



A Bride for the Highlander (Wishing for a Highlander #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: It's the past, and Adeline's life is at risk. So is her heart.

After a terrible storm, dr. Adeline wakes up in the arms of the most handsome man carrying her to his... castle? Or rather, his dungeons.

Laird Logan is about to lose everything. So when a strange, bewitching lass with purple hair lands on his beach and claims she can heal his clan, he must trap her in his castle...

But Adeline comes from a different time. Despite the spark between them, their relationship is doomed from the start. Still when the cruel Scottish Laird claims her lips, all she can do is surrender...

Total Pages (Source): 41

CHAPTER 1

New Jersey, 2023

“Sorry, Dr. Platt, I lost track of time with the handover,” Adeline said in a rush, barging into her boss’s office. “You know what it’s like on Christmas Eve. Worst day to be in the medical profession.”

Dr. Platt sat behind his desk, nursing a glass of something he shouldn’t have been drinking on hospital grounds. “I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

“I know, but we’ve got two nurses out sick, and the resident on the night shift isn’t really happy with it after being here for... I think she said it has been three days since she’s been home,” Adeline tried to explain.

Dr. Platt waved her excuse away, gesturing for her to come and sit opposite. “I had to do the rounds twice to make sure she knew what was going on. It’ll be a crazy night for everyone.” He sipped his drink. “Would you like one? You seem stressed.”

He wasn’t someone she liked spending too much time alone with. But he was someone who seemed to like spending time alone with her, always calling her into his office for the vaguest of reasons. The nurses had warned her that he did it with all of the younger female staff, seeing what he could get away with.

However, as Head of Surgery, he wasn’t the sort of man she could afford to get on the wrong side of, paying her dues while she worked her way up the hierarchy. If that meant listening to him drone on about his new car or his latest golf trophies or

enduring the discomfort of him telling her how pretty she'd look if she just made some effort, then so be it.

"No, thank you," Adeline replied. "I'm driving home."

"One won't put you over the limit," he reasoned.

"I... uh... don't drink, to be honest." She racked her brain, wondering if there was any staff night out where he'd seen her drink, but she figured it was a safe enough white lie when no memory came to her.

Since her birthday last month, she hadn't been out at all, and before, her birthday had been the same. She was too busy working to become a bona fide doctor to have fun.

Dr. Platt pouted, his icy blue eyes skimming down the lapels of her white coat and across the neckline of her scrubs. But the gray t-shirt she wore underneath her scrubs seemed to disappoint him, forbidding him a glimpse of anything.

"You're a gifted doctor, Adeline," he said, swirling the drink in this glass, "but there's more to being a doctor than just being good at treating patients."

"I thought that was the very definition of being a good doctor," Adeline replied, laughing awkwardly.

It was seven o'clock on Christmas Eve, and she had a red-hot date with her sofa, a bottle of red wine, and whatever Christmas movie she found on her TV first. More to the point, tomorrow was her first proper day off in weeks. This conversation was getting in the way.

Dr. Platt smiled as if he'd just heard the world's least funny joke. "You have to prove yourself if you want to succeed," he continued. "If your boss offers you a drink, you

take it. If your boss tells you that you should make more of an effort with your appearance and get rid of those childish purple bits at the end of your hair, you should listen. Now, I saw on the schedule that you have a day off tomorrow.”

“I do.” A chill rippled down Adeline’s spine.

“Any plans for this evening?”

Adeline cleared her throat. “A movie with a girlfriend.”

“Any plans for tomorrow?”

She shook her head slowly.

His smile brightened, while his eyes darkened. “There’s a complex surgery scheduled for the day after tomorrow. A rare case. Not something you’ll see too often.” He paused as her heart leaped. “I could let you scrub in if that’s a belated Christmas gift you might like?”

“Absolutely, Dr. Platt,” she replied, nodding eagerly. “I’ll spend tomorrow reading up on it. What’s the case?”

Dr. Platt wagged a finger. “Not so fast. This is a huge favor I’m doing you.” His smile became a smirk. “What will you give me in return? Nothing is free, Adeline, not even a Christmas gift.”

“Excuse me?” Adeline frowned, hoping she was misunderstanding the situation. Maybe he just wanted her to accept a drink.

“My wife is out of town, visiting family. There’s no one home but me,” he explained. “Perhaps we could make one another a little less lonely this holiday season, and, by

way of thanks, you'll get your place in the operating room."

Adeline's heart plummeted, her hands curling instinctively into fists. "Let me get this straight. You're suggesting I go home with you tonight, in exchange for scrubbing into a surgery?"

"That's about the gist of it," Dr. Platt answered, grinning. "Maybe you could cook me something for Christmas dinner, too. My wife didn't leave anything."

Adeline took a moment to gather herself, before flashing a cold smile in her boss's direction. "I'd say she left the trash where it's meant to be," she said flatly. "With all due respect, Dr. Platt, if those are the terms, you can stuff your 'huge favor' where the sun doesn't shine. I've heard you were a creep, I've heard you'd try and see what you could get away with, but I gave you the benefit of the doubt. Guess I should've listened."

She scraped back her chair as loudly as possible. "Merry Christmas, Dr. Platt. I hope your wife doesn't come back from visiting family and takes half of what you're worth."

"If you leave this room with this attitude, Adeline, we're going to have to have a serious talk about your job here," Dr. Platt insisted, his voice eerily calm, as if he'd done this a thousand times before—dealt with a thousand young women who he thought he could silence.

Adeline glowered at him. "I am leaving for my well-deserved day off. If you're going to drag me in front of a tribunal when I'm back, you'd best believe that I'll be telling them what a creep you are." She paused, letting her anger seep into the room. "So, I would spend Christmas Day considering my choices, if I were you. Goodnight, Dr. Platt."

She'd just reached the door when the smug, older man called out, "And you ought to consider whom they'll believe!"

She wanted to turn around and say everything to him that countless women had probably wanted to say for years, but instead, she kept on walking, striding through the sulfur light of the wards, her sneakers squeaking on the linoleum floor, keeping her head down.

For all its faults and stresses, she adored the hospital, especially when it was decked out for Christmas with ancient tinsel, rough-looking plastic trees and pictures painted by the local schools. Dr. Platt had ruined the entire thing for her, and, what was worse, she truly didn't know if he'd follow through with his threat.

Heading out into the icy evening, the wind battered the door, trying its best to keep her inside the hospital. She had to wonder if it was trying to warn her, letting her know—just as Dr. Platt had—that if she left, she wouldn't be coming back.

She wouldn't be a doctor anymore. Wouldn't get to see the fruits of so many years of hard labor. In one unpleasant encounter, had everything she'd worked for just vanished like smoke in the wind?

They won't fire me, she told herself, bent near diagonal against the wind, biting flakes of snow lashing her cheek. They won't be able to. I won't let them.

So, why was she crying, like she already knew the crushing outcome? The tears were on her cheeks before she realized, freezing against her skin in the bitter weather. There was a storm coming, and this was just the first taste.

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CHAPTER 2

“Hi,” Adeline said as the call connected, “I was just wondering if Jane was there. Jane Clark?”

Having returned home to her frosty apartment, the snow coming down thick outside, she’d had no idea what to do with herself, or how to get the dirty, crawling sensation out of her veins.

She’d immediately thought of her sister. Jane would know what to do about Dr. Platt. So, Adeline had called the number for the archaeological research base in Scotland, figuring that’d be the best way to reach her sister. If nothing else, it would be nice to hear a familiar voice.

But the voice that replied was anything but familiar, and certainly not friendly.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” a male voice replied in a gruff British accent.

Adeline grimaced. “It’s late, huh?”

“It’s one o’clock in the morning,” the man said, adding a dramatic sigh. “Is it urgent?”

“Um... no, not urgent. I just... uh... wanted to wish her a Merry Christmas.” Adeline shook her head, feeling twice as stupid. “Could you ask her to call me tomorrow? I’ll be here all day.”

“Sure, no problem.”

The man hung up, leaving Adeline staring at a blank screen.

Undeterred, Adeline dialed Emma. Her best friend picked up on the third ring, wailing down the phone, “My favorite person in the whole entire world! How are you? Are you at the hospital? Are you coming to the party? It is wild over here!”

She sounded drunk, though it was only a few minutes past eight o’clock.

“The party...”

Adeline could’ve smacked herself. Emma had gone to New York with her boyfriend to celebrate Christmas Eve. It was the only thing she’d talked about for weeks, deliberating over outfits and makeup looks. Adeline had been invited, of course, but she’d declined, knowing that she’d be in no mood for a party after a long Christmas Eve shift. Her past self was one heck of a prophet.

“Yeah, you coming?” Emma yelled as heavy bass music thudded in the background.

Adeline hesitated, doing some mental arithmetic to see how long it would take her to get out of her panda onesie and then get to New York, while having no enthusiasm for it.

“I’ve just been asked to cover a colleague’s shift, so I wanted to get my Merry Christmas in early,” she lied, feeling horrible about it. “You having fun?”

“Addie?” Emma’s voice softened, the music in the background quietening to a distant thump. “Is something wrong? Do you want me to come back? I can bring champagne and cookies?”

“What? No, don’t be silly.”

Emma’s entire mood had shifted to one of concern. “I know you’re not covering someone’s shift, Addie. What’s up? What happened?”

“I forgot about the party,” Adeline admitted. “Had a long day, thought I’d call you, then... obviously remembered you’re in the city. I’m so sorry for calling. You go and wring every bit of fun you can from New York, and give that boyfriend of yours a hug for me.”

Emma was silent for a few moments. “You sure? I don’t mind coming back if you need me, Addie.”

“I need to sleep, that’s what I need,” Adeline insisted, forcing a laugh. “Seriously, go have fun. I’ll be fine. I’m going to eat pizza, fall asleep on the sofa, and call you bright and early in the morning just to torment your hangover.”

Emma chuckled. “You absolutely sure?”

“So sure,” Adeline promised as loneliness crept in through the gaps in the kitchen window frame, where she stood staring at her solitary reflection, letting the cold seep into her bones.

“Well, if you change your mind, shoot me a text, and I’ll come running,” Emma said, meaning it.

If sixteen years of friendship had taught Adeline anything, it was that. Emma would always come when called. Through rain or snow or sleet or hellfire, she’d be there. Had been there.

With a back and forth of goodbyes, Adeline hung up first, leaving Emma to her big

night in the city... and wishing, momentarily, that she'd agreed to go and meet her friend.

“Now what?” Adeline whispered to herself, tapping her phone against her chin.

She peered outside. New Jersey was lit up like a Christmas tree, the snow falling silently as car horns beeped in the near distance. From other windows, the soft glow of festive joy spilled out.

Even below, in the parking lot of her apartment complex, two kids and their dad were making the most of the snow, despite the stormy conditions, rolling up three balls to make a snowman.

We used to do that...

She retreated from the window. It was easier to pretend it was any other day.

She took a bottle of wine from the cupboard and sat down, switching on the TV. She found a ropey Christmas romcom, where the big city girl goes back to her sleepy hometown to save the day, falling in love with some handsome man in plaid along the way. After five minutes, she was up on her feet again, making her way to her bedroom, wine bottle and glass in hand.

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of her tiny walk-in closet, she poured herself a glass of wine and dragged out the dusty, old box that had been hiding behind her shoes ever since she moved in three years ago.

It was a box of buried memories—old school reports, medals from her brief stint as a gymnast, a wooden reindeer ornament with a snapped antler, a few stuffed animals, and pictures of the family she once held so dear, before it all got turned upside down.

“Hello...” She frowned at a hinged black box tucked into the corner. “I thought Jane took you.”

She reached in, opening the lid of the old gift box to reveal a snow globe. It contained an ordinary fairytale scene—a chocolate-box cottage in a forest somewhere, with pine trees decked out in all their festive finery, while glittery white deer stood frozen, like they’d just heard a twig snap.

The more she looked at it, the more details she noticed. A pie cooling on the windowsill, a pair of doves roosting in one of the trees, a fireplace crackling through the cottage’s open door.

Whoever had made it had crafted it with so much detail, making her feel like she could slip into that miniature world, or that there were secret people living in there.

She reached for her phone, about to call Jane again, when she remembered.

No, mustn’t piss off her colleagues.

Still, she’d been certain that Jane had taken the snow globe, assuming she’d packed it away in storage with the rest of her stuff.

Yet, there it was, in Adeline’s hands, the ornament her mother had kept out all year round, despite the somewhat festive scene, giving it pride of place on the mantelpiece.

“If you shake it hard enough, whatever you wish for will come true,” her mom used to say, taking the globe down to demonstrate, though she always kept her wishes to herself.

Downing a mouthful of wine, Adeline shook the snow globe as hard as she could,

whispering, “I wish to keep my job.” She shook it again, harder. “I wish this day never happened. I wish to forget it all.”

She glanced down at the bottle of wine, knowing that it would serve the same purpose.

Tucking the snow globe under her arm, laughing at the ridiculousness of believing that snow globes—or birthday candles, for that matter—had any sort of power, she padded back to the small living room that adjoined the kitchen and sat back down to force herself through the Christmas romcom.

An hour and a bottle of red wine later, sobbing through the grand finale, where love triumphed, Adeline had never felt more desperately alone.

It was Christmas Day tomorrow, and she’d be spending it the same way, by herself, willing someone to call, choosing wine instead of anything resembling a solid meal. She hadn’t even decorated.

Suddenly, all of the rage she’d held back in Dr. Platt’s office hit her like an icy gust of snowstorm. She grabbed the snow globe that had been sitting on the sofa beside her and shook it with a violent fury.

“I don’t want to be alone anymore,” she hissed at the woodland scene. It wasn’t even a wish, just a statement.

Thunder grumbled in the distance.

“I don’t want to be alone anymore!” she growled, louder this time, shaking the globe until her wrists ached and the snow swirled like the storm outside.

The thunder boomed louder, too, making the lights overhead flicker.

“I don’t want to be alone anymore!” she howled, rattling the snow globe so viciously, so vengefully that the slippery glass shot out of her hand.

The precious ornament arced through the air, crashing against the wall. It exploded into glitter and water and snowflakes, the festive scene shattering on impact.

Struck by a punch of guilt to the stomach, Adeline lunged off the sofa, scrabbling on her hands and knees in a vain attempt to pick up the pieces, feeling the bite of glass in her palms but not caring at all.

What have I done?

Tears stung her eyes as thunder roared right overhead, the vibrations thrumming through the walls, the floor, the furniture, toppling the only lamp she had on, and the TV, too.

The apartment pitched into darkness, and she went with it, collapsing onto what remained of that precious snow globe, her hands full of the pieces she could never put back together again.

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CHAPTER 3

Scottish Highlands, 1700s

Thunder bellowed through the stone hallways of Gibson Keep, lightning splintering the winter skies, as a furious wind screamed through every window.

Outside the walls of the keep, the sea thrashed and foamed, reflecting the lightning back toward the skies, while snow tumbled down. It was the strangest sight—snow and lightning together. A sight that Logan Anderson, the Laird of Gibson, had never seen in his two-and-thirty years.

“It’s goin’ to blow up the keep!” his sister, Moira, cried out beneath a mountain of blankets and furs.

“It isnae goin’ to blow up the keep,” Logan replied sharply, his puzzled gaze trained on the thick clouds, waiting for another fork of lightning to illuminate the world.

The lump of blankets trembled. “We must’ve done somethin’ to anger the heavens, Brother. It’s ‘cause I floated that candle out onto the water the other day—on that day—I ken it is!”

“It’s a storm. Storms happen,” he insisted, his tone impatient. “Ye’ve probably seen at least a hundred in yer twenty years.”

“Nae like this one. There’s somethin’... wrong about this one,” Moira replied.

She screamed as another growl of thunder quivered through the bedchamber. Logan could feel it in his chest, like the storm had somehow snuck in between his ribs.

Just then, the bedchamber door flew open, eliciting a blood-curdling shriek from Moira, who sought to bury herself even further beneath the pile of blankets and furs, as if the lightning had just struck through the window and would reach her at any moment. But it was only Logan's man-at-arms, running in without knocking, looking pale and worried.

"For pity's sake, Theo!" Logan grumbled. "This is me sister's private chambers. Ye're to put yer knuckles on the door before harin' in like that! This isnae a mainland market on a Saturday afternoon, though it's startin' to feel that way."

Theo bowed awkwardly toward the lump on the bed. "Apologies, m'lady." He paused to catch his breath. "I went to yer chambers, m'laird, but one of the maids said ye'd come to watch over yer sister. I dinnae even think to knock. See, a lass was found on the beach, so that's all I was thinkin' of when I came runnin'. But aye, ye're right, I should've knocked."

"There's a lass on the beach?" Logan furrowed his brow. "Shipwreck?"

Theo shook his head. "There's been nay boat sighted, m'laird, so if it's a wreck, it wrecked way out at sea and she's been washed up."

"Is she alive?"

Theo shrugged. "I daenae ken, m'laird. Jamie and Bruce went down to pull up the fishin' boats, saw the lass, and Jamie came hurtlin' to find me. I'm just passin' the message to ye. But Jamie seemed... spooked. Said neither of 'em wanted to touch her to check if she was breathin'. Wouldnae tell me why."

Moira suddenly threw back her blankets, sitting among them with a sharp look on her face. “Well, what are the pair of ye doin’, still standin’ there like dryin’ bits of meat? If there’s a lass on the beach and she’s hurt, ye ought to be on yer way already to help her! If ye daenae, in this weather, she might die!”

“We are on our way,” Logan shot back, shaking his head. “I was listenin’ to the story first, nae to mention that ye said ye’d disown me as yer brother if I set so much as a toe outside this room while the storm is still ragin’.”

Moira pulled a face. “Aye, well, this lass clearly needs yer help more than me. Send Ma in, and I’ll be quite all—” Thunder boomed, and she retreated back into her fluffy cave, but not before yelling, “Get on with ye!”

Exasperated by his sister, and troubled by the fate of the girl washed up on the beach, Logan headed out at a brisk pace, with Theo hurrying breathlessly to stay at his side.

In truth, the last thing Logan wanted was anyone outside the stone walls of the keep, but if he just left this woman to die out in the storm, his people would lose faith in him, maybe even think that he was more like his father than he had led them to believe.

“Ye daenae think it could be... a message, do ye?” Theo asked as they prepared to step out in the ferocious winds, lashing snow, and angry lightning.

Logan paused. “What sort of message?”

“From yer enemies,” Theo replied quietly. “A Trojan horse.”

Logan cast his man-at-arms, and lifelong friend, a withering look. “I doubt even me enemies would dare to creep out in this weather, Theo. And I daenae have any that would think to attack. The only enemies we have now are those that quarrel with us

over the cost of grain.” He clapped him on his solid back. “Ye’ve been listenin’ to too many of me ma’s evenin’ stories.”

“She tells ‘em so well, m’laird,” Theo protested. “Ye feel like ye’re there.”

“Aye, well, we’re nae in Ancient Greece.”

Logan grabbed the spare flap of plaid fabric that hung down the back of his kilt and draped it over his head like a hood, before surging out into the bitter, brutal storm. Had he been a lighter man, the first blast of wind might have knocked him off his feet.

It was a short run across a muddy field to reach the rocky slope that led down to the beach, and as he jumped down onto the wet sand, his eyes scoured the shore for the woman.

Two men waved their arms wildly, not far from where a ten-strong fleet of fishing boats had been hauled up onto the beach, to stop them from getting swept away.

“Where is she?” Logan demanded, approaching the two soldiers.

Jamie McGovern pointed gingerly to one of the fishing boats. “She’s down there, m’laird. Me heart almost jumped out of me chest when I saw her. Bruce here thought she was a seal.”

“Thought I was goin’ to get bit again, ‘cause I had fish for supper,” Bruce grumbled. “I swear, they can smell it on ye.”

Logan ignored their twittering and stepped between two of the fishing boats. There, curled up in the middle, protected from some of the buffeting winds, was... a black and white bear with the face and hands of a woman.

“Now, do ye see why we dinnae want to touch her?” Jamie asked, shuddering. “That’s an omen, that is.”

Bruce nodded sagely. “A woman slayin’ a bear and wearin’ its skin—might be best if ye left her out here. Nay good can come from allowin’ somethin’ like that into the keep.”

“It might’ve been a gift,” Logan said, crouching down beside the woman. “Somethin’ to keep her warm from someone dear to her.”

Curious, he pushed back the head of the bear, revealing more of the beautiful face beneath. She was as pale as the moonlight on a clear night, her plump cheeks dusted with freckles and snow. Small plumes of breath drifted from full, deeply bowed lips, confirming she was alive, just sleeping or unconscious. But even in her slumbering state, she seemed troubled, her eyelids fluttering, her mouth moving slightly, her hands twitching.

“I think ye should step away, m’laird,” Theo said suddenly, gesturing to the woman’s hair that had spilled out from the bear’s head. It was long and dark, the ends somehow tinged with a startling purple, visible in the low light of the lantern in Jamie’s hand.

Logan turned to the two men who had found her. “Both of ye, return to the keep and daenae say a word of what ye’ve seen to anyone. I willnae have ye worryin’ folks. She’ll be from an island clan in the far north or somethin’, and this is just their way of doin’ things. Same way people find us strange for paintin’ our faces with ash from burnin’ fish before we go out to sea, to bring us luck.”

“We willnae say a word,” Jamie promised, turning on his heel and dragging Bruce with him, likely to avoid Logan changing his mind and asking them to stay. They did not need to be told twice.

With them gone, Logan returned his attention to the young woman. “Have ye seen anythin’ like this before?” he asked, tracing a fingertip down the center of the bearskin. It seemed to be held together with a long row of small teeth, perfectly interlocked.

Ingenious, in truth, though he could not fathom how it was done.

“That’s a witch, m’laird,” Theo insisted, pulling a face. “She’ll curse ye twice over for touchin’ her. Either that, or she’s a selkie, wearin’ a bearskin instead of a sealskin. Or one of them other things yer maither told us about—them lasses with the fish tails. Sea-maidens or whatever they were called.”

Logan glared at his friend. “She isnae a mermaid or a witch. There are nay witches. I’ve told ye this.”

“Aye, ye’ve told me, but ye’ve yet to explain why there’s a curse upon us all if there’s nay such things as witches.” Theo folded his arms across his chest. “I reckon ye’re starin’ at the answer. She’s come to finish what she started, showin’ her face at last before she kills us all, so we’ll ken who it is that cursed us.”

Logan shrugged off his friend’s worrisome words and scooped the woman into his arms, lifting her easily despite the bearskin. The fur was softer than he had expected, more like velvet than the coarse pelt of a bear. And her hair, as the lightning ricocheted down from the heavens, almost touching the sea, shone a vivid purple once more. Just at the ends, blending out of the dark of the rest of her long, wavy locks.

“If that’s what people are goin’ to think, Theo, then she isnae safe here,” Logan told his friend. “Whatever she is, wherever she’s come from, it willnae do us any favors if we leave her out on the sand. Say ye’re right, say she is somethin’... unnatural—which I daenae believe, but I’m humorin’ ye—do ye think she’ll be less

likely or more likely to fortify the curse if we daenae do anythin'? This could be a test as much as an omen."

Theo arched a thoughtful eyebrow. "Och, well I hadnae thought of it like that."

"Nay, I dinnae think ye would have," Logan grumbled, carrying the mysterious woman toward the keep, her cheek cold against his chest, her eyelids still fluttering like she might awaken at any moment.

"But can I just say one more thing?" Theo asked as the pair reached the rocky slope up to the field.

Logan reached the grassy verge. "Aye, if ye must."

"If she isnae somethin' unnatural, if she's just a lass that's been dragged from a wreck by the tide," Theo asked hesitantly, averting his gaze every time it settled on the woman, "then why is she nae wet?"

Logan frowned. "What do ye mean?"

"She's bone dry, m'laird, aside from the snow on her," Theo replied. "If she's just an ordinary lass, washed up on the beach, why is she nae wet?"

For that, Logan had no answer. A prickle of unease ran down his spine as he realized his friend was right. She was not wet. Not even a little bit.

And as they were situated on an island, with water all around and no unfamiliar boats sighted, there was no way to reach the island without getting in the sea, one way or another.

He walked on in silence, hoping that when she woke up, she would be able to explain

all this, making sense of the impossible.

But what if I'm wrong?

He clenched his jaw. He could not consider that, not even for a moment, for if he did, that meant he was about to carry certain danger into his keep. He looked down at her beautiful face, one question burning his mind. One he hoped she would answer soon.

Where did you come from?

CHAPTER 4

Adeline stirred to muted darkness and the kiss of something cold against her skin. Her tired eyes strained to open, but it was like struggling against superglue. She was aware of movement, her body off the ground, being carried somewhere in the gloom.

Panic hit her like a lightning bolt, at the same moment that thunder growled. With the panic, memory flooded in. She'd been on the floor, scraping up bits of broken glass and the remnants of the snow globe scene, when the lights had gone out.

None of the vague pieces of memory afterward made any sense, though. She'd collapsed suddenly, as though someone had struck her in the back of the head, knocking her out. After that, she remembered the dull thud of a headache, and the sound of male voices all around her, and a nipping wind snapping at her face.

The headache was still there, growing worse with every second, but the male voices had gone away.

I've been kidnapped...

A lightbulb went off in her head. It was the only explanation. Someone had stalked her home, waited for the storm to cover the sounds of their approach, and snuck in to kidnap her.

And she had a feeling she knew exactly who was responsible—someone who needed to make her disappear before she could cuss him out in front of his peers for being a monumental, renowned creep.

Concentrating on a flash of light that pierced her eyelids, she forced her eyes open... and stared up at the face of a man who couldn't have been more different from Dr. Platt if he tried. In fact, for a second or two, she wondered if she was still out cold, and he was just some manifestation from her subconscious.

No one was that handsome in real life. No one.

A strong jaw sported short, dark stubble, leading up to sharp cheekbones and a sloping, wide nose that reminded her of a tiger she'd seen once at the Turtle Back Zoo. His gleaming eyes, reflecting the flare of the lightning, did nothing to dispel the image of a powerful predator, though she couldn't make out their color. In the midst of the storm, they just looked black.

His hair was dark, too, shaven at the sides and long on top, the lengthier locks held back from his face by several bands of twisted golden wire. A scar ran through his left eyebrow, shining silver every time the lightning flashed.

He seemed to be a giant, too, judging by the distance between her and the ground, his muscular arms carrying her with ease, his broad chest so wide that she felt tiny against his immense body.

For a foolish moment, she considered resting her head on his wide shoulder, just to see what it felt like, and then immediately remembered that she was in the middle of a kidnapping.

No one would know she'd been taken, not for days. Jane might worry, but it wouldn't have been the first time that Adeline disappeared for weeks on end, overwhelmed with her studies.

And Emma wouldn't notice until the day after Christmas, between her imminent hangover and spending time with her enormous family. By then, Adeline sensed

she'd be in a shallow grave somewhere, or locked in Dr. Platt's basement until she promised not to blow the whistle on him.

Dr. Platt must've hired this man .

Her stomach sank. The most handsome men were always the most dangerous.

"I have money," Adeline croaked. "You don't need to do this."

The man glanced down at her, saying nothing.

"What did you do to me? Did you hit me in the head? I might have a concussion," she rambled on. "If you don't seek medical attention for me, I might die. You don't want that."

The man narrowed his eyes, their color still a mystery. "Are ye injured?" he asked, in a thick accent that took her a few seconds to decipher.

It wasn't an unfamiliar accent, but her foggy brain couldn't place it. Still, it definitely didn't sound American—not her part of the States, anyway. Minnesota, maybe?

"My head," she confirmed, though the ache was nothing like the headaches or migraines she experienced before.

Instead, it was more like vertigo—her stomach queasy, the world around her tilting and spinning, like she'd been riding a loop-the-loop rollercoaster for hours or had drunk a few more bottles of wine.

"You didn't hit me?"

Annoyance crinkled the handsome stranger's nose. "Nay, I dinnae hit ye. I daenae

ken what happened to ye.”

She had only a vague idea of what he was saying, a wave of nausea sweeping through her, preventing her from concentrating on his accented words.

She closed her eyes and pinched the fleshy spot between her thumb and forefinger, focusing everything she had on not throwing up on the man carrying her.

It wasn't backed up by science, but her mom had always told her that she could quell nausea by pinching that spot between her thumb and forefinger, and as she couldn't exactly put her head between her legs, it was the only thing she could do. That, and taking deep breaths.

Where am I?

She realized, even with her eyes shut, that her surroundings looked nothing like New Jersey. Not the part where she lived, at least. Why would Dr. Platt have had her kidnapped and then taken to the beach? A beach that didn't resemble any she'd been to before.

Slowly, the man holding her came to a halt. Adeline squeezed her eyes shut tighter, preparing herself for what might happen next. She was half-expecting to find herself beside a car, with the trunk popped open to accommodate her before she was taken to her final destination.

Never let them take you to a second destination.

She'd heard the warning a thousand times before, from all of the true crime documentaries she liked to watch to unwind.

Yet, who knew how many destinations she'd already been taken to, after being

abducted from her apartment? But this might well be the last chance she had to make a run for it. She just had to hope that her legs would cooperate.

Just then, the man cleared his throat pointedly, like she was wasting his time.

Adeline's eyes popped open against her better judgment, to find him staring down at her.

"We're here, lass," he said coldly. "Can ye walk?"

"We're where?"

She started at the sight of an old stone wall, rising up in front of her. Straight ahead, a curved wooden doorway, almost medieval with iron studs poking out, stood half open.

Where was the getaway car? Where was the abandoned warehouse where no one would hear her scream, or a gunshot ring out? And since when had there been what appeared to be a medieval castle in New Jersey?

"Where ye're goin' to rest awhile before I send ye back from wherever ye came from," he replied curtly. "Unless ye'd prefer to stay out by the fishin' boats in the middle of this storm? I daenae like yer chances, but I willnae force ye to stay here if ye would rather freeze yerself to death. That bein' said, ye daenae seem willin' to leave these arms of mine."

Adeline blinked up at him, clearing her throat as she wriggled a little. "You can set me down."

"As ye wish."

He tipped her, putting her feet back on solid ground.

But as she tried to take a step forward, her wobbly legs betrayed her. Fresh dizziness roiled in her head, bending her limbs out of shape, and sending a cold sweat down the back of her neck as dark spots danced in her field of vision. She stumbled forward, grabbing the closed side of the door to keep herself upright.

All ordinary symptoms of a concussion, she told herself, soothing her racing thoughts with a practical medical diagnosis. Nothing to worry about, for now. Drink fluids, don't sleep, and keep monitoring it. No pain medication until other possible causes have been eliminated.

"I daenae think ye ought to be walkin' anywhere, nae without drawin' attention to yerself," the man said, scooping her back up into his arms before she could protest.

Too shocked to argue, still wondering where the getaway car was, she stayed quiet and still as he carried her inside the castle.

The world around her only became stranger as they passed through a passageway and into a large courtyard, with a towering castle ahead and longer, stone buildings running down two sides.

Dead center, a goat stared at her. A moment later, it unleashed an almighty bleat that frightened her out of her skin. But the goat wasn't the only animal. There were chickens, more goats, a few sheep, several donkeys, and a gaggle of geese and ducks sheltering in the courtyard to get out of the worst of the storm.

Hallucinations?

She closed her eyes and opened them again. The goat kept glaring at her as if to say, "I'm not going to vanish just to make you feel better."

Hallucinations could be a symptom of concussion, or something worse, but these were way too real, too visceral, and... far too smelly to be made up.

Heading inside the towering castle, she was carried down narrow hallways and up winding staircases, the wind howling through every slitted window and wooden shutter, until they came to another curved doorway. The man booted it open with his foot.

In the room beyond, a woman screamed.

“Have pity on yer poor sister!” a crackly female voice barked. “Honestly, hoofin’ open doors like a donkey with a bad temper. I’d just managed to get her out of the blankets, ye oaf!”

