stone, are now slipping away like sand in an hourglass. His laughter reverberates over the rhythmic splash of Moray Firth, causing strange butterflies to take flight in my stomach.

“Ye know, for someone who claims to be an amateur, you’re taking to this quicker than a Nessie sighting goes viral,” he teases, referencing Scotland’s sea monster legend.

“Guess I’m just full of surprises,” I say, feeling the corners of my mouth betraying me by curling into a smile. Captain MacDowell has an uncanny ability to coax out the version of myself I’ve kept hidden away for safer and less spontaneous occasions.

“Indeed,” he agrees playfully. “And speaking of surprises...”

Before I can question him further, a gust of wind sweeps across us, dangerously tilting the boat. My heart lurches along with it, and my laughter is abruptly replaced by adrenaline.

“Sheet in the jib!” Cal instructs urgently, pointing towards the flapping sail.

“Sheet in the—what? Cal, that sounds indecent,” I protest with an amused snort while

scrambling to follow his direction. Despite my lack of technique and understanding of what exactly ‘sheeting in’ means, I yank at the rope with all my might.

“Ye have a dirty mind, Amelia Sutherland,” he snickers. Still, his focus remains locked on navigating us through this unexpected challenge—as does mine when it dawns on me that we could capsize into the frigid Scottish waters.

The wind feels alive, wild, and untamed. It demands all my attention, and I must not let it overpower us. But as I find a rhythm and start working in sync with Cal, the tension in my shoulders dissipates.

“See? You’re a natural,” he says, his approval radiating warmth more effectively than any sweater could.

“Natural disaster, maybe,” I mutter under my breath, but there’s an undeniable lightness in my voice that wasn’t there before. Trusting myself—and him—doesn’t seem as daunting as I had imagined.

“Embrace the unexpected. It’s where the magic happens,” he assures me, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Magic, huh?” I say quietly, thinking about old legends and new beginnings.

My life is usually crammed with pressure and deadlines. Maybe there’s room for a little magic.

“Absolutely,” he confirms, his gaze lingering on me with an intensity that suggests we’re not just talking about sailing anymore. And for a brief moment—one heartbeat—I allow myself to believe in the possibility.

The boom swings with such sudden force; it’s as if it’s taken a personal offense to my

newfound sailing confidence. My heart leaps into my throat, and I duck just in time to avoid a comical blow to the head.

“Steady on,” Cal shouts over the wind, his hands steady and sure as he adjusts our course. “Ye’ve got to sense the wind’s temperament, predict her next move.”

“Her?” I question, holding onto the mainsheet like it’s the only thing separating me from becoming fish food.

“Aye, she’s a fickle mistress, the wind. Treat her right, and she’ll take you places,” he replies with an unwavering calmness that stands out against my internal tempest.

I squint at the sails overhead, struggling to understand their flapping language. “And how do you treat a gust of wind right?”

“With respect, Mills. Always respect.” Cal says. “You don’t control the wind; you dance with it.”

“Dance?” I scoff, feeling about as graceful as rubber boots at a waltz. But then something shifts—the boat catches the breeze just right, and we surge forward, cutting through the water like butter. The thrill sends sparks flying through me.

“See? Just like that!” Cal’s laughter rumbles through the air, and as I glance his way, a dimple winks at me from his cheek, turning his handsome face into something irresistibly adorable.

“You’re smashing it, Mills!”

“Alright then, Captain. Since we’re dancing with nature now, what comes next?”

“First off,” He quirks a brow in playful challenge before continuing smoothly. “Let’s

drop formalities, Ms. Sutherland... Next up is harnessing this magic?—”

“Magic?” I interrupt him again as another gust tips us sideways.

“Precisely.” Cal leans into the tilt, effortlessly balancing us out again. “The Highlands are steeped in it. Ye’ve seen the loch, felt the stories breathing through these hills.”

“So, stories breathe now?” I smirk at his poetic words. Cal doesn’t just tell a story; he invites me into it.

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“Sure! Everything’s alive here, Mills. Can’t ye feel it?” His gemstone gaze locks onto mine, intense and unwavering.

“Alive with adventure,” he continues. A dare in his tone and an undercurrent of thrill make my heart race.

“I’ve sailed the waters around Scotland, England, Ireland...” His voice trails off, a hint of nostalgiasoftening his words. “Every place has its unique stories that stay with you.”

“What’s been the best part of your travels?” I ask.

“The thrill of diving into new cultures, discovering history... and a bit about myself too.” He inches toward me, his voice low and hopeful, “I think ye might find some inspiration here too.” His words ring like a welcome call to view our surroundings with renewed curiosity.

The sea spray hitting my face suddenly feels like a baptism in creativity.

“This place... it’s the most inspiring spot I’ve ever stumbled upon,” I confess. “I bet I’ll be burning the midnight oil writing tonight!”

“That’s fantastic,” Cal beams.

“But for now, should we maybe focus on not tipping over this boat?” I suggest playfully.

“Sounds like a solid strategy,” Cal agrees, his laughter echoing across the water.

Chapter Thirteen

“Is it just me, or are you trying to make this rope thingy—” I hesitate before continuing. “What’s the correct word again?”

“Sheet.”

“Yes, sheet. Are you making it sound more complex than it is to impress me?” I tease as Cal hands me the line.

“I would never,” he replies with feigned indignation. “I’m merely honoring ancient seafaring traditions. And besides, your flustered look is quite adorable.”

“Flustered? Me? I am calmness personified under pressure.” My words tumble out, daring him to argue otherwise.

“Oh really? Like when I picked you up at Rosewood Cottage? You were serenity itself,” he teases, reminding me of my less-than-dignified encounter with a spider the size of a rat.

“Hey, that thing had murder in its eyes. And at least six of them were looking at me,” I shoot back, laughing. For someone who prides herself on being tough, my fear of spiders is an embarrassing weak spot.

“But out here on Moray Firth, it’s just us and the sea. No spiders, I promise,” Cal’s voice is a balm to my nerves, his fingers gently guiding mine to steer the tiller slightly to port. “Feel the rhythm of the waves. They’re like Highland dancers, graceful but powerful.”

“Highland dancers with enough lethal moves to send us six feet under!” I reply, my grip on the tiller gaining more confidence.

“True. But I won’t let that happen. Besides, a little danger spices up life, don’t ye think?”

“Spice is for curry, Cal, not for potentially life-threatening situations.” Despite my words, there’s an undeniable thrill coursing through me as the salt air fills my lungs and the wind tugs at my hair.

“Speaking of spice,” he says as he eases closer to adjust the sail, his arm brushing against mine. “I thought I might cook for you tonight. I make a mean haggis.”

“Threatening me with haggis now? You Scots know how to woo a lady.”

“Just give it a chance. Like sailing or haggis—both acquired tastes full of surprises... much like yourself.”

“You just compared me to a sheep’s stomach stuffed with oatmeal?” My feigned offense can’t mask the smile tugging at my lips.

“In only the best way possible. You’re both Scottish treasures.”

“Well, this treasure doesn’t plan on being buried at sea today, so let’s keep this boat upright, Captain.”

Cal is quiet for a breath, then offers a nod. “Your wish is my command.”

I feel my shoulders relaxing as we glide over Moray Firth’s waters. Each shared laugh and playful jab with Cal loosens the grip of my past on me. For the first time in a long while, I’m not dwelling on my past disappointments or the uncertainty of my

future.

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I'm living in this moment, learning to sail with a man who is equally infuriating and irresistible. It's liberating—like slipping off too-tight shoes and running barefoot in the grass.

As the shoreline blurs into the distance, I realize that maybe clinging to my old identity isn't necessary.

“You're a natural,” Cal says with that dimpled smile that sends warmth flooding through my whole body.

“Maybe I am,” I concede, allowing myself a rare moment of pride. “And maybe... just maybe... I'm starting to understand why this place is so captivating.”

“Just wait till ye've tasted my haggis. You'll truly be under Highland's spell then.”

“Let's not push our luck, sailor.”

My quip hides the anticipation already building for the evening ahead. I'm curious about his cooking and whatever else might unfold between us.

The wind whips through my hair with an energy that would make any hairbrush cower in fear as I tightly grip the tiller. The tangy salt air kisses my lips, and for a moment, I close my eyes to savor it all: briny scent and chill sea spray on my cheeks.

“Careful,” Cal's voice tickles my ear, sending delicious shivers. “Ye dinnae want to be at Moray Firth's mercy.”

“Is that a concern, or are you afraid I’ll outdo you?” My eyes snap open to meet his gaze.

“A bit of both.” He smirks as he adjusts the mainsail. His hands brush against mine briefly, causing an electric jolt in me that has nothing to do with static in the air.

We work in sync, and an easy rhythm forms between us as we slice through the water. My muscles relax under his subtle cues and silent commands. Each shift of weight, each exchanged glance, draws me closer to him.

“Lean into the turn, Mills,” he instructs me, his breath warm on my neck as he reaches around to show me how it’s done. For a heartbeat, our bodies align—two sailors navigating capricious winds and whatever is simmering beneath our banter.

“Like this?” I ask, hyper-aware of his presence behind me—his strong arms enveloping mine, showing rather than telling me how to harness nature’s power.

“Exactly like that.” His approval resonates in his tone, and he doesn’t move away immediately. He lingers in this intimate space, where I can count freckles dusting his strong jawline.

“I’m getting pretty good at this sailing business, right?” The words tumble out of my mouth, sounding way more confident than I feel.

“Indeed, ye are,” he responds, his hand finding a home on the small of my back. Ostensibly to steady me, but there’s more to it.

“Cal—” My voice trails off as I pivot to face him, only to be caught off guard by the unexpected softness in his expression.

“Amelia.” My full name rolls off his tongue. His eyes ask questions beyond sailing

lessons and haggis tastings—whispering promises of moonlit walks along the loch and stolen kisses under the shadowy silhouette of ancient castles.

“Keep yer gaze on the horizon,” he suggests, but it’s not the horizon that captures my attention—it’s how the wind tousles his hair, the gold specks dancing in his eyes, and the adventurous promise lingering in his smile.

“Honestly? It’s hard to focus on anything but you,” I admit with a boldness that surprises me. But that’s what these Scottish Highlands do—they strip away all pretenses and leave me barefooted and breathless, ready to step into a new version of myself.

“Then don’t,” Cal replies.

Now it isn’t just our boat that feels adrift. A gust fills our sails, carrying more than sea salt—it also carries away my inhibitions.

I swallow hard. “Alright then, I won’t.” The words escape my lips as a knot of anxiety tightens in my stomach, tighter than any ropes we’ve wound around winches.

“Ye look like you’ve seen Nessie herself,” Cal says softly, concern lacing his voice as he moves closer. Our knees touch with every sway of the boat.

“It’s just... this place,” I begin, my words getting lost in a wave of vulnerability I didn’t see coming. “This whole Highland adventure—it’s exhilarating, but it also scares me.”

“You’re scared?” He looks puzzled. “Of what?”

“Losing myself,” I tell him, my gaze falling to my worn-out sneakers.

“Back home, everything is familiar. Predictable. But here with you, it feels like shedding an old skin and not knowing what’s underneath.”

His hand wraps around mine, grounding me as the boat sways. “Amelia, ye’re not losing yourself. Ye’re simply uncovering parts of ye that have been tucked away, just waiting for the right gust of wind to stir them awake.”

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A shaky laugh escapes me as I look at him through my long lashes. “That sounds like something out of a Scottish legend. What’s next? We sail into Loch Ness under a full moon and get transported back in time?”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Maybe not,” I confess, letting the warmth from his hand seep into my bones, “As long as you promise to rescue me from any medieval dragons.”

“And only if ye promise to save me from heartsick spirits,” he counters.

“Deal.” My smile lingers as I take in the vast expanse before us, and then, with courage as fresh and invigorating as Highland air, I turn back towards Cal.

“I want more lessons—everything about sailing—and this place.”

“Everything?” His eyebrow lifts teasingly even though his grip on the tiller remains steady and firm.

“Everything,” I echo, feeling the last remnants of my old self slip away with the tide.

As we continue sailing, with the wind weaving tales into my hair and the wild waters of Moray Firth beneath us, I realize that I’ve discovered more than just inspiration for my next novel. I’ve stumbled upon a legend of my own—one where the heroine learns that sometimes, the bravest thing you can do is let go of the shore and trust in the magic of new beginnings.

Chapter Fourteen

Cal's hand guides me, feather-light against the small of my back, as we push through the pub door, which protests with an adorably creaky groan. Inside, laughter and music are already in full swing, a lively symphony of sound filling the room. The rhythmic beats of contemporary Scottish rock spill from the speakers, weaving seamlessly with cheerful banter and hearty chuckles.

As I walk deeper inside, an unexpected spectacle greets me: a merry mob of colorful neckties dangles from wooden rafters like streamers at an unplanned party. My brain races to make sense of this peculiar interior design choice. Could it be some eccentric tradition instigated by Cal's brother, the proud pub owner?

Does he surprise his patrons by snipping off their ties as souvenirs, brandishing scissors like a fashion-conscious buccaneer? Or perhaps it's an initiation rite unique to Aven Valley—you're not a townie until you've been 'de-tied.' I imagine startled business people clutching their naked collars while their ties perform aerial stunts overhead, and I can't help but suppress a giggle.

The noise level makes it impossible to ask Cal about it now. Besides, he's too busy navigating me further into this lively labyrinth.

"Welcome to The Topsy Trow," he bellows over the din, his smile brimming with mischief. "Best whisky and craic in all the Highlands!"

I raise an eyebrow at him, my voice teasingly doubtful. "Are you trying to get me tipsy, Mr. MacDowell?"

His response is a cheeky grin; his bright eyes twinkle with playful intent. "Well, Amelia," he retorts smoothly, "your cottage is just a hiccup away. So why not?"

As we navigate the sea of tables, fragments of conversations reach my ears: ghostly pipers haunting castle battlements and heated debates over clan warrior prowess. Suddenly, a booming voice slices through the clamor.

“Cal! Who’s this bonnie lass on yer arm?”

I swivel towards a burly, chestnut-and-copper-haired man sporting a beard that would make any lumberjack green with envy. It’s Cal’s brother Cameron, if I had to guess.

“This is bestselling novelist Amelia Sutherland from Canada,” Cal introduces me with flourish. “Mills, meet my brother Cam: pub owner extraordinaire and chief pot-stirrer.”

“Delighted,” I reply, extending my hand for what I expect will be a firm handshake. Instead, Cam dips into an exaggerated bow over it.

“Och! The pleasure’s all mine. A real live author in my humble pub! I must be dreamin’!” He clutches his chest dramatically, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Been a while since my last book,” I admit. “Here to soak up some inspiration.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place!” Cam assures me. “We’ve got more legends and lore than all of Scotland’s castles combined. Stick with us, lass, and you’ll have a bestseller in no time.”

“Allow me to introduce ye to the gang,” Cal interjects, steering me towards a table of ruddy-faced locals nursing their pints. “If there’s a story about these parts, they know it. Meet Mac, Moira, Hamish, and Sharon...”

I instantly recognize Hamish as the cabbie who had driven me to Brady’s from the airport and let out an involuntary snort of laughter.

“Well, look who we have here, the Canadian lass,” he beams. “I see ye’ve traded in your heels. Wise move.” As Hamish extends his hand, gripping mine in an unexpectedly firm yet tender handshake, a surge of warmth cascades through me.

My heart clenches as memories flood back—the sting of Brady’s deceit and the hollow echo of betrayal—yet Hamish’s authenticity seeps through my defenses. I hold onto the moment, allowing his genuine kindness to dissolve my lingering discomfort and remind me that not everyone is cut from the same duplicitous cloth. In this unexpected connection, I find solace and an opportunity to shift my focus toward the positive.

As more handshakes are swapped and “nice to meet ye’s” echo around me, I’m struck by the genuine warmth and camaraderie radiating from this group. These are my people. They’re raconteurs, keepers of legends and enchantment. With this spirited bunch for company, I can feel an unforgettable evening starting to take shape.

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My gaze drops to my well-worn combat boots, scuffed from trekking over fields and cobblestone streets. They've brought me here, to this moment, this assembly of kindred souls. Suddenly, the looming deadline and the dream of meeting my perfect match that propelled me across an ocean seem far away, replaced by a sense of belonging—a spark of possibility.

There may be a touch of magic in these Highlands, after all.

Chapter Fifteen

I slide into a wooden chair, finding myself shoulder-to-shoulder with Mac, a lively old-timer. He leans in, conspiratorially close, his accent thick and sweet as syrup. Cal reappears at our table, arms laden with frothy pints of local brew. The glasses clink together in a chorus of friendship as we lift them high for the toast.

“Ever heard about the warrior queen who led her clan to victory against the English using nothing but her brains and a hefty sword?” Mac asks.

I shake my head, curiosity already piqued. “Can’t say that I have.”

Mac takes a hearty gulp of his ale, relishing the chance to spin his tale. “Ah! It was something else! Legend has it she charged into battle atop a horse blacker than midnight, her flaming hair flying behind her like a war banner. They called her Aoife the Fierce...”

His words weave an enchanting tapestry of times long past. I picture Aoife rallying her troops on fog-drenched moors, swords clashing, hooves thundering, and cries of

pain echoing through the air. It's like I'm there in flesh and blood.

Caught up in this historical reverie, I almost miss Moira, Mac's wife, joining in. "And don't forget about Cawdor Castle's ghost! Rumor has it she still roams its walls looking for her lost love."

"Ghost?" I blink. My writerly instincts snap to attention. "Go on!"

Moira's eyes glint mysteriously under the dim pub lights. "Long ago, an innocent bride was confined to the tower by her ruthless husband who accused her of adultery and left her to starve. When he finally unlocked the door... all he found was her wedding dress fluttering eerily in the breeze..."

A shiver of delight crawls up my spine. I can almost see it: the dank, shadowy tower room, the spectral figure in white, a love story twisted into tragedy. It's pure Gothic romance, complete with desolate moors and tormented hearts.

I glance at Cal, wondering if he's caught up in this thrill too; these stories coming alive, history seeping into our present. Our eyes meet, and for a split second, there's something there. A spark of understanding? Or maybe just the flickering firelight playing tricks on his rugged features.

Regardless, one thing is clear: I'm exactly where I want to be. And I wish this night would never end.

An infectious wave of laughter sweeps through the room, only dying down when all eyes land on Cal.

"Alright, ye sea-soaked barnacle," his brother Cam begins. "How about ye delight us with yer favorite tale?"

Cal rolls his eyes. “Just so ye know, being ‘waterlogged’ has zilch to do with my sailing prowess,” he shoots back.

“Oh, I’m not doubting yer seafaring skills,” Cam replies, a devilish grin spreading across his face as he lifts his half-drained pint glass in a mock salute. “It’s yer alcohol tolerance that worries me.”

Sharon, Hamish, Mac, and Moira laugh again as Cal pretends to be affronted.

“Me? Can’t hold my liquor?” He dramatically clutches his chest as if stung by the accusation. “I’ll have ye know I can drink any of ye under the table.”

Cam snorts and shakes his head dismissively. “You couldn’t even manage bartending at last year’s family gathering without tripping over your own two feet.”

The laughter and banter flow around us like an affectionate tide. It’s clearly just another typical evening for these loving siblings, filled with friendly jabs and fraternal bonding.

After a while, Cal sidesteps Cam’s jibes and the local gossip and smoothly steers the conversation back to local legends.

“Well, I’ve already shared my favorite story with our resident wordsmith here—the legend of the Loch Portal,” he says, his raised brow hinting at something more. “But for ye lot, I’d be thrilled to spin that yarn once more.”

He leans forward, forearms resting on the worn wood of the pub table, lowering his voice to an enticing whisper that pulls us closer. “They say Loch Ness morphs into a gateway to bygone times on certain moonlit nights. Dare to leap into its glittering depths, and ye might find yourself catapulted to another era.”

I try to keep my face impassive as his words ignite a thrill. However, curiosity trumps any pretense of indifference, and I ask him, “Has anyone ever done it? Time-traveled?”

“Legends abound,” Cal begins in a hushed undertone like he’s sharing some top-secret information. “Stories of folks who vanished mysteriously during a full moon, only to reappear weeks later. They insist they’ve spent months or years in different periods, yet are seemingly untouched by time! No one knows who these time-travelers were, but the rumors say they lived alongside kings, mystics, warriors, and witches.”

A shiver runs down my spine as I picture the loch gleaming under a full moon, the water rippling as an unseen force drags me under. Would I surface in a castle with my combat boots swapped for silk slippers? Or on a battlefield with the clash of swords ringing in my ears?

“Of course, it’s all just legend,” Cal says, breaking the spell. “But still... it does make ye wonder...”

“It sure does,” I breathe out, my brain spinning like a top with many possibilities. A hidden portal right under our noses. An opportunity to not just read about history but to experience it. It’s mind-boggling, truth be told. And I can’t help it: I’m thirsty for more.

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“I wouldn’t dismiss it so quickly, Cal,” Sharon pipes up, her hazel eyes twinkling. “There might be some truth in it. We’ve seen weirder things happen.”

The other locals nod solemnly, their features bathed in the warm light from the pub’s hearth. “Aye, like when old Fraser Mcloughlin swore he spotted a phantom piper on the Firth,” Hamish chimes in, his words wrapped in a thick Scottish accent.

“Or when that girl insisted she was whisked away by fairies from our church on top of the hill,” Cameron pitches in before taking a hearty gulp of his whisky.

I lean forward eagerly, my elbows resting on the aged wooden table. “So what’s your verdict? Is this Loch Portal real or just a tall tale people spin around here?”

The debate breaks loose. Some argue fervently for its authenticity, citing ancient texts and family lore passed down through generations, while others remain skeptical, pointing out the lack of solid proof and how stories tend to get exaggerated over time.

In the middle of all this chaos, Cal watches me. “What about ye, Mills?” he asks, cutting through all other voices. “What do ye believe?”

I hesitate, my thoughts swirling like a twister. Part of me wants to brush this off as pure fantasy and retreat to my safe, logical world. But the other part, the one that’s always been attracted to enigmas and magic, yearns to embrace it as a possibility.

“I think,” I start slowly, “that there are things in this world that we can’t see or explain. And maybe, just maybe, the Loch Portal is one of those things.”

The pub bursts into cheers and laughter, and glasses clink together to celebrate the unknown. I join in, feeling an overwhelming sense of camaraderie and shared wonderment, and I find myself grinning wider than ever before.

I may not have all the answers yet, but right now, surrounded by Scotland's enchanting charm and the promise of adventure, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

As the animated discussion begins to fade out, curiosity gets the better of me. "So where should I go to explore some of this history myself?" My pen hovers over my notebook, ready for action.

The locals exchange knowing glances.

"Well, lass," Mac replies, "ye can't go wrong with Urquhart Castle. It's just around here on Loch Ness's banks."

His wife nods enthusiastically. "Aye, don't forget about Clava Cairns either. Those ancient stone circles have a magic of their own."

I scribble furiously, trying to keep up with their suggestions: Culloden Battlefield, where the Jacobite uprising met its tragic end; Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, with its vast collection of artifacts and stories; Inverness's winding streets, where history seems to whisper from every cobblestone.

As I write down each suggestion, excitement washes over me. These aren't just names on a map; they're doorways into history waiting for me to step through them. Each recommendation feels like a key handed over to me to unlock their secrets.

I glance at Cal, curious to know if he can feel the buzz of anticipation zinging through my veins. But he's lost in some deep chat with his brother, their heads

huddled together over an inside joke. I pivot back to the locals, my grin stretching wider. “Thank you,” I tell them earnestly. “I’m stoked to explore all these places myself.”

Moira extends her hand and gives mine a gentle pat, her eyes crinkling in a warm smile. “Make sure ye do that, sweetheart. And once ye’ve done all that, swing by and spill all the details. We’ll be here, eager for yer tales.”

I nod, swallowing down an unexpected lump in my throat. It’s odd how this group, strangers to me only four hours ago, has made me feel so embraced, so at home. With renewed resolve, I stash my notebook into my bag and rise from my seat, ready to dive headfirst into whatever adventures lay sprawled ahead of me. And as I do so, I can’t resist peeking at my trusty combat boots that have weathered countless twists and turns with me.

Maybe it sounds goofy, but there’s this nagging feeling that they’ve led me here on purpose, that somehow, they’ll guide me towards the story destined for me.

The evening wraps up, and Cal and I say our goodbyes to his brother and my new friends. We promise to return soon for more laughter-filled nights and shared shenanigans.

The cool night air greets us as we step outside, the lively echoes of laughter and clinking glasses gradually fading into the background as we meander down the cobblestone street.

“Well, that was a hoot,” I comment, shooting Cal a playful grin. “Your brother could totally have his own talk show.”

Cal’s laugh is low and warm, causing his eyes to crinkle at the corners. “Aye, Cameron’s always been our resident chatterbox. Me? I’m supposedly the strong, silent

type.”

I can't help but snort at this. “Silent? You? I beg to differ, mister. You were holding court in there with all those tales of warriors and legends.”

He shrugs casually. “What can I say? Ye bring out my inner bard, Mills.” His voice dips lower, sending a delicious shiver.

We walk in companionable silence, our footsteps echoing against the surrounding old buildings. As Rosewood Cottage comes into view, my stomach twists with anticipation.

Cal stops at the gate, his fingers lingering on the icy metal latch before he turns to face me under the soft glow of moonlight. We're so close, I can practically hear his heart thrumming in his chest.

“Tonight was... perfectly right... with you...Teine'na broinn,” he murmurs.

His words form a lump in my throat—a personal endearment from him—fire inside her. Usually, I'd deflect such intimacy with humor or sarcasm, but tonight feels different.

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I swallow before speaking. “Me too,” is all I manage to get out before my heart starts pounding like it’s trying to break free from its cage. “I... I’m glad we met.”

But even as the words escape my lips, panic engulfs me. My instinct is to put distance between us, to keep him at bay where he can’t breach the walls I’ve painstakingly built around my heart.

Yet there’s something about Cal that makes resistance futile. Despite all the past heartbreaks screaming warnings, all I see are green flags with this man. I’m drawn to his charm, kindness, and humor.

He steps closer, his right hand gently cupping my face. His touch sends a jolt through me, and I hold my breath as he leans in, our lips mere inches apart...

A startling sound pierces through the night, jolting me back to reality. “What in the world was that?” I step back with a gasp.

Cal chuckles and shakes his head. “Just the red deer stags having a bit of rough play. They’re like rowdy boys leaving the pub.”

I let out an unsteady laugh while trying to slow down my galloping heart rate.

The moment has passed, but the lingering electricity between us is palpable—something shifted tonight.

“Well, I should probably hit the sack,” I mumble almost inaudibly.

“Early start tomorrow.”

Cal nods without breaking our eye contact. “Aye, of course. Sweet dreams, Mills.”

A grin tugs at the corners of my lips, my fingers brushing against the cold metal of the gate. “Night, Captain,” I toss over my shoulder.

As I wander up towards my charming sanctuary, I can practically feel Cal’s gaze burning into my backside. He’s watching me until I become a shadow swallowed by the cottage’s welcoming embrace.

Once inside, I slump against the closed door, its peeling paint cool against my heated skin. My heart is pounding like a drum solo at a rock concert, and it refuses to slow down. It’s clear to me now: whatever comes next will flip my world upside down and shake it for loose change.

But instead of dread creeping in, this buzz of excitement zips through every cell in my body.

It’s been ages since I felt this... alive?

Purposeful?

Whatever it is, it feels like I’ve finally found where I’m supposed to be, smack dab in the middle of an adventure in Scotland with a man who wears his shoes like he wears his heart—on his sleeve.

Chapter Sixteen

A week whizzesby since the wild night at the pub with Cal’s clan, lighting a fire in me for all things Scottish.

But my writing? It's as still as a cat when you call it.

The culprit is a sinfully handsome Scottish distraction who's taken it upon himself to play tour guide. We've explored every nook and cranny of Eileen Donan castle on the Isle of Skye, visited more historical fortresses than I can count, and drowned ourselves in guidebooks brimming with authentic Scottish lore.

Our days have found a rhythm as comforting as my sea-sprayed sneakers. We say goodnight at Rosewood Cottage's door, where I try (and fail) to extinguish the sparks he leaves in his wake, spend nights tossing and turning with dreams of him, and then wake up early to attempt to pour my heart into romantic adventures featuring my new Scottish heroine and hero, Lady Catherine and Sir John of Inverness.

By 9 a.m., just when I've managed to cobble together something resembling coherent prose, there's that knock at my door.

It's always Cal, clutching a bouquet of tangerine-hued avens flowers and looking like he just stepped out of an L.L. Bean catalog, having already worked his fields and taught sailing lessons before breakfast.

It feels like I'm living inside one of my romance novels—only this is way better because it's real. Yet, despite this dreamy existence, something still feels off in my barely-there novel. It lacks that dash of magic that breathes life into stories.

Perched at the table in the heart of Rosewood Cottage's snug kitchen, tendrils of steam waltzing up from my Scottish breakfast tea, a wave of incredulity practically bowls me over. It's surreal to think it's time to pack up my Highland adventure and head back to reality tomorrow.

My phone is aglow with an avalanche of lively text messages from Lila, Margot, and my crew back home, their words spinning across the screen like they're late for a

flash mob. My thumb hovers indecisively over the digital plane ticket bobbing in this sea of notifications.

A twinge of nostalgia sucker punches me as I come to grips with today being my last dance with Aven Valley. The days have spun together in a delightful mix of belly laughs, unforeseen escapades, and swoon-worthy highlanders (one way more than others).

And while I've been busy living my best Scottish life—Brady's deceit tucked away in some forgotten corner—I can't ignore the accusing silence from the closed laptop in front of me. Its dimmed screen screams an uncomfortable truth: My Scottish romance novel has barely grown beyond its first few pages.

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I pull in a deep breath, letting the scent of steeped tea leaves tangle with the briny kiss wafting from Moray Firth. Draining my mug with newfound resolve, I set it down on the counter like I'm dropping a gauntlet.

"Alright, then," I declare to the cottage that feels almost alive. "It's time to seize this day!"

Having spent a picture-perfect June day sailing Loch Ness's waters up to Urquhart Castle, Cal suggests an impromptu picnic under the starlit sky by the water's edge. With our bellies full and hearts content, we sprawl out in our jeans and sweatshirts on a blue tartan blanket on the beach while moonlight weaves silver threads onto the calm loch.

"You know," I blurt, shattering our comfortable silence. "I think my book needs a magic haggis hunt."

Cal chokes on his whisky, the amber liquid teetering dangerously in his glass. His laughter rumbles across the quiet of Loch Ness, bouncing off its glassy surface and pulling a chuckle from me.

"Never met a lass with such a wild imagination and a matching sense of humor," he admits, his laughter fading into soft chuckles. He slings an affectionate look my way, eyes glistening under the moonlight. "Gotta say, Mills, ye're rapidly becoming my favorite person to hang out with."

His words steal my breath away. Heat creeps up my cheeks as I scramble to regain some semblance of control.

“Well,” I start, infusing my voice with light-heartedness to cover up the sudden pounding in my chest. “Here’s an idea: two star-crossed lovers on a hunt for the elusive magical haggis under Scottish moonlight.”

He reclines on his hands, casting his gaze over the glimmering loch. The corners of his mouth twitch upwards into that familiar wry smile as he lets out another low laugh.

“Aye,” he agrees softly, turning back towards me with that same playful spark in his eye. “There’s an undeniable romance about that.”

He’s quiet for a breath. “But if you’re in for Scottish myths and moonlit romances,” he starts slowly, leaning so close I can make out faint freckles dusting across his nose. His voice drops to a whisper meant only for me.

“Remember what the legend says? When the moon is full, and Loch Ness lies still as untouched glass... ye can peer through time itself.”

His gaze locks onto mine as he continues: “All our past eras just shimmer beneath the surface—forgotten dreams waiting patiently for someone brave or foolish enough to take the leap.”

I grab my whisky glass and gulp down its contents before spitting out in disbelief:

“So what? We cannonball into Loch Ness, and poof!—we’re smack dab in another Scottish era?”

“Not quite.”

I brace myself for him to burst into laughter and tell me it’s all a joke, but instead, his eyes narrow, and his face turns serious.

“It requires a special connection—two souls entwined by destiny.” A shiver trickles down my spine despite the warm summer night.

“Legend has it,” he continues, his gaze never leaving mine, “that if those two people leap into the depths together, the loch’s magic will whisk them away to another time and place.”

My hands are clammy from nervous sweat. “This feels like the kind of magic and spontaneity that’s been AWOL from my life,” I admit, barely above a whisper.

My practical side is now rolling its eyes, dismissing this as nothing more than an enchanting Scottish fairy tale. But here, with Cal under the moon’s soft caress, his eyes reflecting its glow, I’m teetering on the edge of belief and flirting with the idea that we could be those two souls selected to time travel.

“Aye,” he responds softly, his calloused fingers intertwining with mine. “So, what do ye think? Ready to leap into history with me?”

I hesitate, caught between skepticism and the magnetic pull of his words and touch. My combat boots feel like anchors, holding me steady. My rational part is battling with the side that craves to toss caution into the wind and dive headfirst into uncharted waters.

“Cal,” I start, my voice slightly shaky as I carefully pick my words. “Even if it were true, I’m not entirely sold on this idea. Sure, old-world Scotland sounds incredibly romantic, but I have an affinity for modern comforts—plumbing without chamber pots involved, for one thing... and shoes made from more than just leather and nails.”

Cal’s laughter erupts from deep within him. It’s so rich and warm it sends delightful flips through my stomach.

“Well, ye’ve got a point there,” he admits. “But where’s yer adventurous spirit? Come on, lass! Don’t ye want to see if this legend holds any truth?”

Our gazes lock in a silent dare, urging me to step outside my comfort zone. His intense blue eyes hold mine captive while everything else seems to fade away—my doubts, fears, and even these sturdy boots keeping me tethered to our era.

Cal and the tantalizing allure of magic luring us forward are the only things that matter now.

Plus, damn it, he dared me. Since my university days, when my engineering friends dared me to take a cherry-strawberry Jello ice bath to see if they could set it, I’ve had difficulty resisting a good dare.

“Alright,” I whisper back, surprised at my courage. “Let’s do this! Let’s wade into Loch Ness and see what happens.”

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His gorgeous grin illuminates his face brighter than any moonlight. It's a mix of youthful excitement and something deeper, more profound.

“That’s the spirit!” Cal grins and pulls me up, giving my hand an encouraging squeeze. The infamous loch is just ahead of us, its reputation for twisting reality into Scottish legend looming large.

As we near the water’s edge, the loch seems to hum with an energy that can only be described as otherworldly, its tranquility broken by the odd ripple hinting at something powerful lurking beneath.

A tsunami of excitement surges through me. It feels like we’re teetering on the brink of something spectacular. Of course, absolutely nothing is bound to happen here—but wait until I tell Lila we gave it a shot!

“Ready?” Cal’s voice is barely more than a breath against my ear, sending tingles everywhere.

I nod; words have taken flight, leaving me speechless in this pivotal moment.

Together, we take that last step, my boots and his boat shoes teetering dangerously close to the waterline. “On three, we leap,” he murmurs, his grip on my hand becoming even more solid.

“One, two...” he begins.

“Three!” we shout in unison, and our toes spring off the sand. I can’t help giggling,

fully expecting us to land in the loch, have a good old-fashioned water fight, and then return to our whisky, crackers and cheese on our blue tartan blanket.

Instead, our world erupts into a technicolor whirlwind. A dazzling array of colors dances across the loch's surface, creating an ethereal glow on Cal's awestruck face. It's like when I witnessed the Northern Lights in Northern Ontario—vibrant ribbons of green, pink, and violet swirling and folding into each other, painting the sky with their mesmerizing display.

The vortex expands at a dizzying pace, its pull intensifying until we're hovering over the loch's edge at the precipice of something exhilarating and terrifying. Suddenly, I feel gravity abandon us altogether.

Cal's hand is wrenched from mine as we're swept up into the chaos, tumbling headlong through what feels like time itself.

Images flicker past in rapid succession:

Verdant hills peppered with grazing sheep.

Ancient stone castles.

Faces unknown yet strangely reassuring.

"Amelia!" Cal's concerned voice cuts through the whirl of colors, a lifeline pulling me back from the brink of sensory overload. "Are ye alright?"

"I'm still in one piece!" I call back, laughing breathlessly, my voice barely louder than the vortex's roar. "Just enjoying the light show!"

The vortex swirls around us like a living thing, its colors shifting and shimmering like

a celestial ballet. It feels as if the universe itself has wrapped us in a kaleidoscope of dreams and possibilities.

And then, everything comes to a jarring halt. We land in an ungainly heap on soft grass, gasping for breath as we try to make sense of the unimaginable. Slowly, I lift my head and find myself locked in Cal's gaze. His eyes are wide with shock and exhilaration.

"Mills," he pants out breathlessly, his voice thick with emotion and disbelief.

"I dinnae think we're in Kansas anymore."

I blink rapidly to clear my vision as I stand there, trying to process what I'm looking at. The rolling hills and jagged cliffs seem familiar yet eerily different; everything has an uncanny aura. Even the stars appear too brilliant for a 21st-century night sky.

"Cal..." my voice breaks the silence of the night as I stammer out words that seem impossible even to myself:

"I don't think we're in our own freaking time anymore!"

Cal pushes himself upright from the unfamiliar grassy terrain we've landed on and offers me a hand. His brows knit together as he takes in the alien landscape.

"Take a look around," I tell him, my voice trembling with fear and exhilaration. "There isn't a single hint of the 21st century—no power lines, no streetlights. Just an ocean of stars!"

He squints into the shadowy expanse and does a slow pirouette, absorbing every detail of the pristine wilderness encircling us before his gaze locks onto mine again. When he finally breaks our silence, doubt flickers in his eyes.

“All these years... I’ve been spinnin’ this tale... never fully believing it myself. The legend... It’s real?” His voice is laced with disbelief as he grapples to understand what his words imply.

“Mills,” he begins cautiously after a pause that feels like years rather than seconds. “It looks like we’re still in Aven Valley... just perhaps not during a timewhen jeans and boat shoes are considered fashionable.”

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His gaze drops to our glaringly modern footwear, and his lips quirk in a wry grimace.

“We may need to get our hands on some period-appropriate attire if we dinnae want to stick out like sore thumbs.”

Chapter Seventeen

We fall silent momentarily as we process this bizarre turn of events. Of all the ways to start a relationship, getting duped by a dick, chased by an angry cow, and whisked back in time isn't one I've ever considered. I'm no fan of social media, but if we somehow make it back intact, my relationship status gets bumped up to:

It's Complicated.

“Okay,” I prod Cal gently on his shoulder, my brows knitting together in contemplation. “Let's say for argument's sake that this isn't some wild hallucination or dream... any idea what year we've crash-landed into?”

Cal cranes his neck toward the night sky like the stars might spill their secrets. “Well, considering there's no light pollution and I can see the Milky Way in all its splendor... I'd wager we're somewhere in the 17th century.” He peers into the distance. “Also, the church I took ye to at the heart of the village? Look. It's still standing, steeple and all! It was built in 1640-something.”

“Fantastic,” I mutter. “We're stuck in an era with no indoor plumbing, no electricity, and, worst of all, no coffee. Dawn is going to find me an absolute joy.”

His laughter dances through the night air while his fingers trace soothing patterns over mine. “Let’s find the positives,” he proposes, his voice humming warmly, “At least that vortex spit us out like an industrial-strength tumble dryer!”

I raise an eyebrow as I check my sweatshirt and jeans for dampness. Incredible: not a spot of water.

“Also, consider this,” he continues, “We’re not lost. We’re just discovering new paths together. Perhaps this unexpected detour is key to what’s been eluding us in our time.”

His words give me pause, and I look at him. I genuinely take him all in, sparking a shift within me. He’s right. We’re waist-deep in this mess together, come hell or high water.

“Alright, Captain,” I say softly, smirk tugging at my lips despite everything else happening around us. “That was deep.” But then uncertainty creeps back into my voice. “What if we’re stuck here... forever?”

As I inch closer to him, the threat of tears glistens in my eyes. My hands shake from nervousness, and the evening chill seeps through my sweatshirt.

Cal is quiet for a breath. He notices my shivers and shrugs off his windbreaker, draping it over my shoulders like a knight presenting his lady with his cloak.

“We won’t be,” he assures me with an unwavering certainty that makes me believe he’s right. “There’ll be another full moon. Another chance to get home. It’s all part of the cosmic balance.”

His conviction is so tangible that I can’t help but wonder if this brave front is just for me. Perhaps to prevent me from spiraling into a full-blown panic attack, attracting

wildlife? Whatever his game plan, it's working; my frantic heartbeat is slowing down.

"In the meantime," he suggests casually, sweeping our unfamiliar surroundings, "we should find some shelter." He points towards a dense hedge near where we're standing on the shoreline.

"Safe enough?" I ask, my voice laced with a hint of trepidation. He shrugs, all cool and casual, but his eyes betray a flicker of worry that he can't entirely hide.

"Can't promise anything," he admits, the raw honesty in his voice tugging at my heartstrings. Then, as if sensing my rising anxiety, he shifts gears and flashes me a crooked grin.

"But hey, on the bright side, room service is free."

With our makeshift plan in place, we tuck ourselves under the sprawling branches of the hedge. It's an impromptu hideaway under a canopy of twinkling stars—not exactly five-star accommodations, but it'll do.

"Try to catch some z's," Cal murmurs into my ear before shutting his eyes.

Tucked into the warm curve of his arm, I feel an unexpected sense of calm wash over me despite our predicament. The steady rhythm of his breathing and the hypnotic sound of the loch's waves crashing against the shore lull me into such a deep sleep that I'm startled awake by my snoring.

Cue blush-inducing embarrassment and a fit of giggles that turns into pure laughter—then lots of shushing each other—until we fall back asleep under our starlit shelter.

Chapter Eighteen

When the sun's rays tickle my cheeks, I open my eyes and remember I'm here, in the butt-crack of dawn, plopped in the middle of God-knows-where and God-knows-when.

As I reach up and stretch toward the emerging sunlight, my gaze stumbles upon my nocturnal cuddle buddy standing knee-deep in the water.

Buck naked.

My view is all buns and glory from where I'm perched, enough to rev up my hunger for a robust Scottish breakfast. Silently, I pray to the brunch gods that they don't skimp on the sausage.

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“Well,” I yell towards his bare backside while suppressing a laugh, “someone’s certainly making themselves at home!”

His laughter echoes off the loch. “Ah, Mills, yerawake! Shield those beautiful peepers for a sec while I make myself decent.”

I roll my eyes but obey nonetheless. When he tells me I can look again, he’s standing ever so close: jeans hugging his hips but still shirtless and barefooted, water droplets cascading down onto me.

“Goddammit!” I internally groan, but it quickly morphs into an internal growl.

Seriously, universe? Can you throw me a bigger curveball?

First, I time-travel, and now I’m getting an unsolicited peep show from a Highland Adonis. Holy smokes, the man is blazing! If this isn’t a test of my resolve—and sanity—I don’t know what is.

If he’s not on today’s menu, then someone better bring me a piping hot cup of coffee, stat.

Once I catch my breath, I notice Cal trying to start a fire. I hoist myself up to help gather twigs, shaking my head at this wild twist life has taken. Scotland promised adventure and inspiration; instead, it handed me a sizzling epic saga.

“Look at this,” Cal blurts out suddenly, thrusting a limp fish into view with an ear-to-ear grin that screams victory.

“Caught it with me bare hands.”

“Well done, you!”

Biting back both repulsion and amusement at his delight over his catch du jour, I let out an airy chuckle without probing for any gory details about its downfall.

I’ll sit tight and enjoy the view. I mean, really, who wouldn’t be grateful to have their very own Highlander on board for such a wild ride?

Cal gets the fire roaring with a finesse that makes my previous struggles with the cottage fireplace look downright pathetic.

“How do you do this so effortlessly?” I marvel as we find our seats on an old fallen tree trunk warmed by the flickering flames.

He’s busy threading fish onto a stick for grilling and shoots me a grin that’s pure boyish mischief.

“Boy scouts for six years, and a firestarter survival knife in my back pocket.” He flicks open a steel, cord-wrapped knife with a wink, then closes it and tucks it back into its sheath in his jeans pocket.

We burst into laughter so infectious it leaves me wiping tears from my cheeks. When we finally regain control of our breaths, I figure it’s time to show him I can also handle whatever curveballs this adventure throws.

“So, no sign of pirates or wildcats yet,” I venture, “Maybe we’ve landed in an era that’s not completely uncivilized?”

“Dinnae go counting yer chickens just yet, weestory,” he says, his voice threaded

with affection and caution. “Let’s keep our cards close until we have a better sense of this place and maybe make some allies. Our modern clothes and lingo could get us into serious trouble—they’ve hung people for less.”

“Do you think they even speak English here?”

“From what I remember readin’ at the church, English started trickling in around 1500 but wasn’t exactly embraced. We should stick to Scots Gaelic until we hear what’s being spoken. Just try to follow my lead.”

After filling up on grilled fish breakfast and extinguishing the fire, we head towards what appears to be a church steeple in the distance. As we near what looks suspiciously like a village, butterflies take off in my stomach.

“Cal, hold up a sec!” I call out, urging him to freeze mid-stride.

“You know I can’t speak Gaelic! I need a strategy here. How do I avoid looking suspicious? Should I pretend to be mute? Or act like I’ve taken a vow of silence?”

Cal chuckles. “Aye, that might just work! Just claim you’re a traveler, and for the love of God, don’t mention selfies.”

“Hilarious,” I roll my eyes. “But first things first, we need clothes from this era. My boots and your boat shoes are screaming alien invasion.”

A smirk tugs at his lips as he glances at our mismatched footwear.

“Can’t argue there. But I think your boots suit ye. They’re very 21st-century woman kicks adulting to the curb.”

I laugh and shake my head at him. “Seriously though, blending in is key. We need to

find a clothing shop or something along those lines.”

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Walking into the settlement feels like stepping back in time, with cobblestone streets underfoot and quaint thatched-roof cottages everywhere we look. It's like being inside a postcard from Scotland's past.

As we wander through the village, what would be Cal's brother's pub, without its usual cheeky sign, comes into sight. Instead of The Topsy Trow, MacDowells' Inn and Tavern is proudly displayed above the door like a family crest, sending waves of surprise crashing over Cal.

His eyes widen to the size of dinner plates. "Well, tickle me tartan," he murmurs, his words barely louder than the hushed wind.

"I might end up having a pint with my great-great-grandpappy!"

"Why not introduce yourself as a long-lost cousin?" I suggest, trying to suppress the giggles bubbling up within me. "We wouldn't want to cause some sort of time-travel anomaly or something."

"Smart move," he says with a small nod. "But navigating clan politics without knowing their secret highland handshakes could be like dancing on thin ice. We need to tread lightly."

"Absolutely. Let's keep our true identities under wraps for now and try to blend in." The idea of donning period clothing sends a thrill of excitement coursing through me, rivaling even our unplanned jump through time.

We meander through the village, drinking in its quaint charm. It's serene—no cars

zipping by or electric wires slicing across the sky. Just cobblestone paths beneath our feet and an uncanny silence echoing off deserted stone cottages. The only sounds punctuating this stillness are chirping birds and distant rhythmic clanging from a blacksmith's forge.

"There," Cal points out a tiny shop with MacTavish's Clothing and Cobblery etched onto a wooden sign swinging above its entrance.

"Cobblery?" I quirk an eyebrow.

"It's an old term for shoemaker. See?" His grin widens. "There's more to this Highlander than just rugged good looks."

I roll my eyes but can't resist cracking a smirk.

"Let's hope they carry our sizes. And take plastic." Cal adds with a playful wink.

The bell above the door chimes as we shuffle into the shop, a warm welcome from an otherwise antiquated setting. An older man's eyes lift from his workbench, crinkled lines of wisdom decorating his weathered face like a road map of life.

"Good day to ye," he greets us in English, his voice thick with a charming Scottish brogue. "I'm William MacTavish. What can I do fer a bonny lass and a braw lad such as yerselves?"

I shoot Cal a wide-eyed look, my heart pounding like I've just run a marathon. He steps forward, clearing his throat in an attempt at nonchalance.

"We, uh, we're travelers... in need of some clothing. And shoes. We've had a bit of a... mishap."

A twinkle ignites in the man's eyes. He clearly finds our predicament amusing. "Aye, I can see that. Ye've been through the wringer."

"But I've seen yer... kind... before," he smiles warmly. "Pleased to help ye blend in using clothes traded by patrons over the years."

"That would be grand, thank you," Cal says sincerely.

The cobbler asks about our clan affiliation, and Cal hesitates before answering. Every muscle in his body tenses up as if preparing for battle.

"I'm a MacDowell... if that's acceptable here?" His gaze locks onto the cobbler's as if telepathically attempting to communicate our precarious situation.

To our relief, the man takes it all in stride and even winks knowingly at us while scurrying around his cluttered shop to gather clothes for us.

I lean into Cal and whisper so low only he can hear me, my voice wavering: "Do you think he knows? That we're not locals?"

Cal shrugs. "I'm not sure. Dinnae worry. If he does suspect somethings off-kilter, he seems quite unfazed."

The cobbler returns shortly after with a breathtaking cream-colored gown. I duck into the back room to change into it. It hugs my waist and flows down to my ankles like a silk waterfall. But I know better than to let aesthetics win over practicality in this strange era we're stuck in.

"It's lovely, but do you have women's breeches?" I ask him as he's gathering more clothes in the front room.

“Breeches? For a lady? You’ll stand out like a thistle among roses!” He seems visibly taken aback by my request.

“Nevertheless, it’s what I prefer,” I insist, suddenly realizing I need to justify why. “I’m from Glasgow. We’re very fashion-forward.”

He shakes his head, a click of disapproval escaping from his tongue, but he humors me anyway, handing over a white blouse, a pair of brown breeches and a sturdy leather belt.

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As I'm cinching the belt around my waist in the back room, Cal saunters out from behind some crates packed with leather and tools. My breath snags in my throat as I drink him in; he's decked out in a vibrant green and blue kilt that the cobbler tells us is the MacDowell tartan. A crisp white shirt clings to his muscular form like it's been painted on, accentuating every solid inch of him.

When the cobbler steps away, Cal explains that the leather and cream horsehair pouch hanging at the front of the kilt serves as a handy wallet. I can't stop staring. The whole get-up makes him look both rugged and regal; he's like the embodiment of the Scottish Highlands themselves.

Cal twirls me around playfully in my new garb, sashaying us back to the front room, an appreciative spark lighting up his eyes.

"Mills," he drawls, "ye're lookin' quite bonnie in those breeches."

I curtsy extravagantly in response, laughter bubbling up from deep within at our delightfully absurd predicament. Here we are, marooned in an era so distant from our own it feels like we've tumbled into a history textbook, yet all I can think about is how ridiculously lucky I am to be wrapped up in this time-warp fiasco with this dreamy Scottish hunk.

My gaze flicks back to the cobbler, who's now brandishing a large pair of leather boots.

"Just crafted these. They ought to fit ye, lad," he announces, passing them off to Cal.

Then, he turns his attention towards me and presents a pair of dainty yellow slippers embroidered with delicate flowers and impossibly thin soles. I cringe at the thought of the splintered wooden floor beneath my feet.

“Um, thanks,” I manage to say, “but do you have something more... practical? Like boots?”

The older man arches an eyebrow at me, sizing me up. “A lass wanting breeches and boots? You’re quite the oddity.”

I can feel heat creeping up my cheeks, but before I can stammer out a response, Cal jumps in.

“She’s unique. But in the best way possible.”

The shoemaker chuckles before disappearing into the back of his shop and returning with a pair of sturdy leather boots that look my size.

“These should do the trick,” he says, handing them over with a pair of stockings. “Can’t have you wandering around bare-legged now, can we?”

The boots are simple but well-made—built to last, just like the man standing beside me, his hand resting lightly on my lower back.

“As for payment...” Cal starts cautiously, “...we’re new in town and looking for work. Could we help ye out here to cover yer craftsmanship?”

Cobbler MacTavish mulls it over before responding. “Our village’s grand fair takes place tomorrow in the town square. I could use extra hands to set up and take down my stall... and maybe even model these boots.” He shoots us a mischievous wink and adds: “Might even make me a sign: Boots Fit for the Future.”

Cal and I exchange glances before quickly looking away, trying to suppress our laughter.

“I’ll need ye here before the sun’s at its highest point,” the cobbler continues. “Yer hard work will cover the cost of the boots, and I’ll even throw in an extra shilling each for yer day’s wages...” He pauses before asking, “Do we have a deal?”

With synchronized nods, we express our relief.

“Thank ye, sir, we’ll be there,” Cal assures him, reaching out for a firm handshake.

The cobbler shakes his hand and gives us another once-over, his brows furrowing in curiosity and suspicion. “Ye two are a peculiar duo, I’ll admit. There’s an air about ye... something uncommon.”

I lose my breath, paranoia creeping in. Is it that obvious we’re time travelers? Are we about to be exposed?

But Cal chuckles. “Uncommon, ye reckon? Well, we do strive to be memorable.”

The cobbler shakes his head, the corners of his mouth curving upward into a knowing smile. “Justmind yerselves out there. These are strange and dangerous times.”

With a final nod of gratitude to our newfound friend and footwear provider, we step out into the lively streets of Aven Valley. The town is awake now, its heartbeat echoing through the cobblestones underfoot. The air is thick with laughter and snippets of hushed conversation punctuated by the occasional horse whinnying or dog barking.

The scent of freshly baked bread, comforting and familiar, drifts from a nearby bakery to tease my senses. It serves as a gentle reminder that despite the unfamiliarity

of this place, some things persist, irrespective of where or when one finds oneself.

Strolling down the cobblestone lane in our vintage (okay, ancient) garb and boots, exhilaration sparks inside me, bubbling up like champagne at a New Year's party. We're not just tourists gawking at history from behind a velvet rope; we're right in the heart of it, side by side.

The reality that we're stuck here is barely a murmur in my mind, entirely overshadowed by the thrill of this unforeseen escapade. It feels like we've been handed an unexpected treasure, a chance to meet Cal's ancestors—maybe even mine—and soak up knowledge from an era long gone.

I slide my hand into Cal's, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“Ready to tango with the unexpected?”

His grin widens as he looks down at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“With you, wee story? Always.”

Chapter Nineteen

The afternoon melts away as Cal and I meander through the village, soaking up its old-world charm. We amble down narrow lanes, drinking in the postcard-perfect view of thatched cottages hugged by climbing rose vines and mossy stone walls. The air is different here; it has a fresh bite to it, a crispness that’s lost somewhere in the 21st century. It’s laced with an earthy aroma of peat smoke that drifts lazily from chimneys.

Eventually, our feet guide us up the central hill, offering a panoramic view of Moray Firth. Standing on this verdant mound, I’m floored by the raw beauty of this untouched landscape. No traffic jams or towering skyscrapers mar the vista—just rolling hills dotted with heather blooming purple under an endless sky. The sight is ridiculously romantic. We’ve stumbled into some painter’s dream where Mother Nature has spilled her soul onto every corner.

As twilight begins to stretch long shadows across this idyllic landscape, Cal shoots me a look brimming with mischief.

“Feelin’ peckish?”

My stomach betrays me then, letting out an embarrassingly loud grumble. His laughter echoes into the open expanse.

“So, that’s a yes then. Let’s see if we can rustle up some grub without having to wash dishes for it.”

I appreciate how this man never lets me slip into hypoglycemia like my exes did.

Those guys were always too busy mashing arcade buttons, claiming ‘just one more level’ before they’d even think about food. Meanwhile, I’d be on the sidelines, contemplating eating my own shoe.

With our new mission in mind, we descend back into the village as darkness creeps in. As much as I’m loving this unexpected jaunt through history, I can’t help but miss some modern-day comforts—a pair of trusty sneakers topping my wish list. Cobblestones may be picturesque, but they’re hell on my poor ankles.

Despite their relentless assault on my new footwear, I can’t deny their role, along with our outfits, in creating a scene so authentic it could be straight from a period drama—the kind that would usually have me binge-watching a whole weekend away.

“Check this out,” Cal blinks, brows drawn, as he pauses outside MacDowells’ Mercantile. He lifts a newspaper so thin it could double as a bookmark. The date in the top corner screams 1645 at us, sending my heart into overdrive.

“1645?” I parrot, my voice barely above a whisper.

Cal nods, his fingers flipping through the fragile pages until he lands on the Almanac section.

“Full moon coming up in exactly one month,” he declares, pointing at the tiny

scribbles that predict lunar phases.

I blink at him, comprehension slowly creeping in.

“That’s our ticket home,” I say more than ask.

We’re going to wade into Loch Ness under the full moon’s glow and hope for the best. It’s all we’ve got.

Cal catches my gaze, his sapphire eyes brimming with understanding and a spark of hope.

“Aye, Mills. That’s our best shot.”

His thumb caresses over the printed words again before halting abruptly as his face loses some color. He frowns and spins the paper around so I can see what has caught his attention: headlines about an impending battle in Inverness.

“Clan wars? And here I thought we only had to worry about if toilet paper’s been invented yet,” I quip dryly, trying to inject humor into our dire situation, but Cal’s lips hardly curl into a smile. He gently folds the ancient document and nudges us towards MacDowells’ Tavern.

“We’ve got to get acquainted with my old-timey relatives,” he says, nodding at the MacDowells’ Mercantile sign before pointing down the cobblestone street towards the Inn and Tavern.

“Looks like they’re running this show around here. If we can get on their good side, they’ll keep us safe.”

As we cross the threshold into the rowdy tavern, two men envelop us in a cacophony

of laughter and hearty back slaps strong enough to dislodge my lungs.

“Well met!” the brawniest man’s greeting bounces off the stone walls as he introduces himself as Alistair MacDowell and the man beside him as his brother Fergus.

“What brings ye to our neck of the woods?”

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The MacDowells from the 17th century could be Cal's doppelgängers: broad shoulders, hypnotic blue eyes, and a tendency to invade personal bubbles. They're like Cal's mirror images, except for their bushy beards that scream rugged Highlander charm.

"Hello... We're just humble travelers seeking shelter," I wheeze out, still recovering from Alistair's enthusiastic back slap.

Fergus joins the conversation then; a grin splits his face as he sizes up Cal's kilt. "Ye look familiar. Are ye one of us?"

"We're... Callum and Amelia. We're distant relatives..." Cal rushes his words out in an uncharacteristic jumble. I've spent enough time with him by now to recognize that slight tremor in his voice: nerves.

"Distant aye? Well now, no matter how far ye traveled... anyone wearing that tartan is family here at MacDowells' Tavern." He announces our status to everyone within earshot, triggering a wave of cheers from the patrons.

Cal claps Alistair on the shoulder in response, his body language mirroring the other man's as if trying to blend in seamlessly.

"Regrettably, we're currently low on coin," he admits with barely noticeable hesitation. His hand is damp where it holds mine, a necessary act given our strange circumstances.

"We've found work with Cobbler MacTavish and should be able to settle our debts

soon,” he adds quickly, shooting me a look I return with a reassuring nod.

Alistair throws his head back in hearty laughter. “Ah, lad! We’ve all weathered hard times. We understand your plight.” His gaze softens as he takes us in, hopefully looking beyond our odd hairstyles and foreign accents to see the shared struggle underneath.

“But,” he adds after a moment’s pause, “we’ll need something in return. The Campbell clan has tried to take our land; there’s no doubt they’ll try again. Ye’ll fight alongside us when called upon.”