Adeline saw the source of the textured voice. She was the most beautiful woman Adeline had ever seen. Tall and willowy, with flowing silver hair down to her waist, and the sort of face that ancient poets would have waxed lyrically about. Ethereal, only growing more beautiful with age, defying society’s expectations.

The older woman’s eyes widened as she met Adeline’s gaze. “So, there was a lass,” she mused. “I thought yer sister was babblin’ nonsense when she said ye’d run out to find a lass on the shore. Actually, nay, I thought it was an excuse nae to watch over her anymore, but... I can admit when I was wrong. What’s yer name, lass?”

Adeline couldn’t speak, her attention fixed on the strange clothes that the woman was wearing—a gown of blue and silver with a tight bodice and full skirts that swept out in a train behind her, and sleeves that gathered in ruffles at the elbow. Not the sort of thing anyone Adeline knew would casually wear on an evening.

Just then, another woman emerged from beneath a pile of blankets and furs, much younger but equally as beautiful as her older counterpart, with skin like cream and

raven dark hair that had been teased free of a bun by the blankets. The man's sister, Adeline assumed.

“Goodness me, have ye seen her hair!” the woman cried. “How did ye do that? Can ye teach me? Ma, do ye think I’d look fair with purple in me hair?”

The older woman lifted a finger to her lips. “Hush, Moira, else ye’ll scare the lass. She already looks like a rabbit surrounded by foxes.” She came over, taking hold of Adeline’s hand. “I’m Sophie. Lady Gibson, if ye prefer, though I daenae.”

Adeline still couldn’t reply, startled by how warm and real Sophie’s hand felt in hers.

“Does she nae speak? Is she mute?” Sophie looked at her son for answers.

He shrugged. “She spoke just fine outside.”

“Are you... in the middle of a costume ball or something?” Adeline blurted out, thinking of the only conclusion that made any sense.

People had all sorts of parties at Christmas, so why not a medieval costume ball? If it even was medieval. She had no idea.

Sophie frowned. “Nay, Miss.” She glanced at her son. “Did she hit her head, Logan? Have ye checked for cuts and bruises?”

“She complained of a sore head, aye,” the man, presumably Logan, replied.

Logan...

Adeline might’ve smiled if she hadn’t been so scared. It was a nice name. Masculine and pleasant on the tongue. She thought it suited him, but that might have been the

concussion talking.

Sophie moved to touch the back of Adeline's head, making her flinch. "I'm nae goin' to hurt ye," she said. "I just want to see."

"I'm fine," Adeline insisted, wriggling in Logan's arms once more until she was standing shakily on her own two feet. "Did Dr. Platt set this up? Where are the cameras, huh? Is he trying to prove I'm not in my right mind or something?"

Sophie reached for her hands, steadying her. "I daenae ken a Dr. Platt, Miss, nor what a camera might be."

"You're not working for him?" Adeline turned to stare into Logan's concerned eyes.

They were blue, she realized, but not the icy blue of Dr. Platt's eyes, nor any shade of blue she'd seen before. They were a dark, cobalt blue, flecked with tiny lines of gold, and there was a small brown freckle at the bottom of his left iris.

"I daenae work for anyone, lass," Logan replied flatly. "I'm Laird of this keep—this island."

Sophie tugged her toward the bed, urging her to sit down. "Please, let me check the back of yer head. Ye might be right that ye're nae in yer right mind. Ye daenae sound like ye are."

"Daenae touch her anymore, m'lady!" another man shouted sharply. A huge man who had been hiding in the shadows. He dwarfed Logan with his tremendous height, his barrel chest so wide that it looked like he was permanently holding his breath.

Sophie rolled her eyes. "Whyever nae, Theo?"

“She... might be a witch, m'lady,” the man, Theo, replied hesitantly. “That purple in her hair, that bearskin she’s wearin’, the way she speaks—it isnae normal, m'lady. I’ve a feelin’ she isnae... natural. Och, I mean, she was lyin’ there on the beach as dry as kindlin’! Didnae look like she’d been in the water at all.”

Adeline snorted, her discomfort transforming into hysterical laughter that bubbled out of her uncontrollably, no doubt making her look even more insane to whichever hidden cameras were recording her at that very moment.

Evidence for Dr. Platt to show his peers... or some kind of set-up from Emma to get her to join the party. Maybe Adeline had gotten it wrong. Maybe the party was in the Hamptons. That would explain the way the beach looked, and, in the daylight, perhaps the castle would prove itself to be nothing more than a millionaire’s mansion.

It's Emma . It has to be.

“That laughin’ isnae natural either,” Theo muttered, throwing his hands up. “Please, Miss, daenae turn me into a frog. I meant nay disrespect. I’ll beg on me knees for yer forgiveness.”

The thought of such an enormous man getting down to his knees, hands clasped, pleading for her to forgive him, was the straw that broke the back of Adeline’s sanity camel.

More laughter poured out of her, her hands braced against her wheezing ribs, her mind spinning at the madness of the elaborate trick. Now, she was just waiting for the punchline—Emma stepping forward to give her a gown and invite her to the party, saying something like, “I told you I’d get you here, one way or another. It’s Christmas, after all!”

“She isnae a witch,” Logan said sharply as he stood over her, squinting down as she

cried tears of hilarity. “Let’s begin at the beginnin’, eh—what’s yer name?”

Adeline caught her breath, swallowing her giggles. “Adeline. My mom really loved Virginia Woolf but hated Virginia as a name. Said it would get me bullied.”

It was a story she’d told a million times, usually getting a few understanding laughs, but the group of four in the room with her stared back at her blankly.

“You know,” she continued, “because Adeline was her real first name.”

More blank looks.

“I’m sure she’s a... lovely woman,” Sophie said, patting Adeline’s hand. “Was she a friend of yer maither?”

Adeline’s head was starting to pound again. “No—the writer, Virginia Woolf.”

“Cannae say I’ve heard of her,” Sophie replied, “but we daenae get too many new books here on the island, so ye mustnae think me uncivilized. I do me best with what we have.”

Adeline closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Look, you’re all very good actors, but the jig is up. Just get Emma in here, and I swear I’ll go to the Christmas party without complaint. I get it—she didn’t want me to be alone on Christmas, she knew when I was getting off work, and she had me brought here by force because that’s the only way I’d come. Where is she? Please, bring her here before I really start to believe I’m going mad.”

The silence in the room thickened until she’d have needed a saw to cut through it. Furtive glances ricocheted between the unfamiliar quartet, spiking her uneasiness. Clearly, she’d said something wrong.

“I think ye ought to come with me. Ye might nae be a witch, but ye’re nae welcome,” Logan said darkly, hauling her up off the bed and throwing her over his shoulder before she had a chance to ask, “What did I say?”

Yet, as he carried her out of the room, and she saw the pale and horrified faces of the two women still within, she had a horrible feeling that this had nothing to do with Emma, or a Christmas party, or even Dr. Platt.

Something was very wrong, and the constant thudding in her head held the key. But she already had part of the answer teetering on the tip of her thoughts.

She was suffering an affliction far worse than a concussion.

CHAPTER 5

It had been a long time since Logan had used the dungeons, and it showed. The cells were covered in a thick layer of slimy dirt, the reek of mold and rot hitting his nostrils before he'd even opened the main door to the dungeons.

They had dispensed with a gaoler several years prior and had never had any reason to reinstate one, but he realized he should, at least, have had someone clean out the filthy cells.

Grabbing a rickety, three-legged stool as he passed it, he set it in the center of the first cell he came to and promptly dropped the mysterious woman onto it. He was furious and deeply concerned, but he could not very well make her sit in the muck.

“Who sent ye here?” he growled, pacing back and forth in front of her. “Where did ye come from, eh? And how, pray tell, did ye get here? As ye can tell, ye’re nae wet, so ye dinnae swim, and ye werenae washed up, but nor have any boats been sighted, so explain yerself!”

Adeline looked up at him, trembling from head to toe, gripping the edge of the stool like it might save her. “What happened?”

“Eh?”

“What happened?” she repeated in that peculiar accent, unlike any he had ever heard before. It was mellow and musical, less clipped and precise than the English, not as fast or melodic as the Irish, making him wonder if she hailed from Wales. “You

were... so nice to me a moment ago, and now... you're throwing me in this place. What... did I do wrong?"

Her teeth chattered, the dungeons as cold as an ice house.

"Are ye a Catholic?" he shot back.

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm not anything. I'm not religious."

"If ye're nae Catholic, ye wouldnae have dared to mention Christmas," he pointed out, eyeing her closely, searching for signs of deceit. "Did ye hit yer head so hard that ye forgot the Reformation?"

She looked bewildered. "I don't know what the Reformation is, but I swear I'm not Catholic. Not that you should be throwing people in prison cells for being Catholic. What do you think this is, the Middle Ages? I mean, I know you're probably trying to stay in character or whatever, but this is harassment."

He felt as bewildered as she looked, only understanding half of what she was saying.

"It's the year of our Lord, 1705, and you ken well enough the penalty for being Catholic in Scotland. Even if ye're Welsh, ye'd ken that, so daenae pretend ye daenae ken. I willnae believe ye."

"Excuse me?" Adeline's eyes widened, her body freezing up. "What year did you say it was?"

"1705," he repeated, suddenly uncertain of her behavior.

How hard would a person have to hit their head in order to forget the year? He had seen a man clubbed in the head by his wife forget that they were married, but

everyone suspected that one had everything to do with the other, and he had been pretending all these years.

Then again, there was a story of a young woman who had been struck in the forehead by a thick bough while riding at speed, and she had forgotten her entire family for almost a year. Even now, though some memories had returned, there were people she could not recognize as old friends.

Adeline began to shake her head, starting slowly, growing more desperate with every moment. Her eyes squeezed shut, her knuckles whitening on the stool, a strange, keening sound emerging from her bloodless lips.

“That can’t be true,” she hissed, her movements unsettling. “You’re lying. This is a set-up, and you really should learn when a joke is over. It’s not funny anymore. Get Emma in here, right now.”

“Emma who?”

“Emma Wickes. My best friend. Get her in here before I lose my damn mind!”

He blinked in surprise at her sharp curse. It was not what he would have expected from a woman, but then she was not like any woman he had ever encountered. She was... some sort of warrioress who wandered the Earth in bearskins, talking in riddles.

If she isnae a Catholic, then...

He considered Theo’s suspicions once again and quickly shook them away. This woman had likely been trained to withstand interrogation, that was all.

“I daenae ken a lass by that name,” Logan told her. “And this is nay jest, lass. This is

a serious crime. If ye're a Catholic, spreadin' the word of Christmas, then ye're in dire trouble."

"What have you got against Christmas? It's me who should hate it, not you," she retorted curtly. "And I'm not a Catholic!"

"Then what are ye?"

She glared at him, shivering violently. "I'm a doctor. I live in New Jersey. I need immediate medical assistance because, clearly, I'm having some sort of mental breakdown. Either that, or you're not real, and I'm in a hospital room, deep in a coma. Or I'm still knocked out on my living room floor, lucid dreaming. Heck, maybe this is what happens before you die—you make believe you're in some... castle, being thrown into a dungeon by a hot man in plaid." Her eyes widened. "Crap, that's it! This is a dream. I was watching some stupid Christmas romcom about a man in plaid, and here you are. This is just my subconscious!"

She jumped up and put her palms on his chest, running them across the hard muscle, squeezing his arms, trailing her fingertips down the ridges of his abdomen. All the while, he blinked down at her, too astonished to move.

He could not remember the last time he had been touched like that, and though he knew he should force her back down onto the rickety stool, his body responded, warmed by her unexpected caresses.

"You're exactly what I'd dream of," she said, lightly slapping her hands against his cheeks, cradling his face. "I mean, come on, look at you! You don't exist in the real world! No man looks like that in real life!"

Coming to his senses with the slight sting of her palms, Logan slowly grasped her wrists, pulling her hands away from his face. "I exist, Miss Adeline," he growled.

“And ye shouldnae touch me.”

His chest burned where she had put her hands on him, sending a bolt of concern through his heart, for if Theo was right, then he had just allowed a witch to touch him.

And that tingling sensation, making his skin run hot with a feverish heat, felt alarming like a spell being woven throughout his veins, cursing him.

I allowed her to trick me .

“I’ve read about hallucinations and lucid dreaming feeling ridiculously real,” she went on, “but if I’m in a coma or unconscious, I can’t get to my textbooks. I wonder if the universe thought I needed a Christmas gift so bad that they made me knock myself out to get it.”

She laughed that strange, uneasy laugh that she had mustered back in Moira’s bedchamber.

“What year do ye think it is?” Logan asked directly, still gripping her wrists.

She did not try to fight him, her eyes—the color of the headland on an autumn morning, green and golden—fixed on his.

“It’s 2023,” she replied calmly. “And pretty as you are, I’m really hoping I’m going to wake up in a minute. Spending Christmas alone is better than spending Christmas in a hospital bed, or worse.”

She sounded so certain, her expression so earnest, that the impossibility of what she was saying was delayed for several minutes.

Instead of telling her that she was quite mad and clearly suffering from injuries he had not yet inspected, he asked, “And where do ye think ye are?”

“I’m in New Jersey, America. I got angry at my snow globe and shook it so hard that it went flying. It smashed to pieces, and I was trying to pick up those pieces when the lights went out, and I... collapsed,” she explained, her words so peculiar and unknown that it delayed common sense even longer.

“I havenae heard of America. Where is it?”

She pointed toward the slick, grimy wall. “If you’re saying that I’m in Scotland, then you’d have to sail past Ireland, and then all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. That’s where I’m from.”

“From the Colonies? Ye sailed all that way? Is that how ye came to be washed up on the shore?” He stared at her in abject disbelief.

“I haven’t sailed anywhere. I’m still in my apartment, and this is a dream,” she insisted, pulling slightly against the grip of his hands.

He loosened his hold a little. “It’s nae a dream, lass. Ye’re here, same as I am.” He frowned. “Did ye get that bearskin from... America?”

“This?” She laughed and yanked her hand free, tugging at a little rectangle of black fabric.

She pulled apart the tiny black teeth that held both sides of the bearskin closed, all the way to the lowest part of her stomach. Logan watched, unable to look away, as she slid her arms out of the bearskin and let the whole thing fall.

It skimmed down her hips, her thighs, her calves, pooling at her feet. But he was no

longer observing the bearskin, his eyes drawn to her slender figure, all but naked in front of him. There was a layer of some kind of gray material he was unfamiliar with, so thin that it was like a second skin on her lean, breathtaking body.

He could see everything.

His breath caught in his throat, his gaze admiring full, shapely breasts, two pert nipples poking through the second skin.

And with the shape of her, his eyes had no choice but to follow the teasing lines of her curves, taking in the hourglass curve of her waist and jutting hips, before committing the firm, lean muscles of her thighs to memory... and the faintest hint of what lay between them.

She's bewitchin' ye! his common sense boomed in his head, snapping his eyes back up to her face, but not before they had savored the elegant curve of her neck, and the slim lines of her arms.

Here was a woman who had clearly worked hard throughout her life, for ladies of good fortune and station did not have her lean, defined physiques, showing their wealth on their bodies, highlighting their rounder curves with bustles and padding. Yet, he had never seen a figure more beautiful, more tempting, more... bewildering.

Why had she stripped bare in front of him?

"It's a onesie," she explained, picking up the fallen bearskin. "It's made of polyester, not an actual panda."

He shook his head. "None of those words make any sense to me."

"That's because I'm from 2023, and you're from 1705," she replied. "And you can

stop staring at me like that. This is a yoga jumpsuit. It's comfy, not something that gives you the right to ogle me."

He immediately averted his gaze. "Are ye a selkie? Is that yer sealskin?"

"No, I'm a woman who isn't in her own time!" Adeline replied vehemently. "I'm a woman with a head injury, who has dreamed you up!"

He swallowed thickly, his mind still raging with the image of her standing so bare in front of him. "Are ye a witch, then?"

"Read my lips," she shot back, though he did not turn to look at her. "I am Adeline Clark, twenty-six years old, a doctor from New Jersey, and I am in the middle of a medical emergency. I'm not a witch, not a selkie, not any kind of Scottish creature you can think of—which, of course, you can't, because you're not real, and my knowledge of Scottish myths and folklore only stretches so far. You're a figment of my imagination, conjured by a mix of bad TV, too much wine, me thinking about my sister, and some kind of trauma to the brain."

Logan gathered his thoughts, pushing down the sensation that still prickled in his veins, and finally turned to look back at her, concentrating solely on her striking eyes. If he glanced any lower, he would lose control of his common sense once more, bewitched a second time.

"It appears ye've been instructed to bamboozle me, so ye can weasel yer way into me keep," he said evenly, though his heart thundered wildly, urging him to take a peek downward. Just one. "It willnae work, Miss Adeline. When ye talk a bit of madness, it's easy to be tricked, but when ye talk too much madness, it circles back around to obvious deceit. So, I suggest ye make yerself comfortable here, and we'll see if ye're nae more willin' to tell me the truth in the mornin'."

He stepped back through the open door of the cell and closed it behind him, turning the rusty key in the rustier lock with a squeal of metal on metal. The key stuck for a moment as he tried to pull it out, but it came away soon enough.

“Fine, leave me in here,” Adeline replied with a shrug, pulling her peculiar bearskin—or “panda,” as she had called it—back over her astonishing body. “Come morning, I’ll be waking up with a hangover, where I belong. At worst, I’ll be waking up to a hospital breakfast. Either way, thanks for the Christmas gift of feeling some rock-hard abs!”

She shook her head, mumbling, “Just when I thought my life couldn’t get any more pathetic, I go and conjure up a Scotsman in a kilt while suffering a catastrophic brain hemorrhage or something. Hey, if I die, at least I’ll die happy.”

Utterly confused, Logan walked away, wondering what in heaven’s name he had willingly carried into his keep. And as he walked, he thought of her curves again, growing evermore certain that she was a witch, and she had just cast a spell on him.

CHAPTER 6

Adeline set the stool in front of the iron bars, the cold metal digging into her back as she leaned against them. She racked her brain desperately, sifting through mental notes from years of studying, trying to remember any remedy or trick to wake someone up from unconsciousness... from the inside .

But everything she thought about required outside help, and most only had circumstantial evidence of working, like playing a favorite song, and others depended on the severity of the head injury, like wafting smelling salts under her nose.

“This can’t be real,” she told herself, her logical mind struggling. “Time travel is impossible. Time travel through a freaking snow globe... that’s what? Magic? And magic doesn’t exist.”

If it did, she would’ve magicked her mom and dad back to life, would’ve magicked Dr. Platt into a toad, would’ve magicked her way through medical school, would’ve magicked her sister back from Scotland for the holidays. She wouldn’t have magicked herself to some island in Scotland three-hundred-plus years ago.

The trouble was, she couldn’t get the bombardment of senses out of her head—the sights, the sounds, the textures, the smells of the world she’d entered. If she’d been knocked out, it was highly unlikely that she was lucid dreaming, where those things might be possible to replicate. Nor had she ever lucid dreamed before, and, apparently, it wasn’t an easy thing to master, whereas everything around her was a masterpiece if it was purely an invention of her mind.

“He felt so... solid,” she whispered, staring down at her hands.

A gasp slipped from her lips as she realized there was something new on the palms and fingers she knew so well, something she hadn’t noticed until now. There were small, fresh cuts in her skin, and protruding from the fleshy pad under her middle finger, something glinted.

She pinched the sharp corner between the thumb and forefinger of her opposite hand and pulled out the offending thing. She gulped as she brought it up to the low light of the lantern that Logan had left outside the cell. It was a tiny shard of glass, with an even tinier piece of glitter still attached.

Wherever she was, whatever year it was, however she had gotten there, she had brought a piece of the snow globe with her. Suddenly, with a sinking dread, her head roaring with pain, the impossible no longer seemed so ridiculous.

I’ve... traveled to the past.

She tried out the thought in her mind again, but the pain washed over it, dragging it down into the pulsing, dark part of her head. She just needed to rest. Once she’d slept, she’d be able to figure this all out—she was certain of it. The truth couldn’t be the truth, her brain wouldn’t allow her to comprehend it.

“I’ve traveled to the past, and I’ve just been thrown into a dungeon,” she repeated quietly... and immediately began to laugh until she cried.

“If ye ask me, ye shouldnae have done that,” Moira said, combing through her long, dark hair, apparently recovered from her absolute terror now that the storm had moved away to the other side of the island.

Logan shot her a warning look through their reflection in her mirror. “It’s me duty to

ensure the keep is safe from anyone who might cause us trouble,” he replied. “I daenae ken what she is, but she’s... troublesome.”

“She’s a witch,” Theo insisted, standing politely in the doorway of Moira’s bedchamber.

Logan groaned. “I cannae be certain if she’s a witch or nae. Part of me thinks that, aye, she is, and part of me thinks that she’s... stranger than that. The story she just told me is the most ridiculous thing me ears have ever had the good grace to hear, yet... I cannae fathom how anyone could fabricate so many peculiar things.”

His mind had bounced back and forth between hailing Adeline as a witch and believing her wild tale, ever since his return from the dungeons, and it showed no sign of settling one way or the other. Both possibilities seemed too outlandish to him, but he could not think of a third.

“This country used to respect witches, once upon a time,” Sophie interjected, her gray eyes turned toward the sea, her expression pensive. “A witch was just another word for a healer, a midwife, a physick, though we have long forgotten that. Now, if a lady sings a song at dawn while she’s pickin’ mushrooms because it makes her feel joyful, she is accused of witchcraft. It is... shameful.”

Theo cleared his throat. “Aye, m’lady, but there have always been the cursin’ kind of witches, too, and we shouldnae pretend they daenae exist, considerin’ our situation.”

“I am nae pretendin’ anythin’,” Sophie argued coolly, “but I daenae believe that young lady is a witch. I cannae explain it, but I feel it in me bones. Ye shouldnae have taken the lass down to the dungeons without givin’ her leave to speak.”

Logan expelled an exasperated sigh. “Are the pair of ye turnin’ on me now? I did what any Laird ought to do when there’s someone shoutin’ about bloody Christmas in

me halls.” He shook his head. “That bein’ said, I’m convinced she’s nae a Catholic.”

“So, what is she doin’ down in the dungeons still?” Sophie fixed her flinty eyes on him.

“I want to give her time to think, so she can tell me the truth,” Logan replied. “Her story just isnae. It cannae be.”

Sophie tilted her head. “Tell it to us. We can be the judge of that.”

Feeling somewhat annoyed that his mother and sister were trying to question his actions, Logan took a breath and told them the same story Adeline had told him, fumbling over some of the words here and there, for they were as foreign to him as Spanish.

He had no idea if he was saying them right, or what they meant, and as he came to the end of the story, his mother and sister looked almost as confused as he felt.

“May I see her?” Sophie asked, getting up from her seat by the window.

Logan shook his head. “Nae tonight. I’ve told her she can think ‘til mornin’, and if I change me mind now, what sort of message will that send to her, eh? That me ma is the one with the power?”

“Ah, but ye’re forgettin’ somethin’.” Sophie smiled. “If ye leave her in those dungeons ‘til mornin’, even wearin’ that... animal skin, there willnae be anyone to ask. The cold will get her, and I’m nae about to allow a poor lass to die, simply because she’s unusual to us.”

Logan had not, in fact, forgotten that it was bitterly cold down in the dungeons, for it had plagued his thoughts since departing that icy underbelly.

Several times upon his return, he had wanted to go back and find alternative accommodations for Adeline, but he had thought it might make him look weak. He did not want her to think him weak... nor did he want her to die.

“Ye can visit her, then,” he relented. “But if ye cannae come to a conclusion as to what she is or where she comes from, then she stays where she is.”

Meanwhile, inwardly, he knew his mother would remain true to her word, insisting that Adeline be placed somewhere warmer for the night. She was just giving him the excuse he needed.

With that, all four of them—Logan, Sophie, Theo, and Moira—traipsed back through the windy, frozen castle, making their way lower and lower, their shoes scuffing on an endless array of winding staircases, until they were deep into the earth.

Sophie went ahead of them, through the door to the dungeons, striding with purpose down the narrow passageway that ran alongside the cells. She did not have to go far before she came to the place where Adeline was being held.

“Are you here to set me free?” Adeline’s voice whispered to her, tugging at something in Logan’s chest. “I knew you had a kind heart the moment I met you.”

Sophie reached out a hand to her son. “The key, if ye please.”

Logan handed it over.

“Ye’re nae free, exactly, but this is nay place for a woman,” Sophie explained. “I thought a guest chamber might suit ye better, so ye can rest and put yer thoughts in order. And I couldnae have slept a wink tonight without seein’ the back of yer head, to make sure ye’re nae bleedin’. The Laird wanted ye to remain here, but I insisted.”

“Oh...” Adeline murmured, sparking guilt in Logan.

He knew his mother had only said that last part to help him seem steadfast, but he was beginning to wish he had just given the command for Adeline to be released himself.

The cell door shrieked open, and Adeline emerged. She dipped her chin to her chest, refusing to raise her gaze, as Sophie took her by the hand and began to lead her back the way they had come, straight past Logan.

He waited for Adeline to glance up at him, in fear or respect, but she did not. Yet, as she passed by, her elbow grazed his stomach, igniting memories he knew he ought to forget as quickly as possible.

Soon enough, they had all reached the doorway to one of the guest chambers, high up in the keep tower—a spot where Logan had spent many a golden afternoon in his childhood, watching the sea for any sign of his father returning.

His mother and sister went in first, but as he prepared to enter the room, his mother appeared in the doorway, blocking his path. “I think it would be best if we ladies contend with our guest,” she said firmly. “Ye’ll only scare her with yer presence.”

Logan narrowed his eyes. “And if she should hurt one of ye?”

“She willnae,” Sophie replied. “Now, away with ye.”

“Are ye forgettin’ that I’m the Laird of this keep?”

She smiled. “Nay, but ye’re forgettin’ that I’m yer maither, and I was once the true Lady of this keep. I may nae have much jurisdiction anymore, but when it comes to the peace of young lasses, I will take charge.” She patted him gently on the chest.

“Go on with ye. If there’s trouble, I’ve nay doubt ye’ll hear us scream.”

She closed the door in his face, leaving him out in the hallway, feeling as if he had just been scolded by a tutor. Behind him, Theo pulled a face.

“I suppose it’s to maintain the mystery, eh?” the giant of a man said too brightly, as if relieved that he did not have to spend any more time with the potential witch.

Logan set off down the hallway, tossing back over his shoulder, “I need a drink.”

With thoughts of Adeline’s slender figure, pert breasts, and the secrets between her thighs running through his mind, Logan suspected that a nip or two of something potent was the only way he would be able to sleep that night.

Could it really be true? What if she’s nae lyin’?

He tried to imagine what the world might look like three hundred or so years from now, but it was like trying to see a ship that had gone beyond the horizon. Yet, there were things he could not explain about Adeline, things that would trouble him, no matter how much he drank. Things that, perhaps, were so ludicrous that they really might be true.

A few years ago, he would not have believed that curses were real, but fate had seen fit to prove him otherwise. Maybe magic was real, too—a magic beyond his comprehension, that had somehow sent her to his shores.

CHAPTER 7

“Was he really going to leave me in the dungeons?” Adeline asked while Moira wrapped her up in blankets and furs, and Sophie went to the armoire on the far side of the room, searching through it for something.

Moira chuckled. “Heavens, nay. He isnae a cruel man, though he behaves like a brute sometimes. I reckon he’d have left ye stewin’ for an hour or two, then brought ye up here with a grumpy look on his face.”

Brought me up here?

Adeline’s exhausted, throbbing mind drifted to strange places, her palms tingling with the half-remembered sensation of running across broad, powerful muscles. She thought of how easily he had carried her from the beach, and how delicious his arms had felt when she’d squeezed them, wondering what he might have done with her once he got her to the guest room.

That pleasant thought quickly morphed into horror, realizing that if all of this was real and not an elaborate, lucid dream, then she’d genuinely run her hands all over Logan’s body, treating him like a piece of prime meat.

A second later, her words to him came back to haunt her, her stomach lurching.

You’re exactly what I’d dream of.

Embarrassment blazed in her cheeks as she barely resisted the urge to bury herself

beneath the blankets and stay there until what was happening made sense.

“I’ve heard yer story, Adeline,” Sophie said, returning from the armoire with a long, white garment, easily recognizable as a nightdress. Not exactly Adeline’s style, considering her devout loyalty to onesies and pajamas at bedtime, but fashion was the least of her worries.

“It’s obvious to me and Moira that there’s more to ye than meets the eye,” Sophie continued, passing her the nightdress. “So, put that on, and while ye’re dressin’, I’m goin’ to ask ye some questions. Answer me honestly. I willnae contest what ye say, but ye must be honest with me.”

Adeline took the nightdress and searched for somewhere to change. She spotted something that resembled an old-fashioned dignity screen and shed her blankets to maintain her own dignity.

This is probably some newfangled thing here, not old-fashioned at all.

She looked over the beautiful designs that were printed on the three folding parts of the screen.

“Me son told me that ye hail from the year 2023,” Sophie said. “Is that true?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Adeline replied, slipping out of her onesie.

“And he mentioned ye were a doctor. Do ye mean ye’re a doctor in the healin’ sense?”

Adeline frowned. “Is there any other meaning?”

Sophie seemed to ignore her question. “So, where ye come from, women are

permitted to be doctors?”

“They are. There are thousands of us.”

“And where did ye learn to be a doctor?”

“At a university,” Adeline replied, peeling off the yoga jumpsuit.

She only had her panties on, feeling exposed despite the screen, and she hurried to slip the nightdress over her head. It was too large and too frilly, the high neck suffocating, but it was better than nothing.

Moira gasped. “Ye attended a university and ye’re a doctor? All of that is somethin’ ye can do where ye come from?”

“All of that and more,” Adeline said, realizing the power of those words as they tumbled out of her mouth.

She couldn’t say she’d ever been very good at global history, but even she knew that women’s rights in the 1700s weren’t great.

Yet, to her, the idea of women going to university and becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers, and anything else they wanted to be was as normal as catching a bus.

They don’t even know what a bus is...

It blew her mind a little, and it must’ve been blowing theirs.

“And that wasnae a bearskin ye were wearin’?” Sophie asked as Adeline came out from behind the screen, holding said “bearskin” as well as her jumpsuit.

“It’s fake,” Adeline explained, showing her the garment. “It’s designed to look like a bear—a panda, to be more specific—but there’s no real fur.”

Moira climbed onto the bed, propping her chin on her hands. “What’s a panda?”

“It’s... well, this, but... uh... filled out.” Adeline laughed, spreading out the onesie. “They’re bears that live in Asia. China. Not many of them left, though.”

“Because too many people were skinnin’ them for their pelts?” Moira asked, with a look of genuine sorrow.

Adeline grimaced. “There are a few reasons. One is that they can’t get them to make enough babies. They’re lazy lovers, apparently.”

“Goodness!” Sophie gasped, a sly grin appearing on her lips. “Ye speak quite coarsely for a lass. Is that... common where ye come from?”

Adeline shrugged. “I suppose it must be. I... um... didn’t mean to cause any offense.”

“None taken, but daenae be repeatin’ that sort of thing, Moira,” Sophie warned gently, running her fingertips down the front of the onesie. “What is this? I’ve never seen anythin’ like it before.”

“It’s a zipper.” Adeline reached out and demonstrated. “It keeps it closed.”

Sophie gasped louder than she had with the coarse panda comments. “That’s... sorcery!”

“No, it’s just engineering and manufacturing,” Adeline replied, understanding that what seemed ordinary to her was likely the closest thing to magic to these kind

people.

If a zipper could thrill them like that, she wondered what the sight of a cellphone would do, or a TV, or... running water, even.