Cal tenses beside me. “Fight?” He repeats with a full-bared teeth wince.

Alistair waves off his concern with an airy sweep of his hand and another chuckle. “Aye, lad! Surely ye didn’t think life here was all feasting and merriment?” Despite his lighthearted words, there’s a serious undertone that hints at darker times ahead.

“Speaking of feasting...” Fergus, his dark hair secured in a neat bun, pipes up from across the room. He’s been deep in conversation with Fiona MacDowell, his wife and clan matriarch. The fiery-haired woman bustles over, her arms laden with trays of roasted meats, hearty stews teeming with root vegetables, and fresh-baked breads that send mouth-watering aromas wafting through the room.

The night is buzzing with the comforting hum of companionship and the tantalizing scent of a robust stew. We’re gathered around the large wooden table that can easily accommodate a small army, our bellies filled to bursting as stories from the past fill the air. Alistair, whose stern exterior hides a treasure trove of tales, sits at the head of the table.

Fiona’s eyes sparkle as he beckons her over with a subtle nod. They share a secret that makes her grin before she saunters towards the rustic kitchen. The worn wooden

floorboards groan under her quick steps until she returns, bearing a silver tray loaded with crystal glasses that catch flickering firelight and a bottle of amber whisky.

Then Alistair and Fiona take charge, pouring generous measures into waiting glasses. Laughter bubbles up like champagne as glasses clink together before being passed down the length of the table. Each person eagerly accepts their glass with smiles that speak volumes about shared history and unspoken bonds.

Alistair begins to paint us a picture through words and memories woven together like an intricate tapestry. “Our grandfather, Ewan MacDowell,” he starts in his strong voice, “born in Inverness in 1578, was nothing short of visionary.”

His tale unravels with dramatic hand motions, spinning out like some grand adventure. It’s all about Ewan’s lofty ambitions and how he morphed this valley into more than just a patch of earth.

Alistair paints vivid images of harsh winters and scorching summers—trials faced by early settlers who dared to believe in his grandfather’s dream. He gestures expansively toward the window overlooking the village, saying, “Each home you see was built by many hard-working hands, each hand belonging to someone who believed in our family’s dream.”

As Alistair concludes his tale, Fergus chimes in with a jovial tone from his corner seat, adding to the narrative with a cheeky grin on his weathered face.

“And this inn of ours here,” he pats the worn wooden table lovingly, “is one such testament to that shared dream.”

Fergus’s tale sweeps us along too, as he explains how they used their timber and nearby stones to construct this inn and tavern. The entire village—mostly MacDowells—had chipped in. The men flexed their muscles while the women kept

everyone fed and cared for the kids.

“And at the heart of it all is our humble home on the hill.” He leans back in his chair like he’s shared a state secret, “Built by every hand in this small town.”

Fiona nods beside him, her eyes misty with memories. “Every soul that worked on our home left a piece of their heart in it,” she says softly. Her voice is gentle but carries throughout the room, wrapped in a delightful Scottish lilt.

The tavern falls into an awed hush as we soak up the depth of their shared history. The sense of unity and community is so thick you could cut it with a knife, leaving me deeply moved by their stories.

Breaking the reverent silence that has settled over us, Fergus and Fiona rise from their seats, gearing up to belt out a traditional folk song.

But before they can even get started, Alistair retrieves a Scottish drum from the corner. At his nod, Fergus and Fiona launch into song while he keeps the rhythm on his drum. They’re singing ‘The Flowers of the Forest,’ an ancient yet beautiful melody Fiona tells us she learned at church.

As their voices fill the inn, harmonizing perfectly with Alistair’s rhythmic beats, I can almost see those early settlers working together to build this town from scratch.

We sing, laugh, and tell stories well into the night, our voices echoing through stone halls steeped in history and love. Each tale I’m told deepens my understanding of this surprising world we leaped into. It’s a living testament to guts, nerve, and the unyielding tenacity of Highlanders who dared to dream without limits.

As the last notes fade into the night, Alistair turns to us with a sly grin.

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“It’s about time fer bed. Now tell me,” he says, his eyes flickering with uncertainty in the dim light, “how long have you two been wed?”

“Wed?” I echo, my cheeks burning up. Cal shoots me a look that screams:

Just go with it.

Chapter Twenty

“Och, yes,” Cal plays along, slinging an arm around me a little too tightly. “‘Tis madly in love we are.”

“Head over heels, completely, utterly smitten,” I throw out there, snuggling into him with a fake giggle. Heat rushes to my face, and I silently thank the dim lighting for its discretion.

“Can’t imagine myself with anyone else,” Callum chimes in, his voice quivering like he’s holding back laughter. But then, his eyes meet mine, and there’s this brief flicker of authenticity.

“Me neither,” I confess in barely a whisper, so faint that I’m not sure he catches it. I quickly bury my face in his chest, feigning a swoon. If he senses my heart racing like a runaway horse, he keeps it to himself.

“How long have ye been handfasted?” Alistair presses.

“Ah, too mesmerized by her green eyes to recall,” Cal fires back promptly, muttering

something about us being fresh off the honeymoon phase.

Alistair offers a small nod. He guides us past the guest rooms on the second floor to a small attic room shadowed in darkness. It features a short, low-to-the-ground bed.

The realization strikes us simultaneously—one bed.

One. Single. Narrow and definitely not king-sized bed for both of us.

As I follow Cal inside, an uncomfortable laugh slips out of me. “Well, isn’t this cozy?” My attempt at humor falls completely flat when my voice wobbles.

“Sleep well,” Alistair responds with a wink.

The bedroom door closes behind him with an ominous click that feels oddly similar to a starter pistol triggering some weird race neither Cal nor I signed up for.

He looks at me from across the room, lingering on me longer than necessary. Then he shrugs nonchalantly and flashes me an uneven grin that screams charm but lacks sincerity.

“No worries, Mills,” he says like we’re talking about tomorrow’s forecast and not the elephant in the room. “I’ve slept on a sailboat many times.”

His courage is commendable but falls flat when we both take our surroundings seriously. It’s a cozy room with an angled roof, rough stone walls, one round window, and a table decorated with candles, oil lamps, dried heather, and lavender. It’s so minuscule that there’s barely enough space for one person to stretch out without getting uncomfortably chummy with the vintage furniture.

“So, we’re bunking together,” he concedes, a teasing half-smirk playing on his lips

that sends my pulse skyrocketing and my stomach somersaulting. He's coaxing rather than commanding, more of a playful nudge than a push.

"Splitting the bed," I manage to squeak out, my words punctuated with a nervous giggle as I trace an invisible boundary down the center of the tiny straw-filled mattress. "And keep it PG-13."

Cal lifts his hands in surrender, an easy grin on his lips.

"Scout's honor," he teases, his tone light yet laced with an undercurrent of frustration.

A livewire crackles between us as we roll back the patchwork quilt and stake our claims on our respective territories. Every shift of his muscle, every breath he takes feels amplified, wrapping around me like an electric blanket that I can't shrug off.

His athletic figure brushes against my backside, sending waves of warmth through me and stirring up feelings that threaten to bulldoze through my self-restraint.

Well, I can forget about getting a wink of sleep tonight. My mind races as I try to ignore how solid he feels against me and how he's lying oh-so-freaking close. For the love of not jumping Cal's beautiful bones right here and now, I need a distraction!

I start chanting in my head:

'I don't need this. Too complicated. Way too complicated! Don't need this.'

But the words barely quell the scorching desire between my thighs. Maybe it's nothing. Perhaps I'm the only one feeling it?

Yet, even as I downplay it, Cal's heat is practically tangible. Something is sizzling—no, vibrating—in the space between us. He rolls onto his back at the same

time as me, and our eyes lock. I glimpse something in his gaze—a flicker of frustration mirroring my own.

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I draw in a shaky breath, trying to regain some control. But with our faces so close, it's impossible to ignore the fire burning between us.

His exhale is slow. Deliberate.

“Comfortable?” he breaks the silence. I can practically hear his heart thumping.

I swallow and pull in a breath. “Extremely,” I reply, sarcasm dripping from every syllable as I exhale and roll away, desperate to put some distance between us. “Nothing quite like sleeping in a corset for ultimate relaxation.”

“Ah, come now,” he chuckles softly. “I’ve heard you ladies love your Shapewear.”

Despite myself, I smile into the darkness enveloping us.

“Goodnight, Teine ’na broinn,” he whispers, so close I can feel his warm breath on my neck.

“Night,” I manage to whisper back, forcing my traitorous body to ignore the thrill of sleeping next to a man who’s quickly becoming more than just an accidental travel buddy.

The sun of 1645 crashes into our first morning with all the subtlety of a cannonball. I’m jerked out of sleep by the shutters smacking the window in the wind, my pulse hammering as if I’ve just sprinted down Toronto’s Yonge Street in five-inch heels. Beside me, Cal stirs, his arm flopping over onto my side of the bed.

“Is it morning already?” he grumbles, scrubbing at his eyes with his fist.

“Looks like,” I reply, nudging his arm back to its rightful territory. “And FYI, there’s no such thing as a snooze button in the seventeenth century.”

His chuckle rumbles through the quiet room and he props himself up on one elbow to squint at me under heavy eyelids. “I miss coffee,” he mutters.

“Yeah? Try missing toilets,” I joke, casting a disdainful glance toward the lurking menace that is our chamber pot beneath the bed.

Late last night, with Cal presumably lost in dreamland, I ninja-stepped with the pot to a corner of our room. It was like failing at charades, trying to hover over it without creating a sound or toppling over. Next time, I’ll risk the great outdoors instead.

But then again... wildcats and snakes and ticks... oh my.

We tackle morning hygiene with equal parts MacGyver-like resourcefulness and sheer dogged determination. Cal magics up a makeshift washbasin from a bowl, and pitcher Fiona left for us while I wage war on a bar of soap that seems hell-bent on remaining suds-free.

“Do you ever think we take hot showers for granted?” I muse aloud, splashing lukewarm water over my face.

“Every damn moment since we landed here,” he replies, toweling off his face with what feels more like sandpaper than linen.

Breakfast downstairs morphs into another episode of *Survivor: 17th Century Edition*. The sight of porridge is comforting until grappling with it using a wooden spoon feels akin to steering a yacht through a hurricane with dental floss.

“Wonder where they stash their microwave in this place?” My quip hangs in the air, a feeble attempt to mask my craving for the comforts of the 21st century.

“Probably next to their Nespresso machine,” Calshoots back, his wink adding an extra sparkle to my morning.

Our playful exchange is cut short by a parade of kilt-clad men strutting in, their footwear a curious blend of rugged functionality and vintage charm. My gaze zeroes in on one particularly beefy guy whose boots look like they’ve survived more wars than he has.

“Time to test my Shoe Theory,” I murmur.

“Shoe Theory?”

So, I’ve got this theory,” I start quietly, my spoon twirling in the air before it plops back into my tea. “It’s all about shoes. They’re like little personality billboards for the people wearing them.” I lean back, folding my arms over my chest and fixating on Cal’s reaction. His sandy eyebrows lift in intrigue as he leans forward on his elbows, a shimmer lighting up his eyes.

“Sounds riveting,” he teases with that Scottish drawl that makes me smile despite myself. “Do go on.”

“Well,” I press on, encouraged by his interest, “it’s not just speculation. It’s been tested and proven. Every guy I’ve dated has perfectly mirrored their shoe choice.” A surge of bitterness washes over me as I spit out the name that still stings. “Including that two-timing asswipe, Brady Reeves.”

Cal nearly spits out his tea at my word choice but manages to let out a brief chuckle before it fades. His eyes soften as he catches my gaze.

“My Shoe Theory may have led me down some jagged paths,” I admit with a shrug. “But it’s also been an X-ray into people’s souls—proving you can judge a book by its cover... or, in this case, a man by his shoes.”

“And what exactly does yer theory suggest about him?” Cal asks, raising an eyebrow with a hint of skepticism.

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Despite his doubt, he humors me with a gentle smile, leaning in to hear my response. His kindness and warmth always make me feel supported, even when I'm off on a tangent.

“Those worn-out boots? He's clearly a warrior poet—a hopeless romantic at heart,” I deduce.

“Mills, he hammers metal for a living, and the last poem he likely penned was an ode to iron and fire.”

“Really?” My frown deepens. “Well, maybe he's got hidden depths.”

“Keep dreaming,” he quips with a wink.

As we continue our meal, I assign shoe-inspired character profiles to everyone who passes us by—much to Cal's amusement.

“So,” he asks, “the guy with mismatched boots is an undiscovered Picasso?”

“Obviously,” I reply, smirking. “And don't disregard that young boy with the polished boots—he's bound for some kind of scholarship.”

“Or he's just a budding narcissist.”

“Come on, Cal. Don't ruin my fun. Shoes are storytelling devices, even here.”

“Stories that seem to change with every incorrect guess,” he chuckles.

“That’s part of the thrill, isn’t it?”

“A thrill in misinterpretation, ye mean.” He grins at me as he playfully nudges my shoulder.

“You think so, huh? So tell me then, sailor,” I challenge him. “What do your shoes say about you?”

He pauses for a moment, his gaze locking onto mine.

“Simple: I’m a man who’s seen many places and faces... searching for something—or someone—worth staying for.”

Heat blooms in my chest, spreading outwards like a ripple on a quiet pond. I jerk my gaze away, feigning fascination with the congealed porridge before me. His words hang heavy between us, as potent and electrifying as the Highland mist.

I’m teetering dangerously close to falling off the precipice of logic into a tangled mess that no shoe theory could untangle.

When I’m about to master the art of shoveling porridge into my mouth without spilling it all over myself, Fiona breezes over, eyes bright.

“Where’d ye hail from, Amelia? Your speech is all sorts of peculiar.”

“Canada,” The word slips out before I can shut my mouth. A wave of dread washes over me as I realize my blunder: Canada isn’t even on the map for another two centuries.

“Can...ada?” Fiona rolls the word around her tongue like it’s a foreign ingredient she’s never cooked with.

Cal gives me a swift kick under the table, his silent cue for me to tone down my 21st-century lingo.

“Far north,” he interjects smoothly, “Very cold. Lots of snow.”

“Ah,” Fiona nods sagely, and I can’t help but suspect she’s picturing a winter wonderland more akin to Narnia than Ontario.

“Our friend Millie here is quite the raconteur,” Cal continues, shooting me a look that screams: play along, or we’re screwed.

“Indeed,” I echo, playing my part. “Stories so vivid you’d swear you were living them. Like... magic.” I clasp my hands together and hope that the universal language of awe translates.

“Magic...” Fiona echoes back. “We could use a bit o’ that around here.”

“Speaking of magic,” I say. “Do you have anything to help with chilblains?” I wiggle my sore toes inside my boots.

Chilblains? Cal mouths at me across the table, clearly puzzled.

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“Red, inflamed toes?” I explain. “Never mind. I’ll just Google it later—uh, I mean, go ask the local healer about it.”

Fiona looks utterly confused at this point. “Google?”

Fuckity! I am one big fat fail at fitting in. I pull my lips between my teeth to stop myself from saying anything else. Thankfully, Cal jumps in again before I dig deeper into this hole.

“An old Gaelic term,” he explains easily, almost making me believe him. “Means to seek wisdom.”

“Ah. Well, if you’re seeking a healer’s relief, my sister Elspeth might have something for yer feet,” Fiona offers after processing this new information.

“Thank you,” I tell her as she leaves us. When she’s out of the room, I shoot Cal a look of thanks.

He leans in closer and grins at me, clearly amused by our predicament.

“Anytime, Mills,” he whispers. “Perhaps ye could avoid the 21st-century lingo from now on, yeah?”

“I’ll try,” I scrunch my nose and wince at myself internally, diving back into my porridge with a newfound determination. Half a second later, I’ve come up with a witty comeback.

“So it’s adios to smartphones, farewell to avocado toast, and au revoir to skinny jeans.”

“That’s cute,” he chuckles, his expression relaxing. “Now, tuck in. We’ve got a daunting day of not messing up history ahead of us.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The 1645 faire explodes into life smack dab in the middle of Aven Valley’s town square. It’s the Highlands’ summer crown jewel, drawing in crowds from all over Inverness like bees to a blooming flower. Stalls burst with color, each showcasing local craftsmanship that’s as inventive as beautiful.

At one end, bakers flaunt their freshly baked loaves, their crusts crackling invitingly. The warm scent mingles with the sweet aroma of sugar-dusted pastries wafting through the air. Not too far away, a round-bellied cheese monger is strutting his stuff with wheels of spicy cheese that look so yummy they should be illegal.

A little further off, blacksmiths are putting on a show, their brawny arms hammering molten metal into intricate ironworks. Sparks fly from their anvils like tiny fireworks against the smoky backdrop of their stalls.

In between these entrepreneurial spirits are entertainers adding spice to the buzzing celebration. Minstrels pluck at lutes while jesters tumble and juggle in bright costumes. Dancers spin around in vivid skirts, creating a parade of color, and when the drum beat fills the air, I’m utterly mesmerized.

“Cal,” I whisper, awe-struck by this magical spectacle that feels more familiar than foreign. “It’s like... like coming home.”

He stops dead in his tracks and turns to face me with a smile that makes my heart

flip-flop in my chest.

“Aye, Teine’na broinn,” he says gently, wrapping my nickname around me like an embrace. “Your roots run deep here, too. This place... it’s part of who we are.”

In one swift move, he sweeps me into his arms and spins us around to match the beat of the music. My blouse billows around us like a cloud caught in an updraft, and when he lifts me high, I feel as light as air.

“Do you think there’s more of your family tree in this early-modern era crowd?” I ask as we sway to the soft music.

“I remember my Da talking about a Fergus who could be my three-times removed great-grandfather, which would make Alistair a distant uncle,” he muses, eyes shining. “And ye know what? I see bits of myself in them—especially the stubborn streak.”

I laugh at that. “Ah yes, the infamous MacDowell stubbornness your mom warned me about!” I tease, grinning up at him. “It’s amazing you’re still single after all these years, Cal.”

He stops mid-dance step, his grin turning devilish like he knows something I don’t.

“Who said anything about being single?”

I smirk, giving him a playful nudge.

“But really, Mills,” Cal continues, a little softer. “Between tending to the farm and heading my sailing club, romance hasn’t exactly been on my schedule. The women I’ve encountered seem to want more than I can offer...” His voice fades into a thoughtful silence.

“So now wanting commitment makes women high-maintenance?” My hands instinctively find their way onto my hips.

Cal’s chuckle softly bounces around us. “Not all... just those who have wandered into my life so far.” He pauses for a breath.

“Then there’s you—incredibly independent and free-spirited. How on earth has no man managed to win your heart yet?”

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I burst out laughing. “Believe me, they’ve given it their best shot! But it’s always been a misguided chase... not quite aligning with what I’m looking for.”

Our eyes meet, and something wordless but meaningful passes between us, a mutual recognition of the pitfalls we’ve encountered dating in the modern world.

The village fair has picked up pace, with a steady hum of activity and laughter surrounding us. More people join the dancing, their movements in sync with the lively music that floats through the air. The savory scent of food mingles with the sweet aroma of pastries.

We’re in the middle of an excited crowd, all eyes turned towards the main event: The Annual Highlander Challenge. Fiona explained it’s a mishmash of brawn, gastronomic endurance, and an overly theatrical swordplay display. A burly man with a beard who could give Santa Claus a run for his money takes center stage.

“Welcome one and all!” he booms out. “You’re about to witness feats of Highland prowess that’ll make Moray Firth look like a shallow pond!”

Cal edges closer to me, his voice barely above a whisper as he grins.

“I think ‘prowess’ is being generous.”

The first event on the roster is a pie-eating contest. Contestants take their places at an elongated table, their faces reflecting a combination of determination and potential pastry-induced regret. The rules are simple: eat till you can’t eat no more without keeling over from pie overdose.

With the shout “Begin!” from our heavily bearded announcer, they dive into their task. It’s an explosion of flying crumbs, flailing limbs, and pastry shrapnel.

“Never thought I’d see such gusto for heartburn.” Cal shakes his head and chuckles.

Next up is the sword-fighting demonstration. More like the sword-flinging circus act. A wiry man with more swagger than sense steps forward, brandishing a massive sword that looks better suited for lumber-jacking than combat. His opponent—another hulk with an equally comical weapon—matches him in dramatic posturing.

“The goal here,” announces Beardy McBeardface with grandeur, “is not harm but showmanship!”

What follows can only be described as a Monty Python sketch. The pair engage in an overblown dance of sidesteps and swoops, their swords clashing with a resounding, more theatrical than threatening echo.

“Parry my blows, or ye shall perish a painful death!” the wiry one shouts.

An ancestor of Macbeth, obviously.

It’s less about actual skill and more about who can fake the most ludicrous injury. When McBeardface takes a particularly melodramatic tumble, the crowd erupts into applause, clearly valuing flair over actual fighting prowess.

I sidle up to Cal, grinning ear to ear. “I feel like I’ve stumbled into a medieval comedy club.”

“If this is how they fight wars here, I think we’re pretty safe,” he answers with a wink.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When we finally arrive at the cobbler's booth, William MacTavish greets us with a toothless smile.

“Good morning to ye! Will ye be flaunting these fine boots I crafted then?” he asks, scrutinizing our footwear again with an artisan's keen eye.

“That was the deal,” Cal confirms, giving him a friendly pat.

“Let's hope they're more durable than my last relationship,” I whisper, earning an amused snort from Cal.

The morning is spent modeling boots—from rugged work shoes to delicate slippers fit for Highland royalty. As we strut around like peacocks—me in breeches and Cal in his kilt—we draw curious glances from villagers. It feels oddly familiar—like being a living mannequin after years in retail.

“Look at ye, the bonnie pair,” Fiona teases, her laughter blending with the lively fair sounds. “Ye could charm the silver right off a nobleman.”

“Or at least charm some sense into one,” I say, triggering a chorus of chuckles from bystanders.

As the day unfolds, I'm slowly sinking into the rhythm of this bygone era. Cal's wit is my anchor, keeping me grounded in our current reality—however twisted it may be—as we navigate this alien landscape. There are moments when our laughter merges, forming a symphony that feels as timeless as the world around us.

“Check him out,” I say, pointing at a man limping in mismatched boots, one sole flapping like a gossiping older woman. “Those shoes could tell quite a story.”

“Probably an epic tale of survival,” Cal chimes in with a grin. “Or maybe a tragicomedy.”

“Your turn.” I nudge him and gesture toward a woman in sturdy leather boots.

“What’s her deal?”

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“Hmm...” He pretends to ponder heavily. “A gal who isn’t afraid to get her hands dirty but can cut loose and dance like nobody’s watchin’ when the moon is high.”

“That sounds about right,” I answer, feeling warmth spread through my whole body at his words. It’s like we’re engaged in a verbal tango, each exchange drawing us closer together.

As the fair winds down and long shadows drape over the Highlands, bathing them in golden light, Cal and I retreat to what has become ‘our’ cozy knoll overlooking the village. He sits beside me so close that our hands are almost touching on the cool grass.

“It’s stunning, isn’t it?” I say quietly, awestruck by the sprawling vista before us.

“Never seen anything like it,” he replies without taking his eyes off me.

I look at him, vulnerability flitting across his face. I can almost hear his unspoken confession: he also feels the weight of our predicament.

“Thank you,” I whisper, holding his gaze.

“For being here; for making me laugh when all I wanted to do was freak out.”

“Anytime, and in any time,” he vows, his thumb brushing against mine.

The Scottish Highlands are cloaked in the soft glow of dusk as we stumble back into MacDowells’ Tavern, our feet protesting from the day’s adventures but our spirits

soaring.

Fi plies us with her robust homemade bread and stew, and it's not long before we're nursing glasses of whisky, the tavern pulsating with Fergus' lively fiddle tunes. Before I can even protest, Cal is pulling me into the throng of dancers.

"Oh no, no, Cal, I'm going to stomp on everyone!" I yelp, clinging onto him for dear life as we plunge into a raucous reel.

His laughter resonates through me as we spin wildly, my world shrinking to a blur of tartan and the comforting pressure of his hand on my waist.

"Trust yerself," he says gently, leading me through the steps like we've danced together in another lifetime

As the music quickens, Cal and I lose ourselves in its rhythm. The traditional Scottish dance steps fade away, replaced by a haphazard jumble of modern shenanigans. My attempt at breakdancing elicits a burst of laughter from him that lights up his whole face. In response, he tries his hand at a '60s twist, which gets me giggling uncontrollably.

Our spontaneous dance-off spirals through time. Cal pulls off a '70s disco spin, only to be one-upped by my '80s moonwalk.

He retaliates with a '90s Macarena, and our absurdity escalates as we bring in elements from each subsequent decade until we're madly flailing about with TikTok moves from the 2020s.

Our foreheads are covered in sweat, our faces flushed from laughter and exertion. Despite being surrounded by Highlanders, we're alone in our own little world.

It takes Fergus stopping mid-tune for us to realize that we've become the evening's entertainment. The crowd encircles us, their faces a mix of amusement and utter confusion.

Caught in the spotlight, Cal and I freeze like deer in headlights, our private moment suddenly very public. I glance at him, noticing he looks just as stunned as me.

With a sheepish grin, he clears his throat. "Well... uh... we thought we'd bring a little bit of... home to ye all," he stammers out, pulling me closer.

"Is that how you dance where you come from?" Fergus arches an eyebrow at us.

"Um, I-I... had an itch," I manage to stutter out, still catching my breath.

Cal wraps his arm around me tighter. "And Mills here is just a tad exhausted from all this... fresh air."

The room erupts into chuckles. The villagers seem to accept our ridiculous excuse, and they relax into smiles.

"Yeah, so tired," I chime in, forcing down my giggles with a faux yawn.

"Shall we make our escape now, Cal?" I ask him quietly, indicating towards the exit with my eyes.

As we retreat, with the tavern's patrons still wearing bemused expressions, Alistair calls after us.

"Ye'll teach me all those steps in the morrow, will ye?"

Cal and I exchange a glance before bursting into laughter.

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Gossip and disapprovingwhispers chase us as we escape to the dim sanctuary of the attic bedroom above the tavern.

The single bed taunts us once again with its less-than-adequate size, but neither of us brings up our sleeping arrangement dilemma.

This morning, Fiona had given us a puzzled look when she noticed our clothes were still rumpled from sleeping.

She blinked at me, eyebrows furrowed. “Why aren’t ye sleeping in yer undergarments like any other married folk?”

I’d had to think on my feet. “Oh, I suppose I’m a bit of a princess, Fi. I’ve come to prefer the comfort of a long nightgown, that’s all.”

Touched by my honesty, Fiona had generously spent the day sewing us matching sleepwear from her cherished hoard of MacDowell tartan, saved for some “momentous occasion.”

So tonight, Cal and I are in opposite corners of our tiny bedroom, awkwardly turning away from each other to change into our fresh, bright Highland garb.

When we finally dare to turn and face each other again, the sight is too much for Cal.

His eyes crinkle at the corners as he gasps between fits of amusement. “Jings, Crivvens, Help ma boab! Mills. We look absurd. Like... like...”

“Jings, Crivvens...?” I ask, quirking a brow at him.

“It means for Feckssakes,” he’s doubled over now, “we look like...”

“Like what?” I ask, struggling to keep my giggles at bay.

“Like bloody Christmas baubles!” His laughter ricochets off the walls like an infectious tune. “We’re practically beggin’ to be hung on a Christmas tree!” The ridiculousness sends us into hysterics, our shared amusement ringing through the room.

Once we’ve caught our breath, we settle on the narrow bed—a pair of songbirds cautious about sharing a branch—and ease into a comfortable silence. We’re so close I can practically hear his heartbeat. When he finally breaks our silence, his voice is soft and thoughtful.

“Mills,” he starts, a ripple of anticipation skittering down my spine, “Have ye ever thought about why we’re here? Like what the universe wants us to learn from all this?”

I pivot towards him, the scant light casting intriguing shadows across his beautiful face.

“I wonder about that constantly,” I admit in a whisper. “Are we supposed to alter something? Or are we just bystanders in this historical spectacle?”

I shrug, feeling an unexpected wave of vulnerability wash over me. “Maybe it’s about unearthing our true selves when modern-day distractions aren’t around.”

“Or perhaps it’s about finding someone who sees ye for who ye are,” Cal suggests, his gaze locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my pulse race.

“Someone who doesn’t require a shoe theory to decipher people?” I quip weakly, hoping to sidestep the emotional ledge we seem to be teetering on.

“Precisely,” he says, lips curling into a soft smile. He leans closer, his voice soft and earnest. “Ye’ve got your Shoe Theory all worked out, Mills. But maybe it’s been yer safety net all along.”

He pauses for a moment. “Maybe ye hadn’t met anyone worth ditchin’ the theory for ’til now.”

My breath hitches as warmth radiates from his gaze, melting my defenses.

“Sometimes the right person makes all those theories feel... redundant,” he adds.

I let out a shallow breath. “Perhaps I should have ditched the theory ages ago,” I murmur, the weight of our words hanging between us.

Cal responds with a low chuckle, a sound so rich it makes the tiny hairs on my arms rise. “I don’t know. I find yer theories—and yer mind—utterly enchanting.”

My whole body tingles. I wriggle on our narrow bed, the rough fabric of the sheets scratching against my skin. Every shift brings me closer to Cal; just a whisper of space separates us. The tension is thick and intoxicating, like peat smoke wafting from nearby cottages.

“Speaking of predictions,” I say, hoping to lighten the mood with humor. “We should probably catch some Zs. Tomorrow promises to be quite a day, what with Alistair’s dance lessons and all.”

A soft smile plays on my lips as I anticipate the hilarity that’s bound to come from that experience.

Cal responds with a simple “Right” and carefully settles himself onto the bed, his back facing me. The old bed creaks loudly under our combined weight. The heat emanating from his body seeps into mine as we lay side by side.

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The situation is laughable—a bed too small, a time too strange. But there’s an undeniable solace in his closeness. I curl towards the edge of the bed, my back to him, our bodies forming a question mark against the sheets.

“Goodnight,” I murmur into the void.

“Night,” comes his reply, laced with something unidentifiable.

The darkness swallows us whole, but sleep eludes me.

All of a sudden, it hits me: my Shoe Theory has been nothing more than an elaborate shield, a defense mechanism to keep certain men at arm’s length. That shield has crumbled into dust here in this surreal and timeless place, leaving me exposed.

Returning to Canada without Cal—without hearing his endearing accent whisper ‘Teine’na broinn’—is suddenly more terrifying than any Highland war.

Another epiphany strikes: Cal and I would never have crossed paths if I’d stubbornly adhered to my Shoe Theory. A man who prefers bare feet by day and boat shoes by night? He wouldn’t have stood a chance with me back home, where status updates and designer labels rule the roost. Yet here he is, potentially the love of my life—a love I could have missed because of my skewed preconceptions.

I stare at the beams on our ceiling, my entire body buzzing. Every breath I draw seems to fuse us closer together, like embers in a fire slowly brought to life by the wind. But fear—that cruel and unyielding jailer—keeps me glued to my spot on the bed.

“Amelia,” Callum’s voice cuts through the silence of the night, soft as a lover’s touch yet potent as a spell. I hold my breath, every cell in my body poised on the edge of anticipation.

“Ye make history bearable.”

His words wash over me like waves lapping at the shore of a secluded beach, warming me from within.

I let my eyes flutter shut, cherishing this moment—his voice in the darkness, his presence beside me. A faint smile tugs at my lips, involuntary, but welcome.

Perhaps this Loch Ness Portal and its moonlit mysteries have guided me towards something—rather someone—worth braving this tumultuous journey for. Someone worth surrendering my fears to and risking another heartbreak for.

Maybe it’s not just about surviving history anymore. Maybe it’s about making history... with him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

For three weeks straight, with Cal marking the days with pebbles, we’ve been caught up in the intoxicating allure of a village that feels like it’s been pulled straight from the pages of a fairy tale.

We tell the locals that we’re two modern-day explorers who’ve tripped over this magical place, keeping our identities swathed in an alluring mystery to keep us safe. Our reasons for hanging around Aven Valley? That stays our delicious secret, keeping the local gossip mill churning but never quite satisfied.

Each day kicks off with Fiona—Fi to those lucky enough to be on her good

side—buzzing about like a hummingbird on steroids. Her energy is so vibrant it could give Red Bull a run for its money. She whips up bowls of porridge that taste like childhood memories and tea that warms yoursoul. Her laughter is the soundtrack to our mornings as we devour every morsel before rolling up our sleeves to pitch in.

Life here in 1645 is simple and satisfying. Yet, there's an underlying fear and sadness. We discovered Alistair shares the farmhouse and land with Fergus and Fi out of necessity rather than choice. His wife and former clan matriarch traveled to Edinburgh and back earlier this year and fell victim to some ghastly strain of influenza—a death sentence in this era. After she died, he was forced to burn down his home and all of their treasured belongings to prevent the virus from spreading. The sorrow casts long shadows across his rugged face whenever her name slips into conversation.

Once we've clockedout from our chores and Cal's work at the cobbler's, he and I make a beeline for Moray Firth's breathtaking coastline. We lose track of time, skipping stones across its glassy surface while diving into deep conversations that peel back layers of our souls. Dreams deferred, fears unspoken, hopes reignited—each confession weaves another thread into the fabric of our blossoming relationship.

As dusk settles over us, Fi and I retreat into the cozy kitchen where she transforms me from a culinary disaster zone into someone who can whip up meals worthy of MasterChef without setting anything onfire—an achievement I wear like a Michelin star. After dinner is served and devoured, along with lots of laughter and playful banter, Alistair whips out his drum while Fergus cradles his fiddle like it's the love of his life. Together, they create enchanting music that makes us involuntarily tap our feet along. We dance to the irresistible rhythm that fills the night until our bodies wave the white flag.

Despite the never-ending cycle of farming, cleaning, and cooking, these days feel like

an unplanned staycation—one of those spontaneous adventures that ambush you and leave you feeling refreshed in ways you didn't even know you needed.

Just a few days shy of the next full moon, Cal and I are tangled up like pretzels in our cozy bed. I stare out our window at the starry sky—so breathtaking without any light pollution—and ruminate on all that's transpired.

Recently, Cal has taken to sleeping in his kilt again. I've deciphered this is not just a nod to his cultural roots but very likely a survival tactic in these uncertain times—and a touch of self-preservation. Sleeping side by side in our tiny bed has been an exquisite kind of torture.

Cal has this devil-may-care aura, a charm that could disarm anyone within seconds. But I've realized there's more to him than flirtatious banter and alpha-man charisma. Beneath his playful exterior, he savors every moment life offers. He unabashedly embraces his desires while maintaining respect and kindness toward others.

Perhaps he accepted the nightshirt Fi sewed for him out of politeness. Still, I soon realized it barely conceals any sexy bits, especially with our frequent accidental brushes against each other. A tangible tension hangs between us, an electric current sparking with each unintentional touch or shared glance.

Through his thin clothing, I can feel the hard contours of his body, which makes it far too easy for my imaginative mind to wander into self-imposed forbidden territories. Every night we've spent here has been a dangerous dance of desire and restraint.

We want each other—it's undeniable. But there's this delicate balance we're trying not to upset, a friendship I'm scared to ruin with rushed decisions.

Yet every morning, Cal only has to slip into his boots and face the day. Meanwhile, I struggle to stop imagining what's hidden under his kilt. I'm torn between wanting to

leap into something more and holding back to protect what we already have. This isn't just about lust; it's about something deeper, something that feels like it could last if we let it grow naturally.

Our conversations peel back layers of ourselves, revealing dreams and fears and deepening our connection. But I can't help but wonder, what if this one leap changes everything? The thought both thrills and terrifies me. So, for now, I'm choosing to savor these moments. To relish in every laugh, every shared secret, and every accidental touch.

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Maybe soon, we'll find the courage to leap together. But until then, I'll hold onto this delicious tension, knowing that what we have is already a rare, electrifying bond.

The thunderous crash of the tavern door being flung open jolts me awake. The pounding of sturdy boots on the weathered wooden planks reverberates through the room, shaking the floorboards beneath us.

Shouts and laughter ricochet off the stone walls, each voice carrying a drunken edge. It gives me horrible flashbacks to the last call at my campus pub.

“Where're ye hiding that Sassenach wench?” one of the intruders bellows.

Cal's grip on my hand tightens, yanking me out of my groggy stupor. “They've got our scent, Mills. Let's move!” His tone is urgent, snapping me further into alertness.

I open my eyes to see he's already standing, buttoning up his white shirt and tucking it into the kilt he sleeps in. I pull on my boots, sticking with the billowy tartan nightie Fi gifted me. A nagging voice in my head warns me I'll probably regret this decision later.

“This way,” he whispers, leading me down the stairs. We dart towards the back of the inn and as I risk a glance over my shoulder, I'm met with the sight of burly men in kilts storming inside like a rowdy mob after a night of heavy drinking. They're tearing up the place, faces twisted in a drunken rage. If they catch us... well, I wish we'd practiced synchronized running because we'll need an Olympic-level sprint.

“Hey! It's that outlandish lass!” one bellows, his words slurring together.

We sprint towards the back door, almost crashing into Alistair, Fi, and Fergus spilling out from the kitchen. The crash of tables flipping over and mugs shattering reverberates behind us.

“Gregor Campbell, always lookin’ for a fight,” Alistair grunts, herding us towards a narrow wooden door. “The cellar! Quick, before they spot ye.”

Cal’s hand clamps tighter around mine as he hauls me into the damp, musty cellar. Fiona and Fergus scamper in after us, their eyes wide with terror. As Alistair slams the door shut, we’re plunged into darkness.

“Well, isn’t this cozy,” I whisper to cut through the tension. “If only we had some wine and cheese down here. We’d have ourselves a real party.”

Fiona stifles a snort of laughter. “Aye, maybe even a nice charcuterie board to go with it.”

“Hush, both of ye,” Cal hisses back at us, but I can hear the smile in his voice. Trust Fi and me to crack jokes while angry Scots are tearing up the place above our heads.

I lean closer into Cal’s solid frame for comfort. This is wild. One minute, we’re enjoying a peaceful meal, and the next thing you know, we’re hiding in a cellar from a clan of pissed-off Highlanders. How on earth did I get myself into this cock-a-leekie soup? Oh yeah... because I decided to peer into some mystical portal instead of whale-watching as any typical tourist would. Superb decision-making skills there, Mills!

The footsteps above intensify with the cacophony of overturned furniture and sporadic shouts. Holding my breath tight, I silently pray they don’t think to check in the cellar.

My eyes squeeze shut as I will them to find the whisky in the kitchen and bugger off. There's no way I've traveled through time to get murdered by a bunch of drunk and angry Scots.

Alistair's hand comes down on my shoulder, making me startle. "Dinna fash, lass," he murmurs gruffly. "We'll keep ye safe. I swear it on the MacDowell name."

I nod, words escaping me. The guts and bravery of these people are something else. They're risking their lives for strangers with weird haircuts and odd expressions. In our short time here, they've fed us, given us shelter, and even danced with us. They feel like family now, and nobody messes with my family. This isn't some whimsical adventure or wild daydream anymore; this is as real as it gets.

Cal squeezes my hand as the chaos continues upstairs, and I force myself to steady my breathing. We're in this together, for better or worse. And if we make it out of this cellar alive, I swear I'm never taking indoor plumbing for granted again.

Alistair crouches down next to me, his eyes glinting in the dim light as he whispers urgently into my ear. "Ye need to understand the history of this land, lass. The clans of Inverness have been at war for generations, fightin' for control and honor."

His quiet intensity paints a picture of the bloody conflicts that have shaped these Highlands over centuries. Despite my uneven breath and trembling, clammy hands, I hold onto every word.

"The Macdonalds and Campbells... the Mackenzies and Frasers... they've all spilled blood on these hills," he says gravely. "And now Gregor and Malcom Campbell seek to claim what they believe is rightfully theirs."

The full weight of our predicament hits me like a punch to the gut. This isn't some bar fight gone awry; it's a centuries-old feud, and we've landed smack-dab in the

middle. My timing is as impeccable as ever.

Above us, the symphony of mayhem plays on, each crash and cry sending icy tendrils of fear spiraling through me. How long can we stay hidden here before they sniff us out? And what happens when they do?

I glance down at my trusty combat boots, drawing an odd sense of comfort. Just yesterday, I'd quickly stopped at the cobbler to retrieve them and wriggled back into them, my feet protesting against the constant torture of those thin-leathered monstrosities they call boots here. Strangely enough, no one bats an eye at my unconventional choice of footwear for this era. Slipping back into them feels like a lifeline to who I am and where I hail from.

Alistair must pick up on my terror because he gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Dinna worry, lass," he murmurs soothingly. "We'll unearth a path from this muddle." His words are meant to reassure me, but as footsteps echo closer and the cellar door creaks ominously above us, I can't help but wonder if our luck is about to run its course.

Fiona's warm hand slips into mine. "Amelia," she says firmly, her voice cutting through the tension. "Ye're one of us now—we won't let anything happen to you."

I nod gratefully even though words fail me at that moment—how do you explain that you're not just some lost tourist but a time-traveling author with zero business being here?

Suddenly, Fergus, our unofficial lookout by the cellar door, turns to us grimly. "They're coming down the stairs," he warns.

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Cal's eyes dart around the cramped space, desperately seeking an escape route. "There's a tunnel behind those barrels," he starts, but his words are cut off as the cellar door opens with a deafening crack. I freeze, my heart pounding like a war drum in my chest as armed men swarm into the room, their swords glinting ominously in the dim light.

"What's this?" A beast of a man bursts into the room. From how he swaggers in, it's clear he's the head honcho, Gregor. He looks at me first, his dark eyes boring into mine.

"What's this? A Sassenach spy?" He smirks, twirling his sword like a toy.

I part my lips to argue, but my voice has taken a sudden vacation. Panic surges up my throat, threatening to strangle me.

Cal moves in front of me like a human shield.

"Back off. She's not yer problem."

Gregor chuckles, and its sound grates on my nerves.

"I beg to differ. Anyone who hangs out with the MacDowells automatically earns enemy status with the Campbells. And enemies... well, they need to be handled."

He points his sword at Cal, the blade dancing dangerously close to his neck. I want to scream, but instead, I desperately rack my brain for an escape plan.

There has to be a way out of this mess—I've been stuck in plenty of tight spots before and always found a way out. This realization fuels a small flame of confidence that chases away some of the cold fear gnawing at my insides. Thoughts of home and everyone depending on me give me strength—especially Lila! Boy, she's going to have a freakin' field day when she hears about this!

Just as Gregor is about to make Cal's head roll—quite literally—Alistair springs into action. He shares a frenzied look with Fiona before stepping forward, his voice booming with unexpected authority.

He positions himself between Cal and our oversized adversary, hands raised in surrender. “Hold yer horses,” he says smoothly, sounding more like a butler than ever. “I'm just the bartender here—but I know where they stash the good stuff.”

The burly Campbell scrutinizes him suspiciously but seems swayed by Alistair's confidence. A ripple of interest spreads through him and his dumb goons at the mention of quality whisky.

“Show us, lad,” Gregor grunts, his voice as rough as sandpaper. “But if ye're lying... well, let's just say ye'll be a head shorter.”

“Right this way,” Alistair says, and—much to my amazement—they follow him—every single stupid one of them.

The echo of the invaders' footfalls recedes into the distance, leaving a vacuum of silence that chills my bones. My breath is trapped in my chest, held hostage by a sliver of hope that we might dodge this bullet. Cal's hand sneaks into mine in pitch black, his fingers lacing through mine.

“I think they've cleared off,” he murmurs, his voice barely more than a breath against my ear. “Now's our shot to bolt.”

I bob my head in agreement. “Lead the way. I’ve got your back.”

We inch through the gloomy tunnel like mice avoiding a cat, Fergus and Fi shadowing us closely. The passage spirals upwards and spits us out under the kitchen, where it opens onto an aged trail leading up the knoll to what I recognize as the MacDowell family farmstead.

Just as we embark on our uphill climb, the pub’s back door explodes open with a crash loud enough to wake the dead. Rival clan members pour forth like an angry hornet swarm, their eyes ablaze with rage.

“There she blows!” one shouts, jabbing his finger toward me.

His fellow clansmen give him confused glances.

“What? It sounded right before I said it,” he shrugs, unfazed by their puzzled expressions.

Before I can even blink or breathe or think of running away, rough hands grab me from behind, yanking me away from Cal and our friends. I shriek and kick like a wildcat caught in a trap, but these men are too powerful and unyielding.

“Mills! No!”

The anguish in Cal’s cry rips through me as he lunges forward, trying to reach me, but finds himself restrained by the intruders, their swords drawn and gleaming in the moonlight.

Cal’s face—etched with desperation and terror—is the last thing I see before I’m hoisted and tied onto the back of one of the men’s waiting horses. The animal bucks, startled by my sudden weight, and then we’re off, thundering into the inky night. I

glance over my shoulder and see more of the enemy clan behind me, untying and mounting Alistair's and Fergus's horses and spurring them into a gallop.

Hot tears streak down my cheeks as the inn dwindles into a speck behind us. I have no idea where they're taking me or what they plan to do with me. All I know is that I'm alone, and I'm terrified.

And somewhere behind me, Cal and our friends can only watch helplessly as I vanish into the black abyss, my fate now squarely in the hands of our enemies.

Chapter Twenty-Four

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My eyes flutter open, a musty smell filling my nostrils as dim morning light filters through the grimy cabin windows. I try to move, but coarse ropes bite into my wrists, holding me captive.

Fantastic. This is what I get for being spontaneous and traveling to Scotland on a whim. Kidnapped by some kilt-wearing hooligans. Not exactly the romantic getaway I had in mind.

Scanning the room, I search for anything to help my escape. A rusted lantern, a moth-eaten blanket, a questionable chamber pot. Slim pickings for a damsel in distress.

A tiny part of me hopes Cal will come bursting through the door, his sword raised high, ready to save the day. But who am I kidding? This isn't some cheesy rom-com movie.

Based on how men have treated me in the past, I can't help but think that Cal is probably back at the tavern, sipping whisky and enjoying his freedom from the crazy Canadian girl who dragged him into this mess.

I pull in a deep breath and try to squelch those ridiculous thoughts. We've got a special connection. He wouldn't do that to me! But I can't stop thinking about my parents' failed partnership. "Don't fall for that happily-ever-after nonsense," they'd warned me over and over again. And yet, each time I did fall, the pain of hitting rock bottom was a little more intense, a little harder to bear.

In this unexpected twist of life, I find myself yearning for a partner. Not just any partner, but a heroic one with a distinct Scottish lilt and captivating blue eyes that

hold an entire ocean within them. A man who wears leather boots that echo with stories of the Highlands, and a tartan kilt as much a part of him as his own skin. My heart whispers his name—Callum.

But I quickly shake my head, trying to banish the thought. I have to be my own hero. I can't rely on anyone else, especially not when it comes to matters of the heart.

Wriggling my hands, I test the give of the ropes. If I can just loosen them a bit, maybe I can slip free and make a run for it. I don't have a clue where I am or how to get back to Aven Valley, but anything is better than being a sitting duck in this dank cabin.

"Come on," I whisper, my fingers working frantically at the knots.

"Embrace your inner Tony Stark. Wait, no. Elektra. Be a femme fatale. You've got this."

The ropes chafing my wrists are about to give way when the low rumble of voices outside the cabin freezes me in place. Every cell in my body tunes into their conversation.

"Gregor's bettin' the MacDowells will shell out a small fortune for her safe return," one captor slurs, his words marinated in a thick Scottish accent that makes comprehension a challenge.

Before I can digest this, another voice pipes up, stoking the flames of my rising panic. "Aye, but it ain't just about the money. Gregor wants to bleed 'em dry—he's got his eyes on their tavern and those juicy acres they own in Aven Valley." He sounds as casual as if he's discussing Sunday's football scores rather than blackmail and land grabbing.

“True enough,” comes the agreement from voice number one. “But we need her alive and untarnished for that scheme to pan out. No roughhousing with her, got it?”

I roll my eyes so hard I almost sprain them. Fantastic. I haven’t just been kidnapped by dimwits; I’m a hot commodity on some Early Modern Scottish eBay.

The negotiations probably go something like: “One slightly pre-loved Canadian tourist up for grabs.”

The enormity of my predicament hits me like the unfinished manuscript that plagues my nightmares.

Okay. I’m trapped in this time warp, but there’s no way I’m going to be a mere chess piece in an age-old Scottish clan war.

I need to navigate through this, not just for my own sake, but to prove something to my agent, my editor, and the rest of the world—that I can see things through to the end. Even if Margot has no clue about my current whereabouts, it’s crucial that I show her—and myself—that I can triumph over any hurdle, no matter how ludicrous it seems. The realization stokes the fire of resolve within me to break free from these restraints and finally put an end to the story that has been left hanging for too long.

“Pull yourself together,” I mentally pep-talk myself as I grapple with the ropes gnawing into my flesh. “Once you’re untied, they won’t know what hit them.”

A burst of laughter threatens to erupt as I reflect on the ridiculousness of my circumstances. Amelia Sutherland—acclaimed author and self-avowed independent woman—now banking on her sharp intellect and a dash of fortune to outwit a gang of Highland hooligans. If my dedicated readers could witness this spectacle, they’d either collapse in fits of laughter or be scared witless.

Suddenly, inspiration strikes—this ordeal could serve as fodder for one helluva novel! Roxy’s London escapades are starting to taste as stale as last week’s doughnuts anyway. But this wild ride through 1645 Scotland? With Lady Catherine and Sir John playing lead roles? That screams “bestseller”! The only hitch is surviving long enough to pen it down.

Mental note: document every tiny detail once out of this Highland mayhem.

The fastened cords around my hands give way after a final yank and twist. I stifle a victorious giggle as I rub the raw skin of my newly freed hands. One look at my grubby, torn nightgown confirms it’s no outfit for an escape artist. With a surge of resolve, I rip off the lower part near the knees, fashioning a makeshift mini-skirt that promises swift movement.

All that stands between me and liberty is seizing the right moment to bolt. With sweat dripping down my forehead and trembling legs, I inch towards the cabin door. An hour ago, two hushed voices echoed outside, but now, only one man seems to stand guard. It’s go time.

My gaze sweeps across the room for a weapon and lands on a sturdy wooden candlestick. Snatching it up, I position myself next to the door, biding my time until the perfect moment to strike.

The door creaks open, revealing my guard’s grizzled face.

“Hey there, Haggis-breath!” I taunt as I step from the shadows. “Never underestimate a woman in combat boots!”

Before he can react, I swing the candlestick high above my head and bring it down with all my strength onto his skull. There’s a chilling bone-cracking sound, and his eyes widen like dinner plates before he stumbles backward.

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Seizing this fleeting window of shock, I lash out with my boot-clad foot, landing a solid kick where it matters most. His face twists in agony as he lets out an ear-piercing wail:

“Aieeeee! Sassenach wench!”

His words hang suspended in mid-air like an unfinished melody before his body crumples onto the cold stone floor.

I don't waste another second before sprinting out into the intimidating darkness of the Highland woods, choosing a path that appears untouched. My boots pound against the rugged terrain as I dodge underbrush and leap over fallen logs. Rogue brambles scratch my cheeks, and twigs whip at my legs, but I press on, ignoring the sting. There's no room for weakness here.

As I delve deeper into the wilderness, each gasping breath seems to echo Cal's warnings this last month about how to navigate these treacherous woods. I squint into the darkness, searching for moss-covered trees pointing north and constellations that could guide me back to my kilt-clad Highland heartthrob. Each scrape from a twig feels like an award for bravery; every step further from my kidnappers is one step closer to freedom.

The determination coursing through me is fierce and unwavering; there's no turning back now. Despite everything—despite being stranded centuries away from home—I know all roads lead back to Cal.

To safety. To love.

Branches snag at my hair and clothes, but I push onward, driven by adrenaline and desperate need to find Cal.

“Just another day in paradise,” I mutter, dodging branches like Tinder matches. “Fleeing from kidnappers, sprinting through the Scottish wilds, and chasing a guy who feels like Mr. Right—all refreshingly better than decoding dating app texts. Fingers crossed that my gut’s right this time!”

I press on through the night, clinging to hope that somewhere out there, Cal is looking for me, just as determined as I am. And if not, well, I’ll have to be my own hero.

As I stumble through the underbrush, a voice slices through the night air like a warm breeze cutting through the cold.

“Mills! Is that you?”

I spin around, my heart stuttering, and there he is—emerging from the shadows with a look of relief, exhaustion, and something else I can’t quite put my finger on.

“Cal!” I exclaim as I fling myself into his arms. “You came for me!”

His green and blue tartan kilt, frayed at the edges from his rugged journey, hugs his waist like a medal of valor earned through untold adventures. His white shirt is slightly disheveled from the windswept path he’s crossed, adding an edge to his otherwise composed demeanor.

He wraps me in a hug, holding me so tightly that I can feel the rhythmic thud of his heart echoing through my chest, his muscles forming a protective cocoon around me.

As the world fades into the background, I feel an overwhelming sense of security and

belonging. Nothing can touch me as long as I'm in his arms.

“Of course I did, you wee daftie,” he whispers into my hair, his voice a husky caress.

“Ye're my lass, aren't ye?”

I pull back and look up at him, my delight mirrored in his sparkling eyes.

“Your gal? I could get used to that.”

Cal grins and gives me a wink. “Aye, well, dinnae get too cocky. But ye have to admit, ye were pretty badass back there, outsmarting those goons in nothing more than a sexy mini-nightie.”

A laugh escapes me, and I feel the spark between us burst into solid flames. “Well, you know me. Always armed with a snappy comeback and a well-aimed boot to the giggleberries.”

His smile is a slow burn, igniting something deep inside me.

“That's my Mills. Irresistibly funny, delightfully fearless, and stunning beyond words.”

Without warning, he closes the gap between us, his strong hands cradling my face with a tenderness that makes my heart race. His touch is electrifying, sending shockwaves that settle into a delicious warmth low in my belly.

Our lips meet in a kiss that's both fiery and teasing, like we've been waiting for this moment our whole lives. As his tongue dances with mine, I can barely stand, overwhelmed by the intensity of it all. It's a symphony of sensation that drowns out everything but us.

As reality fades, replaced by the intoxicating dance of our mouths, I realize that finding someone like Cal might just be my greatest adventure yet. Love is no sure thing, but right now, with him, I can't imagine wanting anything else.

"Yer kisses could be my eternal undoing," Cal murmurs against my lips, his voice a seductive whisper that makes my heart skip a beat. I can feel his breath, hot and heavy against my skin, as he adds, "I cannae stop thinking about laying you down on a soft bed of moss, losing myself in ye completely. You're all I want and more."

"Oh, trust me, the feeling's mutual," I reply, a sultry smile tugging at my lips. "But first, we've got Dumb and Dumber in kilts to outrun."

His laughter is a low rumble, thrilling and full of promise. "Deal. That image of us tangled up and bare will be my secret weapon."

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He grabs my hand, his grip firm and reassuring. “Let’s do this!” he says, and we spring into motion, fueled by adrenaline and a shared desire for what comes next.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hand in hand, we navigate our way back to the village, our senses heightened for any hint of pursuit.

“Ye must have knocked him out cold,” Cal quips, glancing over his shoulder but finding no sign of anyone tailing us.

“I aimed low and kicked hard. He won’t be running anywhere anytime soon,” I reply with a smirk.

Once we’re back at Fiona’s mother’s house—the agreed rendezvous point—we ascend the creaky stairs to the secret attic bedroom, where Fergus, Alistair, and Fiona wait anxiously. The moment they see us walk in, their faces light up with relief and joy.

Fiona practically lunges at us, her arms wide open. “Thank the heavens, ye’re both safe!” she cries, pulling us into a bone-crushing hug. Alistair follows suit, his hand landing on Cal’s back with a hearty thump that echoes through the room. His usually stoic face is lit up with an uncharacteristic grin. “Well done, lad,” he chimes in, pride evident in his voice. “Knew ye’d bring our lass back.”

A knowing glance passes between Cal and me. It’s time to spill our peculiar beans.

“Listen up, everyone,” Cal starts, the gravity of his tone instantly silencing the room. “There’s something crucial we need to share with ye all. Amelia and I... we’re not exactly from... here.”

“Aye,” Fergus pipes up with a nod of understanding. “That’s been as clear as Loch Ness on a sunny day. Ye reek of Glasgow charm.”

Cal shakes his head, eyes piercing with concern as he corrects him: “Not quite what we meant, Fergus. We’re... from the future.”

The following silence is so profound it feels like someone hit the pause button on life itself. Even the Highland winds outside seem to hold their breath for a moment.

I half-expect our friends to laugh at our outrageous claim, but instead, Fergus squints at us suspiciously.

“From the future, aye? Have ye been dancing with the whisky fairy again, Cal?”

Unable to contain myself any longer, I erupt into snorting giggles at the sheer absurdity of our situation.

“I know it sounds like we’ve lost our marbles,” I manage to get out between fits of laughter. “But it’s true! And Cal here... he’s your great-great-great-something grandson! We stumbled on your era through the Loch Ness Portal, and tonight, under the full moon’s blessing, we might just have a shot at returning home.”

Fiona looks at Alistair, who glances at Fergus, who scratches his head in utter bewilderment. The air thickens with disbelief and curiosity.

“Loch Ness Portal? Future?” Alistair grumbles skeptically. He pauses, scratching his beard. “So ye mean to tell me there are no more bloody English invasions?”

“And do they finally invent trousers that don’t chafe?” Fergus chimes in, earning a round of laughter.

Fiona is quiet for a breath. Then she turns to me: “And what about the black pudding? Is it still as scrumptious?”

“Well,” I drawl, mischief sparking in my eyes. “It’s still delicious. And if you think the wheel was a game-changer, brace yourselves for Wi-Fi!”

Cal shoots me a look that screams, “Easy Mills, we’re not here to rupture the space-time continuum,” and quickly interjects. “Though it’s also a vortex of wasted hours, so perhaps best left unexplored.” I furrow my brows at him. All we’re doing is confusing them more.

The room explodes into a cacophony of questions as our friends begin making wild guesses about the future, from flying cows to kilts with built-in heaters. Cal admits that one is a good idea, especially for Canadians like me, and chuckles that he’ll have to patent it if we ever get home.

Fiona finally raises her hands, commanding silence with a grin that mirrors mine.

“Alright! No use arguing over spilled whisky. If ye need our help to return to yer... future... then ye have it.” Her words have an air of finality, her bright eyes twinkling with determination.

Alistair nods, his hand casually resting on the hilt of his sword. “Aye,” he assures us, “we’ll have yer backs and guide ye to the hidden trail behind the house. If any of those goons from the rival clan come sniffin’ around, we’re prepared to fend them off.”

With a booming laugh that could probably shake the Highlands themselves, Fergus

raises his sword as if presenting it to a king.

“Ye may need this when heading towards that enchanted loch, lad! May your journey be as wild and unforgettable as your time with us!”

Cal’s eyes glint with unsaid emotions as he accepts the blade. They share a backslap like brothers with an age-old warrior bond. I blink back the tears.

So. This is what it would look like if Ancestry.com had a reality show.

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Fiona snags a pair of breeches and a blouse, motioning for me to duck into a more private nook.

“Let’s get ye out of that nightie,” she says with a wink. With the ease of two moms swapping yoga pants for jeans, she helps me wriggle into the outfit.