Running water.

Adeline cringed inwardly, fearful of how she was going to wash in the morning. There wouldn't be any hot showers, that was for sure.

Sophie stopped cooing over the zipper for a moment, meeting Adeline's gaze. "It's clear to me that ye daenae belong here," she said softly. "I daenae mean that unkindly, but even if I dinnae hear yer story, these... strange contraptions are evidence enough that ye've lost yerself between our time and yer own. I cannae fathom how, but I've seen enough strange things in me years on this Earth to nae dismiss somethin' just because it seems impossible."

"You... believe me?" Adeline choked out, somehow moved by the older woman's willingness to put faith in a time-traveling stranger.

Do I believe me? she had to ask herself, still clinging to the hope that she'd wake up in New Jersey, and that all of this was just a weird dream.

Sophie nodded. "Aye, but if ye are from where ye say ye're from, then we ought to find a way to help ye back to yer own time as soon as possible. Difference isnae celebrated here, Adeline. Ye've heard me son and his man-at-arms ask ye if ye're a witch—now, they willnae do anythin' to harm ye, I mean that, but if word spreads, there willnae be much that anyone can do to aid ye. People are fearful of the strange and inexplicable, and ye, me dear, are both of those things to them. It wouldnae be safe for ye to stay."

“And ye’ll have to cut that beautiful purple out of yer hair,” Moira chimed in sadly, toying with the ends of her own raven-black hair. “That’ll mark ye out as different before anythin’ else, though ye must tell me how ye did it.”

Adeline glanced down at the purple. “It’s just dye. Well, bleach and then dye.” She paused, remembering to be sensitive to their era. “Bleach basically strips all the color out of the hair, turning it kind of white. Then, you put the purple dye on top, and... you get hair like this. People dye their hair all sorts of colors where I’m from. Bright pink, green, blue—you name it.”

“When ye go, ye’ll have to take me with ye,” Moira said with a sigh, turning onto her back so she could gaze up at the ceiling, likely imagining herself in the future with some sort of rainbow hair.

Strangely, Adeline could imagine it, too, picturing her as a young woman of fashion taking as many sartorial risks as possible.

Sophie cleared her throat sternly. “Ye’ll be doin’ nay such thing,” she remarked. “Everyone ought to be where they belong. I cannae profess to ken much about the ways of fate and the heavens, but this is clearly a mistake, and it must be remedied, leavin’ everyone in their proper time.”

Adeline fiddled with the strangling collar of the nightdress, asking the question that no one else seemed to be asking. “But how do I do that? How do I leave?”

“Why, the way ye came in,” Sophie replied, like it should’ve been obvious.

Adeline thought of the piece of glass in her hand. “But... I don’t know how I came in.”

“Then we’ll help ye to figure it out,” Sophie promised. But there was an odd look on

her face, as if she'd just been given an exam paper she hadn't studied for.

Adeline had no doubt that the same look was reflected on her face. If she didn't know how she got into this world, how the heck was she supposed to get out of it?

CHAPTER 8

For the rest of the night and all through the following day, Logan resisted the urge to visit Adeline in her guest chambers. Instead, he had distracted himself with his duties, riding back and forth across the island to tend to any destruction or injury that had arisen from the previous night's storm.

He had thrown himself into the work, toiling alongside his people, who were spread out across the island. Some lived at the keep, some lived in small clusters of stone bothies—small one-room cottages—and huts, while others preferred solitude, having built their home wherever they liked.

But as darkness fell again, the storm long passed and giving way to light flurries of snow, Logan found himself on the staircase to the keep tower, where Adeline's chamber could be found.

"Nay, take yer behind back down the stairs," a voice called out as a figure descended.

Logan looked up at his mother. "What do ye mean?"

"She's still restin' and healin'. She doesnae need ye scarin' her again," Sophie replied.

"So, she's still there?"

She smiled. "Ye thought she might vanish into thin air?"

“It wouldnae be the strangest thing that’s happened.”

She gave a small nod. “Aye, it’s somethin’ I considered, too. Felt certain that when I went into her chambers this mornin’, she wouldnae be there, though I couldnae explain why.” She sighed. “But she was there, fast asleep. She has been wakin’ to eat somethin’, then slumberin’ again. After all, ye could say she’s had a long journey.”

“Ye believe her story?”

Logan searched his mother’s face for any doubt, for though he did not always care for her interjections, he trusted in her judgment. If she thought the impossible was possible, then maybe it really was.

His mother chuckled tightly. “I do, though it isnae without its... concerns.”

“Concerns?” He frowned.

“Let me dwell on them,” she insisted. “Ye ought to have some dinner and retire to yer own chambers. Ye look tired, Logan.”

Logan pressed on up the stairs, passing his mother. “I’ll come down to dine once I’ve apologized to her. If I frighten her, I’ll leave at once, but ye willnae dissuade me from seein’ her.”

“As ye prefer,” Sophie said softly, turning to watch him as he made his way to the top of the staircase.

There were only two chambers at the highest height of the keep, the other room lying empty. He approached the door to Adeline’s chambers, pausing as he heard a strange sound coming from within. She was singing—a song he did not know, jaunty and joyful.

“Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la,” seemed to be the words, but much like everything else she said, he could not be completely sure.

He knocked, and the singing stopped abruptly.

“Hello?” Adeline called.

Taking that as permission, Logan swung open the door and stepped inside.

Adeline, dressed in an unusual combination of long petticoats and the top part of that gray second skin, yelped in alarm, staggering backward into the writing desk. She cursed loudly, reaching down to rub the back of her thigh.

“Do you always just waltz into a woman’s room?” she grumbled. “That’s going to bruise.”

“May I see?” Worry flared in his chest.

“No, you may not!” she replied, startled. “It’s just a bruise. It’s not going to kill me. Then again, I am in 1705. I think even a little cold can kill you here.”

“I have seen many die from the cold,” Logan confirmed. “Would ye like me to put more wood into the fireplace so ye daenae catch a chill?”

She frowned at him. “Why are you being nice again? Do you have a split personality?”

“I... suppose every Laird has two natures,” he replied uncertainly, using context to figure out her meaning. “There is the man and the Laird. While connected, they cannae always be the same.”

She blinked in surprise. “And I’m speaking with the man, not the Laird?”

“If ye like.”

He went to the fireplace and put more wood into the hearth, waiting until the chopped logs caught fire before he returned his attention to her.

“I apologize for me behavior last night after I brought ye inside the keep. I dinnae let ye say yer piece, and I took ye to dungeons that I havenae used in years. For that, I’m sorry. It’s nae in me nature to be unkind, but when ye mentioned Christmas I feared for me people, and the Laird in me always has to put them first.”

Adeline sat down on the chair before the writing desk. “I’ve had time to think about things,” she admitted. “I understand why you did what you did. Where I come from, long ago—longer ago than now—the idea of witches sent people a bit crazy, too. I’m just glad you’re not their kind of crazy, or I imagine I’d be getting ducked in water or burnt at the stake by now.”

“I have heard about the trials that troubled the Colonies,” Logan said, nodding. “But, ye see, there’s a greater reason why I couldnae put me trust in ye, and why that desire to protect me people overwhelmed everythin’ else.”

Adeline met his gaze, while he tried his best not to look at the tight material of that unusual garment. “What’s the reason? Have you had witches here before?”

“We daenae ken, but we suspect it,” he replied, feeling foolish. He had never truly believed in witches and curses. Even now, he suspected that there had to be another more reasonable explanation for his island’s plight. “There’s a... curse on this island.”

A faint smile, like a smirk, lifted one corner of Adeline’s lips. “A curse?”

“I ken it doesnae sound true, but it is,” he insisted sternly, annoyed by her expression. “It began a month ago. There arenae too many people on this island, to begin with—a few hundred—so ye notice when somethin’ starts killin’ ‘em. It started in the north of the island, makin’ ‘em sick, and it is slowly makin’ its way here to the south. There have been reports of the curse in the east of the island, while the west hasnae been touched yet.”

Adeline’s expression changed to one of intrigue. “I doubt it’s a curse,” she said confidently. “Could be something in the water or food that’s making people sick. Do you preserve food for the winter? It might’ve rotted, but not enough so you’d notice, or moisture might have gotten in, and that is a breeding ground for all kinds of bacteria. Do you all use the same water source?”

“There are three springs on the island,” he told her, just as intrigued by her questions. “Everyone uses whichever is closest. As for the food, aye, we preserve it, but I reckon ye would notice if it was rotten.”

Adeline straightened up, reaching for one of the quills on the desk. She tore off a piece of paper, dipped the nib of the quill in the inkpot, and began to write. Her lean body was half turned toward him, her voice more direct as she spoke again.

“What are the symptoms of the curse ? How is the sickness presenting itself?”

“In different ways,” Logan replied. “In the north, there were fevers, chills, vomiting, and rashes, with most of the pain reported in the stomach and chest. In the east, it’s killin’ quicker. Within a day, for some. Me uncle is there right now, investigatin’.”

Adeline twisted the end of her hair around her forefinger. “It sounds like something has been ingested, particularly with your people in the north. I’d have to hear from your uncle before I could pass any speculation on the eastern issue, to figure out if they’re connected or not.” She nodded. “But, in the north, it’s either a shared source

of bacteria—water, food—or it’s a contagion carried by fleas or rats or birds, possibly. Do you have much trouble with those on the island?”

“Birds, aye, but I daenae ken about rats and fleas,” Logan replied, scowling a little.

Adeline seemed to feel his glower. “It doesn’t mean your conditions are unsanitary. Wherever there are people, there are rats, and rats carry fleas. But... I might have to see for myself if I’m being honest. I can’t diagnose someone from afar.”

“How do ye ken so much about this?” Logan softened toward her.

She smiled. “I told you, I’m a doctor—or a healer, as you might call it. And, before you ask, where I come from, women do all the things that men do. We can go to university, we can have careers, we drive cars, we can live alone if we want to, we can be mothers if we want to, we can fly planes—we can do anything.”

Logan stared at her, dumbfounded. “What are cars and planes?”

“Ah... right. Uh... well, they’re... modes of transport. A car is like a horseless carriage, I guess, and a plane is... it flies through the air from country to country, or from one part of a country to another. We have big ships, too, made of metal, that don’t need steam or wind.”

Logan was quite sure his eyes were about to fall out of his head, his mind exploding with strange visions of what those things might look like. “Humans have advanced that far?”

She seemed surprised by his question. “That’s just the start, but I won’t give away too many secrets, in case you change the timeline of the world by inventing a car hundreds of years too early.” She laughed awkwardly. “I wish you’d invented running hot water, though.”

“Pardon?”

“In my world, you turn a tap, and hot water comes out, on demand. You use it to shower, and I’m in dire need of one,” she explained.

He nodded in understanding, his mind whirring with the idea of hot water as and when one wanted it. “We bathe in the freshwater pools on the shore. I can take ye there if ye want?”

“In winter?” Her eyes widened, her mouth dropping open.

Logan had to smile. “Seems we’re hardier than ye lot. Aye, in winter. In all seasons. Ye’ll come out of that pool feelin’ like ye’ve been reborn.”

“You don’t, perhaps, have any hot baths?” Her voice was small, defeated.

“Aye, we do, but nay one uses ‘em. I could have one prepared for ye if ye’re nae bold enough to face the pools.” He paused, feeling sly. “But ye did say that, in yer world, women can do anythin’ men can. The women here bathe in those pools—maybe they’re tougher than ye think.”

Adeline squared her shoulders, sticking her chin up. “Fine, I’ll bathe in these pools of yours. Cold water is meant to be excellent for the nervous system and circulation.” She shuddered, though she was not yet submerged in the icy water. “The Scandinavians swear by it.”

“Och, well, if the Scandinavians, whoever they are, swear by it, it must be worthwhile,” Logan remarked, already imagining her dripping wet in the fairy pools, as the islanders called them. And if she got too cold, he would always be there to warm her up, giving her his heat.

He would not mind sharing with a woman like her.

CHAPTER 9

Moonlight bathed the beautiful shoreline in silvery light, turning the freshwater pools into mirrors. The snow had stopped falling, but it lay thick on the ground, even blanketing the sand. The salt of the sea would eventually eat away at it, but, for now, the world looked ethereal.

“Am I only allowed out under cover of darkness?” Adeline asked, walking beside Logan. His tall frame and broad body blocked most of the wind that whipped up the beach, prompting her to walk closer to him than she might’ve otherwise.

He nodded down at her hair. “Until ye get rid of that purple in yer hair, aye.”

“I’ve been growing this out for years,” she muttered. “And it’s not like you have a salon nearby.”

“A what?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Never mind. It’s... a place people go to, to get their hair cut and styled.” She groaned. “The best part is the massage. They get shampoo, and they just...” She closed her eyes, thinking happy thoughts.

“Shampoo?”

Her eyes opened again. “You wash your hair with it.”

“So, soap nuts?”

“Excuse me?”

The ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. “The chestnut trees grow in the middle of the island. They drop chestnuts that we pound up into a powder and wash our hair with it.”

She cast a sneaky glance at his hair. Even tied back, it looked glossy and in good condition. So, maybe there was something to be said for these soap nuts.

“If I cut the purple out of my hair, will you let me go to the northern part of the island, to speak to the people?” she asked, forcing herself to look away.

Staring at Logan for too long had a curious effect on her entire body, making her feel warm and cold at the same time, her heart beating faster, her stomach fluttering, her skin flushing with warmth. All symptoms of a commonplace crush—nothing that couldn’t be fixed with some visual discipline.

Logan furrowed his brow. “I daenae ken if it would be safe for ye. The curse might affect ye.”

“But it’s not a curse,” she insisted. “It’s clearly an illness of some kind.”

“I’ll consider it,” he replied, a few moments later.

She smiled, pleased. “What would our cover story be?”

“Pardon?”

She took a breath, trying hard not to feel frustrated. “What would we tell people, so they don’t think I’m a witch or a Catholic?”

She was astonished by how quickly she'd recovered from the initial shock of being three-hundred-plus years in the past. The moment she'd woken up and discovered that she was still in 1705, and not in a hospital bed or her apartment in 2023, it was like an acceptance had fallen over her.

A sort of, "if I can't beat it, join it," mindset. She was well aware that it was probably some kind of coping mechanism, or some residual shock making her numb to the insanity of it all, but she much preferred it to the previous night's panic.

"Well, to begin, we'll have to explain yer unusual way of speakin'," Logan said. "I thought ye were Welsh when ye first spoke to me, so we'll have to pretend ye're that. As for the rest..." He paused, turning his gaze toward the mirror black sea. "I suppose we could say that ye're me guest. A healer I've summoned here from Wales, famed for yer ability to lift curses."

She huffed out a breath. "It's not a curse."

"Aye, perhaps not, but it'll be easier for them to understand if ye call it that," Logan argued, resting his hand on the small of her back, steering her toward an outcrop of cliffs in the near distance.

The touch made her jump, her body torn between putting distance between them and enjoying the warm sensation of his palm. It radiated through the cloak he'd put on her, tingling up her spine and into her head, where all sorts of ideas popped up without warning.

Presumably, the people here didn't bathe in their clothes, after all. What harm could there be in some casual skinny-dipping with a tall, ridiculously handsome Scotsman who, in her own words, was exactly what she'd have dreamed up?

I might as well enjoy this... unexpected Christmas vacation .

Thinking of it that way, as if she'd just gone out to a cabin in the woods for some peace and quiet instead of into the past, made it easier to fathom.

“Can I ask ye somethin’?”

Adeline shrugged. “You’re the mighty Laird of this place. I can’t stop you.”

“What did ye say ye were doin’ before ye arrived here? Ye mentioned a snow globe, but I daenae ken what that is. Is it... somethin’ magical, where ye hail from? Somethin’ yer people have created to jump through time?”

Adeline snorted, picturing that snow globe sitting on the mantelpiece in her family home, brimming with secrets, and her mother telling her that it made wishes come true. It still felt like nonsense to her, but, thus far, she had no other way of explaining what had happened to her. The only common denominator was the snow globe.

Maybe when the lights had gone out, there’d been a surge of electricity through the snow globe that had somehow sent her back in time. The how of it was something she still couldn’t wrap her head around, and maybe it was better not to. Physics had never been her strong suit.

“It’s just a ball of glass with little flakes of glitter and plastic that make the inside look like it’s snowing when you shake it. Not magical, as far as I know, though I’m starting to think I don’t know anything about the universe,” she replied.

He pursed his lips. “I see.”

“Do you? ‘Cause I don’t.” She sighed.

“It means ye daenae ken how to get back to where ye belong.”

A shiver ran through her, his words cutting too close to the bone. “I suppose it does. Still, at least while I am here, I get to be a guest instead of a captive. Silver linings.”

He glanced down at her. “Ye still cannae wander where ye please.”

“I know, I know, gilded cage and all that,” she drawled, refusing to explain.

At last, they reached the freshwater pools, sheltered from the wind by the dramatic cliffs above, which curved around the rocky ground where the pools shone. There seemed to be caves inside the cliffs, piquing her curiosity—but first, she needed to slough away the fatigue of a three-hundred-year-long journey.

“How do I do this?” she asked coyly, taking his proffered hand as he led her carefully across the slippery rocks. His palm was rough, warm against her cold skin.

He stopped at a large pool, the water crystal clear. And around the edge, natural seats had been carved by time and, presumably, backsides. “What do ye mean?”

“How do I bathe here?” She let go of his hand, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

He smirked. “Ye shed yer clothes and ye slip in.”

Don’t say things like that.

Her skin was so feverish that she couldn’t feel the cold at all. Her breathing became uneven, her stomach fluttering with a fresh vengeance, imagining what sort of lover he might be.

She had limited experience, but he exuded an energy, a masculine power that suggested it would be the best night of her life.

“I willnae look,” he assured her. “Ye can give me yer clothes, and I’ll make sure they daenae get wet.”

To prove his point, he turned his back to her, his hand stretched out behind him to receive her clothes. Adeline pulled a face and waved her hand, to make sure he wasn’t peeking. Once she was certain, she wiggled out of the skirts she’d borrowed from the guest room’s armoire and peeled off her jumpsuit.

She put the garments into Logan’s hand but hesitated when it came to her panties. Deciding to go with the flow, she shimmied out of them and, with a nervous breath, put them with the rest of her clothes.

That done, she crouched low, bracing her hands against the sides of the pool, and slid one leg into the water. An involuntary scream spilled out of her lips.

“What is it? Were ye bit by somethin’?” Logan’s voice dragged her stunned gaze up to him. He didn’t have his back turned anymore.

“You said you wouldn’t look!” she shrieked, slipping the rest of the way into the water.

The cold was brutal, zapping through her body like electricity.

She covered her breasts with her hands and turned her back to him, glaring over her shoulder. “I’m starting... to think... this was your plan all... along!” she said through chattering teeth. “You just... wanted to see me... naked.”

Outrage flashed across his face. “I thought ye’d been hurt. I wouldnae just peek on ye without yer permission!” He shook his head. “Honestly, I’m nae some savage brute, Adeline.”

“Well, you’re still looking,” she shot back, sinking lower into the pool until only her neck and head were above the surface. There was a peculiar warmth at the bottom of the pool, rising up, taking away the harsh chill of the water. “Is this... a hot spring?”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “Aye, did I nae mention that?”

“No!” She pouted a little. “If you’d told me that, I’d have been way more willing to come here.”

He mustered a small laugh. “We’re nae mad, lass. We wouldnae bathe in icy water in the middle of winter if it wasnae warm, else we’d all die of cold.” He paused. “I thought ye said ye were a doctor? Should ye nae ken that?”

“You’re insufferable,” she grumbled, hiding a smile as she half-swam, half-walked to the other side of the pool. She sat in one of the natural grooves, crossing one leg over the other, while keeping her breasts covered. “Are you going to look away, now that you know I’m not hurt?”

He eyed the water. “Actually, I wouldnae mind bathin’, now that I’m here. I’ll stay on this side, ye can stay on that side.”

“You’re coming in?” She gulped, too naked to get out if he decided to get in.

He shrugged. “I willnae if ye daenae want me to, but it looks temptin’. All that steam risin’.”

Adeline bit the inside of her cheek, refusing to be drawn in by this handsome stranger. But if he kept saying things like that, her imagination was going to win over her logic and reasoning, especially if he stripped in front of her.

Then again, this was his island, and it was bitterly cold outside the pool—who was

she to stop him from getting in if he wanted to?

“As long as you promise not to come over to my side, you can do whatever you like,” she said, hoping she sounded dismissive.

Holding onto her clothes, he unfastened a belt at his waist. “Daenae peek,” he chided gently, prompting her to turn her head away sharply.

Yet, the sounds were almost as tortuous. She heard his belt buckle clink, followed by the whisper of fabric dropping to the ground. She heard another breath of material on skin as he took his shirt off, and then... the lapping noise of his body entering the water.

He let out a contented sigh. “Och, that feels nice.”

“Can I look now?”

He chuckled. “Ye could’ve looked whenever ye liked. I wouldnae have minded.”

Her face was red hot as she scowled at him, but her glare soon softened as her eyes flicked to the pile of clothes on the damp rocks. He’d put hers on top of his to keep them dry.

“Do you have a wife?” she asked, her gaze turning back to him.

He looked like something out of a magazine, his strong arms spread out across the rocks behind him, his broad chest, dusted with hair, tensing and relaxing with muscles she knew the medical name for, but had never seen on a man in real life.

There didn’t seem to be any part of him that wasn’t honed to impossible perfection, her heart thumping faster as she followed the hard lines of his chest down to the first

ridges of his abdomen. That was where her view ended, and that was probably for the best.

“Why do ye ask?” he replied, tilting his head, exposing more of his corded neck.

She shook her head. “Just curious what she’d say if she knew you were bathing naked with another woman.”

“Och, then it’s fortunate I daenae have a wife,” he said. “Ye need nae be shy, lass... or do ye nae bathe naked where ye hail from?”

She swallowed thickly. “We do, but usually alone.”

“Ah...” A smile formed on his lips, brightening his intense eyes. “What a pity.”

All of a sudden, the heat in the pool rose to the temperature of a sauna, and Adeline had the most alarming feeling that she was the cause, embarrassment and simmering temptation radiating from her.

The most handsome man she’d ever seen in her life was right there in front of her, naked and smiling and flirting, and he seemed to be inviting her to make the first move.

And she had no idea what to do with that information.

CHAPTER 10

Logan gazed at Adeline, while she seemed to be doing everything within her power to avoid meeting his eyes. He had never seen anyone less comfortable in the soothing waters of the pools, or less comfortable with the body that the heavens had given her. And she had the most heavenly figure he had ever seen... yet she behaved as if she was ashamed of it.

Her nerves intrigued him, making him wonder about the world she came from.

“Why do ye cover yerself like that, when ye wear that... gray skin thing? It’s nay different,” he said, waving his hands through the warm water, letting it soothe his tired muscles.

Adeline blinked. “It is different. It covers everything, and, right now, all my hands can cover are my... uh...”

“Breasts,” he supplied, smiling. “Is it shameful to say such words where ye come from, even as a healer? Our old healer had seen almost everybody in the keep over the years, from birth to wrinkled and gray and everythin’ in-between.”

Even in the silvery gleam of the moonlight, he could see the red flush in her cheeks, doubting it had anything to do with the heat of the pool.

“Doctors see a lot, but usually behind a screen,” Adeline replied. “We’re... quite reserved, I suppose. In Europe, I hear they’re freer with... um... being naked. There are nude beaches and things, but in the States... we tend not to flaunt everything. Not

that I speak for everyone.”

The nature of the conversation reminded Logan of what she was hiding beneath the surface of the pool, and underneath her hands. Desire stirred in him, a heat he had not felt in years. Was it witchery, or was it merely her presence, as a beautiful, exotic stranger to his island shores?

He laughed, gazing out at the glistening sea to distract himself. “I wouldnae be nude on this beach in the dead of winter, unless I was in these pools. But in the summer, there’s nothin’ like a refreshin’ swim.”

“I don’t swim much,” she admitted. “Don’t have the time. Used to be good at it when I was a kid, but then...” she tailed off, her forehead creasing as though something unpleasant had touched her foot.

“But then?” he prompted.

She shook her head. “I gave it up. You know how it is when you get older. Sports and stuff get put on the back burner, and it’s all exams and studying and trying to cling to some semblance of a social life. I wasn’t a good enough swimmer to get a scholarship, so it didn’t matter. You know?”

“Nae really,” he replied, still not understanding half of what came out of her tempting mouth. “Why would swimmin’ have anythin’ to do with bein’ a scholar?”

She laughed abruptly, a smile brightening her face. “You know what, I actually don’t know, but it sometimes does where I come from. If you’re really good at a sport, you get to go to college for free or cheaper, at least. But now that I’m hearing you say it out loud, I don’t get it either.”

“What sport? Huntin’?”

She gasped, shock rippling across her face. “No, nothing like that. That’s not... something I agree with.” She paused. “I understand why some people do it, but hunting for sport... no, I don’t think I’ll ever understand that.”

“Ye daenae ‘agree’ with huntin’?” Logan frowned, bewildered. “If ye daenae hunt, or have someone hunt for ye, how do ye eat?”

She expelled a frustrated sigh. “That would be a much longer story, and I think it would probably make your brain explode. I mean, I bet you don’t have to worry if everything is organic, since it’s all grown and caught in your backyard.” She sat back, forgetting to cover herself, sinking deeper into the water. “That’s probably one area where the 1700s has the upper hand.”

“Are ye talkin’ of food ‘cause ye’re hungry?” he asked.

She shook her head. “My stomach is a bit unsettled. Think it might’ve been the journey. Jetlag is bad enough, but I have no idea what’s in store for me with a time-zone jump like this.”

“Jet... lag? Time zones?”

She chuckled, and though it was not quite as mad a laugh as it had been before, there was a hint of insanity about it. “In some countries, it’s daytime right now. So, if you travel to another country quite quickly, you have to adapt to whatever time it is where they are. When you fly on a plane, aka a ‘jet,’ that’s what takes you to these other countries quickly, so we call it jetlag, because your body is lagging behind the time, or the time is lagging behind you.”

“I think I understand,” he told her, in awe of what the future must look like.

He imagined the skies filled with strange mechanical birds that carried people across

vast stretches of land and sea, but he soon began to wonder if it would affect the way the sky looked. Would it be as beautiful from up there? Would it ruin the perfect blue of a summer day or the dramatic gloom of a winter afternoon? He was not sure he would like to have the sky ruined by such things.

“Are ye married, where ye come from?” he asked suddenly, realizing he had not asked her in return.

She snorted. “Definitely not.”

“Why do ye say it like that? Are ye nae desirable in yer own time?” He found that hard to believe. Adeline would have been desirable in any time period.

Indeed, he was having trouble concentrating as his gaze drifted down from her throat to the hollow at its base, and further still to the glassy shimmer of the pool’s surface. The reflection of the moonlight and the darkness of the pool itself kept him from seeing her naked bosom, taunting him with the watery veil.

“I’ve never attracted much attention, other than unwanted attention,” she replied coolly, her eyes tightening. “And I haven’t had too much time for dating or anything like that.”

A bristle of irritation tingled in his chest. “Who hurt ye?”

“Excuse me?”

“Who hurt ye? Who gave ye unwanted attention?” he demanded, forgetting that there was no punishment he could deliver from three hundred years in the past.

Adeline smiled thinly. “Just a little worm who likes to feel powerful.”

“Did he touch ye?” Beneath the water, Logan clenched his hands into fists.

“He didn’t get the chance,” Adeline replied, looking at him strangely. “Does that make you angry?”

Logan sniffed. “Nay man has any right to touch a woman that doesnae want to be touched. If any lass comes to me with a tale like that, the wretch who did it will be branded, or worse, dependin’ on the nature of his crime.”

“Here? In 1705?” She blinked at him in disbelief.

He was almost insulted. “Why should that surprise ye?”

“Well, for one thing, you threw me in a dungeon when you thought I was a witch or a Catholic,” she pointed out, a softer smile forming on her lips. “What if an accused man were to say that he’d been ‘bewitched’ by a woman, and that’s why he touched her? What would you do then?”

Logan had to think about that for a moment. “We’ve never had that happen, but... I suppose we’d have to have a trial, or I’d have to look into the character of the man. If he’s well kenned for bein’ a leech, he’d be punished. If he’s nae, then a trial would take place.”

“And a trial like that would be fair?” She sounded dubious.

“I’d ensure it,” he insisted, rankled by the doubt in her tone.

She shrugged. “At least there’d be a trial, I suppose. If I’d spoken up about the guy who... tried it on with me, it wouldn’t be him who got fired. I think I knew that already. Why else would I have been wishing on a snow globe?”

“Fired? At the stake?” Outrage burned in Logan’s chest.

She raised an eyebrow, laughing softly. “No, it’s where you get... uh... It’s where you lose your employment. It’s our word for it.”

“Oh.” He relaxed a little, still infuriated that any man would dare to touch this woman without her permission.

After all, he was sitting naked on the other side of a pool with her, and though, yes, he dearly desired to touch her, to feel her smooth skin beneath his fingertips, to make her warmer than any water could, to feel her plump lips on his, he would stay exactly where he was unless she intimated that she wanted that from him.

The days of the Gibson clan pillaging and taking whatever they pleased, from whoever they pleased, whenever they pleased, had died with his father.

“But ye said ye were six-and-twenty,” he ventured. “How can it be that ye havenae found a husband?”

She swirled her fingertip on the pool’s surface, disturbing the mirror sheen. “Is it that old to be unmarried?”

“Aye, here, it is,” he replied. “Most lasses are wed by eight-and-ten, twenty at most.”

She settled back against the worn-smooth rock, arching her neck back to rest her head. “What can I say, we’re living in different times. It’s not weird to have your first marriage in your thirties where I’m from, and folks are having kids at a more advanced age.”

“Your first marriage?” He tried not to concentrate on how her neck arched like that.

Adeline mustered a laugh. “Divorce is as easy as getting a morning coffee in 2023. I think one in two marriages end in divorce now, but don’t quote me on that.” She sighed, her chest rising, teasing him with the sight of a smooth, round, water-slicked breast. “I suppose you’ve probably got that whole marriage thing figured out better here, or maybe not. I’m not about to judge.”

He could fathom the idea of planes and cars and women being capable of anything that men could do, but the thought of marriage being so... dispensable did not sit well with him at all. To him, marriage was forever. That was why he had not yet married, for though it was his duty to continue the family line, he wanted to find a wife who captured his heart as well as his mind, both of them fueled by a love that even the stars would smile upon. Nothing less would suffice.

“I’ve shocked you, haven’t I?” she prodded.

“I daenae ken whether to be shocked or filled with pity,” he replied.

She considered his words for a while, her expression pensive. “That’s not to say there aren’t love stories and marriages that last, or could have lasted,” she said. “They still exist, just... not so often. Anyway, it’s getting late, and I am kind of hungry, so we should probably... uh... head back.”

“Did I say somethin’ to upset ye?” He had heard the note of strain in her voice.

She shook her head too vigorously. “Me? ‘Course not. I’m just not looking forward to the walk back after being in the hot water for so long. So, y’know, best get it over with.”

He could tell she was lying but did not want to press the matter. Clearly, she knew of a love story, a happy marriage, that she did not wish to speak about. It was not his place to force her.

“I’ll turn me back,” he said, twisting in the water to face the rocks.

“Can you... um... pass me my clothes?”

He smiled. “Aye, I can.”

Reaching for her strange clothes, stranger still now that she had petticoats to go with them, he stood halfway out of the pool in order to hand her the garments without them getting wet. His nether regions were still hidden by the water, but he caught her glancing. It widened his smile.

“Thank you.” She took the garments hurriedly, while he turned his back.

A moment later, a yelp of fright cut through the air. He twisted around without thinking, just in time to see her falling backward. The rocks were slippery underfoot, and she had lost her balance. He surged forward, catching her before she hit the water, his strong arms encircling her. Her legs knocked into his as she fell against him, panting hard.

And as they stood there in the water, stripped bare, her chilled skin warming against his, a rush of desire pulsed through his veins. He did not want to let her go, did not know if he was capable of loosening his hold at that moment. The swell of her buttocks pressed against the muscle of his thighs, his loins pressed against her lower back, his forearm covering the nakedness of her bare breasts, while his other covered the secret peak between her thighs, somehow keeping her dignity, though she wore not a stitch of clothing.

“The rocks are slick,” he whispered, dipping his head. Her skin smelled divine, like the world after a winter storm.

Her breath shallowed, her neck arching ever so slightly in response to his voice. “You

couldn't have told me that before?"

"I assumed ye kenned," he replied, grazing his teeth across his lower lip as he admired the curve of her neck, eager to place a kiss there.

She gulped loudly. "I forgot that my feet... would be wet."

"Ye ought to be more careful," he warned, his blood singing, urging him to press his lips to her smooth skin.

Slowly, she turned in his arms, bracing her hands against his broad chest. She peered up at him, her eyes shining, reflecting his desire. Her gaze flitted to his lips, then back up to his eyes.

"You didn't have my permission to catch me like that," she said, pressing herself against him. A soft gasp escaped her lips, no doubt feeling his hardness against her belly.

His arms tightened around her. "Would ye have preferred it if I'd let ye crash back into the water, where ye might've hit yer head again?"

"No," she replied simply.

"Shall I release ye?"

She shook her head. "I just... need to test something first."

"Test something?" He frowned.

She slid her hands up his chest and along the sides of his neck, rising up on tiptoe with the motion. With her fingertips gliding into his hair, she paused, her lips so close

that he could feel the warmth of her breath on his skin.

He did not wait to see if she would change her mind.

Pulling her against him, he kissed her, crushing his lips against hers. He had expected hesitation, but before he knew it, she was kissing him back with equal fervor, running her hands through his hair, pressing herself against him as if she had been waiting, all throughout their time in the pool, for him to swim to her side and make the decision for her.

His hand came up to cradle her face, his fingers splayed through her soft hair, grazing his teeth over her lower lip before sinking back into a deep, frenzied kiss that made time stop altogether. A cold wind blew against their bare skin, but he did not feel it, and he would not let her feel it either, using his body to keep her warm.

Her skin was like silk, her hips writhing against him, matching the ebb and flow of their lips. It stirred him toward a precipice of need that could be satisfied only one way, but that would be her choice, not his.

Perhaps, considering her words about not having much experience with men, she did not know what that hardness even meant... though the way she moved in his arms suggested otherwise.

All of a sudden, she stopped and pushed back, taking a half-step away from him. She touched her fingertips to her lips as if they had betrayed her somehow, or to check that the kiss was real.

"I'm sorry," she said thickly. "I... forgot this wasn't... a dream."

He smiled. "I remember ye sayin' I was what ye'd have dreamed of."

“But this isn’t a dream,” she insisted, shaking her head. “I’m here, and I’m stuck here, and... this is... this can’t... I shouldn’t have done that. I got carried away. I’m... I’m tired, and I’m hungry, and I’m time-lagged, and I really think I should be getting back to my room so I can sort my head out. Please, turn around.”

He took a steadying breath and did as she asked, his mind bursting with visions of the rise of her perfect, pert breasts and the tight line of her stomach and that eager press of her lips against his, her hips moving against him as if she wanted more. All things that had been within his reach, now withdrawn.

She’s right . We got carried away.

She might have been the first woman in years to spark desire in him, but she was a woman from the future, trapped in his time. There was no telling when her own time might summon her back. No matter how tempted he was, she was not for him. After all, she could not stay. She had to return, one way or another.

“Would it be okay if we just... forgot that ever happened?” she asked.

He nodded, his back still turned. “Of course.”

A task that was far easier said than done, for whether she was a witch or not, he feared she had already begun to bewitch him.

CHAPTER 11

Adeline couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned in her bed, trying everything she could think of—meditation, deep breathing, clenching and unclenching her entire body, counting sheep. She'd even resorted to a cup of warm milk, though she couldn't remember the last time she'd drunk milk from a glass.

Nothing helped.

If it hadn't been for the kiss, she knew she'd have been relaxed enough to sleep for a week, but she'd gone and ruined her impromptu spa trip by giving in to temptation. He'd been right there, naked and glistening, and she'd forgotten they were from different worlds for a moment. She'd acted like a magpie, drawn to his gleaming skin. She should've ignored it, ignored him and his insanely hot body, but... it was akin to being given a big red button that said, "Do Not Press."

She sat bolt upright in bed. "He's dead, for crying out loud! Has been dead for hundreds of freaking years!"

Gathering up her blankets and furs, she carried them over to the sheepskin rug by the fireplace and began to build a nest of sorts. Nearer the heat, she hoped it might bring back the sleepy feeling she'd relished at the pools.

"This is so stupid," she muttered to the flickering flames. "This isn't a Christmas vacation, he's not a Christmas rom-com hero in plaid, this doesn't have a happy ending in the snow, where everyone remembers the true meaning of Christmas. You're stuck here, you don't know how to get back, you need to get back, and kissing

him is just about the most stupid thing you've ever done!"

And not just stupid, but dangerous. Her knowledge of the Salem Witch Trials wasn't great, but she distinctly remembered women being accused left, right, and center of "bewitching" men. Logan might've claimed to be a fair man, and this wasn't Salem, but what if a mob came for her with torches and pitchforks? His mother had already warned her that there wasn't much anyone could do to help her if it came to something like that.

"First off, you need to watch your mouth," she told herself, burrowing down into her nest of blankets and furs.

After all, it wasn't just herself she had to worry about. There was a greater problem that she hadn't considered properly, since she'd only just come to terms with the fact that she was in the past. If she changed anything in the timeline, even a little bit, the knock-on effect could be catastrophic. And she'd already said and done more than she should have.

"What does kissing an 18 th -century Laird do, huh? What does his knowing about planes do? Are there going to be aliens ruling the world when I get back?"

She groaned and threw the blankets over her face, too tired yet too awake to contemplate such huge things. Physics, theoretical or otherwise, had never been her forte.

But in the dark heat beneath the blankets, thoughts of the future faded away, bringing back the graze of Logan's lips against hers, and his powerful arms around her, making her feel safer than she'd felt in years. A strange paradox, that the most dangerous man could make her feel the most secure.

No man should be allowed to look like that. It's a genuine health hazard.

She closed her eyes. The kiss was something she couldn't allow to happen again, but what harm could there be in a little solitary dreaming?

Just this once.

"The sun has been up for hours, and so should ye be!" A too-bright voice jolted Adeline awake, her eyes barely cracking open to see who was invading her beauty sleep.

"Now, what are ye doin', sleepin' by the fireplace like that?" a gentler voice asked, belonging to Sophie.

Adeline rubbed her eyes. "I got cold."

"Well, ye mustnae do that again," Sophie warned. "If a spark were to land on these furs, ye'd go up in flames."

Adeline stared at the furs, realizing she had more to learn about the 1700s than she'd imagined. Although, with any luck, she wouldn't be staying long enough to have to get used to the way things were done.

"There are more blankets in here." Moira went to sit on a heavy oaken trunk at the foot of the bed, knocking on it so Adeline would know which trunk she meant.

The knock echoed in Adeline's head, as if her wine hangover from Christmas Eve was only just catching up to her. Maybe it was, deciding to wait until after her time-jump migraine had dwindled before hitting her with the consequences of her actions.

"Is it late?" Adeline hissed as Sophie swung open the shutters to let in the daylight.

Moira chuckled. "I've never seen anyone spit at the mornin' light before."

“Fine, you caught me. I’m a vampire,” Adeline grumbled, immediately regretting the joke. They probably thought she was being serious.

Instead, she received two blank looks.

“A what?” Moira leaned forward, curious.

“Nothing.” Adeline remembered her promise to watch her mouth, and if they didn’t know what a vampire was, she wasn’t going to be the one to put it in the common vernacular before gothic novels had their heyday. “I’m... tired, that’s all. The light is hurting my eyes.”

Sophie half-closed the shutters again. “Have ye caught a chill from yer evenin’ bath?”

“What?” Adeline’s eyes widened. Had Sophie seen them in the pools?

“Logan told me he’d taken ye to the pools last night. I dinnae approve, with it bein’ so bitterly cold. The pools are warm enough, aye, but it’s the walkin’ back and forth with wet hair and damp skin that’ll get ye bedridden for a week,” Sophie said, while Adeline’s face burned as if she had succumbed to a fever.

Bedridden for a week, you say?

Her mind wandered to places it wasn’t supposed to, conjuring up images of his glistening skin. Adeline coughed to clear the thought, bringing a look of panic to Sophie’s face.

“Are ye unwell?” the older woman asked, rushing over to rest a hand on her brow. “Ye do feel warm, but that might be because ye’ve slept by the fire all night. I’ll check ye again in a short while.”

Adeline had to smile. “And I thought I was the doctor.”

“Ye’re under me care now, for as long as ye’re here,” Sophie asserted, tucking a wild lock of sleep-tousled hair behind Adeline’s ear.

It was at that moment that Adeline realized Moira was holding something in her hand. It flashed in the pale slice of light that filtered through the gap in the shutters. A long, curved dagger—the edge fatally sharp. Adeline could tell from the way it winked menacingly at her.

Adeline put up her hands, fear gripping her insides. “I don’t think that’s the way to get me back to my time. If you kill me here, I’ve got a nasty feeling that I die in the future—I mean, the present, my present—too!”

“Kill ye?” Moira looked puzzled.

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Mercy, what am I to do with ye? Of course, she thinks ye’re goin’ to kill her when ye’re wavin’ that bloody thing around! Set it down before ye do hurt someone.”

“I wouldnae hurt ye.” Moira put the dagger down on the trunk, her expression wounded. “Did ye really think I was goin’ to do that?”

Adeline took a breath. “No offense, but... I don’t know anyone here very well, so I can’t take any chances. If I see a dagger, you’d best believe I’m going to put my hands up and beg for my life.” She paused. “If it’s not to kill me, what is it for?”

“To cut that beautiful purple out of yer hair,” Moira replied mournfully. “Ma said ye’d want to get out of yer chambers in the daylight, now that ye’re mostly recovered, so it has to be done before we can let ye wander.”

Adeline relaxed, letting out a groan. “I’d forgotten about that. Took me ages to get my hair to grow this long.”

“Hair grows back,” Sophie said, taking the dagger.

Adeline suspected that the older woman wanted to say something else, like “but limbs don’t,” but thought better of it. She probably didn’t want to scare Adeline any more than she already was.

“I’ll be sure to make it look nice,” Sophie promised, sitting down behind Adeline.

There, she spread out one of the blankets to catch the hair and lightly stroked Adeline’s locks backward over her shoulders. Adeline squeezed her eyes shut as she felt a tug. Sophie was holding some of her hair tightly in one hand. A moment later, Adeline heard the scratchy slice of the sharp blade cutting through, and a release as the purple came away in Sophie’s hand.

“What are you going to do with it?” Adeline asked, struggling to keep her spirits high. “How about keeping it as a trophy, or just to prove I was actually here when I eventually return?”

Sophie laughed. “I’m afraid there’s nay place for this but in the fire.”

She tossed the purple ends into the flames without hesitation, unleashing the acrid, almost meaty scent of burning hair. All three women wrinkled their noses at the unpleasant aroma.

Soon enough, all of the purple that seemed to cause so much trouble in this era and in Adeline’s had turned to ash in the fireplace. But as Sophie began to trim the dark brown locks that remained, Adeline heard her breathing change. Although Adeline couldn’t see her, she knew Sophie was wincing.

“Are you okay?” Adeline asked.

Sophie chuckled stiffly. “It’s me back. I hurt it a few weeks back while helpin’ rebuild a wall after a storm. It hasnae been the same since, but I manage well enough. It’s me own fault, anyway. I should’ve asked ye to stand.”

“Does it hurt when you lie down?”

“Nay, I wouldnae say so.”

Adeline nodded. “And when you sit in a chair, is it better or worse?”

“Better than sittin’ like this, but worse than lyin’ or standin’,” Sophie replied, while Moira watched, intrigued.

“Is there pain in the back of your legs, too?”

Sophie paused. “Aye, at times.”

“Would you mind if I assessed you?” Adeline turned around, no longer thinking about the loss of her purple ends.

Sophie arched a curious eyebrow. “Assess me? In what manner?”

“If you’d turn around for me, I can feel along your spine and see if there are any abnormalities. I think I might know what’s wrong with you, but I can’t be sure without feeling,” Adeline explained.

It felt good to be distracted by something familiar.

Hesitantly, Sophie turned around, and Adeline began her assessment, gently palpating

down the ridges of the older woman's spine. Toward the lower back, she felt what she'd expected to feel. A minor swelling, a few vertebrae above Sophie's tailbone.

"If I had a well-stocked pharmacy, I could fix the pain in a heartbeat," Adeline said, pulling a face. "Steroid injections, probably. Surgery, maybe. It doesn't feel too swollen, but there's definitely some inflammation. Lord help me, I don't even have ibuprofen to work with."

Sophie cleared her throat. "Is somethin' wrong with me? Is it very serious?"

"I think you might have a herniated disk. I won't lie, it's probably not going to get better, since I don't have anything that can make it better, but..." Adeline paused, racking her brain. "I can prescribe some Pilates. Physio will help. And... do you have any willow bark around here?"

She remembered reading about the benefits of willow bark in one of the survival medicine articles she'd been obsessed with lately. It was the precursor to aspirin, and though it wouldn't have the strength of modern painkillers, it would definitely alleviate some of Sophie's swelling and pain.

Sophie nodded. "The old healer used to have jars of it, if ye want to look in his chambers?"

"He won't mind?"

"I doubt it. He left for the mainland last year and never came back," Sophie replied with a worried smile. "But what is Pilates? Is it a tonic? A medicine of some sort?"

Adeline hesitated, recalling her promise to watch her mouth. "It's... um... movement, to help with aches and pains. You know when you have a really sore muscle and you rub it for a while, and afterward, it doesn't hurt as much?"

Sophie nodded.

“It’s like that,” Adeline said. “But you stretch the muscles instead. I’ll show you what I mean, it’s probably easier that way. This evening, maybe? We could do some... stretching, soak in the pools, and then, if I can find something useful in the healer’s chambers, I can give you a dose before you go to sleep. In the morning, we’ll see if there’s any improvement, though it’ll probably take weeks rather than days.”

A smile lifted the corners of Sophie’s lips as she turned back around and took hold of Adeline’s hands. “Ye’re a remarkable lass, Miss Adeline. If ye can do even the smallest thing for me back, I’ll be mightily grateful.”

“I’ll do my best with whatever I can get my hands on,” Adeline promised.

After all, healing people was why she’d gotten into the medical field in the first place. She might not have had heart rate monitors, blood testing, x-ray machines, or MRI scanners at her fingertips, but she had her knowledge. Somehow, she’d make it work.

Sophie gave Adeline’s hands a gentle squeeze. “Now, I daenae ken if this will be of any use to ye, but there are books in Logan’s study that the healer left behind. For as long as ye’re here, ye’re welcome to look through them.”

“Does he know I’m welcome to look through them?” Adeline laughed awkwardly.

Sophie waved a dismissive hand. “If ye have me permission, then ye have permission. Daenae worry about him.”

“Who said I was worried?” Heat warmed Adeline’s cheeks as she realized that guilt was probably written all across her face. She forced a laugh to make it seem like a joke, and though Sophie chuckled in return, she knew a pity laugh when she heard one. “Is he in the keep right now?”

Sophie shook her head. “I daenae believe so.”

“Good.” Adeline puffed out a breath. “I might go and take a look at those books, then.”

I’ll have to face him at some point...

But maybe that some point could wait a while longer. If they crossed paths, so be it, but she wasn’t going to seek him out on purpose. With her thoughts still full of him and that searing kiss, being near him again so soon would be a recipe for disaster.

CHAPTER 12

Logan rode back toward the keep with a dark cloud hanging over his head, both literally and figuratively. After the worst winter storms, he liked to ensure that the most vulnerable of his clan were safe and well, and not long before breakfast, he had belatedly thought of one soul whom he had not yet checked on.

“I cannae imagine livin’ on me own like that,” Theo said, riding alongside his Laird. “It gives me shivers up me spine, thinkin’ that ye could... be stuck like that for days—nay, weeks—and nay one would notice or care.”

Logan glowered at the horizon. “I should’ve noticed. I should’ve kenned he might be in trouble and gone directly to him. Och, we must’ve ridden past the path to his hut at least twice after helpin’ the folks at the south cliffs.”

But I was distracted by the lass with the purple hair and silky skin .

It was not like him to ever let his duties fall into second place.

“Aye, but ye helped those who needed it most first, and it hasnae been so many days since the storm lifted,” Theo tried to insist. “It’s nae as if he was actually left under the beams for weeks.”

There was an elderly man by the name of Jonah McBray who lived in isolation on the very edge of a lonely promontory, to the south-west of the island. He hated people, hated being bothered, hated having to go to the market on the west side of the island whenever he needed something—hated everything except his little terrier, Weasel.

But Jonah had always tolerated Logan in a way he did not tolerate anyone else. The old man would crack a half-smile when he saw Logan approaching with a gift of milk or some cheese, and they would sit in silence on two rickety chairs outside the hut, saying nothing at all while they broke bread together. A comfortable quiet.

That morning, Logan and Theo had ridden to the hut and found Jonah trapped underneath the heavy central beam that held the roof of his humble abode up. The rest of the roof had collapsed on him, too—weighty mud and straw, mixed in with some stones. He was alive, the terrier curled up protectively at his side, but after at least two nights and days in the biting cold, he had not been well.

“Stubborn old goat,” Logan muttered. “He must ken that he isnae goin’ to survive much longer if he doesnae come to the keep. I wouldnae be surprised if he’s broken a few bones, and he willnae get warm again without proper protection from the weather.”

After lifting the beam off Jonah, Logan had tried to convince the old man to return to Gibson Keep with him, but Jonah would not hear of it. He grabbed a damp blanket, sat down in one of the chairs that had miraculously survived the storm, and sipped shakily from a jar of potent brew, outright refusing to move. Weasel had jumped onto his lap, baring his teeth every time Logan had tried to physically force Jonah to come with them.

Theo shrugged. “Maybe he doesnae want to. I cannae imagine it’s much of a life, bein’ so alone all the time.”

“I wonder if...” Logan shook his head. “Nay, Auld Jonah would be the first to cry ‘witch’ if I did that.”

Theo eyed him. “Did what?”

“Brought Adeline to him,” Logan replied. “Then again, she’s a pretty lass, and Jonah has always been softer toward pretty lasses.”

Theo had not yet accepted that there was no harm in Adeline’s presence, but as they rode on, a curious expression dawned across his face. “It couldnae hurt. If she is a witch, a curse isnae goin’ to cause him more trouble than he’s already in. If she truly is just some healer and she can fix him, maybe... I’ll start believin’ she isnae about to turn me into a toad if I look at her the wrong way.”

“Why the change of heart, eh?” Logan frowned at his man-at-arms.

Theo blushed a little, an odd sight on such a huge man. “It isnae that I distrust yer opinion, m’laird. Ye ken I’ve never distrusted it before. But... it’s yer maither that is startin’ to convince me. I havenae ever heard of a witch bein’ able to bewitch another woman, and yer maither approves of her, so... maybe there’s somethin’ to be said about that.”

Logan did not know whether to laugh or curse at him. “Och, the gall of ye.”

“I dinnae mean any offense. I’m just tryin’ to think of it rationally,” Theo insisted, still pink in the cheeks.

“What if me maither is a witch, eh? What if they’re all in it together—a coven of ‘em?” Logan teased, watching as the color drained from Theo’s face. “Moirra, too.”

Theo pursed his lips. “That’s nae funny, m’laird. Ye cannae say such things about a lady like yer maither.”

“Aye, well, imagine how Adeline feels,” Logan pointed out.

Likely mulling over the sentiment, Theo settled into contemplative silence as they

rounded the central hills of the island, and the keep came into view. The moment Logan set eyes on the modest castle, his gaze drifting away to the cliffs that concealed the pools, his mind flared with memory.

With the matter of Jonah to contend with, it had been easy to set all thoughts of the night before aside, but now that he needed her help, he had to wonder how he would be received.

She kissed me. It wasnae unwelcome.

He wished Adeline had not stepped away when she had.

He closed his eyes, letting the horse find its way home without guidance, and let his mind savor every detail of the night before. His fingertips could still feel her slick, smooth skin, the warmth of her radiating through the cold sheen of water that made her glisten in the moonlight. His hands remembered perfectly her soft, rounded backside, his chest tingling as he thought of how she had touched him in return, how she had pressed herself against him.

And her lips... so soft and fearless, kissing him in a way he had never been kissed before. With confidence. With passion. With a fierce need that had stoked the same need in him.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she’d said, yet he had no regrets.

Indeed, his only regret was that it had not continued, and likely never would. She had made her position clear. She had “tested something” by kissing him, and her conclusion was that one kiss was all they would share.

Eating a chunk of bread and cheese to stop his stomach from growling, dropping crumbs on the ground as he went, Logan padded barefoot through the castle toward

his study.

It was not yet ten o'clock in the morning, and the cook had informed him that "the guest" had not yet had her breakfast. So, assuming that she was still asleep, he had decided to wait until she awoke before asking her to aid Jonah. He did not know too much about the mysterious morning routines of women, but he knew enough to be wary of asking favors after dragging them out of their slumber.

I have to sweeten her if I want her to help... but I doubt she'll let me sweeten her the way I'd like to.

He knew that in the quiet of his study, he would be inundated with thoughts of her again. She would not give him a moment's peace, even from the top of the tower.

Reaching his study, he paused, the bread and cheese pinched between his teeth. The door was partially open, but it should not have been open at all. No one, not even the maids, was allowed in his study without his permission.

CHAPTER 13

In one powerful movement, Logan flung the door wide open, ready to launch a tirade of sharp words at whoever had dared to enter while he was away from the keep.

But a tirade of curse words reached him first, rattling out of the figure who was in the midst of ransacking his personal library.

“What the heck is wrong with you?” Adeline barked. “Is that how you walk into every room? You just kick the door down and frighten the life out of whoever might be inside? You almost gave me a heart attack!”

Logan bit off a mouthful of bread, chewing it thoughtfully. “Ye’re wailin’ at me for enterin’ me own study however I see fit?” He raised an eyebrow. “A study that ye’re nae supposed to be in, by the way.”

“Your mother said I could, so if you want to go and yell at someone, you can go and yell at her instead,” she shot back, panting hard.

Her hand clutched a book he did not recognize, pulled from the section he rarely read from, and never dusted. A collection of tomes that he had inherited from his father.

“They teach ordinary lasses how to read in yer world?” he asked, closing the study door.

Adeline looked at him as if he had just dropped a bar across it, trapping her inside. Not wanting to make her more fearful than he already had, he moved to the study

window and leaned against the wall, finishing off his breakfast. Still, the door would remain closed—he preferred it that way.

“They teach ‘ordinary lasses’ everything they teach ‘ordinary lads’ in my world,” she said haughtily, clearly still unsettled by his dramatic entry.

He smirked. “That wasnae an insult. They daenae teach ordinary lads how to read here either.”

“Oh...” Adeline clasped the book to her chest. “Well, I didn’t know that.”

“I do me best to ensure that me clansfolk have some ability to read and write, but it’s persuadin’ them that there’s some benefit to it that’s the trouble,” Logan explained, dusting the crumbs from his hands. “Ye wouldnae see many choosin’ to read a book. They’d deem it a waste of their time.”

Adeline glanced up at him. “What about you? You’ve got... a lot of books I wouldn’t have expected to see. Sure, I haven’t heard of most of these people, but I’ve heard of some—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Walter Raleigh, Machiavelli.”

“Ye dinnae think an island Laird might take pleasure in readin’?”

Adeline’s eyes widened. “I didn’t mean it like that. I... don’t know what I meant.” Her expression hardened. “This is your fault. You startled me out of my skin, so my brain is all... jiggled. I can’t think straight.”

“Neither can I,” he replied silkily. “And that is yer fault.”

She turned her back to him, slotting the book back into its place on the shelf. “I thought we agreed to forget about that. You’re just bringing it up because you know you should’ve... knocked or something, and you want to turn it on me.”

“I was talkin’ about ye bein’ in me study, where ye shouldnae be without gettin’ permission from me,” he returned, smiling as her body stiffened. “I daenae ken what ye’re referrin’ to.”

For a short while, she kept her back to him, no doubt trying to figure out how to respond. Still, it pleased him to discover that she had not actually forgotten about the events of the previous night. Perhaps that meant she might be inclined to “test something” again.

He watched her as he waited for her reply, silently lamenting the fact that she had dispensed with that gray second skin he had come to like so much. Evidently, she had been introduced to a more appropriate wardrobe. She wore a simple gown of finely woven wool, the skirts parting like curtains at the hips to reveal petticoats below. He could not remember the name of the garment, nor did it seem important to know. But he could not deny that it suited her, making her appear more... graceful.

“Were ye lookin’ for somethin’ in particular?” he asked, when several minutes had gone by and she still had not spoken.

She took a breath and turned to face him. “The books your old healer left behind. Your mother said I might find some here, but I haven’t yet.” She paused. “Some of the writing is hard for me to read.”

“It is?” He approached.

She pulled out one of the books to show him. “Some of the books are handwritten, which is frankly impossible. I mean, I like a nice cursive as much as the next person, but this is just spider scrawl.” She pulled out another, opening it at a random page. “And then, there are ones like this, where the printing is so tightly packed—how is anyone meant to read it without straining their eyes? Just thinking about reading it is giving me a headache.”

“I can read ‘em to ye if ye start strugglin’,” he offered.

She met his gaze and then immediately lowered her eyes again, her cheeks reddening. “I might need you to. I was looking for something that could help with your mom’s back before I go and swipe what I can from your old healer’s room. But... like I said, this is impossible. I’m not even convinced it’s English.”

“That one isnae,” Logan said, stifling a laugh. “That’s French.”

She seemed surprised. “You speak French?”

“Ye need nae keep widenin’ yer eyes like that whenever ye discover I have some refinement about me, Adeline,” he half-chided. “I might nae be a fancy English Lord, but I wouldnae say I’m an uncivilized brute.”

She swallowed loudly. “You did kick the door in.”

“What would ye do if ye approached a door to a room that only ye ever enter, and ye found it ajar? Would ye enter quietly?”

Adeline frowned. “I think I’d find the nearest baseball bat, but then I am from New Jersey.”

“I daenae ken what that means.” He smiled at her, admiring her beauty... and the pretty pink flush on her cheeks caused by him.

There was nothing so satisfying as making a woman blush for the right reasons.

She smoothed her fingertips across the yellowed pages of the French novella, and Logan noted the dust on the leather exterior. He wished he could say the book had been a gift from a foreign guest, but how it had come to be on the shelves in his study

was a much grislier tale. One he was not prepared to tell Adeline.

“Do you know where the medical stuff might be?” she asked, her shoulders relaxing.

He nodded, reaching high over her head to touch the books at the very top. “Do ye want all of them?”

She said nothing, her mouth slightly parted. Her eyes were fixed on his chest, no more than a hand’s length away from her. Clearing her throat, she backed away a little, her spine bumping into the bookcase.

“Ow,” she mumbled, still staring at his chest.

He decided to enjoy the moment, leaning closer as he grabbed the largest book on that top shelf. He took his time bringing it down to her level, while she stood silently in his shadow, her teeth grazing her lower lip.

“This is the one he used the most,” Logan explained, keeping one hand above her head while he held the massive tome in the other.

She nodded absently. “Hmm?”

“This book. It’s the one the healer used the most.”

Her gaze lifted to meet his, her breath catching in the softest gasp. “Is that right?”

“Aye, it is,” he replied. “I daenae ken if there’s aught in here that can help me maither, though. The old healer wasnae too concerned with aches and pains. He was more of a... broken bones sort of man.”

Adeline’s throat moved as she swallowed, drawing his eyes to that sensual curve. His

lips ached to kiss her there, to feel her swallow again as his mouth grazed her skin. And his arms, so close to her, longed to pull her into an embrace once more, to make certain that the previous night had not been a mirage.

“Willow bark,” she whispered.

Logan arched an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“I... need to find willow bark.”

“Aye, we can do that,” he said, taking a half-step closer.

She pressed back into the bookcase, though she did not try to escape his proximity. His left side was entirely clear. If she wanted to be free of him, the way was open to her. Instead, her breath shallowed, her chest rising and falling in a frantic rhythm as her eyes gleamed with desire.

“Actually, I was hopin’ that ye might help me with somethin’,” he told her, dipping his head.

Adeline shook her head. “I can’t. I can’t do—”

“There’s a man on the cliffs,” Logan interrupted, to spare her blushes. “An old friend of mine. In the storm, his home collapsed on him. We only just found him. He’d been lyin’ there for a while. He wouldnae come to the keep, but I thought ye might consent to visit him, to test and see if ye can fix him.”

Adeline expelled a shaky breath. “Oh, well, if it’s that—I suppose I should do something to earn my keep. I’d... um... be happy to visit him, to see what I can do, but I’m definitely going to need that willow bark.”

“What did ye think I was goin’ to ask ye for?” He could not help teasing, though it was quite plain what she thought he was going to say.

She hesitated, her eyes narrowing. “Do you want me to help you or not?”

“Is that a threat? What have I done to deserve that?” He smiled, taking another half step until there was barely a breath between them. His hand lowered to cradle the back of her neck.

Her breath hitched. “What are you doing?”

“I dinnae want ye to knock yer head again,” he replied. “Now, would ye like me to stay here, or would ye like me to go to the other side of the room?”

She did not answer at once, clearly trying to gather herself. A red blush rose up from the swell of her breasts, coloring her neck, and creeping up to join the pink of her cheeks. Gently, she touched a hand to his chest, but whether it was to push him away or to bring him closer, he did not know... and did not get to find out.

The study door burst open.

Logan whirled around, standing in front of Adeline to protect her. An old instinct not yet forgotten. But as he saw the figure who barreled into the room, his tightly wound muscles relaxed. There would be no fight, nor was he sure why he thought there would be.

“Uncle?” Logan would have cursed the older man’s timing, but one look at the expression on his uncle Dallas’s face, and he realized there was something more serious afoot. “Have ye come from the east?”

Dallas stooped to catch his breath. “Aye, son.” It was the term of endearment he had

always used, even in Logan's adulthood. "It's nae good."

"Is Ben with ye?"

Dallas shook his head. "I left him in the village. He's tendin' to those poor souls as best he can, but his grandfaither dinnae teach him much." He raised pale blue eyes. "It's... dire, and it's only gettin' worse. Worse than the northern villages."

"Are they dyin'?" Logan held his breath.

Dallas nodded slowly. "They're beginnin' to, but it's nae as quick as in the north. I daenae ken if that's a blessin' or a curse. Och, Logan, it's awful. The sounds of their pain are enough to curdle milk." He paused, sweeping a hand through his silver hair. "But that's nae the worst news I have for ye."

"What do ye mean?"

Dallas took a deep breath, while Logan still held his. "Yer brother is among the sick."

"What?" Logan's eyes bulged, his heart lurching in his throat. "How can that be? I sent him away. He's on the mainland."

Dallas pulled a knowing face. "He isnae. He came back just before that terrible storm we had. Must've been hidin' in one of the villages, drinkin' himself into a stupor. Got himself sick instead."

"Tell me ye brought him with ye," Logan growled, fighting to control himself.