“There, now you’re ready to conquer the Highlands—or at least not flash them,” Fiona grins, and I pull her into a warm, grateful hug.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

Fi pulls back, eyes twinkling with a conspiratorial glint. “Ye know, lass, women in these parts aren't supposed to be warriors,” she leans in, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I've seen the fire in ye, the courage. Let me get ye something to defend yerself properly.”

Before I can respond, she's already whisking me down the creaky back stairs, her excitement infectious. We tiptoe through the dimly lit hallway, trying to suppress our giggles as we make our way to her mother's kitchen. It's a cozy, bustling little space filled with the comforting aroma of freshly baked bread—a place that feels like the heart of the home.

Fiona scans the room like a secret agent on a mission, her eyes alighting on the perfect item. With a triumphant grin, she retrieves a hefty rolling pin from the counter, holding it up like a prized artifact.

“This,” she declares, “is your weapon.”

I let out a snort, the sound echoing through the kitchen. "A rolling pin? Seriously?"

"Seriously," Fiona nods, her expression earnest yet playful. "It's versatile, solid, and trust me, no one expects a rolling pin to come swingin' their way."

I take my new weapon, feeling its weight and imagining the surprise on our rivals' faces. I prefer to be offered a sword, but this should do the trick for now. Somehow, it feels right.

Standing at the edge of our final adventure, I'm swept up in a wave of affection for these extraordinary people. They've taken us in like we were their own, treating us more like family than friends. Silently, I wish them peace and prosperity in this quaint little village that has become our temporary sanctuary.

Do Cal and I have a shot at forever?

Who knows? Is there anyone who can claim to be an expert at making love last? Or picking shoes, for that matter?

There's no secret handbook detailing whether the shoes we buy or the lovers we find are meant for one wild night, one season of comfort, or guaranteed for a lifetime of strolls. When it comes to love, the truth is, we're all just winging it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

My boot slips on the uneven terrain, sending me lurching forward. My heart thuds in my chest as I teeter precariously on the edge of a dark pit that materializes from nowhere. I catch myself just in time, but it's a close call. The forest floor is littered with leaves and branches, doing a poor job of hiding the dangerous drop beneath.

"Steady on, Mills," Cal says, his strong hand anchoring me. His eyes scan our

surroundings, a furrow forming between his brows. “Looks like we’ve walked right into an unexpected ‘surprise.’”

I peer into the ominous hole at our feet, still feeling my pulse pound from the near-miss. It reeks of sabotage—probably another trick from the rival clan to slow us down on our journey to Loch Ness. Sneaky buggers.

“But how did they know we’re heading for Loch Ness?” I mutter, disbelief seeping into my voice.

Cal sighs deeply. “That’d be Gregor Campbell’s doing,” he admits. “Alistair warned me about him always being one step ahead. He and his brother Malcom took ye. They’ve probably been tracking us since we arrived.”

“Because we sound different?” I muse aloud.

Cal grins sheepishly at me. “Your English was a dead giveaway,” he confesses. “We both tried to pass our dialect off as Scots, but... well... Scots isn’t really the main language yet here. Dinna fass. It’s not yer fault, lass. Gregor and his gang are always itching for conflict.”

“But Cal,” I interject softly, plucking nervously at the edge of his MacDowell tartan kilt, “it’s not only me I’m concerned about.”

He silences me with a gentle hush and a finger against my lips. But I won’t let him downplay the gravity of our situation.

“It’s not just that I’d be devastated if anything happened to you,” I blurt out, “If something were to happen... it could mean disaster for all of Aven Valley! Without the MacDowells... what would become of the village? Who would continue your family’s legacy?”

He locks eyes with me, his gaze intense and unyielding. “So, we don’t get caught,” he says. “That’s all there is to it.”

“Well, good thing I’ve got my rolling pin,” I pull the wooden weapon out from its snug hiding place in the back of my breeches and swing it about with a smirk, “and wore my trusty combat boots,” I tap my boot against a nearby rock. “Wouldn’t want me tripping at a crucial moment.”

Cal shakes his head in amusement. “Yer readiness is truly impressive,” he teases. “Who knew we’d face death traps tonight?” His tone is light, but his shoulders are tense as he scans our surroundings.

I shrug nonchalantly, adrenaline still pumping through my veins. “Just a hunch,” I reply coolly. “A girl needs to be prepared when she’s romping around the Scottish Highlands with a handsome rogue like you.”

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His eyes sparkle with mischief as he grins at me. “Handsome rogue, huh?”

Despite the danger surrounding us, being with Cal makes everything less daunting. His presence comforts me and reminds me I’m not alone in this wild adventure.

We navigate cautiously around the trap, using our knowledge of the terrain and heightened senses to avoid further surprises. The moon peeks through overhead branches, casting an eerie glow on the forest floor below us.

Suddenly, a twig snaps, followed by rustling leaves and crunching footsteps behind us. My breathing grows uneven as fear grips me, but Cal’s reassuring hand in mine keeps me grounded.

“Almost there,” he whispers, his voice steady and comforting. “Just stay sharp, and we’ll be okay.”

As we sprint through the woods, my mind drifts back to all those times I craved adventure and yearned for something more than just ordinary life. But here I am now, danger biting at my heels and two clans’ destinies hanging in the balance, and my efforts to emulate the daring Elektra are falling short.

“Come on, BE Elektra,” I mutter, startled by the resolve resonating in my voice.

Bounding through the shadowy labyrinth of trees, I overhear Cal, trying to suppress a chuckle. “Aye, Mills,” he whispers over his shoulder. “If ye’ve got any secret ninja moves up yer sleeve, now would be the time to reveal them.”

As I dodge low-hanging branches and leap over gnarled roots, I have to roll my eyes at his comment. But beneath my feigned annoyance at his cheesy jokes, an unfamiliar warmth blossoms in my chest. Even in a mad dash through the forest, Cal has this uncanny ability to make me feel treasured. It's a sensation as foreign as it is addictive.

Feeling the reassuring warmth of his hand in mine, I swallow a surge of courage. We're out of the deepest part of the woods and on our way to Loch Ness, our future hanging in the balance with every step we take.

Just when I think the Scottish hills can't get any more dramatic, a chorus of distant cries echoes off their rugged slopes, sending an unexpected chill tap-dancing down my spine.

"Cal," I hiss, giving his hand a nervous squeeze. "We're not alone!"

His eyes flicker with determination as the chilling sound of metal scraping against leather fills the silence—he's drawn his sword.

"Right ye are, Mills," he replies in a low, steady voice. "Let's pick up the pace."

We quicken our steps, trying to leave our chasers in the dust while keeping our bearings towards the loch. The terrain is a total nightmare, uneven and littered with roots and rocks that seem hell-bent on tripping me up. My lungs feel on fire, but I keep going because stopping isn't an option.

I glance at him just in time to catch him looking back at me, his eyes scanning our surroundings for danger. The sounds of our pursuers grow louder behind us, their footfalls echoing ominously through the undergrowth. But Cal's confident strides and occasional reassuring glances keep me grounded, making every second of this wild chase feel oddly intimate and exhilarating.

Risking a look back, I catch sight of shadowy figures weaving between trees, their faces shrouded in darkness. Fear tries to choke me, but I force it down, focusing instead on Cal beside me and the path ahead.

We're so close now, the loch and our future just within reach. All we need to do is keep running, keep fighting, and trust each other. And maybe, just maybe, we'll live to tell this tale.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The earth beneath our feet abruptly gives out, revealing a narrow ravine with dangerous, jagged edges. Cal's boots skid on loose gravel as he stops short, eyes wide as he takes in the obstacle in front of us. I can see the decision forming in his mind—face the dangers behind us or leap into uncertainty?

“We have to jump,” I blurt, my voice surprisingly steady even though my legs are not.

“Together,” he agrees, reaching for my hand. His fingers intertwine with mine, and something warm and solid unfurls inside me—courage, maybe? Without wasting another second, I sprint towards the edge of the ravine.

As I jump into the void, time seems to slow down. The wind whips through my hair, and adrenaline pumps through my veins like high-octane fuel. Then it's over as quickly as it began; my feet hit solid ground on the other side and buckle underneath me.

I whirl around to find Cal still on the other side. My heart lodges firmly in my throat as I watch him prepare for his jump. But then he's running, leaping across with an effortless grace that leaves me breathless.

He lands next to me, chest rising and falling rapidly. Despite our dire situation, he's still achingly gorgeous: flushed cheeks and tousled hair against the backdrop of danger.

"Not bad for a city girl," he teases.

"Not bad for a sea-soaked barnacle." I grin back at him.

We quickly duck behind a large boulder to catch our breaths. The cool roughness of the rock against my back contrasts with Cal's warmth beside me, creating a comforting yet electrifying sensation.

"Quite the close call," I pant out. "I guess we can add 'ravine jumping' to our list of skills."

Cal chuckles softly. "Aye, we could totally win the Aven Valley Highland Games. No contest."

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“So what’s next?” I whisper, peeping out from behind our rocky hiding spot.

“We need a diversion,” he muses, deep in thought.

An idea hits me like a lightning bolt. A fallen tree trunk across a stream nearby could serve as a makeshift bridge and help us put some distance between us and our enemies. It’s risky, but it might work.

“Trust me?” I ask, my eyes locking with his.

“With my life.”

I draw deep breaths, bracing myself for what’s to come. “Then follow my lead. And whatever happens, don’t look back.”

My hand finds his, and we entwine our fingers in a silent pact before stepping out from our hiding place. “There,” I whisper, nodding towards the log that bridges the river. “We’ll cross there.”

He offers a small nod. “Lead the way, Mills. I’m right behind ye.”

Taking a deep breath for courage, I step onto the log, arms outstretched for balance. The wood groans under my weight but holds firm as I move towards the far bank. Cal’s presence is a comforting warmth at my back as he follows closely behind.

We’re halfway across when shouts slice through the night air—it’s them again; they’ve found us, and they’re closing in fast.

“Hurry!” I call urgently, though my voice barely rises above a whisper in the stillness of night.

The moon is full and bright above us, casting an otherworldly glow over the river and dense forest surrounding us. My mouth is dry, my breathing jagged as we traverse this precarious bridge one careful step at a time.

The log creaks under our combined weight yet remains sturdy until we reach the other side. Relief floods me as I glance back at Cal, who now stands on solid ground, too, wearing an expression of grim satisfaction.

“Well done,” he says, “but we need to make sure they cannae follow us.”

With all the strength I can muster, I lift one end of the log while Cal does the same on his side.

The log is surprisingly heavy, a testament to its age and resilience. But with our combined efforts, we dislodge it from its perch, sending it crashing into the river below. The splash echoes through the tranquil forest like an impromptu concert.

A triumphant grin spreads across Cal’s face, his fist jutting out towards me in the time-honored tradition of modern-day Brohood. Without a moment’s hesitation, I meet his knuckles with mine in a satisfying fist-bump. As our fists pull back, an unspoken electricity crackles between us. Our eyes meet again—this time not fueled by mutual resolve but something far more intimate.

My heart does a little somersault as Cal and I lean into each other, our faces so close that I can count the flecks of gold in his eyes. The world around us blurs into nothingness as I close mine, ready to give in to the magnetic pull between us. But just then, the serenity is shattered by shouts and curses from across the river. Talk about crappy timing.

Our heads whip towards the sound, spotting Gregor and a man who could be his twin swinging across the river like they're auditioning for a low-budget Tarzan remake.

Our almost-kiss moment? Yeah, that's gone with the wind now. We break apart and take off running again, but we're late to the party. With a thud that rattles my teeth, the brothers land right behind us.

And then they're on us, their swords glinting in the moonlight like ominous disco balls. Cal pulls out his blade—Fergus' parting gift—and steps forward to meet them head-on.

“Stay behind me; we're almost at River Ness,” he orders in a voice that's all grit and gravel.

But there's no way I'm sitting this one out. After everything we've been through, there's no chance I'm letting him face this danger solo. Pulling out my rolling pin, I line up next to him, ready to kick some Campbell butt.

The battle starts with a roar that seems to shake the earth beneath us. Cal lunges at Gregor, his sword slicing through the air towards the older man's broad chest. Gregor blocks him just in time, their swords colliding with a sound that echoes across Loch Ness.

The air practically crackles with danger, every clang of steel against steel or wood echoing ominously through the night. Cal and I move together like we've been practicing for some Early Modern dance-off championship. His sword gleams under the moonlight while his eyes stay locked on Gregor, Clan Enemy Number One, with a beard sharp enough to match his cruel intentions.

Meanwhile, I square off against Malcolm, who looks like he could benchpress a small car without breaking a sweat. He quirks a brow and laughs when he sees my kitchen

utensil-turned-weapon and doesn't bother to wield his sword. Instead, he swings one fist at me, but I duck and swing my pin upwards with all the strength my adrenaline-fuelled body can muster.

I may be small and swordless, but I have a head full of moves from modern dance and kickboxing classes. Our fight's a complex choreography; every jab of mine is met with a counter, and every swing I make is returned in kind. Come to think of it, it must look like we're performing a strange, violent ballet.

I'm bobbing and weaving around Malcom's awkward lunges as if I've suddenly transformed into Muhammad Ali wearing boots, my fist landing quick jabs and hooks with pinpoint accuracy while avoiding his lumbering attempts to hit me. My rolling pin feels like an extension of my arm as I twirl it around, whipping up mini tornadoes of leaves and dust.

Cal holds his own against Gregor, their swords clashing under the moon's ethereal glow. I can hear the raw power behind each strike, and the sound sends shivers down my spine. From the corner of my eye, I watch Cal move with an almost deadly grace.

The battle intensifies with every second; my muscles scream in protest, and sweat trickles down my back, but there's no way I'm giving in.

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With a sudden burst of adrenaline, I lunge at Malcom, and he grabs my rolling pin. But I don't back down. I lift my right leg as high as possible so my boot connects forcefully with his midsection, and he flies backward. He trips over an exposed tree root and tumbles clumsily off the cliff—my rolling pin in hand—like he's been sacked in a football game.

Seconds later, Cal seizes his chance when Gregor idiotically leans over the cliff edge to see what happened to his brother. With one swift shove from his strong arms, Gregor topples over the precipice. His surprised yelp echoes around us before being swallowed by the crashing waves of River Ness below.

We peer over the edge just in time to see Gregor's head break the river's surface, his arms flailing as he sputters in the cold depths. The wind carries away his shouts of frustration.

“Well done, Kitchen Crusader!” Cal winks at me, a hint of satisfaction on his lips. “That should buy us some time.” He grabs my hand, and we sprint away from the cliff's edge.

“Almost there,” Cal pants, his breath warm against my ear. “Just a bit farther.”

I nod, too out of breath to form words, and keep my eyes trained on the path ahead. The loch is within reach now, its ancient magic practically tingling on my tongue.

Something else feels within reach now, too. Lasting love was never something I believed in—not after witnessing the destruction of my parents' marriage or experiencing Brady's deceitful betrayal. But with Cal... it's different. It feels right.

We break through the tree line, our feet sinking into the soft sand of the loch's shore. Stretching out before us like a mirror reflecting the star-speckled sky above is the Loch Ness.

"We made it," I whisper, exhaustion and awe making my voice tremble.

Cal turns to me, wearing an emotion I can't quite put a finger on.

"Aye, we did. Together."

As if on cue, clouds part, and the moon emerges, casting a silver glow over everything. Loch Ness shimmers and dances as if alive, and whispers of the Portal Legend echo in my mind.

As I roll up my trousers and we slip off our boots and stand, toes dipped in the loch, there's an electric charge between us that has nothing to do with tonight's mythical magic.

"You know," I tease, "For a man who's been challenging me since we first met, you aren't half bad."

A chuckle rumbles from deep within Cal's chest. "Aye, and for a wee lass who's been driving me mad with her stubborn ways, you're not so terrible yourself."

"Watch it, Captain. I may have fallen for you, but I can still kick your ass."

His eyes soften as he reaches up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "I dinnae doubt that for a second. Come on. Time to leap."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

My toes bury themselves in the soft sand as an unspoken question hangs heavy in the air—will the mystical portal show up for an encore? The alternative options aren't exactly appealing; we land in Gregor's not-so-loving arms or face something far worse.

As I stand on the precipice of something new, memories yank me backward. Back to Toronto with its Lila-shaped comforts, parental drama, a smattering of friends, and one very spoiled cat.

But that isn't enough now. Hemingway nailed it when he said: "In order to write about life, first you must live it."

Until Cal swaggered into my world with his sailing prowess, barefoot charm, captivating stories, and those irresistible, sexy dimples, dating was just another shade of gray. What I craved was color. Depth and authenticity.

These weeks spent adventuring with Cal have been like a breath of fresh air after being underwater for far too long. No more aimless wandering through days that blend into each other; now every moment pulses with life.

My old self feels like a ghost from another timeline. Can I really go back to that drab existence after feasting on this vibrant buffet of experiences alongside Cal? The answer is elusive as thoughts of my cramped apartment are shooed away by visions of an unknown future sparkling on the horizon.

"So... this is it," I say, trying to keep my voice steady but failing miserably. "We just... wade in and hope the magic portal zaps us back to the 21st century?"

Cal chuckles, a sound I associate with comfort, and my nerves ease up a bit. He's holding his handcrafted boots—a clear winner over the modern boat shoes he used to sport.

“Aye, lass. Though maybe ye need a pair of ruby slippers instead. Click yer heels three times and say there’s no place like home.” His grin tilts off-center and sends butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Still, I snort at his silliness.

“And are you my wizard?”

“Nae, more like time-travelin’ tour guide, with benefits.” He casts a sultry wink in my direction. I feel heat creep up my cheeks as memories of that shared bed, that intoxicating kiss flood my mind.

The loch stares back at me, daring me to make the first move. It’s a now-or-never situation—dip our toes in or forever be stuck in 17th-century Scotland. I gulp a lungful of air, trying to stir up that audacious spirit that landed me in this predicament.

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“Alright, let’s get this over with before I lose my nerve,” I declare, striding forward until the icy tendrils of water lap at my ankles, sending an electric shiver up my spine.

“If something goes wrong... it’s been one hell of an adventure, Cal.”

“We’ll make it, Amelia. Còmhla. It means together.” Cal’s voice echoes solemnly through the quiet night as he weaves his fingers through mine. The rough texture of his palm grounds me.

Hand-in-hand, we wade deeper into the loch, the freezing water swirling around our legs, rising higher with each step. I’m breathless and worn out but ready to leap again—fueled by adrenaline, fear, and a flicker of hope.

Is it just me, or is the water starting to glimmer with specks of silver and gold? A vortex of pink, green, and purple light seems to bloom beneath the surface. A glance at Cal confirms he sees it, too; his expression mirrors my nervous anticipation.

An enraged roar from behind us shatters the tranquil moment.

“Argh! Bloody MacDowell demons! Ye willnae escape me this time!” Gregor Campbell stands on the shore—wet and fuming with fury. Even from here, I can see the vein pulsating in his temple and a murderous gleam in his eyes.

“Quick, Mills!” Cal shouts, seeing Gregor charging into the shallows with his sword drawn. “We’re almost there!”

My breath catches in my throat, and my heart races as I push against the churning

water—waiting for the vortex to swallow us whole. We have to hurry before we're trapped in this era forever, at the mercy of a madman.

Cal tightens his grip on my hand. His eyes are ablaze with determination and courage, and I see the man he's become, ready to fight tooth and nail for those he loves. For me.

“Còmhla,” he says, his voice steady. “No matter what happens, lass.”

I nod, my heart swelling with a love I've never allowed myself to imagine before. “Together.”

The water churns around us, the vortex growing wider as though it's in tune with our determination. We charge headlong into the fray, and suddenly, the portal within Loch Ness yawns open, sucking us into a dizzying whirl of colorful magic and moonlight. My eyes squeeze shut as I cling onto my boots and Cal's hand while time seems to drag us under.

Gregor's livid cries are escalating, his splashing footsteps closing in. But we're already sliding out of his reach, the pull of the future dragging us deeper into the portal's clutches. The last image seared into my mind before light engulfs us is Gregor's face twisted with fury and disbelief. He's too late.

Then reality shatters into a riot of colors and we're tumbling, tumbling, down through centuries, back to where we started—back to a future that I hope we can shape together.

As the swirling pink and green hues fade away, I realize I've landed on Loch Ness' soft shore. Cal is beside me, his hand still locked tightly with mine. Our breaths come out in ragged pants.

Looking up at the night sky, I notice that the stars don't shimmer as brightly as they used to. The constellations are masked by a hazy glow—a dead giveaway of light pollution from our contemporary world. A bittersweet nostalgia hits me as I recognize familiar cottages on the coast—we're back in the present.

“We did it,” I murmur, like saying it louder might jinx it somehow. “We made it back.”

Cal's eyes twinkle with relief and joy. “Aye, we did indeed. Just in the nick of time.”

A ripple of laughter bubbles up from my chest, bouncing off the serene waters of Moray Firth with infectious energy. The realization that we've outfoxed Gregor, leaving him trapped in the pages of history where he rightfully belongs, fills me with a heady sense of triumph. I shake my head, trying to make sense of our wild ride—our victory feels as surreal as a dream spun from moonlight and Scottish mist.

“Do you hear that?” Cal's voice interrupts my thoughts.

I strain my ears and catch the faint strains of music wafting from a nearby window. It's a tune that feels like an old friend in this new reality. “Is that... Time After Time by Cyndi Lauper?”

Cal laughs. “Aye, it is. Fitting, right? A song about time, welcoming us back to the 21st century.”

“Of all the songs we could've heard right now, it just had to be that one. The universe sure has a twisted sense of humor,” I say.

His grin widens. “Well, at least there'll be no more corsets and chamber pots for ye, Mills.”

“And no more kilts and swords for you, Captain.”

“I dinnae know,” he ponders out loud, brushing sand off his family tartan. “The kilt suits me. And I might still need my boots in the fields. They’ll come in handy if I step in a cow patty.” With a mischievous smirk, he tosses his boots onto the sand and steps into them before lacing them up, and I follow suit.

As we stand hand-in-hand under the starlit sky, laughing together like two kids caught playing hooky from school, relief washes over me like a wave crashing onshore. We’ve made it back—against all odds—and our feelings for each other are more potent than any magical vortex or vengeful clan.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

We start our trek back from Loch Ness’s mystical shores towards Aven Valley; the gentle lapping of waves against the shore serenading our journey home. Cal’s normally lively banter gives way to a contemplative silence that hangs between us like an uninvited guest at a party. His gaze seems distant—I wonder if he’s counting up how long we’ve been gone or simply pondering over the enigma that is time travel.

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The path meanders along the shoreline—its twists and turns mirroring the uncertainty in my heart. With each passing minute, I can practically hear the gears turning in Cal’s mind, louder than the crashing waves nearby. The familiar hum of an electric street lamp buzzes overhead, interrupted by the distant wail of an ambulance siren.

“Sounds like we’ve definitely made it back to our time,” Cal finally breaks our silence, his voice filled with a hint of relief. His words soothe my restless thoughts, confirming that we’ve managed to slip free from history’s iron grip. As we inch closer to home, victory sweet on our tongues, a tiny sprout of doubt pushes through the soil of my thoughts, and I wonder if he’s feeling the same way.

What if our love story is doomed to be a relic of the past, tangled up in ancient times and dusty folklore? The uncertainty drapes over me like a leaden shawl, casting long shadows over our shared triumph.

We weave through familiar streets and serpentine paths that lead back to Aven Valley, but I can’t shake this gnawing question that itches at my brain. How can two people separated by an ocean carve out a future together?

Desperate to break the heavy silence, I muster up a feeble attempt at humor. “So,” I say with a forced smile, “I’ve got my priorities straight for when we get back. Hot shower first, then curling up with an electric blanket and a monster bowl of microwave popcorn.”

Cal chuckles, but continues walking, his gaze fixed on the path ahead.

As we continue our journey home, hope and fear tug at my heart. We’ve fought too

hard and risked too much to let uncertainty sabotage what we have. Surely, whatever hurdles lie ahead, we can take them on together.

When we reach the last cottage on the cove, Cal turns to me, his soothing voice cutting through my thoughts.

“Amelia,” he says softly but sincerely, “we’ve been through so much already, and there’s still so much left to figure out...”

I stop in the front garden and give Cal an incredulous look. “Figure out?” I echo, furrowing my brow. “Did you forget about how we just messed with time itself? Outsmarted some pretty ticked-off Scotsmen and came back in one piece!”

“Sounds like a bestseller to me,” he chuckles, the sound bouncing off the Firth behind us. “But ye should probably get some shut-eye before ye start penning our tale.”

“Don’t you want to come inside?”

His gaze lingers, his eyes a complete mystery in the low light before he finally tears them away.

“I gotta... I need to mull it over,” he murmurs. His sudden silence is as jarring as an icy gust off the loch. I swallow hard and blink back tears as I try to decipher the thoughts hidden behind his expression.

“Mills... ye’re a bestselling author; ye’ve got a whole life back in Toronto,” he shatters the quiet unexpectedly, his fingers ruffling through his tousled hair. His tone is gentle, but resolute.

“I’m just a farmer who’s had a glimpse of simpler times. Maybe I’m meant to... maybe we’re meant to...” His voice dwindles into an indistinct murmur.

“We should catch some z’s,” he says firmly after another pause. “There’s... a lot on our plates.” His cryptic hint leaves me utterly baffled.

I nod in agreement, squashing down the deep disappointment that bubbles within me.

“Right then... see you at sunrise?” I ask softly.

His quirky grin is there, but his eyes hold a shadow of something elusive.

“Aye, see you at first light. Sweet dreams, Mills.” With that, he spins around and disappears into the night, leaving me standing here, my mind whirring with uncertainty.

Did I misinterpret our connection? Was it only an illusion crafted by enchantment and adrenaline?

As I nudge open the cottage door, I’m hit with the comforting scent of age-old books and salty sea air. But just as I’m about to step inside, something grabs my attention. The weathered Rosewood Cottage sign hanging by the door now reads Campbell Cottage.

My brows knit together in confusion. Did I wander into the wrong cottage? But no, there it is—One Rosewood Lane—engraved into the stone beside the entrance.

“That’s strange,” I mutter. “Maybe while we were off traipsing through time and space, the owner decided to spruce up the place?”

I set down my combat boots, reflecting on how they’ve carried me through centuries and across Scotland’s rugged terrain. Tip-toeing across squeaky wooden floors and upstairs to my bedroom, I head for the antique roll-top desk nestled beneath the window, overlooking the sea. Bathed in moonlight, a sudden wave of inspiration

crashes over me. I need to write everything down, and capture all the magic and danger, before it evaporates like a morning mist.

I rummage out my laptop from deep within my suitcase, its silver exterior gleaming under lunar light. It's quite a jolt when I plug it in and see 11 pm and the date displayed on-screen—it's the very same night of our Loch Ness picnic!

Damn. That feels like eons ago, yet there it is—less than an hour has passed since we were sucked into that whirlpool, lived another life in 1645, and were spat back out again!

And now it's crunch time. I've got one day before I'm supposed to board a plane back to Canada. One day to figure out the what-comes-next part of this twisted fairytale.

Cal and I are back on the night we left, in our own time, but it feels like we're still spinning, like we just stepped off a dizzying carnival ride.

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Sitting at the antique desk, I gaze out at the sea, my fingers hovering over the laptop keyboard. I can't focus. I'm trying to make sense of the month... or centuries? Time travel is tricky like that. It's been an emotional tornado: fear, excitement, passion... and now, confusion.

Cal isn't acting like himself. He's normally Mr. Confidence with a side order of ego and a generous helping of self-deprecating humor for dessert. But the whole walk home, he was distant; his usual quick-witted banter replaced by an unsettling silence.

Is it the whiplash from our sudden return? Or does he regret what happened between us in 1645? Is this his way of putting up walls?

A part of me wants to march right up to his cottage and demand answers, ask him why he's turned into a stranger since we got back. But then there's another part that worries his answer might be something I'm not ready to hear.

As I stare at the mocking blankness on my screen, my mind keeps circling back to that moment when we took our leap into Loch Ness together, hand in hand, when our world did a complete 180. Did something change in this time? Has it changed Cal, too?

I shake off the doubts and start hammering away at the keyboard, spilling all my thoughts, fears, and questions into a document that probably won't see the light of day.

But as words fill up the screen, it hits me. It's not just about Cal acting differently; it's also about me.

The woman who first set foot on Scottish soil isn't the same one typing out her story now. I've changed drastically. I've tasted love, formed friendships, and been brave in ways I never thought possible.

But now, back in my own time, with my flight home looming like an executioner's axe... I'm at a loss about what to do next. Is there a future for us? Or did we leave our shot at happiness back in 1645?

24 hours. That's all the time I have left to figure it out.

Chapter Thirty

Jolted awake, I'm unceremoniously ripped from the comforting arms of slumber. Waking up at Rosewood Cottage has evolved into an Olympic sport, complete with twists and turns to avoid a head-on collision with low-hanging beams. But this morning feels different.

After locking horns with wild Scotsmen and taking a dip in a magical loch, I feel like a new woman—one who can remember to duck under an attic bedroom ceiling.

“Score one for Mills,” I whisper to the barely lit room, my lips curling into a smirk as I stare at the ceiling.

The familiar scent of sea salt intertwined with aged timber fills my nose. I take another moment to appreciate the cottage's quaint charm—its blue floral wallpaper, the seashells, and the sand-dollar collection displayed on floating shelves. A solitary ray of afternoon sunlight sneaks through lace curtains, casting playful shadows over my favorite pair of beat-up sneakers at the foot of the bed.

Reality seeps back in slowly but surely, cold and unwelcome like water invading a leaky boot. A pang of longing hits me hard—for tartan kilts and morning porridge,

for Cal and his ancestors' Scottish accents echoing off ancient stone walls. Yet here I am, nestled in the last cottage on Moray Firth's tranquil cove, all by myself.

Swinging my legs out from under the covers, I stand up and catch sight of my reflection in an antique mirror.

"Holy moly," I mutter under my breath as I squint at the sleep-deprived monster staring back at me. "I look like I've been through four centuries."

My usually vibrant green-gold eyes look like they've gone ten rounds with Father Time himself.

"Get a grip, Mills," I tell my reflection. "You've survived the shark-infested waters of online dating, weathered your parents' marital hurricane, and time-traveled to and from 1645 without GPS. You can totally handle a bit of post-time travel jet lag."

My eyes flick to the clock on my bedside table. 3:15 pm? I've slept like a log—or rather, like a Scotsman after a victorious battle and a hefty swig of whisky. But if it's late afternoon already, why hasn't Cal shown up yet?

I shuffle towards the window to look out at the Firth, tripping over last night's discarded breeches. The sunlight outside promises to be the ultimate pick-me-up. I'm stronger now; Cal's love and a dash of adventure have seen to that. A little romantic uncertainty isn't going to break me.

"Sunshine is the answer," I proclaim to the sea shore, my hand splayed against the cool window glass. It's either this or surrender to the lure of bed, and Amelia Sutherland doesn't wave her white flag so quickly.

"Even if Cal has become as elusive as Nessie," I mutter, half-hoping the legendary loch magic might sprinkle some clarity my way—or at least prevent me from nose-

diving into my coffee.

Resting my forehead against the windowpane, I let the sun's warmth seep into me, its rays promising a salve for my chaotic thoughts. Outside, it's like someone hit pause on life—only the trees sway rhythmically in sync with the breeze, seemingly performing for the waves that brush against the shoreline with each rhythmic lap.

“Maybe tree-whispering should be my next career move,” I muse aloud, “Seems less heart-wrenching than trying to understand men.”

My gaze follows a pair of robins darting around in the greenery. The tranquility of it all makes it hard to believe anything could be wrong. But then again, it's equally challenging picturing Cal not bursting through that door any second with his trademark lopsided grin and a ‘wee story’ about his latest highland cow friend.

A pang shoots through my chest at the thought. His presence has become as predictable as a sunrise, woven into every part of my day-to-day life. Yet today? Today feels hollow without him.

“Where are you hiding, Cal?” I whisper to myself before quickly erasing the heart I drew on the foggy glass.

“Pull yourself together,” I think, tugging on a t-shirt and my go-to dark jeans. “You’ve navigated rougher waters than an MIA boyfriend... Wait, he is still my boyfriend, right?”

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Of course, he is. Any other thought is ludicrous, considering our unbelievable shared adventures. But despite trying to reassure myself and stealing glances at my silent phone every five minutes, Cal's silence feels like a fog rolling in from Loch Ness—chilling and impenetrable.

“He could've at least texted. Or sent a carrier pigeon,” I grumble while tapping the kitchen window. My attempt at humor dwindles with each passing moment. The lack of scones or flowers is understandable; he can only spoil me for so long, but his absence? That's a puzzle that even my caffeine-starved brain can't crack.

I've packed my laptop, purse, and clothes in my suitcase. I need to be at the airport in five short hours from now, but Cal and I have so much to discuss first, and he hasn't answered one text. I never thought I'd be leaving like this!

My heart runs a marathon in my chest as I pace around the cottage, each loop making the place feel smaller. “Maybe he's finally figured out that dating a girl who uses humor and sarcasm as her shield isn't so much charming as it is... an emotional minefield?” I cringe at my own words, self-deprecation tiptoeing dangerously close to self-pity.

I make a beeline for the front door mat and scoop up my boots.

“Enough moping.” I sigh, sliding them onto my feet and striding back down the hall to gather my stuff for today's adventure. Each click-clack of my boot heels against the cottage floor echoes like a heartbeat, matching my resolve.

I shrug into my jean jacket, its familiar weight settling over me like armor. One last

look at myself in the hallway mirror reveals fear lurking behind my eyes, but also strength.

“Seize the day,” I whisper, “Go get your love story.”

With that mantra in my mind, I close the cottage door, leave the key under the potted plant as instructed, and step onto the lane that borders the sea.

Trudging along Rosewood Lane with my suitcasewheels squealing behind me, I’m having horrible flashbacks to my first day in Inverness, complete with rain drizzle and the dark cloud of worry hanging over me.

“Cal?” I call out, scanning the horizon for a glimpse of his tousled hair or maybe even just a hint of sunlight bouncing off his broad shoulders. But all I get is silence and the echo of my footsteps bouncing back at me, a cruel reminder that Cal is nowhere in sight.

And then there it is—where Number Three Rosewood Lane should be—but instead of Cal’s charmingly rustic cottage standing proudly as an ode to Scottish heritage, there’s this jarring modern beast made of glass and steel. A bright “Learn to Sail” sign flaps in the breeze like a victory flag.

“Wait, what? Modern architecture here?” I scoff into the wind, shaking my head in disbelief. “What’s next? A Starbucks in his parents’ stables?”

The thrum of bodies around this unfamiliar structure is a sensory assault. Their garish sailing attire clashes with the subdued hues of heather and gorse blanketing the landscape. It’s like someone’s upended a pack of neon markers onto one of those brooding Scottish postcards I’d mailed to Lila when I first got here.

“Excuse me,” I pipe up, snagging the elbow of a woman whose outfit screams

maritime savvy. “I’m trying to find Cal MacDowell. He’s the owner here, isn’t he?”

She swivels towards me, her face shifting into an expression that’s half confusion, half annoyance. “MacDowell? Are ye pullin’ my leg?” Her eyes widen as they dart from my disheveled state to where Cal’s cottage used to stand behind me.

“No joke,” I reply, feeling my arch-support problem and the ridiculousness of this situation bear down on me. “He has... or had... a cottage right here.”

“Sweetheart,” she drawls, gracing me with a condescending smile that makes me itch for a gangplank to walk off. “The only thing Cal MacDowell ever constructed here were tall tales and fish stories.”

With an offhand pat on my shoulder, she flits away, leaving me standing in the shadow of bafflement with thoughts spinning faster than a Ceilidh dance-off.

Something doesn’t add up here, and it isn’t just this architectural oddity in front of me.

My feet freeze on the cobblestone path, my mind a tornado of confusion.

Seriously, what the hell is happening here? Did I smack my noggin once again on my cottage’s angled ceiling? Or... could it be something entirely different and infinitely more bizarre? Does it have to do with the Loch Ness Portal? Have I somehow stumbled into an alternate reality courtesy of some magical Scottish legend?

“Fantastic,” I mutter, catching my disheveled reflection in a passing car’s window. “Not only am I potentially back on the market again, but I’ve also managed to mess up the space-time continuum. Classic Mills—can’t even time travel without causing a cosmic kerfuffle!”

But then, a chilling thought strikes me: If Rosewood Cottage has a new name, and Cal's cottage has vanished... what else might have changed?

A sudden pang of worry gnaws at my insides. I hope he's alright, and the time shift has only changed this street.

As each second slips away, the tangle of bewilderment only grows tighter. I need clarity. And there's one place left where I might find it.

"Don't let me down now, Topsy Trow," I whisper under my breath as I drag myself and my suitcase to Cal's brother's pub. It's a cherished gathering spot for locals; surely it would remain untouched by time?

Chapter Thirty-One

Stepping into The Topsy Trow, the off-kilter vibe hits me like a punch in the gut. The delightful sign outside has vanished, replaced by an over-the-top neon number above the bar that screams Campbell's Cavern. It bathes the worn leather furniture and peeling black and gold-leaf wallpaper in an otherworldly glow.

"Excuse me," I say to a guy nursing what looks like his fifth pint of something dark and ominous. "I'm looking for Cameron MacDowell. Is he here?"

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“MacDowell?” He snorts, shooting me a look that’s equal parts pity and amusement. “You’re about three hundred years too late for that, lassie. Wolf Campbell is the one you want—over there behind the bar.”

I try not to gasp as my gaze lands on a towering figure with eyes colder than a rainy afternoon in Inverness. Definitely a Campbell through and through.

“Thanks,” I mumble, quickly re-lacing my left boot before approaching this Wolf character—because if there’s one thing I’ve learned so far, it’s that properly laced boots can make all the difference when dealing with a Campbell.

“Hi,” I start, striving for calm in my voice. “I was hoping to speak with Cam MacDowell...”

Wolf cuts me off mid-sentence, his tone oozing disdain. “No MacDowells here, lassie. This town is Campbell territory, and this joint’s mine.”

Territory? My chest tightens at the thought of this warped reality Cal and I have stumbled into.

“So... nice place you’ve got here,” I venture casually, leaning against the bar. “How’d you come to own Campbell’s Cavern?”

Wolf barely looks up from his cleaning, his voice gruff. “Been in my family for centuries.”

“Centuries?” I echo, struggling to keep my shock under wraps. “That’s... impressive.”

My mind races with the implications.

Something went horribly awry when Cal and I jumped into the Loch Ness Portal.

“Yeah,” Wolf replies curtly, clearly uninterested in further chit-chat.

“I bet it’s fascinating, running a place with so much history,” I press on, undeterred.

“Stories,” he snorts dismissively, finally meeting my gaze with a raised eyebrow.

“Who needs stories? Ye outsiders are all the same...”

I defend myself as best as I can while my thoughts twist like a cyclone—what happened to Aven Valley? And more importantly, how can Cal and I fix it?

“If you ever fancy swapping tales,” I offer lightly despite the dread coiling inside me.

He declines politely but firmly. Turning away from the bar, I scan the room for any hint that could help me decode this perplexing new world.

“This place reminds me of a pair of well-loved sneakers,” I call out, my voice a bit too bright. “They’ve seen better days, sure, and they might even be a bit funky. But there’s something about them that keeps pulling you back.”

Wolf’s eyes narrow, his jaw tightening at my metaphor. A twinge of regret pricks me. That was probably not the best way to lighten the mood.

“Who are ye calling smelly?” His voice is chilly, suspicion heavy in each word. “Are ye one of those MacDowells? Always poking around where ye shouldn’t!”

I blink, taken aback by his sudden hostility. “MacDowell? No... I’m just visiting. Looking for Cameron and Callum, actually, but it seems I’ve got the wrong address.”

“Clearly,” Wolf mutters with a derisive snort. “The MacDowells’ land has been long gone. And good riddance.”

I swallow hard against the unease bubbling up inside me. “Right,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Thanks for your... hospitality.”

As I turn from the bar, my mind races with worry and confusion. What happened to Aven Valley? Why does this feud between Campbells and MacDowells seem so much more intense than before?

He calls after me just as I’m about to leave, curiosity finally winning over his frosty demeanor. “What’s yer name?”

“Amelia Sutherland,” I reply after a moment’s hesitation.

His eyebrows furrow in thought but he shakes his head dismissively after a beat or two. “Never heard of ya’. Stay outta trouble though; we don’t need any more drama here.”

I force a weak smile as I step away from him. “Trust me, I’m not here to cause any trouble. I just need to find my friends and go home.”

He snorts in response, turning back to his glass polishing. “Good luck with that.”

My thoughts are a tangled mess of doubt and fear as I distance myself from the bar. I need to find Cal—God, I hope he’s safe—and figure out how we can fix whatever damage we’ve done by traveling through the Portal. But first, I have to understand this unfamiliar Aven Valley better, which means it’s time for Detective Amelia Sutherland.

Feeling dizzy and overwhelmed, I slide into a corner table and order a plate of fries;

comfort food might help me focus better. As I munch on a fry, my mind drifts back to Rosewood Cottage and its peaceful seaside cove that used to be my sanctuary from reality. Now, though, reality has slammed into me like a tidal wave, and all I can do is try not to drown.

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“At least you’re still here,” I mumble down at my combat boots. They feel like the only link left to who I was before everything went haywire.

“Did ye say something?” An old man’s gruff voice breaks through my thoughts.

I flush with embarrassment as he eyes me curiously. “No... Just talking to myself,” I admit sheepishly before adding under my breath, “It’s been one hell of a day.”

He grunts in agreement but doesn’t seem interested in continuing the conversation.

“Does it always feel like a powder keg ready to blow around here?” I toss out, aiming for nonchalance. “You know, with the whole Campbell versus MacDowell saga?”

The man huffs out a laugh, sizing me up with a quick sidelong glance.

“Ye’re definitely not local,” he observes without any trace of malice. “But here’s a tip for ye, lass: steer clear of the hometown politics. It’s one gnarly mess, and those who get entangled rarely emerge unscathed.”

As I finish my fries in the dimly lit tavern, I try to figure out where to go next. My eyes wander down to Wolf’s feet, where he sports flashy neon green sneakers that scream high-end, usually spotted on athletic superstars. Quite the contradiction to his otherwise rugged persona.

What could this mean? Honestly, who freakin’ knows? My Shoe Theory is flawed, I’ve lost Cal, and I feel like I’ve tumbled headfirst into Stranger Things’ Upside Down.

I tune into the conversation at the next table. Two women there paint a somber image of Aven Valley that's as foreign to me as Mars.

"It's just unbelievable," whispers one woman, her voice trembling like an autumn leaf clinging to its branch. She stares into her pint as if searching for answers in its amber depths. "Another heartless concrete beast has sprouted up on what was once MacDowell land."

Her friend, a woman whose face tells tales of years spent under the Highland sun, nods gravely. "Mayor Zeke Campbell couldn't care less about us or our history," she grumbles with an edge sharp enough to cut glass. She lowers her voice conspiratorially, "Just like his brother Wolf over there."

"My great-granny used to say how different things were when she was young," murmurs the first woman. "The place had... life."

The second woman nods, her gaze wandering offsomewhere far away. "I recently found an old history book with photos of their annual village fair," she shares, frowning at some spectral injustice. "Seemed like everyone was having a blast."

"True," echoes the first woman, her voice heavy with longing and loss. "But those days are long gone now... I dinnae think they're comin' back."

Their words hang between us like a thick fog over the Firth. This new Aven Valley is not my cup of tea.

The women's bubble of nostalgia is abruptly popped by the entrance of Wolf Campbell, pulling up a chair, uninvited, at their table. His broad frame, flattened nose, and venomous stare scream bad news. He exudes an air of entitlement that makes my skin crawl, but I can't tear my eyes away from the drama unfolding in front of me.

“Well, ladies,” Wolf drawls, a smug grin plastered across his face like he’s won the lottery. “I couldn’t help but overhear yer little trip down memory lane.”

The women stiffen like they’ve been flash-frozen, their expressions turning as icy as the wind howling outside. “Mr. Campbell,” responds the first woman, her voice tight with barely restrained fury.

Wolf chuckles in response to their palpable hostility. “Now, now...what Zeke’s done here is not all doom and gloom,” he drawls dismissively, reclining in his chair with an air of smug indifference. “Progress is necessary for any town to survive.” His words are met by a silence so profound it practically ricochets off the walls.

My fists ball under the table. I’m seething. This man and his brother are ripping apart Aven Valley’s heritage brick by brick and they dare to label it progress?

Wolf swivels towards me, a devilish glint in his eyes as if he senses my inner turmoil. Maybe he’s just relishing his moment in the spotlight. He winks conspiratorially—I nearly choke on my drink.

“Oh dear,” Wolf coos mockingly while patting his chest with faux concern. “Did I startle ye?”

I shoot him a glare through tear-filled eyes but bite back any retort—hurling my drink at him would probably be too satisfying for him.

“I’m just sayin’...” Wolf continues unabashedly ignoring my silent protest and pivoting back towards the women at his table. “We can either embrace change or be left behind.”

His words reverberate around the hushed pub like a death knell tolling for everything this town once embodied. Community spirit and respect for history are being shoved

aside by greed and apathy.

A surge of melancholy sweeps over me. It's not just about the physical transformation of this quaint little town anymore; it's about the people here losing their identity, their sense of belonging.

The two women won't look at Wolf. They stareblankly at their untouched drinks, their faces etched with despair that mirrors my own feelings.

It sounds like Gregor Campbell and his clan didn't just take over Aven Valley, they've morphed it into something alien and unrecognizable. My heart plummets. This isn't just about Cal and me anymore. The whole town is under siege.

Stepping back onto the cobblestone streets, the setting sun casts long shadows, painting a picture of foreboding. This isn't my Aven Valley anymore, and I'm at a loss to navigate its treacherous terrain.

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I have to find Cal, pronto. We need to untangle this mess, or we'll be stuck in this warped rendition of his hometown forever.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Regret gnaws at me as I huff and puff my way up the relentless slope towards MacDowell Farm, my ankles protesting loudly and my stomach staging a mutiny for Fiona's Scotch Pies instead of the stale fries from Campbell's Cavern.

The wind decides to have a dance party with my chocolate brown hair, whipping it into a wild frenzy across my face. Each uphill step with my luggage trailing behind me sparks a mini-rebellion in my calves. At least I'm smart enough to be in boots this time.

"Aven Valley seriously needs to invest in some escalators," I grumble.

As I conquer this Everest disguised as a hill, thoughts of Cal ambush me:

Will he be at the farm? Why didn't he text?

Despite our shared past, nerves nibble at me like a rebellious teen sneaking out for a late-night rendezvous.

As I crest the top of the hill, the postcard-perfect panorama of the highlands unfurls before me, neighboring hills undulating like emerald waves on an ocean of green. But it's Cal's solitary figure that steals my breath away.

His towering form demands attention against this backdrop, his muscular physique whispering tales of resilience. Still dressed in his favorite kilt, the fabric dances with the wind around him in dramatic swirls.

“Cal!” I call out. Just then, the sun decides to play peekaboo behind low-hanging clouds, throwing a blinding glare that forces me to squint and raise my hand as an impromptu visor.

“What are you doing here all alone?”

He doesn't answer, his eyes locked onto something in the distance.

Holy crap, are those... sleek black condos?

Not just a few. Hundreds of them! I scrunch my nose at the sight of these monstrous, modern black and glass monstrosities, rudely poking out from the serene Scottish hillside like an unwelcome zit on a prom queen's face.

They're all sharp angles and severe designs, brutally at odds with the gentle, rolling green landscape. The oversized glass windows mirror back the somber Scottish skies while the slick steel balconies seem absolutely alien among the few remaining thatched-roof cottages. Each building screams 'disturbance' in this once-timeless panorama. They're complete eyesores, a cold, impersonal smudge on the historical and natural beauty that has stolen my heart.

Where's MacDowell Farm?

It should be right there, snuggled between these hills and Moray Firth, like a cozy hug from Mother Nature herself. A tide of confusion sweeps over me, stirring up an impulsive urge to yank off my boots and chuck them at the cosmos for playing mind games with us.

Cal stands alone, a solitary figure against the backdrop of what used to be his lively family farm. Now? Just an empty expanse earmarked with a sign announcing yet another batch of impersonal condos. The hum of distant machinery punctures our silence, a harsh reminder of the inevitable transformation.

“Cal?” I venture, my voice teetering on the precipice of uncertainty. “What happened? Where’s your farm?”

He pivots toward me, his eyes shimmering with tears he’s fighting to hold back. The usual twinkle in those sapphire pools is replaced by a depth of sorrow that clenches my heart. I want to reach out and soothe him, but something about this moment roots me to the spot.

“It’s all gone, Mills,” he says, his words barely more than a breathy whisper.

“The farm. Our legacy. Everything we worked for.” He inhales shakily as if bracing himself for what comes next.

“My parents live in Edinburgh, for godsakes, and I found Cameron in some dinky tourist office, just a shadow of his former self. It shattered me seeing him like that...so adrift from who we are.”

As his revelation sinks in, I feel like I’ve been sucker-punched. The MacDowells have moved away? They’ve lost their land, and Cam’s lost his pub? The unfairness of it all has my blood boiling, but I ignore it, focusing instead on the man crumbling before me.

His gaze drifts back to the barren land stretching out behind him as regret laces his words. “I wish I hadn’t crossed Gregor back in 1645... It cost us everything.” A lone tear breaks free and carves its way down his chiseled cheek. “I should’ve known better... should’ve found another solution. This can never be set right.”

I can almost feel the weight he's bearing on those muscular shoulders. All I want is to lighten his load, to reassure him that together we can fix things. But as I part my lips to speak, the words shrivel up and die, uncertainty muddying my thoughts.

Could he be right? Is there no do-over, no magic eraser for past screw-ups? I shake off the creeping doubts. We've come too far and battled too much to throw in the towel now.

I inch closer to Cal, my hand hovering before it gently lands on his arm. His skin is warm under my touch. "We'll work this out," I assure him, my voice solid though my nerves are a complete mess. "There has to be a way to salvage your family's heritage, to carve out a new future."

Our eyes lock and for an instant, hope sparks in his gaze. But it dies as quickly as it flares up, replaced by that all-too-familiar stubborn tilt of his jaw. He pulls away from me, his eyes turning steely with determination.

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“It’s over,” he grates out, each word heavy with emotion. “Nothing left worth saving.” He digs into his pocket and shoves a handful of bills into my palm; his fingers linger before he steps back.

“Just go catch your flight. No use stickin’ around here.”

I stare at the crumpled Scottish notes in my hand, his brush-off triggering a surge of hot anger within me. His readiness to surrender everything we’ve built together is just... infuriating! I chuck the cash back at him, the bills fluttering down like discarded dreams.

“I can’t believe you’re folding so easily,” I snap back, words rising like mercury in a thermometer. “After all we’ve been through? You’re really going to walk away? I’m sure we can reverse this! We can change things!”

In Cal’s silence and fixed gaze lies an ephemeral shadow of disquiet. I see layers of doubt lurking beneath.

Is he holding back just because his family’s legacy is at stake? Or does it run deeper, a fear that he might not be able to shield me from the dangers of 1645?

The sky above us has blackened entirely, and rain starts to fall, its cold droplets mixing with the hot tears on my cheeks. I blink them away fiercely—I won’t let him see how much his rejection stings. The crumpled Scottish pounds strewn on the muddy ground between us twirl in the wind before settling down again.

Cal stoops to pick up a twenty-pound note and thrusts it into my hand. “Take it,” he

says gruffly.

“Just catch a bus and go home.”

I shove the crumpled note into my pocket. “I don’t want your cash,” I holler, my voice shaking. I want you, you stubborn, maddening Scotsman! I want a future with you. How can you just give up on us?”

Cal winces like he’s been physically hit, his eyes glistening with tears he won’t let fall.

“Mills... please,” he pleads so softly that it’s almost drowned by the wind. “Dinnae make this more difficult than it already is. I have nothing to offer ye now. I am nothing now. Can’t ye see that?”

“No!”

My head shakes so vehemently that it’s a wonder it doesn’t fly off my shoulders.

“You’re not nothing, Cal! You’re shocked and frightened, but we can fix this together. We can salvage your family’s legacy and carve out a life here! Just don’t push me away now... not after everything we’ve weathered.”

“What do ye want from me?” His voice is an echo of desperation.

“I want you to shake off this self-pity party and fight for something that means something to you!”

His eyes flash with wounded pride and indignation. “You think I’m no’ fighting? This is me fighting—grapplin’ with reality—that sometimes what fate hands ye isn’t up for negotiation.”

“That’s Highland cow bull crap!”

I’m half-laughing at my own colorful language choice. “We’ve crossed time itself together, Cal! After everything we’ve survived, are you seriously telling me it’s too late to do anything about this now? That we should just give up?”

“Aye,” Cal replies flatly, his tone as cold as a Scottish winter. “Maybe we should before one of us gets hurt again.”

His words slice through me. This is it, I realize with an icy dread coiling in my stomach. This is how our story concludes; not with a fairytale ending but with a heart-twisting farewell under the drizzle.

I square my shoulders, letting the anger steady me. "You know what, Cal? If you're determined to stay miserable, then that's on you. But I won't beg for a space in your life when you're too scared to fight for it."

I take a deep breath, crossing my arms to hold myself together. My voice is firm, even though my heart's breaking. "Love should push us forward, not hold us back."

With those words, I turn away, head held high despite the tears brimming my eyes. Each step I take feels like a dagger twisting in my chest and a declaration of my pride—a refusal to cling when he's already let go. As I walk, the wind tangles my hair. I wish he'd find the courage to love without fear.

My legs barely support me as I trudge down towards the bus stop at the village's edge, but I force myself to keep moving, to put one foot in front of the other.

As I lift my suitcase onto the bus back to Inverness, the rain starts pouring down; the droplets drumming against the windows in a sad symphony.

Hello again, Heartbreak. Goddammit! Is lasting love just a pipe dream for me?

The bus roars to life beneath me, pulling me away from Aven Valley; away from Cal. As the village recedes in the rearview mirror, I let myself cry, mourning a love found in the foggy corridors of time.

I wipe away tears as I steal a final glance at Cal's formidable silhouette up on the hillside. As the bus lurches forward, I sink into a seat covered in rough tweed, feeling hollow and spent.

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The notion of destiny and an enduring love that outlives time suddenly leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Outside the window, rain blurs the landscape into watercolor smudges. Every passing mile brings me nearer to Inverness and, subsequently, closer to my flight back to Toronto. But as thoughts of home rise up within me, they're shadowed by an unexpected twinge of... what exactly?

Doubt? Yearning?

I love it here. It's always raining, and they've got strange traditions involving sheep stomachs, but it feels like where I belong.

Still, building a life in Aven Valley would mean missing Lila and Chanandler Bong—my bestie, and my precious fur baby. Despite these ties tugging at my heartstrings, though, Toronto feels more like a faded snapshot than somewhere I belong.

A peculiar sensation bubbles up inside—homesickness not for Toronto but for Moray Firth's rugged hillsides, Rosewood Cottage's endearing charm... and Callum MacDowell.

The truth slams into me harder than any Scottish gale: Home doesn't feel like home anymore without him in it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The rain has finally given us a break, but its oppressive presence lingers, seeping into my bones like some Highland ghost. Shoulders hunched against the cold, I shuffle off

the bus and head toward the taxi stand.

Were the last few weeks with Cal even real? Logic screams no, but my heart's not buying it. I can still feel the warmth of his rough hands, the intensity in those captivating eyes, and the taste of whisky and want on his lips.

God, I've fallen head over heels like a total nincompoop.

A car horn snaps me out of my self-pity party. I whirl around to see a black taxi approaching the curb beside me. The window rolls down, revealing a familiar face framed by a beard.

“In need of a ride, miss?” Hamish asks with a beaming smile. “Ye seem like you could do with one.”

As I look into his warm gaze, a strange mix of laughter and tears escapes me—part emotional wreckage, part relief.

“Hamish! You’re exactly what I needed right now!” I shout, realizing he has no clue who I am, but not caring in this beautiful private reunion in my mind.

“Always at yer service, ferrying visitors and locals alike,” he says with a wink. “Climb in. This old cabbie’s got an ear if ye need it.”

I toss my suitcase in his trunk, but as I start to slide into the back seat, I spot two more familiar faces grinning at me.

“Moira! Mac!” My heart lifts at the sight of my friends from the Topsy Trow, easing some of the tension in my shoulders.

“What brings you to town?”

They share a look before turning back to me, bemusement dancing in their eyes.

“Right. You don’t know me because we met at the Trow, which is not currently... the Trow!” I hiccup on a sob that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. Mac just shrugs while Moira reaches out and gives my hand a comforting squeeze.

“Dinnae sweat it, love,” she soothes me. “We’re pals now, yeah?” Her warmth is a constant, even in this alternate reality. It’s like a comforting cup of hot cocoa on a snowy day—always there when you need it.

I sigh as I take in the backseat of Hamish’s cab, already bursting at the seams with passengers. “Your taxi looks like it’s about to pop,” I groan, mentally running through the nightmare that is public transportation.

Hamish waves away my worries. “No bother at all.” He gives me a grin that could win over the grumpiest of Scots, then turns to Mac and Moira, “Fancy taking the scenic route?”

They bob their heads eagerly and Moira adds her two cents, “Aye, it’s a bonny day for a jaunt through the countryside.”

“And there ye have it!” Hamish pats the passenger seat next to him. I slump into the seat, shoulders easing, but my heart still missing Cal.

“So,” Hamish kicks off once we hit the road again, “where are we headed? And why do ye look like ye’ve seen a ghost?”

I stall for time, unsure of where to start or even where I should go. I’ve got this flight looming over me that I’m dreading more than a root canal, and home feels less like home now—alternate universe or not. My world is spinning.

But then Moira pipes up from behind us. “Come on love, spill it,” her voice floats from behind, tender and sympathetic, and my walls crumble.

I let them in—I open my heart and spill it all to them—every wild detail. How I stumbled into Cal's life by trying to play the hero on the Firth, only to end up needing rescuing myself. Our time-bending escapades through clan warfare, dodging swords, and sharing stolen kisses, all while facing the one-bed dilemma that brought us closer. And then the jarring return to this day, where everything feels upside down and uncertain. The words tumble out of me like they've been waiting for this moment, and Hamish listens attentively as he steers us down the road.

As expected, Mac and Moira don't bat an eyelid at the Loch Ness Portal legend. But what floors me is Hamish's reaction—or rather his non-reaction. He soaks it all in with wide-eyed interest as I lay bare our adventure.

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I hardly notice his occasional nods or Mac and Moira's murmurs of understanding; I'm so wrapped up in the highs and lows of our time-traveling escapades. Just as I reach the part where Cal and I argue, he shifts in his seat, adjusting his T-shirt. I glimpse its whimsical logo: "Cyborgs Ate My Shortbread!"

That little absurdity catches me off guard. Knowing he won't dismiss my story as a whimsical fantasy puts me at ease. The group's genuine interest makes this wild ride feel a bit more grounded.

When I finally fall silent, Hamish lets out a low whistle.

"That's quite an adventure ye've had there," he says thoughtfully.

"I don't know what to do next," I confess. "Cal's become my... my person! But now, everything's one big mess."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Hamish ponders everything I've said for a moment before responding to me in a gentle yet firm voice.

"If he means that much to ye, go to battle for him, lassie."

Moira pipes up from the backseat, adding her two cents:

"Love is like haggis—it may look messy, but it's worth digging in!"

I laugh from deep in my belly for the first time in a day, but all of their words make sense. They're right. In all my confusion and anger, I lost sight of what truly matters.