"I couldnae," Dallas replied somberly. "He couldnae be moved without it causin' him pain, and there were nay carts I could use to bring him. They're all bein' used for... the dead and dyin'."

Logan clenched his hands into fists. “We’re ridin’ back, at once. I must find out what is causin’ this, and I must find out before... anyone else is lost.”

“I thought ye might say that.” Dallas sighed. “Hoped ye might, anyway.”

At that moment, Adeline stepped from behind Logan, drawing Dallas’s surprised gaze. “You’re not going anywhere without me,” she stated, gazing up at him. “I can be of service.”

“Nay,” Logan replied curtly.

“You’d be an idiot not to take me there,” she shot back, moving to stand in front of him. “I know what I’m looking at when I see sick people. I know what to do. I might not have my usual resources, but... I can help. At the very least, I can figure this out, and, by the Grace of God, if it’s something I’m familiar with, we might be able to stop it from spreading.”

Logan thought of his brother, claimed by this plague that continued to blight the island. It was not really a decision at all. Of course, there was a great risk of someone hailing Adeline as a witch, which came with its own cruel array of consequences, but if he did not let her come with him, his brother might die. He could not allow that to happen.

“Very well,” he said, noting for the first time that the purple was gone from her hair. “But remember yerself.”

She squinted. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He took hold of her chin, lightly brushing his thumb across her lower lip. “Guard this .” He lowered his voice so Dallas would not hear. “Be careful of what ye say.”

For if Adeline was their only hope of holding back the tide of this sickness, his clan needed to believe the story—that she was someone he had invited to the island to help, and not a witch or a sorceress or a woman who did not belong. They needed to trust her, and suspicion was a fever that spread far quicker than any illness.

CHAPTER 14

“Is it meant to be this... wobbly?” Adeline whispered to Logan, her thighs aching where she’d been gripping the saddle for at least twenty minutes.

He sat behind her, one arm around her waist. “Ye’re nae goin’ to fall. Do ye have such little trust in the hold I have on ye?”

Oh, if only you actually knew the hold you have on me .

Her mind flitted back to his study. She liked to think she had some semblance of willpower, but she was fairly certain that she’d been about to make the same mistake again. If that silver-haired man hadn’t walked in when he had, she’d have kissed Logan—there was no point denying it.

“I can’t remember the last time I rode a horse,” she said, ignoring his remark. “I think I went on one pony trek when I was about six and another when I was eight, maybe, but that’s pretty much my entire experience.”

“If ye cease wrigglin’, it willnae feel so shaky,” Logan told her. “Though, I daenae mind it.”

Flashing him a disapproving look, she pulled herself forward an inch or two... but that didn’t do much to help her escape the press of his muscular thighs against hers, nor the secure arm around her waist. Not if she didn’t want to tumble off, anyway.

And it felt... nice. Too nice, maybe. Being that close to him was treacherous; the

near-miss in the library had taught her that. But what could she do? It wasn't like she could be trusted to ride her own horse without becoming the one who needed medical treatment.

"Who is Ben?" she asked, focusing elsewhere. "You mentioned him before."

"Ben Donohue. He's the old healer's grandson," Logan replied. "Without a real healer on the island, all the duties of a healer fell to him."

Adeline frowned. "So, you do have a healer?"

"Nae exactly. The lad is barely six-and-ten, and he dinnae listen much to what his grandfaither taught him." Logan sighed. "He's a poor substitute, but he's all we have."

Adeline looked ahead, astonished by the stark beauty of the island. They were following a wild path through wind-tossed hills, where nothing but spiny shrubs and twisted trees grew. Here and there, huts and small stone structures could be seen, but they had not seen another soul since leaving the keep, as if the island were deserted. It should've been ugly if Adeline was being honest, but there was an intangible charm to the landscape. An ancient mystique that thrilled her.

Now, I think I understand why you like all of this so much, Jane.

"And who is your brother? You never said you had a brother." Adeline looked back at Logan. "Come to think of it, your mom and sister didn't mention you had a brother either. Don't you get along with him? Is he, like, a stepbrother or a half-brother or something? Is that why you sent him off the island?"

Logan furrowed his brow. "Which question would ye like me to answer first? I wasnae expectin' a barrage."

“Whichever you like.”

“Oliver is me brother. Nae a step or half.” His face pinched, a dark look narrowing his eyes. “He’s... a rough lad, but he’s family.”

Adeline laughed awkwardly. “So, you don’t get along with him, but you don’t want to say so outright. I can understand that. Families are difficult. Most of them have a black sheep.”

“Do ye have family?”

She turned her attention back to the wild horizon, watching a cluster of rabbits freeze at the sound of the horses approaching. Their ears flicked back and forth, sensing danger. And she was a rabbit caught in headlights, similarly panicked.

“I have siblings,” she replied, pretending she’d misheard the questions. “Well, one sibling. A sister. Funnily enough, she’s somewhere out here right now... somewhere in Scotland, just... not at the same time.”

“Where is she? Perhaps I ken the place.”

A lightbulb flashed in Adeline’s mind, wondering if that was the key to getting home, but she quickly turned the light off again. That couldn’t be it. It had something to do with the snow globe or the storm, not the location, or her sister. And she couldn’t actually remember where her sister had said she was—Jane had probably told Adeline a thousand times, but the name hadn’t stuck.

“In the Highlands somewhere, I think,” she said, deciding that sounded about right.

“Do ye get along with her?”

Adeline's heart clenched with sadness. "I love her more than anything else in the world. So, yeah, I guess you could say we get along. I mean, we used to fight like cat and dog when we were kids, but... we couldn't be without each other now."

And if I can't make it out of this era, back to my own, she's going to be all alone...

She settled back into the sturdy support of Logan's chest, taking comfort from his warmth and solidity. It was the only thing she could do to distract herself from the realization that, when Jane found out she was missing, it would seem like she had vanished off the face of the Earth, leaving no explanation behind whatsoever.

And knowing Jane, she would search forever for an explanation that would never come.

Logan had made the island sound tiny, but it felt like an eternity before signs of civilization came into view. A small village, smaller than any settlement Adeline had ever seen, appeared out of the greens and browns of the wilderness.

Two stone cottages acted as gateposts, showing where the village began, but the rest of the structures were wood—huts and cabins, dotted around haphazardly. Some of them were way too close to the lip of the high cliffs for Adeline's liking, the thought of the sheer drop to the churning sea below making her stomach lurch.

She'd never been a fan of heights.

"Remember who ye are," Logan whispered, his arm tightening around her waist for a moment. It felt like a squeeze of encouragement, and though it should've comforted her, she was terrified.

"Miss Adeline Clark. Daughter of a famed healer, come all the way from... Where am I from again?" Her heart fluttered wildly, nausea rising.

“Wales,” he replied patiently.

“Not like the sea creature?”

Logan shook his head. “Nay, nae like the sea creature. It just sounds the same.”

“And where is Wales?” Adeline felt like she was cramming for an end-of-year test again, and nothing was sticking.

“To the west of England.”

Adeline nodded. “It’s an island?”

“Nay, it’s attached to England, but it’s separate,” he said.

“That’s not confusing at all.” Adeline took a breath. “I can do this. I can do this. It’s what I’m good at.”

Within minutes, it was time to put her money where her mouth was. The horses came to a halt just in front of the stone cottages that marked the village boundary, and Logan slipped down from the saddle.

He reached his arms up to her. “So ye daenae fall at the last moment,” he explained.

Gingerly bringing her leg over the saddle, so she sat facing him, she leaned forward to take hold of his broad shoulders. Muscles rippled underneath her hands, their faces within kissing distance as his hands settled on her waist. Like a male dancer lifting a ballerina, he plucked her off the saddle like it was nothing at all and slowly set her down on the ground.

But Adeline’s legs were still shaky from the ride, and her badly timed nerves. She

clung onto his shoulders for a few moments, catching her breath and steadying herself. Meanwhile, his hands stayed on the curve of her waist, his beautiful blue eyes peering down at her with concern.

“Are ye well?” he asked.

She made the mistake of looking back up into his eyes. “I will be.”

“I can send ye back with Theo if ye cannae do this,” he said. “Ye’re still recoverin’ yerself.”

She loosened her grip on him and stepped back, rallying. “I’m fine. Just... get me to the people who need help, and I’ll do what I was born to do.”

She reached into the horse’s leather pack and took out the jars she’d pilfered from the old healer’s chambers. She’d only been allowed a few minutes in there before Logan had insisted on them leaving, and the writing on the jars was impossible to read, but she hoped she had the right remedies. Figuring out how to use them was going to be the hard part, since they didn’t come in handy, little pills.

As they approached the village—Adeline, Logan, Dallas, and Theo—some of the villagers began to emerge, to welcome the arrivals. The people who hadn’t yet succumbed to the mystery illness, or so Adeline assumed. But it wasn’t long before the wary glances started darting in her direction.

“This is a guest of mine,” Logan announced, nudging her forward. “She’s a gifted healer, come all the way from Wales at me invitation to help rid us of this curse, once and for all.”

Adeline put on a nervous smile. “Hello there.” She took a deep breath. “If you wouldn’t mind taking me to the sickest folks first, I can get started.”

She was aware of every word that came out of her mouth in a way she never had been before. It was like sitting a Spanish exam, having to translate every word in her mind, then picking out the right words before speaking.

“Do as she says,” Logan encouraged.

An elderly woman, with so many wrinkles that her face seemed to be stuck in a constant frown, beckoned to Adeline.

Adeline immediately followed, her shoes squelching through the churned-up mud that served as a road through the village. Eyes peered out of darkened doorways, narrowing as she passed, and whispers made her ears burn.

A chill ran up her spine, wondering what these people would do to her if she put a foot wrong, and they started to think she really was a witch.

Maybe it would’ve been wiser to stay behind, after all.

CHAPTER 15

Adeline picked her way across mounds of horse manure and other things that she didn't dare to guess at.

Focus on the sickness. Focus on assessments, whatever tests you can do, and helping these people. They wouldn't be the first ungrateful patients you've treated.

"In here," the elderly woman said, leading Adeline into a small, wooden hut.

The blast of heat struck Adeline immediately, her brow beading with sweat within seconds. The air was too thick inside the hut and sour with sickness, two fires burning at the same time, following the outdated theory that heat combatted heat. It had long been established, at least in her world, that too much heat with a feverish patient would only make them worse.

Adeline spotted the three figures on the floor, in between the two searing braziers, all buried beneath a mountain of furs and blankets. Two young women and a man, their faces bright red, even in the low light of the hut.

She went to them without hesitation, her training kicking in, shunning all of her nerves. Kneeling beside the first of the two young women, Adeline touched her hand to the woman's forehead. It was like touching hot coals.

"Get the doors and shutters open," Adeline commanded, her voice firm.

The old woman stared at her as if she was completely mad.

“Trust me,” Adeline urged. “Get the doors and shutters open. We need good airflow through the hut. And then...”

What can I do for them without medicine?

She racked her brain, thinking through all of the survival medicine guides she’d read, seeking inspiration.

“And then, I need someone to fetch snow,” she continued, nodding to herself. “As much as they can carry. And salt, if you have it. I’ll need to borrow some pots to boil water, too, if you can spare them. Spread the message—I want everyone boiling as many pots of water as they can. I’ll need cloths, as well. All the cloths you can find.”

The old woman hesitated.

“If you do this, I can help them. If you don’t, I can’t, and they’re going to get worse,” Adeline insisted, not unkindly.

The old woman took a shaky breath and, with a nod, disappeared back out into the street. Adeline could hear her barking the instructions to the rest of the villagers, while she herself set to work on getting good airflow through the stifling hut, pulling open shutters and wedging the door open.

That done, Adeline pulled back the blankets and furs that covered the first woman. Without a stethoscope or a blood pressure monitor or any kind of machinery, for that matter, she was really dipping into her survival knowledge. Still, she wouldn’t let a lack of technology beat her.

Tearing off a length of her petticoat, she tied it around her face and leaned down to press her ear against her first patient’s chest. The woman’s heartbeat was frantic, racing too fast. And as Adeline pressed her fingers to the inside of the woman’s wrist,

feeling for her pulse, she could easily guess that the patient's blood pressure was sky high.

Just then, the old woman came back in, carrying an armful of cloths. "I got these for ye. The lasses in the village are rippin' up more. The lads have gone to fetch the snow that ye asked for. And there are pots comin'."

A thought occurred to Adeline. "Are there hot pools near here?"

"Aye, down by the beach," the woman replied.

"Are they really hot or just warm?"

The woman frowned. "Just warm."

"How warm would you say they are? Is it like when you've made yourself a... bowl of hot soup and forgotten about it, so when you come back to it, it's only just warm?"

The woman's eyebrows rose, like she understood exactly what Adeline meant. A good sign.

"Aye, like that," she confirmed.

Adeline could feel her confidence rising. "Is it easy to get down to the beach?"

"There's a slope, aye."

"Can you fit a cart down it?"

The woman nodded.

“This is going to sound a bit... mad,” Adeline confessed, “but I need you to get everyone who isn’t sick to gather in the middle of the village for me. It’ll be easier if I explain what needs to happen all in one go, instead of repeating myself.”

The woman was out of the door before Adeline had properly finished, filling her with hope that these people might trust her, after all.

Taking a moment to work through what she was going to say to them, Adeline drew in a deep breath, the air already fresher inside the hut, and headed out into the gray light.

To her surprise, everyone had already gathered, including Logan, his uncle Dallas, and Theo. Then again, there weren’t too many people to gather. Forty or so. Everyone else must’ve been in a similar condition to the three patients in the old woman’s hut.

“I realize you don’t know me,” Adeline began, trying not to let the wary stares get the better of her. “But I am here solely for your benefit, and now that I’ve seen one of the... sickly, I’m certain I know how to help. But in order to help, you’re going to have to trust me and listen to me. I might say some things that you don’t agree with, but... if you want the sick to survive this, you need to believe that I know what I’m doing.”

A grumble rippled through the small crowd.

“To begin with, we’re going to start taking the sick to the hot pools by the beach,” she went on, her nerves rattling. “Let’s start with five people, and once they’ve bathed, we’ll exchange them for the next five, and so on and so on until everyone has been in the pools. The sickest first.

“For those who are waiting, I need you all to open your shutters and doors to let the air flow through your homes,” she added, conscious of her vocabulary. “Too much

heat isn't good. And... the air will stagnate if it can't get out, and that stagnant air will stagnate in the lungs of the sick."

She chose explanations she thought they would understand, though it wasn't easy to steer away from the medical terms that came so easily to her.

"I've also asked for you to start boiling as many pots of water as you can. This is the only water you must allow the sick to drink, and only once it has been cooled." Adeline clenched her hands into fists, suppressing her anxiety. "That's why I've asked for snow to be fetched. This is not to be melted down and drunk, for any reason. Instead, set the cups of the boiling water on it, to cool it down quicker. However, you will need to melt some of the snow down, then dip cloths into it and put those cloths on the foreheads of the sick. When they warm up from being on the skin, change them for freshly dipped cloths.

"Cover the sick with blankets and furs, of course, but not too many. You don't want them to get too hot, and, right now, they're boiling alive," she concluded. "I'll come around to each of you in turn and help you understand how many is too many, and I'll give the sick a tonic to help with the fever, once I've brewed it."

She held up the jars she'd brought with her. "It's just feverfew and willow bark. I'm sure you've heard of them before. It'll help, alongside everything else I've just advised."

The villagers kept staring at her, though their expressions weren't quite as suspicious as before. Instead, they looked anxious, like they hadn't quite understood everything she'd said.

Adeline glanced over at Logan, who was gazing back at her with his eyebrow raised. He seemed impressed, a half-smile on the lips that she would've given anything to kiss just then, so she wouldn't have to think about the enormous task ahead of her.

Healing an entire village with no modern medicine whatsoever seemed impossible, but what choice did she have?

“Oh, and do as I’ve done,” Adeline added, pointing to her makeshift face mask. “I don’t know yet the nature of the curse, but if it’s in the air, this will lower the risk of the rest of you getting sick. All of you should drink the boiled water—only the boiled water. And... uh... I’ll have to check your food stores at some point, to see if that’s causing all of this.”

“Ye think someone cursed the food?” one man asked.

Adeline shrugged. “It’s a possibility we all have to consider. But, for now, please do what I’ve asked, and we’ll see how we get on.”

“Ye heard her!” Logan strode forward, tearing off a strip of his own shirt to tie around his face. “Get to work! We’ve a lot to do, by the sound of it.”

Immediately, the villagers followed suit, grabbing bits of cloth and fabric to tie around their faces, before dispersing to do as Adeline had commanded. It gave her hope that, even if they didn’t quite trust her, they trusted their Laird enough to save their own lives.

“I daenae ken what ye have planned,” Logan said, approaching, “but ye sounded like ye kenned what ye were sayin’. Ye certainly daenae seem so nervous anymore.”

Adeline flashed him a smile, realizing too late that it was hidden behind her mask. “Believe it or not, this is the kind of thing that relaxes me. I thrive on stress.”

“That cannae be good for ye, can it?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Everyone has their thing. You bathe in hot pools, drop crumbs all

over your study floor, and... I don't know, lift weights or something. I prefer to exercise my brain, and right now, it's running a marathon."

"Lift weights? What does that mean?" He frowned at her.

She shook her head. "Never mind. Come on, we've got who knows how many people to get bathed and treated. It's going to be a long day, and I can't have you... distracting me."

"I distract you?"

She put a finger to her lips. "Nope. Zip it." She nodded down the muddy street. "Anyway, shouldn't you be worrying about your brother? He's here somewhere, isn't he?"

"Nae here, exactly," Logan replied. "Ye do realize that this is only the first of the eastern villages, do ye nae?"

Adeline's eyes bugged. "What?"

"There are five all down the eastern coast," he said. "This is the first. Me brother is in the last."

Adeline puffed out an exasperated breath. "You mean, I have to do this four more times?"

"Aye, though I daenae think ye'll be able to use the pools for the villages that are farthest from here." He scratched his head. "I daenae suppose ye have any other ideas, do ye?"

Adeline nearly threw in the towel right there and then, but one look at the villagers

running back and forth, wearing their makeshift masks, doing exactly what she'd asked, and she knew she couldn't give up. If the other villages couldn't come to the hot pools, the hot pools would just have to come to them.

"Ride on to the next villages," she instructed, thinking out loud. "Have them find the biggest buckets they can—the closest thing to a bathtub. Get them to start boiling pots of water and fetching snow. Once I have everything sorted here, I'll start on the next village."

Logan smiled. "Ye really do ken what ye're doin', eh?"

"Did you doubt me?"

His smile widened. "We'll have to see what happens." He leaned down, his mouth close to her ear as he whispered, "I'm still nae entirely convinced ye're nae a witch."

"Do you want to get me burnt at the stake?" Adeline hissed, struggling to ignore the heat that rushed down her neck. His lips were so close to her skin.

He chuckled. "I willnae allow it."

"And if you can't stop it?" she probed, genuinely curious.

His smile faded, his breath tickling her throat. "I'd get ye out of here, nay matter what it takes."

"That's the plan anyway, remember?" she said, more to herself than to him.

She'd only been on the island for a matter of days, but with each of those days, getting closer to the people she had encountered, the world she'd landed in began to feel less strange. And not once had she sat down and really thought about how to get

home. It worried her, more than she knew how to explain.

No matter what, I have to get back...

There were people waiting for her. People who'd miss her. People who'd be crushed by her disappearance. Only two, in reality, but those two were enough to ensure she never forgot her goal.

Logan pulled back, dipping his head. "Aye, I remember." He turned to his uncle and man-at-arms. "We're ridin' up the coast. Come, there's nae a moment to lose."

Adeline didn't dare to believe it, but as she watched Logan retreat to the horses, she could've sworn she saw a look of disappointment on his face. As if it might not be the worst thing in the world if she had to stay, and he'd only just remembered that she had to go.

You won't tempt me, she silently vowed as the whisper of his breath burned on her neck.

CHAPTER 16

Darkness had fallen by the time Logan, Adeline, and their small escort of Dallas and Theo entered the last village on the eastern coast. Snow clouds loomed overhead, releasing the first feathery flakes from their swollen bellies, and the cold nipped savagely at any speck of bare flesh. A warning to seek shelter before more snow fell.

“Adeline?” Logan whispered.

Adeline lolled in his arms, moving with the sway of the horse. She had been that way since he had hoisted her into the saddle and they had moved away from the previous village, resting flush against his chest, his arm around her the only thing keeping her from falling off the beast.

“Adeline?” he whispered again, somewhat reluctantly.

He could not recall the last time he had held a sleeping woman in his arms, the responsibility filling him with a fierce sense of protectiveness. Indeed, he wished he could let her sleep on in his embrace, but he did not know what needed to be done at the last of the eastern villages. In this case, he was just the messenger.

“Hmm?” Adeline rubbed her eyes, turning to look at him.

“We’re at Red Briar,” he explained. “Before ye can rest, they’re goin’ to need ye to do... what it is ye do with all this healin’ business.”

She stifled a yawn. “I was just resting my eyes. I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Is that so?” He smiled, unable to resist the urge to push her windswept hair out of her face, tucking it gently behind her ear.

She blinked, her eyes certainly more awake than they had been a moment ago. “I... don’t have any hair ties,” she mumbled. “Your mother said I couldn’t use them. They’d be too strange in this world. But the ribbon she gave me is useless. My hair keeps slipping out of it.”

“Do ye want me to tie it for ye?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Do you know how?”

“I have a sister. A very demanding sister,” he said, by way of explanation.

Holding her by the shoulders, Logan turned her back around. She shuffled forward slightly, denying his loins the satisfying sensation of her round buttocks pressing against them. Still, that was probably for the best.

As the horse plodded on around the village, Logan unfastened the ribbon from Adeline’s hair and clenched it between his teeth. Slowly, his fingertips lightly brushing her neck, he swept her hair backward, gathering it in one hand.

The pale curve of her neck drew his gaze for a moment, his tongue running over his lower lip as he thought about kissing her there. Dallas and Theo were far enough ahead that they would not notice, nor did they have any reason to look back.

Daenae make her into somethin’ ye willnae want to let go of.

He returned his focus to her hair. But even that came with its own array of risks, the raven black locks carrying the scent of something unfamiliar and sweet, and so silky that even he was not sure the ribbon would hold her hair.

He decided on a braid, like the ones he put his own hair in, and the ones that Moira would spend hours twisting her hair into—the more elaborate, the better. It did not take him long, Adeline's hair moving easily between his fingers. And once he was done, he wrapped the ribbon tightly around the unbraided end, before tying it into a tight bow. All the while, his gaze kept flitting back to the curve of her neck, her smooth, pale skin taunting him.

“I liked the purple,” he said, letting her braid fall onto her back.

She laughed. “So did I.”

“I expect ye'll dye it back again when ye're where ye belong, eh?”

She hesitated, her shoulders stiffening slightly. “I don't know, actually. I might. Might choose a different color.” Another laugh, more awkward than before, left her throat. “All I know is, when I get back, I'm staying well away from snow globes.”

“Aye, whatever snow globes are, I expect that might be for the best,” he told her, while his mind whispered something else, something that could not be said aloud.

Or, ye could come back. For healin' purposes, of course. With medicine from yer time or somethin'.

The horses halted on the outskirts of the village—the largest of the five on the east coast—and Logan helped Adeline down. This time, however, she held onto him for longer than before, her gaze meeting his. Her lips parted as if she wanted to say something, but with a subtle shake of her head, she stepped back and clapped her hands together.

“Right, let's see how well you all passed on the message, should we?” she boomed.

Her pretty face was streaked with the dirt and grime of the day, her dress caked in mud and soot and countless bodily fluids. Yet, Logan did not know if he had ever seen her look more astonishingly beautiful. She was like something out of a legend, standing there with all the knowledge and determination that could save his people.

Ye came in a storm, as a blessin' to this island.

He was still in awe of how commanding she had been in the previous villages, winning the people over with her firm but kind delivery and her unwavering confidence in her healing skills.

However, as soon as the quartet walked into the village of Red Briar, Logan sensed the difference in their welcome. Suspicion crackled in the air, and only a handful of villagers came forward to greet their Laird, while the rest hung back in their huts, cottages, and bothies, peering at Adeline.

“We did what ye asked.” A figure emerged from one of the nearby huts. Ben Donohue, the old healer’s grandson. He looked flustered, wiping bloodied hands on a cloth, though Logan noticed he wore no mask on his face. None of the villagers did. “But it wasnae easy to get them to comply. Half of ‘em were willin’, half of ‘em willnae open their shutters and doors. They believe sweatin’ out the fever is the only way to make it break.”

A grizzled man approached. “I willnae take any orders from a healer I daenae ken,” he said curtly. “Nay offense to ye, m'laird, but I willnae do as a stranger asks me to when it's the life of me whole family at stake.”

From the front door of a stone cottage, Logan heard whispers that sent a shudder down his spine.

“I willnae be doin’ as a witch tells me,” the voice muttered. “She’s likely the one who

cursed us in the first place. That's why she kens how to cure it."

He knew better than to confront the gossip, for it would only make it worse, giving the whispers validation that he could not allow.

"Give me a week," Adeline said suddenly, putting up her hands in a gesture of surrender. "That's all I'm asking of you. Give me a week to show you that my methods are genuine and that they'll help to bring your loved ones back from the brink of death. I know you don't know me, I know why you think you can't trust me, and I know it's difficult for you all when you're so worried about your families, but I wouldn't be putting my neck out like this if I didn't think I could help."

A few more faces appeared at doorways, the curiosity drawing them out like mice in a hayloft.

"My mother sent me here, knowing that I might face suspicion and distrust, simply because I'm a woman doing work that men do," she went on, her voice wavering.

"But she heard of your plight, and she couldn't let this curse take over this island. She'd seen it before, countless times, in the villages of Wales. She faced suspicion and even contempt in her tireless work. But she believed in me enough to send me here, and I'm asking you to put your faith in me for just a week. If my methods don't work, I'll return to where I came from, and you can handle this in your own way. If my methods do work, I'll explain how they work, so that if something like this ever happens again, you'll all be equipped to deal with it."

The people of Red Briar seemed to respond to Adeline's earnest words, the whispers dying down. And as Logan watched, a fresh rush of awe coursed through him. They were hanging on her every word, and so, in truth, was he.

It feels like sorcery, but... I think it's just her.

He hoped that her natural charm would not stir up the gossip again. Not every confident, assured, intelligent woman had to be labeled a witch—though she was bewitching.

“Well, what do we do with these bathtubs, eh?” a woman asked, her arms crossed over her chest.

Adeline relaxed. “How big are they?”

“Fairly big,” the woman replied. “I can fit meself and me husband in one.”

“I bet ye can!” a voice jeered from somewhere down the long street, sending a ripple of laughter through the villagers. It broke the tension, and more of the healthy souls emerged to greet the newcomers.

Adeline chuckled. “Put two of the sick in each of the bathtubs, then. They shouldn’t be too hot—I’ll come around and check the temperature of each one. Only leave the sick in the bathtubs until the water cools, then get them out, put them in blankets—not too many—and please, please trust me when I say that you need to open your shutters and doors to let the air in.”

“Do we have to wear cloth on our faces, like ye’re doin’? Someone said we do, but I daenae understand why,” another voice asked.

“It’s to stop more people from getting sick,” Adeline explained without hesitation. “I checked the food stores in the last villages and couldn’t see any contamination, so it stands to reason that the curse is coming from the air or the water. That’s why you’re to only drink boiled water, from now on. Even if you pull it from the wells or the springs, boil it first, let it cool, then drink it.”

A haughty-faced young woman sneered. “How do ye ken that?”

“My mother taught me that... curses are most often found in water or air or in the exchange of... um... bodily fluids, where it can get to the most amount of people—so, try not to kiss or get too close or... uh... make love while the sickness is ongoing, either,” Adeline replied.

An older woman snorted. “I’ve been tryin’ nae to do that ever since I got married!”

“She isnae lyin’!” shouted a man. Presumably the woman’s husband.

But the young woman with the sneer did not seem satisfied. “Ye seem to ken an awful lot about curses. Who’s to say that ye’re nae the one who put this curse on us, eh?”

“I’m no witch if that’s your insinuation. I’m just a woman who also happens to be a gifted healer, all thanks to my mother,” Adeline replied curtly. “You see, my mother doesn’t just heal, she also captures witches and makes them remove the curses they’ve put on people. She has captured hundreds of witches in her time. That’s how I know where the curses are most likely to be hiding, and that’s how I know how to help you.”

Logan listened to the story with interest, wondering if any of it was true. Adeline had not mentioned much about her family before. Indeed, whenever he mentioned family, she seemed to go quiet, changing the subject quickly. But hearing that, he was determined to find out more.

A little boy ran up to Adeline. “Yer ma was a witch-catcher? Me ma just churns butter and calls me da all sorts of names.”

“My mother was a witch-catcher, yes,” Adeline replied, laughing. “But I bet your mother makes excellent butter, and I bet it has made her strong enough that she could catch a witch if she wanted to.”

The boy held out his arms, and Adeline picked him up, eliciting a few gasps from the villagers.

“Ma, does churnin’ butter make ye strong enough to catch a witch?” the boy called out.

A woman chuckled at the side of the street. “Aye, and to smack yer wee behind if ye daenae get down from that poor lass, at once. She doesnae want ye climbin’ all over her.”

“But I had to check she wasnae a witch,” the boy insisted. “Everyone kens that witches start smokin’ if they get near children, and she isnae smokin’, Ma. She wouldnae have picked me up if she was!”

Somehow, this reasoning seemed to appease some of the skeptics among the Red Briar people, their scowls of suspicion softening into smiles as Adeline kept carrying the boy.

“Would you like to help me check the temperature of the baths?” Adeline asked him.

The boy furrowed his brow. “Aye, but I daenae want to go in the bath. I had a bath a fortnight ago, I daenae need another.”

“No bath for you, then,” Adeline promised, approaching the closest house.

Two women barred the way, but as soon as Adeline approached, the women exchanged a look and stepped aside, allowing her entry into their home. Her charm, it seemed, did not just work on men and children.

She’s winnin’ them over.

Logan smiled. Though it was the sight of the boy in her arms that had given him pause, his wayward mind picturing her in the keep with a different child in her arms. He quickly shoved the thought away, for though he had been waiting years for the right woman to come along, it could not be her.

She was an impossibility. More to the point, he barely knew her.

A tap on his shoulder snapped him out of his thoughts.

“Shall we find yer brother?” Dallas asked.

Logan nodded. “Aye, though if he isnae too sick, ye’d best believe he’s goin’ to get a hidin’ for comin’ back here without me permission.”

In all his awe and admiration for Adeline, he had completely forgotten about his errant brother.

CHAPTER 17

“What are ye doin’ that for?” A young woman by the name of Dara peered over Adeline’s shoulder as Adeline sprinkled some salt into the brew of feverfew and willow bark that she had made.

Adeline set the brew on a pile of freshly fetched snow to cool it faster. “Salt helps restore the body when it’s sick,” she explained. “Just a little bit, or it’ll draw out all the moisture instead.”

“And why are we suddenly boilin’ all of our water?” Dara eyed the tonic, leaning down to sniff it. “Ugh, I hope I daenae catch the curse, ‘cause I’m nae drinkin’ that. It smells vile.”

“It tastes vile, too, but most medicine tends to taste foul,” Adeline replied, laughing. “That’s how you know it’s doing you some good. That’s what my mother used to say, anyway, when I wouldn’t take my medicine.”

Dara slipped on the floor and hugged her knees, peering at Adeline. “Is all this really goin’ to save me sisters?”

“I hope so.”

Dara nodded. “Ye cannae promise it, though?”

“I don’t think anyone can promise that someone will pull through a sickness,” Adeline replied. “It’s mostly in the hands of...” She pointed upward.