With newfound resolve, I lean forward. "Hamish, take me to Loch Ness. I have a hunch that's where Cal is, and I need to tell him I'm not giving up on us."

Hamish's eyes twinkle. "That's the spirit! To Loch Ness, we go then!"

Mac and Moira clap and cheer from the backseat as Hamish puts the pedal to the metal. As we speed through Inverness like a Scottish cabbie's version of *The Fast and Furious*, my mind races with thoughts of how to convince Cal that together, we can overcome any obstacle, no matter how absurd or time-bending it might be.

The cityscape is a smear of colors in my peripheral vision, soon replaced by rolling hills and sparkling rivers. With each passing mile, I can feel my resolve hardening.

Fear?

Doubt?

No room for those party poopers here. I'm ready to kick some Scottish butt for us and the chance to set things right—because Aven Valley deserves its fairytale ending just as much as we do.

When Loch Ness comes into view, its murky waters glinting under the barely-waning moonlight like liquid silver, I can feel my pulse pounding in my throat. Somewhere along that vast shoreline, I have a feeling Cal's waiting.

"Could you hold my suitcase for me, Hamish?" I ask quietly, thinking to myself, "Possibly for about four hundred years?"

“Aye lass, dinnae sweat it.”

“Thank you,” I manage to choke out through the lump in my throat. “All of you... for everything.”

Hamish tips his cap with a smile that radiates warmth and understanding. “Go get him,” he says simply. “Love’s worth the risk.”

“Lace up those boots tight, lassie!” Mac bellows with enough force to shake the cliffs, while Moira chimes in with a grin:

“Ye’ve got this, girl! Go get your hunky Highlander!”

Their words ricochet in my head as I burst from the taxi, optimism mixing with determination.

My boots kickup the sand as I stumble towards the edge of the loch, goosebumps prickling my skin in response to the cool night air.

There’s Cal, silhouetted against the moonlit water, looking like he’s bearing the weight of the world.

“Cal!” My voice slices through the stillness. He turns sharply, kilt billowing, eyes widening with surprise and something else—relief.

“Mills? What are ye doin’ here?”

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I close the distance between us, my heart racing as if trying to match the rhythm of his. “I couldn't just leave things hanging,” I confess, breathless. “Not without giving it a shot. Were you trying to go back?”

He shakes his head. “Never without ye,” he says softly, meaning a thousand things. “I thought ye'd be on yer flight by now. I just needed... to feel close to ye. But look,” he gestures towards the sky, “the full moon's fading. I'm not sure if it'll work now... or if we're even meant to return.”

I reach for his hands, warmth radiating from his skin like a homecoming I've longed for.

“We can't just quit, Cal. Not on us.”

He sighs, his eyes drifting back to the shimmering loch. “I know. I was scared. Terrified of losing everything—my family, my dreams. I thought pushin' ye away would protect ye from all the danger. Just being a stubborn eejit, thinking I could handle it alone.” He pauses, his thumb tracing gentle patterns across my palm.

“Dumbest thing I've done since I stuck my tongue to a teeter-totter back in primary school.”

A laugh bubbles out of me, light and free. “And I was awee daftieto walk away. I hate that I did.” I fall silent for a breath.

“But there's no way I'm not going back in time to fix things—with or without you.”

A glimmer of amusement and hope lights up his eyes. “Ye’re a stubborn one, aren’t ye?”

I close the gap between us. “And you love every bit of it.”

Laughter rumbles through his chest as he pulls me into a hug, the world around us falling away until there’s only the two of us. Our lips crash together, fueled by adrenaline and longing, sealing an unspoken vow in the moonlit air.

As we pull apart, the loch begins to shimmer as if responding to our presence. The air crackles with energy, raising the small hairs on my arms.

“Do you feel that?” I whisper, my breath turning ragged.

Cal nods, his grip on my hand tightening. “Blimey, it’s happening! Everythin’s going tits up again!” I can tell he’s trying to make me laugh so I won’t feel afraid.

The world around us blurs and pink, green and purple hues melt together like a watercolor painting left in the rain. The ground beneath our feet gives way, and suddenly, we’re falling, tumbling through a Northern Lights kaleidoscope.

I cling to Cal, not wanting to lose him again, as the vortex pulls us deeper, faster, hurtling us through the fabric of time.

Though I’ve done it before, the sensation feels new. It’s both thrilling and terrifying, like the first drop on a rollercoaster, only a thousand times more intense.

And then, as suddenly as it began, it’s over.

We land with a thud, the air knocked from our lungs. I blink, trying to orient myself in the noise and chaos. My eyes widen as I take in our surroundings, the reality

crashing down on me—we're in the middle of a battlefield.

The back of MacDowells' Inn and Tavern looms before us, its windows shattered, its walls scorched by fire. The sound of clashing swords and angry shouts fills the air as the townsfolk and Gregor's clan battle around us.

"We made it," I blurt, barely able to catch my breath. Heart pounding, I scan the field. Cal's jaw tightens as he points ahead of us.

"Look, there's Alistair and Fergus!"

With their swords gleaming in the dim light, the brothers stand shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield. The clash of metal rings out as they fight valiantly against the enemy forces. Without warning, an agonizing wail tears from Alistair's throat.

"Argh! The burn of it!"

A blade from an enemy sword has found its home in his leg, causing him to falter. Despite the fierce determination I see in our comrades' faces, it's crystal clear they're outmatched. They need reinforcements, and fast, if there's any chance of tipping the scales of this savage battle in our favor.

"Everything looks just like before... only worse!" I shout.

Cal's eyes are steeled with a resolve that sends a wave of warmth cascading through my entire body, igniting every nerve ending.

"Aye, seems we've got a fight on our hands."

His gaze sweeps across the battlefield, finally settling on a fallen soldier clad in the rival tartan. He bolts towards him, his muscular legs pounding against the ground.

With one swift motion, he yanks the sword from the lifeless man's grip. Its blade gleams ominously under the moonlight.

He whirls around to face me, eyes ablaze with trust and determination.

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“Without ye by my side, Mills, I’m just a man wrestling with ghosts. But I need ye whole—not shattered,” he says, his typically assertive voice wavering just a tad.

As he offers me the reclaimed weapon, our fingers brush against each other momentarily, sending electric sparks up my arm. Clutching onto the hilt with newfound resolve, I ready myself for whatever comes next.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The MacDowells’ cozy inn and tavern has been transformed overnight into a makeshift command center. Robust Scotsmen nonchalantly swing their swords like they’re flicking through their social media stories, their grumbles bouncing off the time-worn stone walls. Having taken on the role of a battlefield nurse, Fiona is patching up their wounds (a few of them accidentally self-inflicted) with a wonderful mix of sternness and humor.

The air is heavy with a smoky aroma that would be utterly romantic if it were billowing from a beachside bonfire. But when it’s spewing from hastily lit torches in what was once my favorite pub? Not quite as charming.

As I grip the sword Cal tossed my way earlier, the cool metal against my palm is like a shot of espresso, pumping pure adrenaline and courage into my system. This isn’t just a hunk of metal—it’s a tangible sign of Cal’s trust in me—his trust in us.

“Hey! Listen up!” I scramble on top of a stack of whisky barrels and holler over the din. “Our future depends on this fight! We have to unite to kick these Campbell invaders to the curb! Teamwork’s our secret weapon!”

My words slice through the noise. Our makeshift team—Fiona, her sister Elspeth and their badass girl gang in trousers and boots, Alistair and Fergus rocking clan kilts and brandishing shiny swords, even the stable boys armed with pitchforks—they all spin towards me with sparks of determination flaring in their eyes.

Well, what do you know? I've rallied them. Not too shabby for a 21st-century woman dumped into Early Modern mayhem, wearing combat boots and double-denim.

As we start arranging our troops into some semblance of strategic formation, Cal pops up beside me again, seemingly unfazed by the surrounding pandemonium. Alistair thrusts another sword into Cal's hand.

“Glad tae see ye haven't bolted,” he grunts in his thick brogue. “Thought ye might've legged it back through that portal last night, leaving us tae clean up yer mess.”

Cal lets out a belly laugh. “And miss out on all this excitement? Nah... beats another night binge-watching Netflix!”

Alistair shakes his head, looking utterly confused as he tousles his hair.

“Ye're a strange one, lad. But I'll admit, there's something about ye that's oddly endearing.”

Alistair slaps Cal on the back before we join Fergus and gather around the main table. Pouring over rudimentary maps and brainstorming tactics, it becomes clear that while our brave crew outside fends off the enemy forces, our role is to strategize from within to secure victory.

Hours slip away until dawn breaks; the morning's first rays illuminate our group and signal that it's time to move. Fueled by unity and the thrill of an impending battle, we're primed to confront whatever challenges the new day—and Gregor's

troops—may hurl at us.

As we step out of the tavern onto the battlefield, I glance at Cal. His strong profile and how he carries himself in the family kilt give me courage and send my heart racing.

Suddenly, Cal bellows a warning:

“On yer left!”

He lunges forward to intercept an attack aimed at me. Swiveling around with my sword held high, I’m instantly squaring off against one of Gregor’s strongest warriors. He towers over me like a menacing mountain; his eyes glint wickedly as he swings his sword.

“Witch!” he sneers.

I grip my weapon tighter, attempting my best “resting bitchface” glare.

“Well, well,” I retort with faux nonchalance while internally freaking out, “Looks like someone ditched Etiquette 101.”

His response is a snarl and a blade slicing through the air towards me. I parry just in time; the jolt travels up my arm like an electric shock. We’re locked in a deadly dance now: swords clashing together in an orchestral display of steel against steel. Sweat trickles down into my eyes, but there’s no chance I’m backing down.

“Ye fight well, fer a woman,” he grunts, his hot breath fanning my face.

Oh, it’s on now.

“And you don’t fight half bad... for a Neanderthal.”

A chuckle escapes me. Then I muster all my strength and give him a good shove. He stumbles back but recovers faster than I anticipated, his eyes narrowing into slits as he starts circling me like some big cat eyeing its dinner.

The battlefield around us is complete chaos. In the thick of the turmoil, I glimpse my allies. Their expressions, etched with firm determination, hold steady against an opposing force that appears ready to swallow us whole.

Fiona is in the thick of it, her sword flashing as she takes on three hulking brutes who look like they ate boulders for breakfast. But she’s not backing down. Her quick wit and nimble footwork are enough to keep them at bay.

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Then there's Alistair. His kilt and shirt—once pristine white—are now splattered with blood and dirt. But he's not fazed; instead, he rallies our forces with a voice that booms across the battlefield.

“Hold yer ground, lads! We're not lettin' these ruffians take what's ours!”

His words ignite a spark in our troops. The MacDowell clan roars in approval, their spirits lifted by Alistair's unwavering leadership.

Caught up in the spectacle, I let my guard drop for just a moment too long. My opponent seizes his chance and lunges at me; his blade grazes my arm before I can dodge out of the way.

I suck in a sharp breath at the sting of cold steel slicing through my skin. Warm blood begins to seep through my jean jacket sleeve, but there's no time to dwell on it now. Thankfully, it's only a surface wound. Can't stop now. This cave dweller is going down!

“Is that all you've got?” I taunt, my voice laced with bravado. “I've had paper cuts that hurt worse than that.”

The warrior's face contorts with rage, and he redoubles his efforts. Our swords keep colliding, the metallic ring echoing through the air as we both vie for control.

My muscles are screaming at me, crying out for a break, but I can't afford to give them one. Not now. A fierce determination, born from my love for these people I've come to care about so deeply, keeps me going.

In the end, it's not my sword that saves me. It's my right boot.

As the warrior lifts his blade for what could be a fatal blow, I kick out, catching him square in the chest. His eyes widen in surprise and he stumbles backward, his weapon clattering to the ground.

I seize the golden opportunity and press my sword against his throat.

“It's quitting time.”

My voice comes out surprisingly steady given how much adrenaline is pumping through me.

The warrior's gaze is intense as he glares at me. There's so much hatred there it's almost tangible, but his body betrays him. He's simply too tired to keep fighting.

Feeling a surge of emotions, I watch as he crumbles to the ground, his shoulders slumping in surrender. Relief and empathy wash over me, but there's no time to linger in my moment of victory.

With an immediate pivot on my heel, I dash off toward where my friends are still knee-deep in battle. I'm determined to help because, let's face it, we're stuck in this mess together until someone figures out how to create a time-travel app.

Honestly, though, who knew swinging a sword could give me a better workout than my spin class? Calorie burn for the win!

As the sun climbs high in the sky, casting long shadows across the battlefield, the momentum of the battle shifts in our favor. As the morning's high-energy chaos slips into a tense afternoon lull, Fergus's bagpipes wail through the air—his not-so-subtle way of spooking the Campbells—while swords clash in the distance.

When the sun starts to go down, painting the sky with streaks of orange and purple, a sense of uneasy calm settles over our side of the field. The air grows cooler, and the shadows lengthen, signaling the approach of night. As darkness wraps around us again, flickering torches illuminate our weary faces.

The moon hangs low in the sky, a ghostly presence barely piercing the blanket of stars. Its once-bright glow has dwindled to a whisper of light, casting a faint, almost ethereal shimmer over the battlefield.

So that's it. Cal and I can forget about a quick escape back to Wi-Fi and takeout food.

But hey, at least the MacDowells are starting to give the Campbell bullies a run for their money. Gregor's goons are pulling back, their numbers dwindling under our relentless attack.

TBH, it's not exactly a champagne-popping moment.

Wounded men are being hauled off, their faces twisted in pain. Bodies of those who didn't make it litter the ground, staring blankly at the sky.

But even in this nightmare, I see glimmers of hope. Fi is over by the tavern, playing nurse to the wounded with her healing touch. Alistair's clapping his men on their backs, his eyes gleaming with pride and gratitude.

My gaze skates across the battlefield—all clashing steel and gut-wrenching screams—until I spot Cal in all the pandemonium. He stands tall, a Highlander superhero, sword raised high as if challenging the Gods to a duel.

But then everything turns into slow motion, and time seems to freeze.

An enemy warrior who looks more like a grizzly bear than a man lunges at Cal with

lethal intent. His blade slices through the air towards his heart, and my breath catches in my throat.

The sword plunges into Cal's chest with an awful sound that makes my stomach churn. I feel like I'm being stabbed right along with him. He widens his eyes like he never saw this coming—like he never imagined he could be this vulnerable.

His knees buckle beneath him like they're made from origami instead of muscle, and he stumbles backward onto the blood-soaked earth below.

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His sword slips from his hand and hits the ground with an echoing thud that sends chills down my spine. He's among the fallen warriors now, just another casualty on this battlefield from hell. But he's not just another casualty— he's everything to me.

No!

This can't be happening! The sight of him lying there, so still and helpless, wrenches my heart with an almost physical pain.

A tidal wave of memories crashes over me: the awkward but hilarious first encounter when I showed up in my nightie at his capsized sailboat; the tour around his rustic farm and the village's medieval graveyard; those snug evenings by the fire, just us and the crackling logs. And those are our days in present-day Aven Valley.

I can still feel the warmth of his body curled around mine in our bed at the inn. I can almost hear his laughter echoing across our attic bedroom, filling it—and me—with a lightness that makes everything seem possible.

Cal isn't just some guy I've fallen for. He's become my teammate, always valuing my opinion and including me in every decision. His unwavering loyalty and respect for me as an equal have slowly mended my shattered trust, showing me love doesn't have to be a battlefield; it can be a harmonious dance.

Through Cal, I've uncovered parts of myself I didn't even know were there, and I'm finally starting to believe that lasting love can be more than just a beautiful dream. It can be my reality.

“Cal!”

I scream his name into the chilly night air, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. The world goes fuzzy around the edges as raw grief sweeps over me like a storm.

My Cal—my strong, brave Cal—is lying broken on the ground while life carries on like nothing’s wrong.

The sight shatters what’s left of my heart into a million shards.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“Cal!”

His name rips through the air again, my voice a desperate plea drowned out by the clashing swords around us. A symphony of nerves thrums wildly in the pit of my stomach as I sprint towards him, each beat echoing with the fear of losing him.

Just the thought of it feels like an icy dagger stabbing my soul—unthinkable after everything we’ve been through together.

As I close the gap between us, something catches my eye. A twitch of his arm?

Could he still be breathing? Is it possible?

In response to my silent prayer, Cal pops up like a jack-in-the-box on steroids.

Oh, that sneaky Scot! Seeing him sitting up sends my pulse skyrocketing into overdrive. He’s been playing dead the whole time, fooling our rivals into thinking they’ve got him beat.

He swivels to face me, and that's when I see it: his shirt is torn apart across his heart, but the blade has only grazed his chest and instead lodged itself in his arm. Despite the fresh wound marring his muscular bicep, he clings to his sword with an unyielding grip. Blood leaks from the gash, seeping into his sleeve and turning it a horrifying shade of red against the pale backdrop of his skin.

His face is all stoic determination, but beneath this hardened facade, I catch a glimpse of pain flickering in his eyes.

“Cal! You're hurt,” I gasp out as I reach him finally. “Stop fighting! I've got this.”

Our eyes meet for a split second before he shakes his head with determination. “No way, Mills. We've got this.”

A spark of resolve ignites in his eyes like a match hitting the striking pad. His words are more than just a denial; they're a vow—one sculpted in affection and hardened on the battlefield.

Shoulders squared and hearts racing, we charge forward as one: Cal, Alistair, Fergus, Fi, me, and four other robust allies. We're hot on the heels of Gregor and his last two goons through the labyrinthine lanes of the village, our footfalls echoing off the time-worn cobblestones like an insistent drumroll.

Finally, we trap them in a dead-end alley with noescape routes left for them to exploit. Gregor is standing at the helm of his pitifully shrinking forces, his face twisted into an ugly grimace of rage and desperation.

“It's over, Gregor,” I call out, my voice ringing with conviction. “Surrender now, and we'll show you mercy.”

Gregor lets out a harsh bark of laughter.

“Mercy? From a MacDowell witch? Aye! I’ve witnessed yer witchcraft out on the Loch! I’d rather die than accept pity from a sorceress.”

With the cat out of the bag about our strange magic, I’m on the verge of blurting out the truth about my lineage as well.

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“I’m not a witch. I’m a Canadian, you big oaf! And a Sutherl...” I begin, then pause, biting down on my lower lip. A rush of conflicting emotions surges within me.

Cal and I are partners in time now. In my heart, that makes me a Sutherland-MacDowell. But does this thick-skulled oaf need to know that? No need to waste precious moments enlightening him about the complexities of time-travel partnerships and inherited Scottish surnames.

Besides, it will all go over his head like a highland caber toss.

“Gregor, this doesn’t have to go down like a bad breakup,” I say, my voice steady, hoping to inject some reason into the escalating tension. “We can squash this beef right here, right now. No more bloodshed, no more grudges.”

I swear I catch a glimmer of regret in his frosty gaze for a split second. But then his features harden, and he hoists his sword with renewed defiance.

“Never,” he snarls through clenched teeth. “I’ll keel over ’afore I bow down to ye MacDowells.”

Behind him, his crew shifts around like they’ve got ants in their pants. Their expressions are a mixed bag of doubt and unease. Ah. They’re starting to question their fearless leader’s sanity.

Taking a bold step forward, our eyes locked in an intense stare-down, I call him out.

“Take a look around,” my voice rings out clear and steady amid the chaos. “Your

posse is ditching you faster than last season's fashion trends. They see the pointlessness of this showdown. They know you're on one big ego trip that's only going to bring pain."

Gregor's face contorts with confusion, probably at how I'm speaking and at my audacity. He's definitely never encountered a woman who dares to fight. But there's an unmistakable spark of doubt flickering in his eyes that wasn't there before.

He knows deep down that I'm onto something.

"Your reign of terror has to stop. Now," I snarl at him.

As if on cue for dramatic effect, thunder rumbles ominously overhead.

"You've been playing human Jenga with families for too long just to feed your own freaking power trip. But playtime's over, you kilted buffoon. Drop the sword!"

There's a heart-stopping pause where Gregor stands frozen like a statue; sword still raised high in stubborn refusal. Then Cal moves in, weapon at the ready and his free hand poised to snatch Gregor's blade from him.

Gregor's sword makes a desperate plunge for Cal's. Their metals meet with a bang that echoes around us before morphing into a deafening crack. It's the swan song of Gregor's precious blade as it breaks at its hilt.

The pieces clatter to the ground like someone just dropped their hopes and dreams on the floor. Gregor's eyes nearly pop out of his head as he takes in his ruined weapon. Then they fill with what I can only describe as Oscar-worthy tears.

"N-no... not me darling blade!" he wails, crumbling to his knees and sobbing as he gathers the shattered pieces close like they're his babies.

A cheer ripples through our ragtag army as Gregor's two remaining men surrender, their weapons clattering on the ground behind him.

We've done it! We've won! But even as a wave of relief crashes over me, I'm painfully aware that the real test is just beginning: piecing back together what's been shattered and figuring out how to move forward.

I sneak a peek at Cal, my heart blooming with pride and affection. He's been my rock through all this madness, a steady beacon in the chaos. Together, we've stared down the impossible and come out stronger for it.

As though picking up on my thoughts, Cal swivels towards me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You know, Mills," he teases, his voice full of admiration, "you might've just kicked off a new fashion revolution with those boots of yours."

I follow his gaze and chuckle. He's spot on. The women around us—Fi leading the charge—have all shucked off their boots and are brandishing them like they're ready to hurl them at Gregor and his goons.

Fi tosses me a cheeky grin, her fiery red curls bobbing around her face. "Much more practical than those flimsy slippers!" she announces triumphantly, waving one of the cobbler's latest boot creations in the air. "We'll all be sportin' these boots from now on, thanks to ye, Mills."

Laughter bubbles up from deep within me, releasing the tension that had knotted my shoulders during battle. "Happy to be of service. It's like I've always said: boots make kick-ass weapons."

As the dust settles and the adrenaline from the battle slowly fades, Fi and her sister Elspeth jump into action, expertly bandaging our wounds. We're back in the sanctuary of the Inn and Tavern, a space that's become our steadfast command center.

Fi and her friends move through the room like a well-oiled machine, gently tending to the injured and soothing away pains with their tender care. Cal and I glance around, taking stock of what we've lost and what we've gained.

Gregor Campbell, that silver-haired snake, is groaning in the corner, his hands and ankles shackled.

“Oh God, me head,” he whines like a spoiled child who lost at his own game. A lone soldier from his clan hides behind an overturned table. He’s spotted by Alistair, who raises his sword menacingly. The poor guy screams a pathetic plea for mercy before high-tailing it out of our tavern.

Whoops of triumph fill the room as Gregor is unceremoniously dragged down to the cellar by Alistair and Fergus, where he’ll be locked up tight as a drum.

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Cal and I weave through our victorious crowd, offering comforting words here and sharing a laugh there. My whole body is ready to burst with pride.

“We did it,” I say loud enough for everyone to hear me over their own jubilation. “We were brave together, and look at us now!”

Their faces light up with relief as they clap and cheer in response. An emotional lump forms in my throat as I see these people who risked it all to stand with us.

“I cannae thank ye all enough,” Cal adds. “Yer courage, yer sacrifices... yer unwavering commitment means more than ye’ll ever know.”

Alistair strides forward, eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Amelia, Callum, my family and friends,” he booms, his voice echoing across the tavern.

“Today marks a remarkable achievement. We’ve defended our rightful land and done it together.” He pauses for a breath, letting the weight of his words settle over us all. “But let’s not ignore the challenges loomin’ on the horizon. This battle may be won, but there will be more. The world is shifting under our feet; we must shift with it.”

I swallow hard as a shiver of realization runs down my spine. Nearly four centuries of change and evolution are waiting in the wings for these people.

Well, at least we saved the farm. My gaze flits to Cal. He catches my eye and flashes that dimpled grin that always makes me swoon.

“And let’s remember the legacy we’re crafting,” Alistair continues. “The

MacDowells have always embodied strength, resilience, honor. Now that this land is ours again, we've got an opportunity to build something extraordinary."

He lifts his glass high above his head, hope and determination sparkling in his eyes like twin stars in the twilight sky. "To the future," he says. The room vibrates with the timbre of his voice, a deep bass that bounces off the stone walls. It's as though each word he lets loose has been marinated in centuries-old Scotch whisky—rich, full-bodied, and steeped in tradition.

"To the MacDowells and all those who stand beside us."

"To the future," we echo back in unison.

Fi uncorks three dusty bottles of aged whisky at this cue, setting off a riotous celebration throughout the tavern.

No sooner than the flickering candlelight begins its waltz across our elongated wooden table, we're all scurrying to get it set. Moments later, it's heaving under the weight of robust stews and homemade loaves of bread that are so tantalizing I'm practically salivating like a Pavlovian dog at dinner time. Fi and Elspeth had the foresight to stash the stews and bread in the cellar, so the meal just needed a quick warm-up to be ready. Good news for my stomach. If it growls any louder, I might have to pounce on the table.

The candles have burned down to their halfway point. Their thick, earthy scent of animal fat and a hint of lavender intertwine with the lingering aroma of peat smoke, ale, and roasting meats.

Kilted men stomp their feet to the beat of the tavern's makeshift band—Cobbler MacTavish on bagpipes (who knew?), Fergus on the fiddle, and Alistair on his drum. The women twirl in vibrant tartan dresses, their laughter echoing off the old stone

walls.

Across the table, I catch Cal's joyful gaze. We can't be sure we've set everything back to how it was in present-day Aven Valley. But one fact shines brighter than any candle here tonight: the MacDowells are ready for whatever comes next.

The tavern is practically vibrating with the energy of our late-night celebration. Fi darts through the crowd, whisky bottles in hand, topping off glasses as she goes. The euphoria is contagious, and it's impossible not to smile.

Cal slips next to me, his hand settling on my lower back. "Ever experienced anything like this before, Mills?"

His touch sends a comforting warmth through me, and I lean into him.

"Time travel? Epic battles? A party that feels like it's been ripped from the pages of a history book?" I flash him a teasing wink. "Nah. Just an average day for a novelist."

He chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Aye, but ye've navigated it all with such grace and bravery. I'm honored to be by your side."

Heat creeps up my cheeks at his words. "I couldn't have done any of this without you, Cal. Or without any of them." I gesture around the room at our friends and allies, who are all wearing wide—and slightly drunken—smiles.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The band launches into a spirited number and the crowd springs to life, bodies swaying with unrestrained delight. Fi's grin is infectious as she drags me into the sea of dancers.

“Let’s show them how it’s done, Mills!” She shouts over the music, spinning me around so fast my feet barely touch the ground.

We’re a flurry of motion, her skirt and my hair flying in sync with our laughter. The air in the tavern pulses with energy and unfiltered joy.

As Fergus shifts gears to a slower, sweeter tune, Fi winks at me before twirling off to find another dance partner. A tap on my shoulder halts me in my tracks, and I spin around to find Cal standing there, his eyes twinkling like stars.

“May I have this dance, my lady?” He asks, offering a mockbow that makes me laugh.

“You may indeed, good sir,” I reply, playing along.

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His hand finds its place at my waist while he gently takes mine in his other one. As we begin to sway together to the rhythm of the music, an electric current passes between us. His nearness is intoxicating; I can feel the warmth radiating from him.

“Mills,” he murmurs lowly next to my ear, making the small hairs rise on my skin. “There’s something I need to tell ye.”

My pulse quickens as I look up at him. “What is it?”

“I love you,” he says firmly enough that it leaves no room for doubt. “I’m madly, deeply... ridiculously in love with ye.”

I freeze at his declaration, thoughts whirling like tornadoes in my head.

Love. The very thing I’d given up on—the thing that caused me nothing but pain until I met Cal. I’m in love with him, too. But am I ready to admit it? Am I ready to risk this heart again?

As I look into Cal’s eyes, so full of hope and adoration, I make the easiest decision of my life.

“I love you too,” I say, my voice steady and sure.

The tavern falls eerily silent, as if everyone is holding their breaths. Cal glances around and chuckles at the unexpected audience we’ve gathered.

“Well, since we have an audience...”

Before I can comprehend what he means by that, he lets go of me and drops down on one knee, making the crowd gasp collectively. My hands fly up to my mouth.

“Amelia Grace Sutherland,” Cal begins, his voice thick with emotion. “From the moment your motorboat practically high-fived my sailboat, I haven’t been able to imagine my life without ye. Ye’re the keeper of my temper, the sharer of my scones, the woman I want beside me on every adventure. I love yer courage, yer compassion, even the way ye steal all the covers.”

Surprised gasps and gentle laughs fill the tavern. Cal’s hand finds mine, his touch an anchor in the sea of emotions threatening to sweep me away. Suddenly, he’s reaching into his sporran, pulling out a silver ring that sparkles against the worn leather.

“The village blacksmith has been crafting this for over a week,” Cal confesses.

As I catch sight of the intricate Celtic knot design, warmth unfurls in my chest. His thoughtful gesture is overwhelming.

“I didn’t have the coins for a traditional Luckenbooth brooch,” he admits, his voice tinged with vulnerability. “But I hope this ring speaks to yer heart, at least for now.”

As his words sink in, tears prick at the corners of my eyes—happy tears that threaten to spill over and expose how deeply I’ve fallen for him. He’s asking me something now, a question that promises to change everything:

“Please, do me the extraordinary honor of becoming my wife? I’ll give ye foot rubs every night and all the toffee pudding ye can eat. Ye’ll want for nothing, except perhaps a white noise machine to block out my snoring.”

Tears are streaming down my cheeks, but I’m giggling at the same time. I probably look like I’ve lost it, but who cares?

I'm staring into the hopeful blue eyes of this amazing, adventurous man. The one who somehow brought my belief in forever-love back from the dead.

I used to think dating apps, lukewarm Pad Thai, my ridiculous Shoe Theory and Situationships with 2 a.m. booty texts were all I had to look forward to.

But Cal's given me so much more. I'm pretty sure the only 2 a.m. text I'll get from him is to make sure that I'm safe.