She remembered the constant internal conflict she had to go through at the hospital, not to promise a patient that they were going to make it. Even if the signs were good and the surgery had gone really well, it was downright stupid to make promises about life and death. Certainly not to any family members who'd end up suing if their loved one did die.

Dara glanced across at her three slumbering sisters, who'd all had their lukewarm baths, taken their first dose of tonic, had good airflow and not too many blankets, and were being tended to with a constant carousel of cold compresses on their brows. It was still too early to tell if any of the remedies had worked, but no one had died, and that was always a promising sign in Adeline's book.

"Should I be prayin' for them?" Dara asked. "I never ken what to say when I'm prayin'. When we go to the church on Sundays, and they tell us to pray, I clasp me hands, and... me mind just ceases thinkin' anythin'. I daenae think God listens to me, truth be told."

Adeline reached over and took hold of her hand. "Pretend you're speaking to a friend instead," she said. "Imagine the friend and tell them what you're thinking. Say what it is you want to say to them, like a prayer, and don't worry too much about communing with the Almighty. He hears more than you think."

She had always had a fractious relationship with religion herself, especially after her parents were taken away, but there was no denying the comfort that it brought to people. And, now and then, she liked to think she had seen a miracle or two at the hospital.

"Speakin' to a friend?" Dara considered the suggestion. "Could I speak to one of me sisters instead?"

Adeline smiled. "Whatever is easiest for you. A prayer is just something you want to

happen or don't want to happen—the heavens listen, no matter who you're saying it to. And I'd say sisterhood is as holy as anything else."

"I'll do me best," Dara said, giving Adeline's hand a squeeze. "Ye ken, I think ye're very brave, Miss Adeline."

"You do?" Adeline checked the temperature of the bowl of tonic, but it was still too hot. "Why is that?"

Dara sighed. "Me ma always told us that we could do anythin' we put our minds to, but me ma wasn't like a lot of the people here. They daenae like lasses like ye, who come in and start givin' orders, even if it's for their own good. That's why they've been callin' ye a witch and all sorts of things." She shrugged. "So, I think ye're brave for nae carin'. I havenae seen ye flinch once."

"I keep my flinching on the inside," Adeline quipped, feeling a fresh pinch in her insides.

Dara laughed. "Well, I hope ye prove 'em wrong. I hope everyone becomes well again, nae just 'cause I want me sisters to be well, but so ye can wipe the smirks off the faces of the skeptics." She hesitated, frowning. "Although, if everyone lives, they might call ye a witch twice as hard. I daenae ken."

"I'm aware of that," Adeline admitted. "But I'm not going to let fear stop me from helping people. I never have. If they want to call me a witch, I've got lists of diagrams and information I can give them to prove, without doubt, that I'm just a humble healer. Everything I do can be explained. It's not sorcery, it's just medicine."

Dara gazed at her sisters. "It's nae sorcery, it's just medicine. I like that. Gives me hope."

From outside the one-room stone cottage—a “bothy,” as she’d recently learned—Adeline heard her name being shouted in the village streets. It seemed that the time for getting to know her patients was over.

Ironically, it was the same in her own world—there was never enough time to speak to the patients, to learn more about their lives, and what they’d be going back to when they got better.

“Well, keep doing as I’ve told you, and hopefully”—Adeline crossed her fingers—“everything will work out the way I want it to. It’s not always the case, but... I might say a prayer or two myself.”

Dara got up to walk Adeline to the door, though it couldn’t have been more than five paces from where they’d been sitting. “Thank ye,” she said as Adeline stepped out. “Thank ye for puttin’ me mind at ease.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” Adeline replied.

She turned to look for Logan, recognizing his voice immediately, but before she could reach him, Dara grabbed her back.

“Can I ask one thing before ye go?”

“Of course.”

Dara’s gaze flitted up and down the darkened street. “Are ye really a guest of the Laird, or... are ye somethin’ else?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Adeline’s insides twisted in knots. Had she been caught out already?

Dara smiled. “I’m nae sayin’ ye’re nae a healer. I’ve seen yer work. Clearly, ye are, but... I wondered if ye were a healer and somethin’ more to the Laird? I might be pryin’ and me sisters are always tellin’ me off for puttin’ me nose where it doesnae belong, but... I couldnae help noticin’ a bit of somethin’ between ye.”

“I’m just a guest,” Adeline replied, a beat too quickly. “I was invited from Wales. I don’t know where he heard about me, but I was summoned, and I came. That’s all there is to it.”

Dara seemed disappointed. “Och, well, serves me right for askin’, I suppose. I hope I dinnae offend ye?”

“Not at all.” Adeline allowed herself a smile as Logan shouted for her once more. “I mean, who wouldn’t be flattered by an observation like that? It’s not true, but it’s not offensive in the slightest.”

Dara brightened, hiding a giggle behind her hand. “For what it’s worth, I wouldnae mind havin’ ye as Lady Gibson. Heaven kens he needs himself a wife. Nay one can rest easy ‘til he’s married.”

“Why is that?” Adeline looked down the street, making sure Logan wasn’t too close.

Dara leaned in closer. “Without an heir, bein’ a laird is a dangerous position to be in, and with that brother of his—all I’ll say is, I wouldnae be surprised if the Laird has an accident one of these days. And when he does, we’ll all ken it wasnae any accident.”

Before Adeline could press Dara for more information about this mysterious brother she kept hearing about, Logan appeared from one of the narrow alleyways that cut between the cramped houses. He spotted Adeline instantly, making a beeline for her.

“Have ye been washin’ so many sickly souls that ye got water in yer ears?” he said

abruptly. "I've been callin' for ye for an age."

Adeline put on a sweet smile. "Were you? I didn't hear anything."

Behind her, Dara stifled a sharp snort.

"What were ye doin', eh? Indulgin' in whispers with the local gossips?" Logan dipped his head to Dara. "I see ye're up to the same mischief as always, Miss Aitken. I'll be sayin' a prayer for yer sisters, though they'll be glad of the rest after raisin' ye all these years."

Adeline was about to tell him off for being rude when she heard Dara chuckle.

"I'm nae the hellion I once was, m'laird," Dara insisted. "I'm almost a proper lady these days."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "So, ye werenae caught robbin' the last of the apples from Arthur Allan's orchard a month back?"

"That nay good, lyin' sack of weasels said I could have 'em," Dara huffed, "and now he's goin' around, tellin' everyone that I stole 'em because I refused his marriage proposal. I tell ye, lads get so bitter when ye daenae give 'em what they want. But if I'd kenned them apples came with such a price, I wouldnae have taken even one."

Logan laughed. "I ken, I heard the real story from yer brother, but I couldnae resist seein' what ye'd call Arthur Allan this time. I believe it was a 'week-old trout left out in the sun' last time."

"Ye best be careful around this one," Dara warned, nudging Adeline in the arm. "He pretends he doesnae have any humor about him, but he'll tease ye rotten before ye realize it."

Adeline frowned at the younger woman. “You didn’t mention a brother. Does no one mention their brothers around here?”

“Och, I thought ye kenned!” Dara pointed down the street to where Logan’s uncle and his man-at-arms were standing with the horses. “Theo is me brother. I wasnae hidin’ it. I swear, I thought ye already kenned, since he’s always complainin’ to everyone about me.”

Logan offered his hand to Adeline. “Aye, Dara, and for good reason.”

“Miss Adeline, daenae believe a word he says about me. Only half of it is true,” Dara urged, grinning. “Now, if ye daenae mind, I’ve got some of that nasty brew to give to me sisters, and ye’ll notice that it’s nae Theo who’s tendin’ to them. I’m surprised he hasnae pretended to have this sickness, so he doesnae have to do anythin’.”

When Adeline didn’t take Logan’s proffered hand, he put his hand on the small of her back, steering her away from Dara’s doorway. “A pleasure as always, Dara,” he called over his shoulder, shepherding Adeline toward the horses.

“I see how it is,” Adeline said as they walked away, a sharp jab of jealousy catching her under the ribs.

Logan glanced down at her. “Ye see how what is?”

“You must flirt with a lot of women. I mean, I can see why—you’ve probably got your pick of the island and beyond, right?” She heard the coldness in her tone and felt utterly stupid.

What did she have to be jealous over? It wasn’t like she had any claim to Logan, nor did he have any claim to her. They just happened to be in the same era at the same time, and they’d part ways soon enough. Sure, she’d have a tough time forgetting a

face as handsome as his and having the best kiss of her life because of him, but he wasn't real. Not really real. In her world, he was just a name in the history books, long gone.

Logan halted, spinning her around to face him. "If ye're insinuatин' what I think ye are, then daenae. Dara is like another sister to me. All of the Aitken sisters are. I've kenned them since I was a bairn because of Theo."

"I wasn't insinuating anything." Adeline feigned ignorance. "I'm tired, I'm dirty, I'm covered in goodness knows what, I'm so hungry that I could eat a whole goat, and I'm grumpy. That's all."

Logan frowned at her. "Aye, well, I've got bad news for ye."

"More bad news?"

The ghost of a smile lifted one corner of his lips. "We cannae return to the keep tonight. I need to be near me brother, else me maither will insist on comin' out here, and I daenae want her gettin' sick." He nodded up the street. "Dallas and Theo are goin' to ride back to keep me maither informed."

"And why can't I ride back with one of them?" Adeline challenged, thinking of how blissful those hot pools would be right about now.

"Because I cannae let ye out of me sight," he replied simply, though something glinted in eyes. Not quite mischief, but close to it. "I trust 'em both, but ye heard the whispers that were circulatin'—I wouldnae want anythin' happenin' to any of ye on the road back to the keep. I daenae want to be worryin' over ye and me brother all night. Moreover, ye'll be where ye need to be come mornin', instead of ridin' all the way back. So, ye're to stay with me."

Adeline folded her arms across her chest. “I can’t fault your logic, but I’ll only stay on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

She nodded down at herself. “You find me somewhere with a bath. A hot one. And something delicious to eat.”

“I already have it arranged,” he told her, his hand falling to the small of her back once more.

In the twenty-six years she’d been alive, she’d never let any man get away with putting their hand there without her say-so. But with Logan, it didn’t feel seedy—it felt protective. A tingle ran up her spine, and though she knew she shouldn’t be letting him touch her at all, considering their recent history, she allowed him to guide her to wherever they were going.

It turned out to be a small inn that overlooked the sea, so quaint that it didn’t look real to Adeline. Hazy candlelight spilled out into the darkness, welcoming them in from the cold.

They were greeted by the innkeeper and his wife.

“We’ve got the bath drawn,” the wife said, taking hold of Adeline’s hand. “It’s the least we could do after everythin’ ye’ve done for us today. Me wee bairn is already cooler.”

Adeline brightened. “He is? Can I see him?”

“In the mornin’,” Logan interjected. “The poor lad will be sleepin’. He doesnae need ye pokin’ at him.”

The innkeeper's wife chuckled. "Aye, he is sleepin', but if ye'd see him in the mornin', I would be soothed by that."

"It would be my pleasure," Adeline promised. "Now, how about this bath? I don't think I've ever looked forward to one more."

The innkeeper gestured up a rickety staircase. "The chamber is up there. I'd show ye to it, but the landin' is awfully narrow, and we'd be squeezin' past each other, so I'll let ye make yer own way."

"Thank ye." Logan ushered Adeline away from the warmth of the inn's lower floor, where a few customers were nursing drinks and digging into a hearty-looking stew.

Adeline's mouth watered as she looked back longingly, but the staircase was narrow, and Logan had pushed her ahead of him. She couldn't hope to slip past him, back to whatever stew and bread she could get her hands on.

But as she reached the landing and saw just one door ahead of her, she forgot all about the stew and turned around to face Logan. "Where's the other one?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm guessing my room is behind that door, so where's your room? The other room?"

He frowned as if confused by the question, but there was that glint in his eyes again as he replied softly, "There isnae one."

CHAPTER 18

Logan was not trying to trick Adeline, though he could tell she thought otherwise. It had taken five minutes to get her to enter the bedchamber that had been prepared for them, and now she was perched on the edge of the bathtub, tapping her foot impatiently.

“Are you going to leave?” she asked, at last.

Logan walked to a chair by the window and sat down. “Why would I be leavin’? I told ye, they only have one chamber. It’s nae as though too many guests come through these parts, so they daenae have more chambers than they need. Like I said before, I’m nae tryin’ to fool ye.”

“I need to bathe,” she said. “That’s why I need you to leave. You’re not staying for the show, Logan.”

He tilted his head to the side. “What show?”

“You’ve done this on purpose. I know you say you haven’t, but you clearly have.” She swept an anxious hand across her hair, her dark locks still held in place by the ribbon he had tied, aside from a few stray strands that framed her beautiful face. “I could’ve gone back with Theo or your uncle. Nothing would’ve happened to me. You just made that up.”

Logan sighed. “Ye cannae be too careful, Adeline. Ye’ve become invaluable to me, and I couldnae risk anythin’ befallin’ ye on the ride home. Even if ye werenae

ambushed by lads with naught better to do, it's treacherous on the road back, and I dinnae want ye ridin' with anyone but me. I ken the roads better than anyone."

"Well, fine, but would you please get out so that I can bathe in peace?" Adeline urged. "I don't want to be grouchy, but you're testing my patience here."

I could test somethin' else if ye'd allow it, he wanted to say, but he figured she would not appreciate it at such a time.

He stood up, deciding to be courteous. "I'll be downstairs. Will half an hour be long enough?"

Adeline seemed surprised by the gesture, pushing herself off the edge of the steaming tub. "You're going to go?"

"That's what ye wanted, is it nae?" He walked to the door. "Ye've had a long day, ye've done the work of hundreds by yerself, and I'm proud of what ye've done here, even if the curse isnae miraculously lifted in the mornin'. The least I can do is let ye bathe in peace, as ye say."

A flicker of something passed across her face, but he could not read the expression. Was it disappointment he saw in her enchanting eyes, or was he merely seeing what he would have liked to see? Either way, he opened the door and headed out without another word, leaving her to her bath.

Almost an hour later, carrying two bowls of hot stew and half a loaf of fresh bread, Logan headed back up the stairs to the bedchamber. He had spent the past hour among good people, his people, hearing their worries and woes as they drank a draft of ale together. And though he had braced for the accusations of Adeline being a witch, there had been none.

“Ye did a fine thing, invitin’ that lass to the island,” one man had said, tears in his eyes. “I daenae ken if she can fix this curse, but she’s given us all hope. I daenae mind tellin’ ye that.”

“We’ve been waitin’ for someone like her, m’laird. Ever since the news came of what was happenin’ in the north, we’ve all been fearin’ for our lives,” the man’s wife had agreed. “Now, we daenae have to worry so much. It’s nae as if our lives are in Ben Donohue’s hands anymore, heaven help us.”

“I daenae like to count me eggs before they’ve hatched, but me daughter feels cooler already,” someone else had said. “We thought the lass was mad when she had us boilin’ water for the baths and for drinkin’, but I’ll be damned if it isnae workin’.”

“Will she be stayin’?” another woman had asked. “It’d be a worry off our minds if she is, though I expect she’ll be back to Wales soon, eh? Once folks hear of what she’s done here, if all goes well, everyone will be wantin’ her.”

Logan had not liked that last sentiment as much as the plaudits Adeline had been receiving, though it was perpetually gnawing at the back of his mind.

She was an asset to his island, she had become invaluable, and if it turned out that she had lifted the “curse” with her future knowledge of medicine, he did not know how he was supposed to relinquish that security. It could change everything, reducing the number of lives lost each year to illnesses, childbirth, and accidents.

And he was starting to like having her around.

Reaching the door to the bedchamber, he knocked awkwardly with his elbow. After an hour away, he was fully expecting her to be out of the tub and tucked into bed, where she would undoubtedly make him sleep on the floor. Not that he planned to.

“Adeline?” he called out when she did not respond.

Silence echoed back.

Worried, he set the bowls of stew and bread on the floor and turned the handle. He poked his head around the door, surprised to find Adeline still in the tub. Her knees were drawn up to her chin, her arms hugging her legs. But he did not even think about her nakedness. It was the glimmer of tears in her eyes and the droplets running down her cheeks that caught the entirety of his attention.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. “Are ye hurt?”

He approached the tub cautiously, but she said nothing, staring down into the cooled water as though she could see something that he could not.

“Adeline?” He kneeled beside the tub, gently resting his hand on the curve of her back. “Adeline, what’s the matter?”

She finally stirred, lifting her gleaming eyes to his. “Being around all these people... all these tight-knit families...” She wiped a tear with the back of her hand. “It’s going to sound stupid but... I miss my sister. You remember I told you she was working somewhere around here—around Scotland?”

Logan nodded.

“Well, it’s far, even with planes,” she continued. “I haven’t seen her at all in the last year. Haven’t spoken to her as much as I wanted to either, because of time zones and phone lines, and... a million other excuses I keep making, when I could’ve put in so much more effort.”

Logan hesitated. “Phone lines?”

“It’s a way to speak to people from anywhere in the world,” she replied tightly. “You use a phone. It connects you to them, so you can talk. There’s video, too, where you can see their faces while you’re talking, but we never had good enough service for that. I don’t know how to explain what service is. It’d be like if you were trying to yell to someone on the beach from the keep. On a clear day, they’d probably be able to hear you—so, that’d be good service. On a windy day, they wouldn’t be able to hear much at all—that’d be bad service.”

Logan slowly brushed his thumb across the nape of her neck. “I understand.”

Surprisingly, he did. He could picture what she meant, even if he could not picture what a “phone” was.

“I just keep thinking about what happens when someone realizes I’m not home, and that I’ve gone missing. My sister...” Adeline’s voice caught. “She’s going to think I’m dead, and I can’t do that to her. We’ve lost too much already.”

Logan paused his gentle caresses. “What have ye lost? I take it yer maither isnae really a witch-catcher.”

“She was a cop,” Adeline replied quietly. “A... constable, I guess you’d call it? She caught criminals. My father was—I don’t know why I’m telling you this.” Her demeanor switched sharply, as if she had just realized she was in the bath, and he had entered the room without her permission. “You shouldn’t even be in here. I’m not done.”

But Logan did not move. “Have ye thought of a way to leave yet?”

“Do you think I’d still be here if I had?” There was an edge to her voice, but it did not

match the frightened look in her eyes, nor the slight tremble of her lips. “I have no idea how I got here in the first place. Not really. So, I have even less of an idea about how to get back. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

He got up and took a clean blanket down from the rack by the fireplace, before standing at the side of the tub. He held it out for her and turned his head to give her some privacy.

“Ye’ll catch a chill if ye stay in that water,” he said, ignoring her harsh tone. “I willnae look, but ye must get out.”

She stood abruptly and snatched the blanket out of his hands, wrapping it around herself. “Thank you,” she muttered, her voice possessing no gratitude whatsoever.

“Have ye ever thought that ye might actually be a witch?” he asked casually, walking to the chair by the window.

A strangled sound, half growl, half hiss, left her throat. “Do you think it’s funny to keep saying that? You do realize that if anyone were to hear you, they’d think you were serious, don’t you? You’re putting my life at risk by even joking about it, and, frankly, I’m not in the mood for jokes.”

“I wasnae jokin’,” he replied.

“Oh, of course, you weren’t.” She rolled her eyes as she clambered out of the tub. “After everything I’ve just done today for you and your people, you still don’t trust me. That’s why you wouldn’t let me ride back with Theo or your uncle. You weren’t worried about me getting ambushed on the road. You were worried about me turning them into toads or something equally ridiculous. That’s why you wanted to keep me close by. Admit it. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve heard it today.”

Logan leveled his gaze at her. He could not stay seated. The fire in her eyes drew him like an angry moth. A second later, he was on his feet again, approaching her the way a fox approached a rabbit in a snare.

“Do ye really want to ken why I think ye’re a witch?”

He kept walking toward her until there was no distance left to close between them. She held her ground for a moment, before edging backward... only for the backs of her thighs to bump against the lip of the bathtub, blocking any route of escape.

“I asked ye a question,” he growled, planting his hands on either side of her, gripping the edge of the tub to stop himself from gripping her thighs instead.

She glared at him, giving the smallest tip of her head as a nod.

“Because ye’ve bewitched me!” His breath caught in his throat. “I cannae think of anythin’ else but ye ever since ye landed on me beach with yer purple hair and yer selkie skin, and it’s pushin’ me toward somethin’ like madness, Adeline. When I’m near ye, ye unleash somethin’ in me. It was there in the library, it was there by the pools, but ye told me to forget it all, so I did me best to. Believe me when I say I’ve tried, but ye’re lodged in my head like a barb, and I daenae ken how to get ye out!”

Her breathing shallowed as she stared up at him, her chest heaving. “Why do you think I stopped the kiss?”

She said it so quietly that, at first, he was not certain he had heard her correctly.

“What?” he rasped.

“Why do you think I stopped the kiss?”

Logan clenched his jaw. “Because ye think me a barbarian with nay manners.”

“I’m not afraid to like someone who’s a little rough around the edges,” she shot back, anger flaring in her eyes, “but I am afraid to like someone I’m going to have to leave sooner or later. What’s the point? Don’t you get that?”

Logan did not have an answer, for though he would not admit to being afraid of anything, he understood. After all, just one kiss had left his head spinning. What would one more do? What would it do to him when she had to leave, if they went beyond that one kiss?

“You want to know how I came here?” she continued, her cheeks flushing red. “I freaking wished I wasn’t alone! That’s how!”

Logan’s arm snaked around her waist, pulling her off the edge of the tub. He held her tightly against him, overwhelmed with a desire he could not suppress anymore. “Ye’re nae,” he growled.

“What?” she gasped, her palms running up his stomach to his chest.

“Ye’re nae alone,” he replied, dipping his head to kiss her.

CHAPTER 19

Adeline couldn't have resisted him, even if she wanted to. And she didn't. Logan was everything warm and real and distracting, and all of her worries in the bath had left ice in her veins that needed thawing. In fact, just hearing "You're not alone" was like a trigger being pulled, blowing up all of the logic and warnings she'd given to herself.

She kissed him back, running her hands up his hard chest. It was meditation, in and of itself, to feel the flesh and bone solidity of him. Like an anchor, almost, to stop her from spiraling.

"Hold me," she whispered against his lips. "Make it stop."

He paused their kiss for a moment. "Ye want me to stop?"

"No, I want you to make it stop," she urged. "Make the thinking stop. I don't want to think for a while."

He caught her lips with his, murmuring, "I can do that."

And while a lot of men talked a big talk, she believed him.

He pushed her up against the edge of the tub, an echo of what he'd done before. She sat on the lip of the bath, her breath catching in the back of her throat as he nudged her thighs apart with his.

Being as tall as he was, he had to bend down to keep his mouth on hers, kissing her

with a vengeance that shoved away any lingering doubts about this not being the best idea. She'd had a long day, she was tired, she was emotional, she was missing home, and she certainly wasn't thinking straight. But who needed to think straight when there was a man like him kissing her like that? A man who could take control, making everything else fade into the background.

With one arm around her waist, his other hand braced against the edge of the tub, he kissed her as if she might vanish within the hour. He kissed her as if this was their last chance. And she kissed him back just as fiercely, needing him in a way she hadn't needed anyone before.

"I daenae think that blanket will serve ye anymore," he growled, drawing his kisses away from her lips and down the curve of her neck. His mouth was rough and soft all at once, grazing her still-damp skin.

She gripped his shoulders. "I'm not dry yet."

"Nor do I want ye to be," he murmured, his tongue flicking against her throat.

Her eyes widened at his words, her fingernails digging into the hard muscles of his back. She liked the sound of that, but before she could tell him, her voice was snatched away by a sudden gasp.

His hand slid between her thighs, the friction of his work-roughened palm like striking a matchbox, and she was the match. The flame erupted inside her, burning passion racing through her veins like wildfire.

She needed more. Wanted more. Even if she did vanish in the morning, she wanted a night to remember.

"Tell me what ye like," he said in a husky voice, as if the smoke of her desire had

caught in his throat, too.

His fingertips stroked along the trembling flesh of her inner thighs, moving closer to a point of no return. Kissing was one thing, but what he was about to do was crossing a line that she'd done her best to draw in the sand.

The trouble was, she no longer cared where the line was. She couldn't even remember why she'd asked him to forget that they'd ever kissed. This wasn't something to be forgotten. This was like lucid dreaming, and she was eager to find out where the dream would lead her next.

She gasped as his hand cupped her, so confident that she almost melted there and then. She'd been right, this was a man who knew what he was doing, and how to do it well.

"Yes," she breathed, tilting her hips forward.

"Aye? Ye like that?"

She nodded, her desire-addled brain no longer able to form words.

He smirked a little against her collarbone, tracing his tongue along the ridge. "I havenae even done anythin' yet."

She grasped him tighter as his thumb pressed against that sweetest of spots, holding her breath in anticipation. He didn't keep her waiting for long, as he began to circle that small nub of pleasure, slowly at first, firing off rippling sparks that exploded in her belly like fireworks.

All the while, his lips explored her, savoring every inch of bare skin that he could reach. He kissed her neck, her throat, her temples, her shoulders, her upper arms,

always keeping her guessing. It was like he was making a map of her, and only he knew the coordinates.

“I need ye closer,” he growled, his free hand settling on the swell of her behind.

He gave her butt a sly squeeze before pulling her nearer, until she almost slipped off the edge of the tub. She might have, if his hips weren’t between her thighs, and his hand was on her ass, pinning her exactly where she wanted to be.

And as he pulled her closer, a cry slipped from her lips as his fingers slid inside her. A move so smooth that it took her brain a moment to catch up, though her body was already racing ahead. Her hips tilted, curving his fingers to that sensitive spot inside her. Though it seemed he already knew about it.

Applying delicious pressure, he slid his fingers in and out slowly, while his thumb continued to strum the nub of her pleasure—of every woman’s pleasure. Two rhythms working together in harmony, building up to an ecstasy so powerful that she was already wondering if it would be okay to scream. After all, there might still be customers downstairs.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Oh, yes. Yes, keep doing that.”

He smiled against her cheek, bringing his lips back to hers. There, he kissed her with a ferocity that she’d only seen in movies. And she kissed him right back, clinging to him like her life depended on it.

“And you had the... audacity to call me a witch,” she whispered, arching her neck as she rocked against his fingers. “You’re the one... conjuring magic here, Logan.”

Logan laughed softly, kissing her harder.

It was a matter of minutes before she felt the switch inside her, every strum and pulse of his fingers spurring her on toward the ecstasy she craved. It hit her like an unexpected wave at the beach—not exactly coming out of nowhere, but giving her no time to prepare. In fact, nothing could have prepared her for the orgasm of a lifetime.

She leaned forward abruptly, burying her face in his neck as the wave knocked her off her figurative feet. Her thighs began to shake, the vibrations shuddering through her. For a moment, she couldn't breathe, pleasure squeezing her lungs. Her eyes scrunched shut, her head filling with the throbbing pressure of raw euphoria that left her mind spinning.

“Oh... oh, yes!” she gasped against his skin, sinking her teeth into his shoulder to stop herself from crying out. “Yes, Logan!”

He didn't quicken his pace, he didn't change a thing about what he was doing, other than applying a little more pressure to that sweet spot inside her. And as he let her ride the wave at her own speed, he caught her mouth with his, kissing her slowly, sensually, until it was almost too much to bear.

This couldn't be real. This didn't happen in real life.

Yet, it was. Her body felt every delicious second.

But good things always had to come to an end, and it wasn't long before she felt the tide of ecstasy recede, leaving behind little flutters of bliss. Short, intense pulses that danced across her abdomen and up into her chest.

The grip of pleasure loosened, and she could breathe again. Or rather gasp and suck in air as if she'd been drowning. In a way, she had, and she'd have done it again in a heartbeat.

Logan gently withdrew his fingers, and the loss of that intimate touch was like a heartbreak to Adeline. She wanted to feel him inside her again, even if it was just his skilled fingers. She wasn't done figuring out just how talented this 18 th -century Scottish Laird was.

Apparently reading her mind, Logan suddenly hoisted her up into his arms. She yelped in surprise, her legs locking around his waist in fear of being dropped. A second surprise made her eyes widen, as she felt him for the first time, straining to reach her.

For a second or two, she thought she was mistaken. It couldn't possibly be what she thought it was.

Testing the theory, she sat a little lower... and had her suspicions confirmed.

Okay. That's something to consider.

Her heart raced as he carried her over to the bed, her recovering brain beginning to overthink again. There was a lot to contemplate.

Reaching the bed, Logan seemed to have taken Adeline's request to the letter. He clearly didn't want her to think too much, and he was prepared to do whatever it took to keep her worries from creeping back in.

He leaned forward, taking her with him, pressing her into the surprisingly soft mattress. And as he climbed further onto the bed, he maneuvered her as if she was part of him, until her head was resting on a pillow.

There, he gazed down at her, his hand slipping between them to loosen the twisted knot she'd made in the makeshift towel. Propped up on one arm, he unwrapped her like a present. And with it not being too long since Christmas and all...

“Ye’re beautiful,” he murmured, taking his time to savor the sight of her naked body.

And where his eyes wandered, his lips soon followed. He kissed down her throat, drawing his tongue from the hollow at the base to the dip between her breasts. She didn’t call it a valley, since she’d never been that well-endowed, but the way he worshiped every part of her chased away any self-consciousness or inhibitions that she’d been carrying around with her since she was a teenager.

He kissed up each curve of her breasts, teasing her pert nipples with his tongue, only to kiss away again. Frustrated, she arched her back, and with a smile that she felt against her skin, he drew a nipple into his warm mouth.

She grazed her teeth across her lower lip as he sucked, pulling fresh pleasure from the very core of her. It shivered upwards in electric currents, branching out into her limbs. Her thighs shook violently, her breaths turning shallow again. As if she already knew, or hoped, what he might have in store for her next.

With a teasing brush of his tongue, he resumed his intense worship of her body. He kissed her, tasted her, caressed her, until she was pretty sure there wasn’t a single part of her he hadn’t touched. And like the strumming of his fingertips before, it seemed to be building toward something. The sparks that began to burst into life within her couldn’t be wrong, his kisses and caresses almost as powerful as his earlier display of talent.

He moved downward, his mouth guiding him. As he reached the flat of her stomach, he lowered himself to the bed and wrapped his arms around her thighs, his hands gripping her soft flesh.

“Oh... oh, yes,” she panted as his tongue tasted the only place it hadn’t yet savored.

If she’d thought his fingers were skilled, she realized she was in for a whole new

world of pleasure.

His tongue rolled against her sweet spot, slow and tormenting in the best possible way. And just when she thought he was going to taste her again, he turned his head and kissed her inner thigh instead. Keeping her guessing, once more.

She was about to tell him that she'd really liked the other thing when his tongue moved against her again. Her hips bucked a little, pleasantly surprised, while her hands gripped the blankets beneath them.

He eased into a sensual rhythm that quickly had her writhing, her body taking on a mind of its own as it responded to every potent stroke of his tongue. She was shaking, shivering, gasping, bucking her hips, her mind completely fogged with desire. Her breaths came in short, sharp pants, her heart thundering in her chest. And she'd never felt better.

Nothing else mattered, as long as he kept doing what he was doing.

"Oh, Logan!" she cried out as he let his fingertips pause at her entrance. "Yes, Logan! Yes!"

He pushed his fingers inside her, his tongue not breaking its rhythm for even a moment. And as she felt him fill her, though it wasn't exactly what she wanted, she could already feel herself tipping over the edge into another mind-blowing, earth-shattering orgasm.

His tongue quickened slightly, curving now and then to suck, as his fingers applied that delirious pressure that he was so very good at. It was too much, and yet not enough, and Adeline couldn't understand how any of this was happening, but she was grateful to be given such a breathtaking gift.

After all, she hadn't received anything that Christmas. Emma probably would've brought gifts around, but... Adeline concentrated on the motion of Logan's tongue, refusing to let her mind dwell on reality—her reality, far in the future—while she had him in her bed.