My heart's doing a wild dance in my chest. If I get any happier, I might start levitating.

I think back to our walk around the graveyard, him sharing stories about the Highlands with such passion and authenticity. That's when it hit me—this guy is for real. Cal is solid to the core.

Sure, this move might seem fast to my friends and family, but when you've literally jumped into a time vortex with someone, time gets a whole new meaning.

I'd leap anywhere with this guy. Timbuktu, themoon—even the 15th century, if he asked. I gaze at him, seeing pure adoration shining back at me, and it hits me: I don't need to ask anyone else for advice this time—not Lila, not my parents, and definitely not Margot. I already know what I want.

“Yes,” I manage to choke out through all the emotion clogging my throat.

“Yes, Cal. A thousand times yes—I'll marry you—or get handfasted,” I whisper to him with a grin. “Whatever they do here, let's do it!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Alistair, Fergus, and Fi exchanging baffled looks—probably wondering why we're making such a big deal out of something that

was supposed to have already happened. But everyone else in the tavern is far too sloshed to care. They break into cheers as Cal jumps up on his feet and sweeps me off mine.

He twirls me around in his arms, and I laugh as I cling to him for dear life. He still smells like pine trees, smoke, and sweat from the battlefield, but underneath it all is that scent that's uniquely Cal—the smell of leather mixed with salty sea air and spices.

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When he sets me back on my feet again, I reach up to cup his face in my hands—my thumbs tracing over the rough stubble on his jawline.

“I love you Cal.” My voice comes out in a whisper but doesn’t lose intensity. “I don’t know how or why the universe decided to throw us together, but I’m so damn grateful it did.”

“Aye, lass,” he murmurs, his forehead resting gently against mine. “I thank my lucky thistle every day for steering ye into my path, even if ye did insist on playing the heroine to a seasoned sailing instructor out on the Firth.”

I let out a snort of laughter, lightly thumping his chest in playful indignation. “You looked like you’d capsized that boat, you big lummo. But I suppose I’ll tolerate your daily presence. After all, someone must shield me from insurgent chickens and disgruntled cows.”

Cal throws his head back and laughs, and the sound rings out through the tavern. “I’ll wrangle a thousand cows for ye, my wee fierce lass. Now come and kiss me again ’fore I expire from wanting ye.”

As his lips capture mine once more, I melt into him, secure in the knowledge that whatever challenges we might face: angry clansmen, magical time portals, my frequent head bumps—we will face them together.

Always.

Brimming with kinetic enthusiasm, Fiona bounds our way, a vibrant whoop escaping

her as she wraps us in a bear hug that nearly knocks the wind out of me.

“I thought ye were already handfasted!” she exclaims, shaking her head with a grin.

“Just a moon ago, ye were sniping at each other over how to brew tea.” She winks at us conspiratorially, her smile softening.

“But even then, I felt there was so much love, beneath the bickering.”

Her words send a rush of warmth flooding me, with memories of our first days in this era and the intimacy of sharing one bed making my cheeks blaze.

Keeping my feelings for Cal under wraps has been like trying to hold back the tide, especially when we've been so close together in that small space. But tonight feels different. There's a sense of anticipation for our first naked night together humming beneath my skin. A light sheen of sweat forms on my palms, not just from the wild dancing but from the promise of what comes next. The way Cal's fingers linger on mine, the heat in his eyes... it's an unspoken promise of fireworks later.

Alistair wanders over, his usual stern expression replaced by an uncharacteristic grin that transforms his rugged face. He claps Cal on the back before turning to me with raised brows.

“Well done,” he rumbles, adding with a chuckle, “First, travelers from the future, lost in our era, and now not yet wed? Our minister is going to have quite the story for Sunday sermon.”

Cal laughs, but his gaze never leaves mine as he addresses Alistair. “Sorry for not being completely upfront about it. We've had to think on our feet and adapt quickly.” He pauses for a breath before softly adding, “And figure out our own feelings while we were at it.”

Alistair's grin widens into an almost smug smirk as he winks at us both. "Can't say I'm too upset about it. You two have managed to save our little town, after all."

"And you've saved our future home!" I add, my voice thick with gratitude and awe. Will he ever truly understand the enormity of what he's done? Alistair waves away my thanks with a casual flick of his wrist, but there's something in his eyes that looks suspiciously like pride.

"Don't be daft," he chides gently. "I'm just glad to see my battle-hardened brother settling down with a fiery lass who'll keep him on his toes." He trails off, blinking rapidly as if fighting back tears. "It warms this old heart of mine..."

"But remember," he adds, his finger wagging in the air with all the drama of a stage actor. He's trying to keep a straight face, but a twinkle in his eye gives him away. "'Tis considered quite scandalous indeed to share a bed before marriage... unless time has altered such norms in yer future?"

Fi's laughter bursts through the room, her infectious energy lighting up every corner of the inn and tavern like a sudden break in stormy clouds. "Aye! Maybe they've come up with some fancy term for it in their time: 'It's complicated,' or some such nonsense!"

I catch Cal's eye, and we dissolve into barely suppressed giggles ourselves. The irony is too delicious—if only Fi knew how close to home she was hitting!

Sex and love in our time isn't just complicated; it's taken up a corner of the bookstore and become as complex as a mystery novel. I might never fully understand how to make love last... but I'm willing to camp out in that corner of the bookstore for as long as it takes if it can help my love and I go the distance.

As the rest of the townspeople crowd around us, offering their well wishes and

congratulations, I lean into Cal's side, basking in the warmth of his presence and the love that surrounds us. For the first time in my life, I feel like I belong somewhere, not just to a place, but to a person.

As our friends return to their seats and drinks, Cal's low, intimate voice rumbles in my ear.

“What do ye say we make this official, Mills? I dinnae want to be causing a scandal, but above all else, I can't wait another moment to call you my wife.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

I tilt my head back to examine the intensity of his gaze. I'm momentarily breathless, as if the air has been stolen from my lungs.

“Wait, you're saying... get married? Like, right this second?”

That devilishly charming smile spreads across his face. “Aye, right here in this very pub, surrounded by friends and relatives. I cannae think of a more perfect kick-off to our life together.”

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“But... our parents... Lila, your brother,” I stutter out, wishing for this moment to unfurl naturally but feeling torn.

Cal gently cups my face with his hands, his touch steadying the thoughts swirling in my mind. His gaze is filled with warmth and reassurance.

“We’ve a whole family back home in modern-day Aven Valley, no question about it. But we cannae get to them yet. And take a look around ye, love. We’ve got ourselves a clan right here.”

I let my gaze sweep over the warm faces of our friends and beam back at them. He’s absolutely right. They’ve all become my family.

“Rest easy about my folks. They’re safe at the farm; I can feel it in my bones, Mills, and I cannae go wrong when I trust my instincts. As for yours, Lila, Cam, they won’t have an inkling that we’ve skipped a beat in time,” he adds softly, assuring no one else can hear our conversation.

At his words, I find myself frozen in place, my mind churning over the reality of our situation. We’re stuck here until the next full moon; there’s no way around it. We’ve been pretending to be married for a month already! And I’m totally, unapologetically in love with this man.

“Besides,” Cal seems to complete my thoughts, an impish sparkle lighting his eyes as his thumb grazes my hand, “I’m eager to call ye my wife in every timeline—in every sense of that word—if ye get what I mean?”

His soft, seductive words linger in the air, heavy and loaded with possibilities. A champagne glass of joy bubbles inside me as images of our potential future together dance like a film in my mind.

I picture us bundled up in ridiculously oversized sweaters, parked on the weather-beaten bench outside our adorable cottage. We'll be nursing steaming mugs of coffee, its robust aroma tangling with the crisp morning air. The dawn sun will paint the dew-kissed flowers with a golden hue as we sit together without needing words.

Oh, and our stolen kisses! They'll pop up in the most unexpected corners—among pots and pans in his kitchen or hidden under piles of laundry. A quick smooch while pairing socks, a lingering one when we think we're alone—ordinary chores turning into secret dates.

In this vivid mental movie of mine, kids also make a cameo—two or three, maybe? We'll pile them into our family wagon, their infectious chatter filling every nook as we navigate through twisting lanes to Aven Valley's local sports field. I can almost hear their triumphant shouts echoing around me.

Our weekends will be spent at Cameron's pub, The Topsy Trow, where the sign is in its rightful place outside, and laughter is still as abundant as the whisky flow.

Cozied up in our favorite corner booth, we'll swap stories and jokes with friends who feel more like family, their company providing a warmth that beats even the coziest fireplace.

When night falls and moonlight dances on Moray Firth's tranquil waters, we'll sneak away for impromptu skinny dips. The shock of frosty water against our skin, coupled with our laughter echoing through the silent night, will spark a rush of freedom in us like nothing else.

This cozy domestic life isn't frightening; it's tantalizingly within reach.

It won't be perfect; oh no, it'll be messy and complicated and sometimes feel next to impossible. But I know, more than anything, that it's a life bursting with love and laughter, ripe for the taking. And I'm eager to dive right in with Cal.

I rise onto my toes and meet his lips in a kiss that feels like the culmination of every adventure we've shared.

"Let's do it," I murmur against his lips. "Let's get handfasted today."

As the villagers erupt into more cheers and shower us with flower petals, we're swept up by a joyful tide of friends and family. The air buzzes with laughter and a chorus of "Slàinte!"—the Highland call for health and good fortune—that fills the tavern.

Cal and I are caught in this vibrant whirlpool, our hands glued together as everyone jockeys for a spot to offer their well wishes. Fi's infectious grin leads the pack, and she's the first to wrap us both in a bear hug.

Then, just as we're catching our breath, Cal is momentarily surrounded by the guys, their hearty slaps on his back so enthusiastic they nearly topple him. Cal swivels to Alistair, a hint of concern furrowing his brow.

"Is there a chance of another attack? Should we be on guard?" he asks, his voice low but urgent.

Alistair strokes his beard before responding. "Well, ye understand, it cannae be our typical grand spectacle," he begins, his voice laced with understanding, "but given the recent clan skirmishes, we must remain vigilant. A quaint handfasting ceremony here in the tavern should suffice, as it will allow us to keep a watchful eye. We do no need to make a spectacle around town or march to the church. We'll stand guard right

here while ye make yer vows official. Why delay when love is in the air, aye?”

As more allies join in the applause, Fi, her sister Elspeth, and a lively group of women eagerly take me aside, their enthusiasm contagious.

“Oh me goodness, Mills! We’ve got so much to do!” Fi exclaims, her eyes sparkling with a playful glint. “We need to prepare ye for yer bridal Foot Washing Ceremony, gather some flowers, and find the perfect dress! But dinnae worry about a thing; we’ll have ye all set in no time.”

Her words spill out like a waterfall, and suddenly, I’m whisked away into the tavern’s kitchen—a domain that reeks more of boiled innards and fermented brew than romance. But hey, Aven Valley Charm would probably sell well as a niche perfume.

While the men contemplate constructing an altar in the tavern and women chatter about local flora, Fi and Elspeth lead a small group of village ladies in converting the kitchen into something that looks like it’s been ripped straight from the pages of *Zen Living Monthly*.

Okay, so the quinoa dispenser and yoga mat storage are missing. But it’s close!

Bowls filled with steaming water are lined up like soldiers. The rising steam twirls seductively in the air. Dried lavender and aromatic herbs hang from the rafters.

“Welcome to your Foot Washing!” Fi announces with a grin. I chuckle as she and Elspeth perch me onto an improvised throne—basically just a burlap sack flung over a robust wooden chair. With my feet hovering just above the floorboards, Fi and her brigade roll up their sleeves, gearing up to pamper me as if I’m some sort of Early Modern era princess.

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As Elspeth skips out to get the wildflowers, Fi leans close and murmurs confidentially into my ear: “In our time, lassie, a Foot Washing is more than mere foot hygiene—it’s a ritual cleansing to wash away past burdens and embrace fresh starts with open hearts.”

I stifle a giggle and lean in, whispering, “Oh, does that mean I get to pick a shade and maybe some paraffin wax, too? You know, in my time, a pedicure isn’t complete without a color that screams ‘I have my life together’... even if I’m still eating cereal for dinner.”

Fi lets out a belly laugh. “Aye, lass, I’m afraid our selection is a wee bit limited. But I can offer ye a lovely shade of ‘Highland Mud’ with a hint of ‘Wild Thistle Green.’”

“Sounds like the perfect accessory for my next leap into Loch Ness,” I chuckle softly, wiggling my toes in anticipation.

When Elspeth reappears, Fi delicately cascades a blend of warm water, handpicked herbs, and wildflowers over my tired feet. The inviting heat from the water seeps into my skin, effortlessly melting away layers of pent-up tension. I allow my eyes to drift closed, surrendering to the comforting caress of lavender and thistle that envelops me in an aromatic hug. It’s the ideal pre-wedding foot treatment.

Who knew a 17th-century spa day could be so indulgent? And, bonus! Without the hassle of finding parking!

As Fi’s sundial signals it’s five o’clock, candlelight pirouettes across the tavern’s time-etched wooden tables and rough-hewn stone walls, bathing everything in a

golden glow that amplifies the room's raw beauty.

The air is heavy with the untamed scent of the Highlands—purple heather and thistle. It hits me harder than spotting the bright orange avens flowers my friends have gathered from Moray Firth's shoreline, and I have to take a breather to choke back euphoric tears.

As the afternoon wraps around us like a soothing lullaby, the minister slides in the back door, flanked by two of Alistair's strongest warriors standing guard. The weight of reality sets in: this is really happening.

Cal stands beside me at our makeshift altar, his fingers intertwined with mine in an unbreakable bond. He looks as stunning as I feel jittery: clad in a sleek black coat, crisp white shirt that accentuates his sun-kissed skin, and donning Clan MacDowells' traditional kilt—heirlooms passed down through generations of proud Scottish warriors.

I'm swathed in Fi's mother's rosy red wedding gown. Its simplicity belies its elegance; its design flatters my athletic build without overpowering it. It seems to whisper stories within its seams—softly spoken tales of steadfast love from another time.

Our eyes lock as the minister weaves his enchanting words around us. A sense of absolute certainty anchors itself deep inside me. This is exactly where I'm supposed to be: standing beside Cal at this altar made of love and promises, ready to tackle any curveballs or adventures life decides to pitch our way.

As we stand before our friends, the officiant presents us with the traditional tartan cloth. We extend our hands, and he deftly wraps the fabric around them, binding us together in a symbolic union.

Once the handfasting is complete, we slip in a few unique pledges of our own, hoping the merry townsfolk, well into their cups by now, won't notice the oddities.

"Mills," Cal begins, "I vow to bring home the bacon and brave the morning chill to milk even the grumpiest of cows."

I bite my lip to stifle a giggle as he adds with a wink, "And I swear to renovate my old cottage so ye won't be in constant danger of knocking yerself unconscious."

His tone softens as he continues, taking his time to enunciate each word. "But above all else, I promise to be your partner in crime, your lover in life, and your soft landing when times are tough. My heart will always know your name."

As he slips the silver band onto my finger, my knees threaten to buckle beneath me. I take a deep breath, pausing to gather my thoughts as I exhale.

"Cal, I'll be there to catch you when you fall, too. And I commit to writing our extraordinary tale while preserving your reputation."

"And I solemnly swear not to overindulge in footwear purchases." I pause and correct myself with a flourish:

"Well... except for an ample supply of ass-kicking boots," I giggle, mimicking his Scottish accent perfectly.

The crowd cheers as the officiant tells us to seal the handfasting with a kiss, a tradition older than the stone walls around us. Cal grins and sweeps me into his arms, his lips claiming mine in a long, passionate kiss.

As our loved ones erupt into cheers and bombard us with avens flower petals, the music accelerates courtesy of Fergus' fiddle and Alistair's drum. Cal seizes my hand,

pulling me onto the impromptu dance floor. My dress billows around my ankles as we spin and leap, our laughter blending with the lively fiddle notes and rhythmic foot-stomping. I feel like I'm floating, all my anxieties and uncertainties blown away by the pure joy of this moment.

“So this,” I whisper, “is what bliss feels like.”

The night stretches on, and the energy of the celebration shows no signs of waning. Cal leans closer to me, his warm breath tickling my ear as he murmurs, “What do ye say we sneak away? I've got plans for ye that don't involve an audience.”

A shiver courses through me at his words, my body already reacting to the seductive spark in his gaze.

“Lead the way, Captain,” I murmur back.

I grip his hand tighter as we slip into our attic bedroom, leaving behind the gradually dimming sounds of festivity.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The modest window pours a muted glow across the antique floorboards as the moonlight filters through a thin veil of clouds, casting a gentle, silvery sheen over the patchwork quilt draping the bed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:28 am

“Well, Mrs. MacDowell,” Cal teases with a cheeky grin, using the firestarter on his survival knife to light two candles and a tiny oil lamp on the dresser. “Can I take ye to bed— with fewer clothes this time?”

Before I can come up with one of my classic snappy comebacks and potentially spoil the mood, I leap onto the bed impulsively, yanking my fresh-off-the-altar husband down with me in a burst of infectious laughter. We crumple onto the soft quilt in a jumble of limbs and wedding finery.

I lay there chortling, amazed at the delightful madness of it all.

“What has ye grinning ear to ear?” Cal asks, propping himself up on an elbow to gaze at me.

“Just thinking how surreal all of this is. Us. Married. In Scotland... in 1645.”

“Aye, it’s pure mad,” he agrees as he smooths back an errant lock of my hair. “But there’s no one else I’d rather be mad with than you, Mills.”

His lips find mine in a kiss that ignites a rush of pure need through me. I melt into him, savoring the strength of his arms, the softness of his lips, and the scrape of his stubble. When we finally break apart, I look up at him, feeling the sweltering heat of our connection.

“You know,” I say, playing with the edge of his kilt, “when I rented the last cottage on the cove, all I wanted was a quiet escape and a spark for my novel. Now I’m working on a series set in Scotland, and you’re... quite the character study.” I laugh.

Cal's voice spills out in a sultry whisper. "Happy to help with the research, especially if it involves positions." He gives me a flirty wink, and I roll my eyes.

"You're a handful," I say.

"Aye. It's part of my charm."

I caress his chest and imagine working side-by-side, creating something meaningful. That picture sends a tingle of excitement through me.

"Let's start writing tomorrow. Maybe we can mix in some Loch Ness legends."

His gaze softens, warmth flooding his eyes. "With yer creativity and my local lore, it'll practically write itself."

My fingers trace his jaw, savoring the rugged feel beneath my touch. I'm practically drooling over my husband and his perfect mix of grit and sophistication.

Cal rummages in his sporran and pulls out a cell phone.

"I believe ye deserve a proper wedding waltz, Mills. This time, I'm prepared. It's Cameron's playlist, but it'll serve us well."

A soft laugh slips out as I recall our missed kiss at Rosewood Cottage. "So, no more depending on Mother Nature for our romantic soundtrack?"

"Nae," he grins wickedly, tapping away on the screen.

"I'll not be shown up by horny deer again."

As the room fills with the haunting melody of a Scottish love ballad, Cal tosses the

phone onto the table and tugs me against him. One hand finds its way to my lower back while the other intertwines with mine. Our bodies sway to the rhythm of the music in an instinctive dance that feels as natural as breathing.

Caught in Cal's intense gaze, those sapphire eyes promising me everything under the stars, I feel like I'm drowning in pure adoration.

To think that when I arrived in Aven Valley, I was just another cynic with a shattered faith in love... And now? Now here I am head over heels for a tartan-clad man who bulldozed through my walls with his kindness and charm.

If this is some sort of dream, then please don't wake me up, because everything about this moment is real. The solid warmth of Cal's body pressed against mine, his earthy-spicy scent filling my senses, the rhythmic thud of his heart in time with mine—it's all beautifully, achingly real.

The rhythm of the music holds us together, lost in our own little universe. Cal's hands start to wander, tracing my curves with a reverence that sets my skin aflame.

"Mills," he growls, his voice gravelly with want. "Do you have any clue what you're doing to me?"

"I think I'm starting to get an idea," I breathe out, my fingers digging into the soft fabric of his shirt.

His lips find that sweet spot just below my ear.

"Oh love, ye've only just begun to understand," he says in a huskier growl, sending delicious tremors down my spine. And then he's kissing me—a scorching kiss that's all-consuming passion and unhidden need. I surrender myself completely, overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of his desire.

When we finally break apart for air, I blink open my eyes and find Cal looking at me with an expression that's a potent mix of love, lust, and pure joy. The way he gazes at me like I'm the most precious thing in his world makes me feel like the air's left my lungs. That, and sensing his growing arousal through the fabric of his kilt.

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Cal opens up his sporran and pulls out a condom. "I'm afraid one's all I had time to grab... this and another survival knife."

"I imagine we're going to do it more than once, sailor," I giggle. "I could ask Fi for birth control advice, but I'm not exactly keen on a sex-ed class from her and Fergus."

Cal barks out a laugh. "Well then, we'll have to learn all the old-timey methods ourselves. Through practice."

And then, with that adorable, devilish grin, he nudges me onto the bed, and I land on my back with him hovering over me.

Slowly, almost reverently, he begins to slip off the stunning gown and petticoat Fiona gifted me. His fingers glide over my skin like silk whispers. Each touch leaves an echo of longing behind, a craving for more closeness, to feel every inch of him against me.

As the last piece of clothing falls away from me, his eyes drink in every curve and angle of my body.

"Christ, yer beautiful," he breathes out. "How did I get so lucky?"

Fumbling with the buckles on his kilt sends a low moan slipping past my lips as I finally strip him bare.

"Damn," I gasp out while drinking in the sight of him. "I mean, just look at you! I'm hitched to a Scottish Sex God."

He captures my hands and pins them above my head.

“Aye, lass,” he whispers into the space between us. “Just ye wait... by the time I’m done, ye’ll be inventing a whole new pantheon just for me.”

His bold declaration rips a laugh from me, but the intoxicating closeness of our tangled bodies quickly silences it. The smoky look in his eyes leaves me gasping for air, my body humming with anticipation.

“Now, I’m going to worship every inch of you.”

His lips brush my forehead, eyelids, and linger on my lips, before blazing a trail of fiery kisses along the curve of my neck. He traces them down my abdomen and the curves of my hips, pausing teasingly at my thighs, locking his eyes onto mine with a smoldering intensity.

“I’ve been craving yer sweetness,” he murmurs huskily.

I let out a low, feral moan as he dips his head and his tongue delves deep inside me. He moves with skill and purpose, coaxing wave after wave of climax until I’m left panting and trembling. When he finally comes up for air, sheaths himself, and fills me with his firm presence; his gaze is all heat and promise.

As he moves against me, we easily find our rhythm. Each thrust sends waves of ecstasy rippling through me, awakening a wild side I never knew existed.

Then, in one smooth move, Cal hoists me from the bed, and my back meets the cool, rough surface of the attic wall. His hands cup my ass as he pins me against the stone with his hips. The sudden shift sends jolts of pleasure crashing through me, each one more potent than the last. Our bodies meld together against the wall in a sensual dance of intimacy, every gasp and moan echoing into the electric night, threatening to

rouse our sleeping friends below.

“Teine’na broinn,” he growls low in his throat as he lifts me higher, his eyes full of that devilish spark that only fuels our wildness. “I cannae get enough of you.”

His hands grip my backside, pulling me even closer, his hips moving with a deliberate, tantalizing rhythm. Each touch is like lightning, the rough stone wall’s cool texture heightening the intoxicating heat of his body pressed against mine. I arch into him, feeling the solid strength of him thrusting into me, every hard inch of him carved in pure need.

His lips trail fiery kisses along my throat, murmuring sweet nothings in that irresistible Scottish brogue that amplifies every sensation tenfold. Every whispered word, every heated touch resonates deep inside me, building to a crescendo that leaves me breathless and trembling.

“Cal, oh God,” I pant, my fingers threading through his hair and pulling him closer as if I could somehow fuse us into one. The world blurs around us, every sense focused solely on the overwhelming pleasure that’s consuming us both.

His movements quicken, each pelvic thrust sending ripples of ecstasy through my body. A delicious tension coils tighter and tighter within me, a storm of emotion and sensation ready to explode.

As we come together, I throw my head back, a wordless cry escaping my lips. Cal’s deep growl of satisfaction echoes around us—primal and raw—and its unexpected intensity sends a shockwave through me, pushing me over the edge once more. The sound reverberates through the attic, wrapping around us, and I find myself surrendering to another surge of bliss more powerful than anything I’ve ever felt before.

Panting and spent, we slide to the floor, still entangled in each other's arms, the warmth of our bodies and the cool stone wall a comforting contrast. I look up at him, my heart full to bursting, and find his eyes locked on mine with a mixture of tenderness and awe.

"Ye're incredible, Mrs. MacDowell," he murmurs, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face with infinite care.

"And you're legendary, Captain," I chuckle softly, the sound a mix of joy and contentment.

We stay sprawled and knotted up against the wall, soaking in the afterglow as stars spill through the attic window.

Chapter Forty

A veil of mist pirouettes over Moray Firth the morning after our wedding. The dawn breaks like a Monet masterpiece; gentle washes of light seep through our pint-sized attic window, painting ghostly silhouettes on the time-tested wooden beams above.

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Cal's bedhead hair sparkles in the day's first light, his bare, chiseled torso etched against the tender glow. His rugged scent fills my nostrils, creating an intoxicating cocktail of safety and lust.

As he turns his head and looks at me, a warmth radiates from him that sets my heart doing a cha-cha in my chest. His hand seeks mine under the covers, and our fingers weave together like they've made a secret pact. It's such a small thing, but it feels monumental.

"Mills," Cal interrupts our snug silence with what sounds like a weighty question.

"What's up?" I ask, a flicker of worry starting to kindle. I don't want anything to spoil this moment.

"What on earth are we going to do while we wait for the next full moon?" He quirks a brow, then playfully yanks me back under our well-worn quilt.

The room is a testament to our recent shenanigans: half-melted candles throw weird and wonderful shapes onto the well-worn table by our bed. Their lingering lavender and bayberry scent mingles with the salty tang of the sea breeze sneaking in through the open window.

Well into the wee hours of the morning, Cal's fingertips charted a course of yearning across my skin, each touch an unspoken promise of our shared hunger. Now, it feels like even the walls are pulsing with an unmistakable vibe of passion and closeness.

But it's not just this emotional echo that charms this room. From downstairs, the

comforting aroma of Fi's porridge simmering over an open hearth is seeping up through the old floorboards. The scent is earthy but sweet, whispering stories of oats slow-cooked in creamy milk until they're smooth as silk.

Another fragrance weaves its way into it; stronger, more commanding. The distinct perfume of tea leaves brewing in Fi's hefty iron pot over an open fire.

This isn't just any old cuppa; it's my new addiction, Carstairs' Blend—a bold mix of black teas that Fi and Fergus confessed they've enjoyed every morning since a wanderer and his female companion passed through Aven Valley and traded the foreign delight for a few nights at their inn.

"Hmm, I have an idea," Cal murmurs against my collarbone before answering his own question. I'm too caught up daydreaming to respond, lost in the intoxicating scents and the feel of his lips on my sensitive skin.

"We could just spend the entire month up here, in this cozy little love nest of ours."

"You are a delightful chaos magnet, you know that?" I say, giving him a playful nudge with my shoulder.

"Can ye blame me?" His smirk is contagious, his fingers drawing idle patterns on my skin.

"I've got the most stunning woman in two timelines as my partner, and an entire lifetime ahead of us to compensate for all those years we were strangers."

"Well, when you frame it that way... nope. Can't blame you one bit," I tease.

Our laughter fills the room, a joyful lightness that seems to banish any lingering shadows of our past lives. As we cuddle closer, limbs tangled beneath the quilt, I marvel at how perfectly our bodies fit together.

It's like we were destined to tumble through time together, finding not only this crazy love but also the story I was meant to write. Scotland gave me everything I came for—a plot twist I never saw coming and a love that's the real happily ever after.

But even as I bask in the glow of our newfound happiness, there's this niggling feeling that something more awaits us just over the horizon. Something that will test our bond and challenge us in ways we could never predict.

For now though, none of that matters. All that exists is this moment: our love and future stretching like an open highway.

Cal's fingers trace a lazy path down my spine, sending shivers racing through my body. His touch is electric; sparking a flame that makes me want him all over again.

“Mills,” he murmurs with raw desire lacing his voice. “I still cannae believe yer mine. Completely mine.”

I look up at him through half-lidded eyes, a coquettish smile teasing the corners of my mouth.

“Yours, huh? This might be the 17th century, sailor, but I'm not some property to be claimed.”

Laughter rumbles through his chest. “My apologies, lass. Let me rephrase: I still cannae believe I've been granted the privilege of being stuck in time with you.”

Cal's out cold after our latest love-making marathon. I burrow into him, finding a cozy nook on his chest that feels like it was made just for my head. The gentle lullaby of the ocean harmonizes with my heartbeat, conjuring a peace that's new to me. Past, present, future—they all blur together in this timeless sanctuary.

His body is a furnace against the nippy air sneaking in through the attic window. He

instinctively pulls me closer as he shifts next to me, his arm cinching around me like a safety belt. I let out a soft giggle at his sleepy show of affection.

“What’s so funny, lass?” he mumbles, eyes still heavy with sleep.

“Just thinking how epic this has been,” I respond. “What’s next? A treasure hunt across timelines?”

“We’re only scratchin’ the surface. Who knows what surprises are waiting for us here... or what the Loch Portal holds.”

Propping myself up on my elbow, I smile at him. “As long as we keep our humor and the spark alive, I think we’ll be unstoppable.”

His blue eyes sparkle with mischief.

“Aye, maybe we can sneak in a few more... adventures... before the full moon, eh?”

“It’s us! How could we not?” I chuckle.

As I settle back on his chest with a contented sigh, I realize the truth that’s been there all along: as long as Cal and I are together, we’re already home.