All other thoughts swiftly evaporated again, replaced with that building, almost-sneezing sensation that made her want to scream Logan's name at the top of her lungs.

He was a master of his craft, and it would've been rude not to give him her full attention.

Her back arched up off the mattress as she felt it coming, every cell in her body on fire with the euphoria that he was pouring into her. Her thighs trembled, her knuckles whitened as she gripped the blankets tighter, her skull pulsing with that incredible rush of bliss once more, and as her stomach tensed, her body finally released what it had been building toward.

Ecstasy pummeled through her veins, more powerful than the last time. Every muscle seized and strained, her breath caught in her throat. Her legs shook, right down to her feet, while her mouth opened... but no sound came out, like it was lodged in her chest somewhere.

A moment later, she cried out, writhing as the pleasure swept through her. It was beyond anything she'd ever experienced, and though her experience wasn't vast in the slightest, she knew that this was something special. That he was something special.

How am I supposed to go back to 2023, knowing that he is here in 1705?

It seemed like a shallow thought, but she couldn't help it. Her mind had joined her

body in doing whatever it pleased, driven by pleasure instead of sense.

Gradually, the intensity faded, and she collapsed back into the mattress. Staring up at the ceiling, she tried to steady her breathing, her entire being so relaxed that it was like she'd had fifty baths in the best oils and herbal soaks that money could buy.

Logan withdrew his fingers, turning his head to kiss his way down her inner thighs before retracing his steps across the top of her thigh. He kissed every inch of her skin, making his slow way back to her lips.

There, he kissed her gently. Tenderly. His eyes were bright as he gazed down at her, gleaming with a passion that was undoubtedly reflected in her own eyes.

But with the fading of her euphoria, her mind began to clear. The lusty fog lifted, bringing back that question—how was she supposed to return to 2023, knowing that he was here in 1705? She'd drawn that line in the sand for a reason, and she was only just remembering what it was. Too late.

“Ye’re going to ask me to forget that this ever happened, are ye nae?” he asked, almost sadly.

Adeline gave a small nod. “I think we’re in dangerous territory, and I think you’ve realized it, too.”

“Aye, though I daenae regret it,” he said, tucking a lock of sweat and bath-dampened hair behind her ear. “I would’ve regretted it if I hadnae done that.”

Adeline exhaled shakily. “No more touching. No more kissing. No more being alone together, if we can help it.”

“Aye,” he replied as he rolled onto his side and carefully pulled the blanket back over

her bare skin.

Had they been in her time, this could've been the beginning of something, but it felt a lot like an ending as she wrapped the blanket tighter around herself. She wasn't worried about him making a move in the middle of the night. Clearly, she was the one who couldn't be trusted not to give in to temptation.

But he can stay in the bed. He's a laird—I wouldn't dream of making him sleep on the floor .

An exhilarating reel of everything that had just happened was already playing in her mind, and she had no doubt that it would be playing in her dreams when she fell asleep, too. This time, they really had gotten carried away, and that question kept gnawing at the back of her mind, no matter how hard she tried to shove it down.

How am I supposed to go back, now?

CHAPTER 20

In the dawn light that filtered in through the chamber window, Logan watched Adeline sleeping. The blankets had twisted around her in the night, barely covering her naked figure. He would have liked to sit there, admiring every curve he had kissed and caressed the night before, but with the chill in the air, he feared more for her well-being than the need to satisfy his eyes.

Carefully, he took new blankets from the pile on the chair and draped them over her. Whenever she stirred, he paused, not wanting to wake her. But she slept deeply—the slumber of someone who had worked hard—and soon enough, she was covered in enough blankets to keep her warm until morning properly came.

He resisted the urge to brush the dark locks out of her face.

Did I stop ye from thinkin' too much, or should we have thought a little more before we did that?

He was not a man who regretted much in his life, and he refused to regret bringing Adeline the kind of pleasure that had consumed her, albeit temporarily. But he had considered what might happen if they went beyond a kiss before, and he was considering it even more intently now. Now, he had an inkling of what it might do to him when she left.

We cannae be alone together again . I cannae let her get further under me skin.

He knew he should probably leave her alone, to sleep until the sun and her healing

duties awoke her, but the serene sight of her kept him where he was. He would go out for a walk soon, to clear his head. But, for now, he would enjoy the peace of standing guard over her as she slept, knowing it was likely the last time they would ever be in a bedchamber alone together.

Adeline wouldn't admit that she'd been a bit disappointed to wake up alone in bed. She'd instinctively reached over to the other side, expecting to feel the warm comfort of Logan beside her, but there'd been nothing but cold blankets. It didn't even look like he'd slept there, his side of the bed made.

He's just doing what we agreed.

She dressed quickly and then made her way downstairs. Surely, he'd be in the main space below, having breakfast or something.

But he wasn't there either.

She paused, staring at all of the empty tables as if she could make him appear if she willed it hard enough. If she did have some witchy powers she didn't know about, they'd have come in handy right about then.

Did I dream it all?

It was something she had to consider. She hadn't yet gotten to the bottom of why her head had hurt so much after her abrupt arrival into the past. Now that the pain had faded, she'd mostly forgotten about it, but maybe there was some damage to her brain. There'd definitely been a knock to her impulse control, that was for sure.

"Good mornin' to ye," the innkeeper's wife chirped, appearing from nowhere.

Adeline jumped in fright, her hand flying to her heart.

“Goodness, I’m sorry!” The innkeeper’s wife hurried over, resting a hand on Adeline’s shoulder. “I thought ye’d heard me. Me husband is always sayin’ I’m catfooted. I should’ve announced meself.”

Adeline mustered a smile. “Not your fault. I was in my own world for a moment there. You could’ve stormed in, and I probably wouldn’t have heard it.”

“Och, well, as long as I dinnae scare ye too badly.” The woman relaxed. “Me name’s Maureen, by the way. I dinnae get to introduce meself properly last night, and I dinnae want to intrude on ye this mornin’. There’s breakfast to be had if ye want?”

Adeline felt her racing heart begin to slow. “A pleasure to meet you, Maureen, and thank you for the bath. I think it might’ve been the best of my life.”

She’d been thinking that a lot, lately, her mind constantly rewinding to the night before. In her twenty-six years on Earth, she could confidently say she’d never experienced pleasure like it. She hadn’t even known her body could climax like that, from head to toe.

“Ye’re nae feelin’ unwell, are ye?” Maureen looked concerned as Adeline realized her cheeks had responded to the memory of Logan’s touch. They were red hot.

Adeline shook her head. “Not at all.” She paused, collecting herself. “I think I’ll skip breakfast if that’s all right. I’m not much of a breakfast person, to be honest. But I can look in on your son now if you want?”

“I daenae think there’ll be any need,” Maureen replied, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. “His fever broke in the night. This mornin’, he’s been askin’ for milk and bread with a thick spread of butter on it. He’s still nae himself, but... he’s better, and it’s all thanks to ye.”

Adeline should've been pleased, but panic struck her first. "You didn't give him any milk, did you?"

"I boiled it first," Maureen said, worry creasing her brow. "Did I do the wrong thing? Should I nae have given it to him?"

A smile broke out across Adeline's face. "If you boiled it first, he'll be just fine. From now on, boil everything, just to be sure you get rid of any... bits of the curse that might be hanging around."

"Och, ye frightened me, Miss Adeline!" Maureen burst out into relieved laughter, clapping Adeline on the back. "I suppose I deserved that for scarin' the life out of ye."

"I'm just glad his fever broke," Adeline said, her heart full of hope. "It's a good sign for everyone else, as it's usually the younger ones—though not the youngest—who recover first. Children are notoriously resilient."

Maureen nodded. "I couldnae believe it when he started callin' for me, and I daenae mind admittin' that I had me doubts about yer methods, but I shouldnae have doubted ye for a second. Ye've given me son back to me. If I had all the gold in the world to give ye, it wouldnae be enough." A happy tear fell onto her cheek. "After all we'd been hearin' about folk in the north, we thought the worst was comin' for us, that we'd be buryin' our loved ones by the week's end, but... ye're a blessin', Miss Adeline. I praise yer maither for sendin' ye here to help us. I'll praise her and ye until me last breath."

"I'll tell her," Adeline replied, her voice catching. "And there's no need to thank me. I'm just doing my duty."

The snow globe...

A thought snuck into her mind as she went over Maureen's words. The snow globe had been her mother's. The snow globe was the thing her mom used to wish on and had encouraged her and Jane to wish on. What if it hadn't just been a silly game to make everyone feel better? What if her mother had known something about the snow globe, something she might've gone into more detail about when her daughters were older, but never got the chance to?

"You don't know where the Laird went, do you?" Adeline asked, remembering something Logan said.

Have ye ever thought that ye might actually be a witch... I wasnae jokin'.

She didn't think she actually possessed magical powers—that was ridiculous—but there was obviously something unnatural going on. And if she could just put the pieces together, between magic and snow globes and curses, maybe she'd be able to figure out how to get home.

The quicker, the better, before she started imagining a future in the past.

"He left just after dawn," Maureen replied. "I daenae ken where, but I expect he's gone to watch over that brother of his."

Adeline nodded, picturing the hut where she'd treated Oliver Anderson the previous day. He'd been out of it, knocked unconscious by the illness, and with too many other people to treat, she hadn't really paid much attention to him. He was just another patient, not the hellraiser Logan had alluded to.

"Thank you," Adeline said, heading for the door.

There weren't too many people up and about in the village, though the few that she passed were a million times more civil to her than they'd been the day before. They

bid her a good morning or stopped her to tell her how their sick family members were faring. Despite it being early days in terms of eradicating the illness, Adeline grew more confident with every person she encountered, feeling it in her bones that her survival medicine crash course had done some good.

It wouldn't fix everyone, with the old and the very young being more vulnerable, but if it fixed the majority, she'd be content.

Leaping over a mound of horse manure, she cut through an alleyway and moved away from the community of the village. Ahead of her sat a solitary stone cottage, set apart from the rest of the settlement. Whether it had been built first or last, Adeline didn't know, but that was where she'd find Oliver. And, hopefully, Logan.

Not exactly sticking to the rule .

Seeking Logan out was definitely on the prohibited list if they were going to stand any chance of not repeating the absolute bliss of last night. Then again, with his brother lying sick in the same place, that was probably a decent remedy for any impulsive thoughts that might sneak in.

She was just wandering around the side of the cottage to reach the front door, which faced away from the village, when a figure stepped out.

Adeline gasped, having a mini heart attack for the second time in less than twenty minutes. "I'm going to have to insist on everyone wearing bells around their necks," she muttered under her breath, recovering quickly. "Good morning."

The woman moving toward her didn't reply, and as she neared, Adeline noticed there was something... odd about her. It was hard for Adeline to put her finger on what was so strange, but the woman's entire demeanor seemed off, ringing alarm bells in Adeline's head.

She was tall and rake-thin, shrouded in what looked like a potato sack. Her feet were bare and caked in mud, her ankles dotted with something that, at first, Adeline mistook for more mud. Upon closer inspection, she realized they were tattoos, clumsily inked against pale skin. Two matching anklets that resembled snakes eating their own tails.

The woman's face was equally intriguing. Like her body, her features were thin and angular, reminding Adeline of a heron or a stork. Her white hair hung loose in ratty tendrils, and several streaks of black ash seemed to have been deliberately smeared across her cheeks and forehead, and over her eyelids. It made her strange green eyes stand out, and as Adeline met her gaze, she was struck with the weirdest feeling of having met this woman before.

"Good morning," Adeline repeated, trying to remember where she'd seen the woman before.

The woman stopped a half-step too close for comfort. "Good mornin'," she replied, at last. "I trust ye slept well and yer headache is gone."

"What?" Adeline blinked in confusion.

"It's nae easy on the body, what ye've been through," the woman continued.

Adeline could've sworn her heart stopped beating for a moment. "What I've been through?"

"The journey ye've been on," the woman clarified, her green eyes shining with wisdom that sent a shiver down Adeline's spine. It was as if she was seeing right through Adeline, into her very soul. "Ye've traveled a long way, Adeline."

Adeline cleared her throat. "You know my name?"

“Aye, ye announced it to the village yesterday,” the woman said with a wry smile, as if they were sharing a joke instead of having some bizarre encounter. “But I kenned ye’d come, long before. I kenned yer name before I kenned who ye were and what ye were here to do.”

A weird hope suddenly surged in Adeline’s chest. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“There are things that can be seen and things that cannae be seen, Adeline,” the woman replied, almost apologetically. “I’m learnin’ at the same time that ye are, in many respects. But there’s one thing I do ken...”

The unusual woman with the wise green eyes reached into the pocket of her potato sack dress, removing a small parcel wrapped in the same fabric that her dress was made from. She passed it to Adeline. When Adeline wouldn’t take it, scared of what it might be, the woman grabbed her wrist with surprising strength and placed the parcel into her palm, forcefully closing her hand over it.

“If ye ever wish to return,” the woman whispered.

Adeline’s eyes widened, feeling the rough material in her hand... and something hard inside. “You know how I can go back? Tell me how. You have to tell me.”

But the woman was already walking past her, rounding the corner of the cottage and vanishing out of sight. A second too slow, Adeline ran after her, determined to make her talk.

The stretch of barren grass between the cottage and the rest of the village was empty. The woman wasn’t there, though there was no way she could’ve run that fast, not with her bony legs.

Rubbing her eyes, Adeline looked this way and that, searching for any sign of the

woman. People didn't just disappear into thin air... apart from her, vanishing from her apartment on Christmas Eve—but that was different. That was some kind of physics glitch. A phenomenon that had an explanation that hadn't been explained yet, like alien abductions or time loops or ghosts.

Or magic .

Slowly but surely, she was running out of rationalizations that didn't point to the “m” word.

She was about to keep running, hoping that the old woman simply was that fast and was just in the village somewhere, minding her own business, when a voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Is someone out there?” Logan called out. “I can hear ye creepin’ around.”

Panicking, Adeline shoved the small, fabric-wrapped parcel into the pocket of the apron around her waist. “It’s just me!” she called back, heading back down the side of the cottage.

She’s probably the village madwoman .

Whatever was in her pocket was probably just a pebble, or worse. As for what the woman had said about a long journey, she’d probably meant Wales.

But those haunting eyes lingered in Adeline’s mind, still piercing her soul, though the woman was long gone. They weren’t the eyes of a madwoman. They were the eyes of someone who knew things, had seen things, and possibly knew more than she’d been willing to say.

CHAPTER 21

“Are ye well?” Logan asked as Adeline appeared around the side of the cottage. “Ye look pale.”

Adeline looked more than pale, in truth. She looked shaken.

“I’m fine,” she replied, forcing a smile that did not reach her eyes. “I just came to see how your brother is doing.”

Logan set down the pile of logs he had just carried in from the woods yonder. “He isnae as feverish as he was yesterday, though he’s still nae farin’ too well. When Theo and me uncle return, we’ll be takin’ him back to the keep, whether he wants to come with me or nae.” He hesitated. “Are ye sure ye’re well? Ye’ve got a queer look on yer face.”

“Just tired,” she replied, some color rushing back to her cheeks. “It was a long day yesterday. Long night, too.”

He smiled. “Aye, though nae long enough if ye ask me.”

“Don’t,” she warned, shaking her head. “Don’t do that. It’s against the rules.”

He dipped his head in apology. “I’ll have to ask ye to write me a list of these rules, so I daenae forget.”

“I’d be happy to.” She skirted past him, slipping into the cottage.

He went to stand in the doorway, watching her as she worked. She moved with the grace of a dancer between the fireplace, the pot of boiling water, the bowls of melted snow, the stack of cloths that were arranged on the table, and the jar of cooled tonic on the windowsill. But she would not look back at him, too focused on her duties to even notice he was admiring her.

It is likely against the rules.

Though, that did not stop him.

When she knelt to give Oliver his next dose of tonic, Logan felt a pinch akin to jealousy in his chest as she cradled his brother's neck with her hand, lifting his head so she could slowly pour the remedy into his mouth.

Swallowing down the unpleasant feeling, Logan's mind drifted back to the night before. He soothed the sharp nip of jealousy with memories of her silky skin beneath his fingertips, his mouth exploring wherever it pleased, his tongue and his touch drawing sounds out of her that made his loins burn, even now.

Perhaps it might have been better to allow the pinch of jealousy to stay, for the ache of knowing he could never be that close to her again, could not even kiss her again, was far worse.

"I thought we might visit Jonah on our way back to the keep," Logan said, needing to draw her attention away from Oliver.

Adeline frowned at him. "Who's Jonah again? Is he the stubborn old man who wouldn't come to the keep for treatment?"

"Aye, that's him."

Adeline puffed out a breath. “In for a dime, in for a dollar, I guess.” She flashed him a more genuine smile. “While I’ve got my doctor’s hat on, I might as well try to fix everyone on this island. Make myself useful, earn my keep and all that.”

“If ye’re too weary, we can visit him tomorrow instead,” Logan offered.

She shook her head. “I’ve got medicine with me, and I might be... uh... more tired tomorrow. I’d rather get as much done today as possible. Do what I can while I can, if you catch my drift.”

“Why would ye be more tired tomorrow?” He heard the sneaky note in his voice, but if she did, she ignored it.

“Tiredness can have a cumulative effect, and I was hoping to pass back through the villages to see how everyone is doing, so it’s definitely going to be another long day,” she said evenly. “And I promised your mom that I’d go through some stretches and exercises with her, for her back, so I should probably start that tonight. Yeah, it’s going to be a very long day.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

She meant it . She’s goin’ to stick to her rules.

Remembering his vigil that morning, he knew that he had to, as well. He could not flirt, could not tempt himself, could not even entertain the thought of another night with her. He had sworn he would not allow her to get further under his skin, but until now, he had not understood just how far beneath his skin she had already crept.

It would require all the discipline he possessed to carve her out.

The cart rattled across the wilds of the island, escorted by Logan, Theo, and Dallas.

Oliver had not yet awoken, though his fever had continued to go down. Indeed, the same seemed to be true at every village they had passed through on their way back to the keep. Fevers were going down, people were more hopeful, and though the sickness was not gone—not by any means—there was hope in the air.

Something that Logan had not seen in the devastated north of the island, where all hope had been lost with every buried body.

“I was wonderin’ if ye might venture to the north of the island with me,” he said, holding Adeline against him. For her safety, of course. He was not enjoying the sensation of her pressed so close against him, nor was it reminding him of the delights of the previous night—not at all.

Adeline twisted her head to peer up at him, wearing a look of grim resignation. “Today?”

“Nay, nae today,” he replied, stifling a laugh. “In a week or so, once we’ve seen what good ye’ve done in the east. Ye said we’d ken better what to expect in a week, did ye nae?”

She nodded. “Five to seven days is usually a good baseline for seeing improvement. If it’s nothing too nefarious, quite a lot of them should be feeling almost normal in a week.” She hesitated. “The trouble is, I still don’t know what caused it, and without all of the usual stuff that I’d use to check for bacteria or viruses, I don’t know how to figure out what caused it. My best guess is the water, though. Water is easy to contaminate, and it’s the common denominator. They all drink from the same spring.”

“Do ye think it could be the same in the north?” He frowned, thinking. “They all use the same spring, too. The north has one, the east has one, and the west and south share one.”

Adeline chewed on her lower lip, drawing his attention to her mouth. “I’d send a message out that everyone needs to start boiling their water, even if they’re not in one of the affected parts of the island.”

“What message are we sendin’ out?” Dallas pulled alongside Logan’s horse, a troubled look on his weathered face.

Logan repeated Adeline’s suggestion. “Would ye see to it for me, Uncle?”

“Aye, son.” Dallas dropped his chin to his chest. “If it’ll unravel this curse, I’ll stand over ‘em and watch ‘em all boil their water meself, ‘til I can be certain they’ve all obeyed. Ye ken what people are like—they daenae like bein’ told what they can and cannae do in their own homes.”

Logan smiled. “Thank ye, Uncle.”

“All the thanks should be given to this wee lass,” Dallas insisted, nodding at Adeline. “I cannae begin to understand how ye’ve done what ye’ve done, but I daenae think I speak for just meself when I tell ye how grateful we are. I thought ye were just another one of these healers that asks for a vast sum in return, does nothin’, then disappears without a trace, but I was mistaken.”

Logan’s arm tightened protectively around Adeline’s waist. “She hasnae asked for anythin’ at all.”

“Aye, but there must be somethin’ ye want in return,” Dallas countered, furrowing his brow. “I’m nae in the habit of believin’ that folks do somethin’ purely out of the goodness of their hearts. Please, do prove me wrong, though. It’s to our benefit if ye’re truly nae askin’ for any reward.”

Adeline flashed the older man a shy smile. “I really don’t want anything, except to

get this job done and then go home. I'm a simple woman with simple wants. So, I guess there are some of us who just want to do something good for the sake of doing something good."

"I hope ye're bein' honest with us," Dallas said, his expression still bemused.

"I am," she assured. "I'm not in the habit of lying. I don't have any reason to."

Dallas chuckled. "Well then, ye're more extraordinary than I already thought ye were. Ye must forgive me, Miss Adeline. I'm a wary creature. Always have been. Me words to ye are nae meant to cause insult, but it's me duty to defend this island, so I'm sure ye can understand why I might be suspicious at first."

"You're not the first, and I doubt you'll be the last," Adeline replied, relaxing back against Logan's chest as if she'd momentarily forgotten their rules. Maybe even she did not know what the rules truly were—she was just making them up as she went along.

I really will have to get her to write 'em out for me.

Logan debated whether or not he dared to invite her into his study again so she could do just that. As long as she did not ask him to fetch another book for her, from one of the highest shelves, they would undoubtedly be able to resist temptation.

"Is that where we're headed?" Adeline pointed to a solitary building in the near distance, perched upon the jutting lip of a cliff.

Logan nodded. "Aye."

"It looks so... lonely," she murmured. "I never thought a building could look lonely before."

Logan grimaced. “Jonah is... a strange man. As solitary as his home. Daenae be offended if he’s nae pleasant to ye.”

“I’m used to it,” Adeline replied as the cart and horses pressed on.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled to a halt outside the lonely hut on the cliff. Or what was left of it. The sides of the structure remained standing, but the collapsed roof left the interior vulnerable to the elements. Not that the hunched, grizzled man inside seemed to notice or care. He had a fire roaring in the center of his ruined house as if that was precisely the way he had intended it to be.

“I had a feelin’ ye’d be back,” Jonah grumbled, lumbering to his feet. He winced as he added, “Ye never listen when I tell ye to leave me be.”

Logan slid down from the saddle, helping Adeline. “I have a friend for ye to meet. She’s goin’ to patch ye up, good as new.”

“Is it that witch I’ve been hearin’ so much about?” Jonah shot back, narrowing his rheumy eyes at Adeline.

Adeline narrowed her eyes right back. “Not a witch, just a healer. And if I have to say that one more time, I think I’m going to explode. Of course, if you don’t want me to fix whatever you broke with your stubbornness, I can go on my merry way. It makes no difference to me.”

Logan, Theo, and Dallas all stared at Adeline as if she had gone mad. Logan, most of all. He had heard her retort more than a handful of times by now, but never with such venom in her voice. It shocked him.

The beautiful, young woman and the grumpy, old man continued to glare at one another, an awkward silence stretching between the spectators. Logan suspected he

should step in, but there was a part of him that wanted to wait and see what would happen next. After all, she had won over the eastern villages by herself. Maybe she could win Jonah over, too.

All of a sudden, the strangest sound began to sputter out of the old man. A gravelly, strangled sound. His deeply wrinkled face scrunched until his eyes melded into the wrinkles, his neck bobbing like a chicken.

“I like this’un, m’laird,” Jonah said. “Havenae been spoken to like that since me wife died.”

Only then did Logan realize that the old man had been laughing. That awful sound had been a chuckle.

A blur of ginger shot out from the remains of the hut, bounding up to Adeline. Jonah’s terrier, Weasel. He jumped up, pawing at Adeline’s legs, making a whining noise in the back of his throat.

Most of the island were terrified of Weasel. He had a reputation for being as grumpy as his owner, biting and snapping at anyone he took a dislike to. So, when Adeline bent down to stroke the dog, Logan almost leaped forward to scoop the beast out of the way, fearful that it might bite her.

Instead, Weasel licked her face all over, his tail wagging furiously. Apparently, her charms worked on animals, too.

“Well, well, aren’t you beautiful?” Adeline cooed, scratching the dog behind its tufty ears. “Yes, you are. You are the most handsome, little cupcake I’ve ever seen! Yes, you are. You are!”

Even Jonah seemed stunned. “I daenae think he’s ever done that before.”

“It’s ‘cause she is a witch,” a voice drawled through the whistling wind, slow and labored. “The dog kens it, I ken it, everyone kens it, but they’re too blind to say aught ‘cause she’s passably pretty or they’re already bewitched.”

Logan whirled around. In the back of the cart, Oliver was struggling to sit up.

“What did ye say?” Logan growled.

Oliver pushed his palm against his forehead, wincing. “Ye heard me. Mercy, ye’re the most bewitched of all.”

“She’s nae a witch, Master Oliver,” Theo cut in. “There’s nay such thing. I can see how ye might think she is, after all she’s done for the villages, but she’s just... very talented. Blessed, ye might say. Why, performin’ miracles is more of a holy thing than a witchy thing.”

After the help that Adeline had given to Theo’s sisters, and gaining Logan’s mother’s seal of approval, it appeared the man-at-arms had changed his mind about her completely.

“Aye, I’d say it’s probably yer fever talkin’,” Dallas agreed, despite his earlier wariness.

Logan squared his shoulders. “A fever that’d be much worse right now if it wasnae for Adeline.”

But Oliver shook his head, undeterred. “I wish I wasnae gettin’ better because of the potions of a witch. I’d rather meet an early grave than have her sorcery in me blood.” He glared at her. “I saw her talkin’ to one of her own kind while ye were bringin’ in wood this mornin’, Brother.”

“One of her own kind? What are ye talkin’ about?” Logan thought back to Adeline’s appearance at the cottage that morning. How pale and shaken she had been.

Oliver smirked, one eye closed against whatever pain was pulsing in his skull. “I saw her speakin’ in secret with the seer. As I said, one of her own kind.”

At that, Logan’s blood ran cold, for the seer was a witch by any other name. An exception to the rule of burning at the stake, but an outcast all the same. A woman that no one went to openly, visiting her in secret for things they could not say out loud.

And she was just about the only person on this island who likely knew of a way for Adeline to get home.

CHAPTER 22

“I daenae ken the lass, and even I can see ye’re talkin’ out yer arse.” Jonah leaped unexpectedly to Adeline’s defense, snarling like his terrier at Oliver. “Weasel has a sense for people, and if I were to put him near ye, he’d bite yer nose off. But ye’ll notice he doesnae want to do anythin’ but kiss the nose off this lassie here. I suggest ye put another cloth on yer head and lie back down, ye wee wastrel.”

Adeline stood frozen beside Logan, willing him to look at her, willing him to show her that he didn’t believe a word his brother had just said. Maybe she had met with a seer, whatever that was, but she hadn’t done it on purpose.

She came to me. I didn’t seek her out. I didn’t even know what she was. I just thought she was some weird old woman, she wanted to say, but she had a feeling that would only make things worse.

Oliver’s nostrils flared, his eyes flashing with menace. “What did ye just say to me, old man?”

“Och, do ye want me to put ye over me lap and wash yer ears out, too?” Jonah shot back, with all the attitude of an elderly man who didn’t much care what happened to him.

“Watch yer mouth!” Dallas barked, though it was not clear whom he was reprimanding.

Logan put up his hands. “Quiet, all of ye. I dinnae bring Adeline here to start a

quarrel.” He gestured to her without looking at her. “Can ye go and tend to Jonah, please? Meanwhile, I’m goin’ to deal with me brother.”

He stormed off toward the cart, taking hold of the carthorse’s reins. He turned the cart around and walked the mighty beast—Oliver jostling in the back—down the path from the hut, halting only when he was far enough to be out of earshot.

If you come back calling me a witch again, I’m going to take whatever that seer gave me, and I’m going to leave.

Angry tears stung Adeline’s eyes. After last night, she didn’t want him distrusting her again. Her heart, already fragile, wouldn’t be able to take it.

The terrier whined, jumping up to lick her face again, as if to say, It’s all going to be okay. Now, gimme a kiss.

Deciding that the dog might be therapeutic, she scooped the terrier into her arms and lavished him with scratches and kisses. He panted happily, his tail swishing, as she approached Jonah.

“We’ll get started, then, unless you still don’t want me to help you?” She flashed him a wry smile, doing her best to ignore whatever was happening by the cart.

Jonah shrugged. “Weasel seems to think ye’re nae so bad. Aye, ye can help me, though I daenae ken what ye think ye can do for me. If ye’re anythin’ like that last healer we had, ye’d be better off sendin’ for a priest.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Adeline said firmly, pressing on into the tumbledown hut with Weasel in her arms.

An hour, several bandages, a fresh batch of willow bark tonic, and some stern

instructions later, Adeline emerged from the hut. Weasel trotted beside her, as if he was planning to follow wherever she went, while Jonah limped behind.

“Six weeks, and you’ll feel like a new man. Or an old man, but not so broken,” Adeline teased.

Helping Jonah had come at the perfect time, keeping her attention off Logan and Oliver.

“Remember,” she continued, “snow against the ribs for as long as you can bear it, until the swelling and bruising goes down. Sleep with a pillow under your back. Drink that tonic every four to six hours. And no marathons, no boxing matches, no duels, no playing chase with Weasel here, even if he gives you puppy eyes. Eat well, drink well, boil your water, and I think you might just outlive us all.”

Jonah bowed his head, fishing in his pocket for something. “Ye’ll take this for yer troubles, lass.”

A coin flashed in his hand.

“I can’t take that,” she insisted, but he put it in her hand anyway, just like the seer had done.

“I willnae be beholden to anyone,” Jonah said gruffly. “Ye did fine work, ye get paid for it.”

Reluctantly, she slipped the coin into her apron pocket, along with the mysterious parcel. There’d been no time for her to even take a peek at the object, but she could feel it there like an omen or a gift—she didn’t know which.

Just then, Logan returned, having left the cart and Oliver at the bottom of the slope

leading away from Jonah's home. He still wouldn't look at Adeline, focusing his full attention on the old man instead.

"Has she healed ye?" he asked.

Jonah shrugged. "We'll find out in six weeks, accordin' to her. But I cannae say this wasnae one of me better afternoons. If ye feel compelled to visit me again, m'laird, despite me wishes to be left alone, bring her along with ye." He winked at Adeline. "For Weasel, ye understand. Poor lad looks like he's goin' to miss ye."

Sweeping the terrier up into her arms once more, Adeline kissed his coarse fur, her eyes discreetly peeking at Logan.

Was that why he was acting like this? She'd assumed that hearing about the seer would make him want to throw her in the dungeons again, but now she was starting to think it had more to do with what the seer might be able to do for her.

Is he ignoring me because he's going to miss me?

Her heart twinged.

She thought of that morning, waking up without him. How she'd reached across to find him, hoping he was there beside her, and the crushing disappointment when he hadn't been.

Last night had changed something between them. They'd both felt it, right at the end, when they'd gazed into one another's eyes—a connection that would hurt like hell when time severed it.

"We should be I' back to the keep," Logan said flatly. "Do whatever she's told ye to do, Jonah, and daenae complain about it. I've got faith in her healin' abilities."

Jonah rolled his eyes. “She’s already hammered the instructions into me head. Ye daenae need to hammer them again.” He paused. “Though, if ye are feelin’ obligin’, I wouldnae mind borrowin’ some lads to help me rebuild me roof.”

“I’ll come tomorrow,” Logan replied, a note too fast. “I’ll bring what I can, and if it takes a few days, so be it. I cannae have ye and Weasel freezin’ out here when the next storm hits us.”

Jonah shrugged. “Aye, well, I’ll be waitin’ with me boiled water for ye, then.”

“Adeline,” Logan said gruffly, making his way toward the horses.

It’s better this way.

But Adeline did not believe a word. She wouldn’t have asked Logan to forget about last night at all if she’d thought it would mean him turning cold on her.

Dallas had taken the horses off to graze while Adeline had been tending to Jonah, and it seemed like Logan’s uncle had gotten so bored of waiting that he’d fallen asleep on a mound of moss. As natural beds went, Adeline thought it looked pretty comfortable. The kind of place that, in the summer, when it was warm in the evening, she could picture herself lying on with Logan.

I won’t be here in the summer .

It hadn’t been an accident that she’d asked the villagers to give her a week to prove herself, and if nothing worked, she’d leave. In her mind, a week was just enough time to see the effects of her treatment without getting too attached to this place and the people in it.

Of course, she was painfully aware that she’d said that before last night happened, but

still...

“Dallas, we’re leavin’.” Logan gave his uncle a gentle kick in the side. “On yer feet.”

Dallas peered up at his nephew. “How’s the wee imp farin’? I dinnae hear screamin’, so I assume ye either struck a peace treaty or killed him.”

“He fell asleep,” Logan grumbled.

Dallas got up, dusting off his trews. “I willnae join ye back to the keep. After seein’ what happened in the villages, I willnae be able to rest ‘til I’ve told the north, south, and the west about this boilin’ of the water. But I’ll return once the task is done.”

“Och, ye’re leavin’ me to contend with me brother alone?” Logan groaned in exasperation. “Me maither will coddle him, as she always does. She just willnae see that he’s the twin of me faither. Willnae believe there’s a bad bone in his body, when most of ‘em are rotten already.”

Adeline raised a shy hand. “I’m no psychiatrist, but I can’t imagine it’s easy to be the second son around here.”

Logan and Dallas both turned to stare at her. She realized, too late, that she’d let a modern word slip, but neither seemed to care about that.

“I was a second son,” Dallas replied haughtily, “and I never let meself get into the sort of trouble Oliver gets into because of it. I understood me place. He never has.”

Adeline hesitated. “With respect, that’s you, not him. People deal with things differently. He’s probably got a major inferiority... uh... obsession. I mean, you look at Logan here, and you think, ‘This man can’t be real.’ He’s like a mythical hero in real life. The kind of man people can only dream of, you know?” She gestured to the

cart in the near distance. “And Oliver is just... the brother. He likely realized he’d get a lot more attention if he acted out and has been doing it ever since.”

Logan and Dallas kept staring at her, though she was fairly certain she wasn’t speaking a foreign language, and she hadn’t dropped any other modern words.

“Just a thought,” she said awkwardly. “An opinion. I might be wrong, he might be a total bastard, but... something to consider.”

Logan’s expression hardened. “Did ye forget what he said about ye?”

“I didn’t forget, but he’s sick, he’s cranky—he’s going to say some mean things. I’ve seen it a thousand times before,” she replied. “Besides, I know I’m not a witch.”

Something else flickered across Logan’s eyes. “But did ye speak with the seer?”

“Logan, I wouldn’t know what a seer was if it came up and smacked me in the face. What does a seer see, exactly? We don’t have them where I come from.”

It was only a partial lie, and until she knew what was in that little parcel that the old woman had given her, it would stay that way.

Logan’s face softened slightly, but tension lingered in his clenched jaw. “Uncle, ride on to the other villages and report to me when ye return.” He glanced back at Adeline. “I keep sayin’ it, but we’re leavin’ now, and if we daenae leave soon, it’ll be dark. Nights come in quickly here on the islands.”

I wish they’d slow down.

Adeline’s hand unconsciously fell to the pocket of her apron. Something round and solid pressed against her palm.

Her exit out of 1705, or just a gift from a mad, old woman? She guessed she'd find out soon.

CHAPTER 23

Though he had been given no choice but to hold Adeline on the ride back to Gibson Keep, Logan had not been able to take any pleasure from it. Holding her so close was slowly becoming a torment. Breathing in her unusual perfume, feeling the rise and fall of her chest, and the press of her buttocks against his loins was not a teasing joy anymore, but a strange torture.

She has to leave, and I daenae want her to.

It was that simple and that difficult.

And as she slept in his arms throughout the journey, exhausted from the day, the protectiveness he felt took on a dangerous edge. Indeed, it was Oliver's earlier outburst that had made him understand the reality of the situation, more than he had before. In his world, he could not keep her safe, no matter how hard he defended her.

If the island turned on her, that would be it. He could not fight them all. Even if he could, what would that leave him with? An island of bones and a woman who needed to go back to where she came from, whether that was two weeks, two years, or twenty years from now.

"Ye mustnae listen to what Master Oliver said," Theo remarked as if reading Logan's thoughts.

Logan rubbed his weary eyes. "I wasnae plannin' to."

“Then why are ye so quiet?”

“Am I nae always quiet?”

Theo tilted his head from side to side. “I’ve kenned ye long enough to ken when ye’re... in a pensive mood, that’s all. Ye’re in one right now. Troubled, ye might say.”

“I’m nae troubled,” Logan lied. “I’m just worried about this curse. If it doesnae lift, they’ll come for her.”

Theo glanced at the sleeping figure of Adeline. “Are ye sure she’s asleep?”

“What?”

“Are ye sure she’s asleep?” Theo repeated. “Ye daenae want to be sayin’ things like that if she’s only pretendin’. Ye’ll scare the lass.”

Logan peered down at Adeline, but it was impossible to tell if she was actually asleep or not. She looked asleep. Her eyes were closed, her breathing was soft and slow, and her expression was as peaceful as it had been that morning, but Theo’s doubts were enough to hold his tongue.

“Do ye smell somethin’?” Logan asked, sniffing.

Theo frowned. “Nothin’ new.”

“It smells like the pigsty at Red Briar.” Logan sniffed again. “I think it’s comin’ from Adeline.”

He waited, watching her face closely for any twinge or tightening that might prove

she was pretending. Meanwhile, Theo's mouth opened, and he flashed a subtle wink as he realized what Logan was doing.

"I do smell it, now that ye mention it," Theo replied. "Och, she's ripe. Did she nae have a bath last night? I thought ye were goin' to arrange one for her."

Logan squinted harder at Adeline's cheeks, expecting a flush of pink to color her moonlight-pale skin. But it did not. It was not exact proof that she was truly asleep, but it was enough to soothe his fears that his words might frighten her into leaving his world sooner.

"Do ye think she actually did meet with the seer?" Theo whispered, a few minutes later.

Logan kept his gaze fixed on Adeline. He wondered how a woman he barely knew, who came from a different time and place, could have entwined herself so quickly around his heart. At the beginning, he had been so eager to send her on her way, once she had rested and recovered. Now, the thought stuck in his throat like a fishbone.

"I daenae ken," he replied, at last.

Theo leaned back in his saddle. "It wouldnae necessarily mean that she's a witch. Maybe she just wanted to ask the seer somethin'. She's a wise woman, after all. Me sisters and me maither have both been to see her for different reasons, and they've always come back in lighter moods."

"Can we nae discuss this now?" Logan said tersely.

Theo pulled a face. "Sorry, m'laird. I get these thoughts in me head, and I get carried away, like I have to pour 'em out me mouth before they take up too much room in me skull." He pretended to sew up his lips. "I willnae say another word."

They rode on in silence, Logan choosing to savor every moment he got to hold Adeline in his arms. If she decided to leave, he would not stop her. If the seer had told her how, so be it. She was not one of his clansfolk, she was not one of his people. He had no right to stand in her way when her own home was beckoning to her across a three-hundred-year divide.

All he had to do was put himself in Adeline's place and think of his mother and sister to know that, when home called, you had to go back. Even if it hurt.

"You're not coming with me to see your mom?" Adeline asked, pausing at the bottom of the winding stone staircase that led up to Sophie's chambers.

Logan gestured back at the main door. "I've got to get Oliver inside."

"Surely your brother will want to see your mom," she said. "Two birds, one stone."

Logan shook his head. "I'll leave ye to whatever ye said ye were doin'. Me maither will come and find Oliver when she wants to, and I've got other business to attend to, once I have him settled in his old rooms."

"Such as?"

He frowned. "Pardon?"

"What other business do you have to attend to? We could write that list later if you want?"

His frown deepened, his dark blue eyes clouding over. "I daenae think it'll be necessary. I ken the primary rule, and that's all I need to ken."

"What's the primary rule?" she pressed, reluctant to leave him while he was acting so

aloof.

He paused, sighing. “I’m nae to touch ye. Ye’re nae to touch me. I think that ought to be all.”

“But you held me all the way from Jonah’s, so maybe the rules need to be a bit more detailed,” she insisted. “Plus, if I were to fall over or something, and you could stop me from falling, then you’d have to touch me. You know, grab my arm or something.”

She knew she’d asked for it, but she wasn’t too keen on the distance stretching between them. Being on the horse with him had been a relief, in a way—to feel his arm around her and the warmth of his body against her, lulling her to sleep.

It should’ve been the most impossible place to fall asleep, but she’d awoken at the keep, revived and refreshed. And she was already thinking about the night ahead, and the empty bed she’d retreat to, wishing he was there with her.

The little fabric-covered parcel in the pocket of her apron was to blame, she was certain of that. Every time she thought of it, it triggered something in her brain, making her realize just how little time they might have left together.

Would it really be so bad if they said goodbye in a more... memorable way than just a kiss on the cheek or a handshake? Worse still, what if she opened the parcel and the mysterious object just zapped her back to 2023 immediately, happening so fast that she didn’t get to say goodbye to him at all?

Don’t leave like this .

“I think we understand well enough,” Logan said drily. “We’re nae bairns, lass. We daenae need to put all the details on paper. Now, if ye’ll excuse me, I need to bring

me brother in before he starts howlin' about ye bein' a witch again. He's troublesome enough without a fever makin' it worse."

He walked off without another word, leaving her standing at the bottom of the stairs. And though she'd promised to teach Sophie how to do the exercises and stretches that would help with her back, Adeline couldn't bring herself to head up. In fact, she had the most awful feeling that if she saw Sophie and Moira, she was going to burst into uncontrollable tears.

The healer's chambers.

She shook her head in a vain attempt to shake away her sad thoughts.

With a soft harrumph to give herself strength, she pushed away from the staircase and headed down the labyrinth of drafty stone hallways to the old healer's abandoned chambers.

As she walked, she pointed out things she didn't like, to make herself feel better.

"It's freezing cold all the time," she muttered. "Everything feels damp. The candles smell funny, like rancid fat. I'll go blind in no time if I have to read books by candlelight. There's no medicine. If I get a bad cold, it could genuinely kill me. The clothes aren't as comfortable as my clothes. I never want to wear stays again, even if it does make my waist look good. There's not much entertainment. There's no running water, and drinking the water makes you sick."

She reached the curved wooden door of the old healer's chambers and let herself in, taking one of the torches out of a wall sconce on her way. Casting the light around, she searched for the funny-smelling candles and lanterns, lighting them one by one until the room was filled with a cozy, romantic glow.

It was a strange room, resembling a wine cellar with all of the wine removed. Instead, jars upon jars of miscellaneous herbs, powders, and liquids lined the walls, plus boxes of cloths and bandages, and more boxes of healer's tools that she had no idea how to use. She wouldn't have even liked to guess how some of them were used. They looked like medieval torture devices, rather than anything medical. Although, she supposed the same could be said of some modern medical apparatus.

In the center of the room was a long, timeworn workbench. Unsettling stains were splashed across the old wood, making her think it might have served as a surgical table as well as whatever else the old healer needed to use it for—his dinner, setting broken bones, taking his evening tea, helping a laboring woman who needed a caesarean, having a snack while he read some of his books.

“Do they even do caesareans?” she pondered aloud.

Her knowledge of medical history was about as thorough as her knowledge of the 1700s as a whole.

“No, probably not,” she replied to herself, shuddering.

She couldn't begin to imagine the torture of a caesarean without anesthesia, though maybe they had chloroform or something similar.

She settled herself on the high stool beside the workbench and dragged a candle closer. She needed all the light she could get for what she was about to do.

“Okay,” she murmured, reaching into her apron pocket. “I don't know what supernatural forces sent me here, I don't know why I was sent here. I don't know if there was a demon hiding in the snow globe, but if you could not zap me straight back to 2023, I'd be grateful. I just want to see.”

If anyone saw her, they'd think she was insane. Maybe she was. After all, what was more insane than traveling back three hundred years, landing on the island of the most handsome man she'd ever seen, and catching feelings for him?

Nerves set in as she placed the little parcel on the table. Upon second viewing, she realized it wasn't wrapped in the potato sack material that the "seer" had been wearing. It was finer than that, tightly woven, with a strange sheen to it. Almost golden.

"No zapping back, remember," she whispered to whichever forces had sent her there.

Slowly, with trembling fingers, she peeled open the parcel as if something might jump out and bite her. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until her lungs started to ache, filling her chest with a panicky sensation. Immediately, she exhaled, just as she eased away the last bit of fabric.

But underneath the golden material, there was another wrapping—silver, this time. It felt like silk against her skin. Expensive. Not at all the kind of thing she'd have expected a muddy woman in a ragged dress to be carrying around with her. Then again, she'd known at first sight that the "seer" was no ordinary woman.

"Playing games, huh?" she mumbled, peeling away the second layer, just as slowly as the first.

Her eyes widened as she looked at the object in the center of the silver and gold squares of fabric.

She'd joked about the old woman just giving her a random pebble, and the truth wasn't far off. The gift was a small stone in the shape of an egg, the curved sides perfectly smooth. The stone itself had a milky sheen to it, but when it caught the light, it glittered like the fake frost flakes that had danced inside the snow globe. And

though she couldn't explain why, she had a feeling that if she were to shake it, it would glitter even more.

"What are you?" she whispered, compelled to touch it. "Some kind of opal?"

They were known to be bad luck if given as a gift, but Adeline wasn't sure if this was a gift or just a key to the gateway home. Did that still count as a gift?

Gingerly, she touched it... and as her fingertips kissed the icy cold surface, a blast of wind came out of nowhere in a room with no windows and a closed door, snuffing out every candle, plunging her into darkness.

CHAPTER 24

Logan dozed by his brother's bedside. He had followed Adeline's strict instructions to keep air flowing into any room where there was a feverish patient, but the low light of the candles and the comforting heat of the fireplace made it a struggle to keep his eyes open. Nor had he slept well last night, his fatigue cumulative, just as Adeline had said it was.

He might have fallen asleep right there and then, had a sharp knock at the door not jolted him out of his exhaustion.

"Logan?" His mother's face appeared, followed by her body and, a moment later, Moira. "Is that me boy?"

Logan's mouth stretched into a yawn. "Both of 'em, aye."

"Well, I kenned that ye were here, but I dinnae believe it when Theo said ye'd brought him back." His mother hurried to Oliver's bedside, perching right up on the bed to get closer to him. She clasped his hand in hers, pressing her other palm to his brow. "He doesnae feel too warm."

Logan nodded. "Because Adeline wasnae lyin' about bein' a healer in her world." He swept a hand across Oliver's sleeping figure. "She's been singlehandedly undoin' curses since yesterday. I figured she'd have told ye everythin' already."

His mother was not listening, her attention fixed on Oliver. "It's yer maither, Oliver. Can ye hear me? Oliver?"

“Adeline said he’s goin’ to need as much rest as possible, so I wouldnae try to wake him if I were ye. I wouldnae get too close either,” Logan half-warned. “She hasnae decided if the curse is in the air or the water, and if it’s in the air, it can make ye sick, too.”

Sophie frowned. “But we’re miles away from the eastern villages. There’s nothin’ in the air here.”

“She says it travels with the sick,” Logan replied. “She described it in a different way, but I cannae remember the words she used. That was the gist of it, though. The curse clings to the sick, and goes where they go.”

His mother pulled a face. “Well, if she can heal my wee lad, she can heal me if I get sick, too.”

“I suppose we can end our wager on who is the favorite bairn, eh?” Moira said drily, pulling up a chair beside Logan. “I’ll be honest, I had me coin on meself, but that was when Ollie was on the mainland—out of sight and all that.”

Logan snorted. “I could’ve told ye to save yer coin. It has always been Oliver.”

“Are ye two deliberately bein’ unkind, or did ye forget that I’m sittin’ right here and can hear every word ye’re mutterin’?” Sophie said curtly, flashing them a wounded look. “I have never had favorites among ye. I love ye all the same, but what ye all choose to ignore is that Oliver dinnae have the same beginnin’ in life that the two of ye had.”

Moira leaned forward. “What do ye mean?”

As the youngest of the three, Moira had not been there for the grim days following Oliver’s birth. Logan had only been seven, but he could remember it keenly, now that

he thought about it.

“He was sickly from birth,” Sophie replied, stroking her younger son’s hand gently. “Nay one thought he would live. Yer faither wanted me to leave him out on the rocks in the cold until he perished. Didnae like the notion that he had a weak son. Didnae like other people thinkin’ he was weak for havin’ a weak son. Of course, I wouldnae do it. I think it was the only time I fought back against yer faither.

“One night, I awoke to feed yer brother, but he wasnae there in the cradle, where I’d been watchin’ over him day and night since I brought him into this world,” she went on, her voice catching. “I ran screamin’ through the keep. Nay one would tell me where he was, and yer faither had sailed off earlier that evenin’ with his men, though I kenned he was responsible. He might nae have taken me boy, but he ordered someone to.”

Logan frowned, ancient memories coming back to him at a slow pace. Things he had not remembered for a long, long time.

“I told ye where he was,” he whispered. “I’d seen one of me faither’s men snatch him and take him out to the rocks.”

“Aye,” Sophie confirmed. “And ye came with me to take him back. Ye showed me the way, though I was wailin’ and weepin’ like a banshee. When we got to the spot, Oliver wasnae alone. There was a woman sittin’ with him, holdin’ him to her, usin’ her shawl to keep him warm. A woman that the islanders called a witch, though that came later. She was just a midwife, in truth. A clever woman, sweet and kind, who’d heard me son cryin’ and had come to investigate. She saved his life, but I couldnae save hers.”

Logan’s heart began to beat strangely, a chill prickling down the back of his neck. “Faither had her tried as a witch. Accused her of kidnappin’ Oliver in the night, to

make a blood sacrifice. All to conceal what he had done.”

“But he never let Oliver forget that he wasnae wanted,” Sophie said, her voice tight with pain. “Never let him forget that he was ‘weak,’ though he’s never been weak. He has always been a warrior, fightin’ for his life. If he wasnae, he wouldnae have cried that night, drawin’ that poor woman to him.”

Logan rubbed the back of his neck to try and warm the chill that bristled there. As he stared at his brother, remembering that stormy walk across the treacherous rocks to reach him, dragging their mother by the hand, though he was just seven years old, Adeline’s words came back to haunt him.

He’s probably got a major inferiority... uh... obsession.... Oliver is just... the brother. He likely realized he’d get a lot more attention if he acted out and has been doing it ever since.

“She was right,” Logan muttered to himself, seeing his brother in a new light.

To their father, Logan had been the favorite. He was the heir, he was the one who grew up strong and agile, excelling in all the training he was put through. He was the one their father was proud of, in his own twisted, cruel way. He was the one their father had boasted to about his piracy, likely hoping that Logan would follow in his wicked footsteps.

And, all the while, Oliver had just been the spare. A spare that their father had schemed to have killed by exposure on the rocks. Logan could not quite recall, but he was fairly sure that their father had even told Oliver that, after one too many jars of liquor.

“I had nay notion of that,” Moira said quietly.

Sophie sniffed, wiping her eyes on the back of her sleeve. “Aye, well, maybe ye’ll think twice before ye start bein’ unkind again. I ken he’s nae the most... well-behaved lad, but it’s nae all his fault. He sees anger as affection. His faither taught him that.”

“That’s what Adeline said.”

Logan felt a little unsteady, despite being in a chair. How had Adeline known that? Was that something they learned in the future—a medicine of the mind and the character, as well as the body?

Moira groaned. “Where is Adeline? I have been desperate to see her, but I think she’s still wary of me after the whole dagger incident. Can ye believe she thought I was goin’ to kill her? I wouldnae harm a hair on her head.” She grimaced. “Och, those purple locks. I wish she could’ve kept them.”

Logan squinted at his sister. “What do ye mean, where is she? She went up to teach Maither some stretches for her back.”

“Nay, she dinnae,” Moira retorted. “I think I would ken if I’d seen her. I havenae seen her since before ye left yesterday.”

Sophie gasped. “Ye daenae think she... Nay, she wouldnae have gone without sayin’ farewell, would she?” Her eyes widened, the color draining from her face. “She really dinnae come up to see me, Logan. What if... the thing that brought her here took her back without her say-so?”

Logan’s head began to spin, his heart lurching in his throat.

We could write that list later if you want?

He heard her voice in his mind, saw the sadness on her face when he had told her it would not be necessary. Had she been trying to hang onto a reason to stay, and he had not given it? His stomach dropped, recalling how coldly he had walked away from her.

“I need to search the keep,” he said thickly, lumbering to his feet. “I willnae believe she’s gone until I cannae find her anywhere.”

Moirra jumped up. “I’ll come with ye. I’ll search high and low.” Her breath hitched, her hand flying to her mouth. “If she’s gone without sayin’ farewell, I’ll never forgive meself for playin’ with that dagger!”

“I daenae think it was the dagger,” Logan replied, marching toward the door.

“I’ll follow ye!” Sophie called. “Daenae forget to check the dungeons, the old store rooms, the stables, the old barracks, the...”

Logan did not hear the rest, blood whooshing in his ears as he broke into a run.

CHAPTER 25

“Adeline?” a voice whispered in the darkness.

Her heart thundered in her chest, uncertain of where she’d be when she opened her eyes. Aside from the candles being blown out, she couldn’t remember what had happened after she’d touched the strange opal egg. But she guessed she wasn’t on the stool anymore in the old healer’s chambers. She felt the hard floor underneath her, and her head ached. A pain almost as bad as when she’d first arrived on the beach of Logan’s island.

I’ve gone back . It zapped me. It zapped me, though I expressly told it not to!

Her heart sank. Panic fluttered in her chest as tears filled her unseeing eyes. She didn’t get to say goodbye, and now she was stuck in 2023, with no way of even sending Logan a message to tell him how... perfect and strange their brief time together had been.

“Adeline?” the same voice whispered again.

In her devastation, she thought the voice sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. It was probably a cop or a paramedic finding her on the floor of her blacked-out apartment, spat out by the opal egg.

“Over here,” she murmured miserably.

Footsteps approached in the darkness, the glow of a flashlight wavering through the

shadows. Her sister had told her stories of the will-o-the-wisps that haunted Scotland—moving orbs of glowing light that tried to lead oblivious travelers off well-trodden paths to their deaths.

For a moment, she pretended that was what she was looking at, instead of her wake-up call back into the 21 st century.

Soon, the light stopped above her. She heard a knee crack as someone kneeled down beside her, bringing the glowing orb with them.

As soon as the flare of light caught the face of her discoverer, she unleashed an almighty scream. Those icy pale eyes, that silvery hair, that trimmed gray beard, that pallid skin, and, most of all, that smug mouth. Of all the people who could've found her, Dr. Platt was the very last person she wanted to see.

“Adeline? What’s wrong? Are ye in pain? Did ye hurt somethin’ when ye fell?” he asked in quick succession, worry creasing his pale, haunting eyes.

She froze, the scream dying on her lips. That wasn’t a New Jersey accent. That wasn’t an American accent either. That was pure 1700s Scotland. Not Logan, definitely not Dr. Platt, but someone else.

“Adeline, can ye speak? I daenae ken how to heal anyone, but if ye tell me what to fetch ye, I can,” the man said as her dazed mind put the pieces together.

“Dallas?” she croaked.

Dallas nodded slowly. “Daenae try to sit up. I think ye hurt yer head.”

“I’m not... I didn’t... I’m still here,” she mumbled, staring at his concerned face.

She could've hugged him—she was so relieved. It had only been the shadows cast from the lantern in his hand that had made him look like Dr. Platt. Now, with more of the lantern light on his face, she could see him properly. And if she was looking at Dallas, then she hadn't gone anywhere.

“Am I still in the old healer's chambers?” she asked, quickly realizing that she'd almost said something she shouldn't say. He'd have had her marched back down to the dungeons if she'd accidentally mentioned she was a time traveler.

Dallas pressed his hand to her forehead. “Aye, ye're still here. What happened?”

“I was... looking through some books.” She paused, her mind flitting to the opal egg.

Where the heck is it? Is it still on the workbench?

“I... uh... felt dizzy, and I must've fainted.”

Dallas frowned. “Ye were in here without a candle?”

“I think there's a draft in here,” she said, struggling to sit up. “It blew my candle out.”

It blew all of the suckers out .

Dallas tried to urge her to lie back down. “I really daenae think ye should be sittin' up. Just... stay there, and I'll go fetch Logan and his maither. Daenae move. The old healer used to say that ye shouldnae move someone if they've hit their head 'til ye're sure they havenae cracked open their skull.”

“He was part right,” Adeline said quietly.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Dallas stood up, his knees cracking again. “I willnae be a moment, lass. Stay where ye are.”

“Will do,” she promised, listening to the sound of his footsteps retreating.

She waited until she heard the telltale squeal of the door hinges opening and closing before she pushed herself back into a sitting position. Her head swam, a sharp pain splitting her skull, but she’d take all the migraines that 1705 could give her.

She was still in Logan’s time. She hadn’t vanished without saying goodbye. And that was a belated Christmas gift, in and of itself.

Opal egg, her brain kicked in, reminding her of why she was sitting up in the first place.

Shakily, feeling her way up the side of the workbench, she managed to get to her feet. Her fingers scrabbled blindly across the rough wooden surface, splinters biting at her skin, as she attempted to orient herself. She felt the candlestick, and, a few inches to the left, she touched the edge of that strange, sheeny material.

“Please say it’s still there, please say it’s still there,” she prayed, tentatively moving her fingertips across that square of material.

Wait! If you touch it, you’ll pass out again!

Cursing under her breath, she pinched the edge of the material between her fingers and dragged it over to where she thought the little egg should be, like she was trying to rewrap it in the dark.

Relief swelled in her chest as she felt the solid object underneath the silky silver fabric and the rough golden wrapper. She still had the key to the future.

But as she hastily wrapped it back up and slipped it into her apron pocket, an urgent question popped into her head.

If she'd touched the egg and woken up in 1705 again, how on Earth was it meant to take her back to 2023? Had she missed a step, or did the egg somehow know that she wasn't ready to return?

She didn't have much time to dwell on the possibilities, as a stampede of muffled footsteps filled the silence. They were coming from beyond the chamber door, approaching fast.

Logan burst into the old healer's chambers, wielding a torch as if he were hunting down a criminal hiding in the woods. He swept it left and right, spilling fiery orange light into the room.

"Where is she?" he called to Dallas.

"Over there," Dallas replied. "On the other side of that table."

It had been two hours since the search for Adeline had begun, and at least an hour more since she had initially gone missing, having never made it up the stairs to Sophie's bedchamber. In those two hours, Logan had truly felt like he was losing his mind. Every room he entered had raised and crushed his hopes when he had scoured every corner, every nook and cranny, and she could not be found.

Indeed, had he not run into Dallas while on his way to the dungeons, almost on the brink of admitting defeat, he might have given up completely.

“What are ye doin’ here?” Logan had asked. “I thought ye were ridin’ to the rest of the villages.”

“I spread the word to the southern villages, but I was ridin’ past the keep and couldnae resist. I thought I’d rest and have somethin’ to eat before continuin’ on through the night,” Dallas had replied. “It’s fortunate I did. I’ve just seen Adeline in the old healer’s chambers. I think she fell and hit her head, so I told her to stay while I fetched ye for her.”

Logan had never run as fast in his entire life as he had after that revelation, sprinting to the woman who had captured his heart. The woman he had thought, for two hours, he had lost forever.

“Adeline?” he called, skidding around the edge of the workbench.

He saw her on the floor, his heart lurching. Her face was too pale, her lips bloodless.

“Adeline?” He sank to his knees, scooping her up. “Adeline, can ye hear me? Dallas said ye fell and hurt yer head. Are ye well? Adeline?”

Adeline cracked one eye open. “You’re not supposed to move someone who might have a spinal injury.”

“What?”

She mustered a slow smile. “I’m just teasing. I think my spine is fine. My head only hurts a little, so I’m pretty sure I’m going to live.”

“Ye were... teasin’ me?” Logan did not know whether to laugh or be furious with her. “I thought ye were... I thought ye’d... I thought somethin’ bad had happened, and ye start jestin’ like that? Ye’re a menace, Adeline. I swear on me life, ye are.”

He put the torch in her hand and picked her up, grateful to have her back in his arms. “Daenae burn me with that,” he warned lightly. “I think ye’ve singed me enough for one night.”

“I’ll try not to,” she promised, her gaze anxious. “You’re not actually mad at me, are you?”

“I daenae think mad is the right word,” he replied, carrying her out of the healer’s chambers.

Outside the door, a small crowd of three had gathered: Sophie, Moira, and Theo. All nervously waiting to find out if Adeline was all right. Their immediate relief reflected Logan’s, though he could not show it yet. Not until he was alone with Adeline again.

“Ye had us flappin’ all over with worry!” Sophie cried. “I daenae think I’ve seen Logan react like that since there were enemy ships landin’ on our beaches a decade ago.”

Logan scrunched his eyes. “I couldnae have anythin’ happen to the island’s most valuable asset, that’s all. There are still sick people who need her help.”

“That’s the only reason?” Adeline asked quietly.

He did not respond, carrying her past his mother, sister, and oldest friend. He continued on through the maze of hallways that he knew like the back of his hand, until he reached a lone doorway at the end of a very narrow corridor. He opened it and carried her down a narrow staircase that led into the underbelly of the keep.

“Are you putting me in the dungeons again?” Adeline’s voice trembled, her eyes wide as they went lower and lower. “I didn’t do anything wrong, and you know I’m not a witch, so what are you putting me in prison for?”

Coming to the end of another narrow corridor, Logan booted open the last door. “I’m nae,” he assured, carrying her into the subterranean realm of his private bedchamber.

CHAPTER 26

“What is this place?” Adeline gaped at the incredible room.

It was similar to the old healer’s chambers, in that it resembled a wine cellar, with vaulted ceilings and no windows. But while the healer’s room was filled with jars of herbs and tonics, this room was covered in books. Rows and rows of them, lining every wall. A secret library that he hadn’t told her about, leaving her to scrounge around for reading material in his study.

A roaring fire burned in the fireplace, filling the space with a cozy heat. Huge cushions and furs littered the floor in front of the fireplace, so inviting she almost flung herself down and wrapped herself in them. But, a split second later, it was the sight of a large four-poster bed, tucked away in an arched corner at the side of the room, that caught her full attention.

“Forgive me for bringing my 21 st -century customs into the past, but I think you’re supposed to ask a woman if you can take her to your bedroom before you just Tarzan her here,” Adeline said, her heart fluttering. She was in dangerous territory.

Logan set her down. “I cannae let ye out of me sight, so ye’re goin’ to spend the night here.”

“Again, I think you’re supposed to ask if I’m cool with that.”

He gazed down into her eyes. “Are ye?”

“I... don’t mind,” she replied hesitantly. “I won’t stay if you’re going to be angry at me, though.”

He arched an eyebrow. “I’m nae angry with ye.”

“Have you seen your face?”

He laughed softly. “Do ye have any idea what ye did to me tonight? Do ye have any notion of what went through me mind when we couldnae find ye?” He shook his head. “I thought ye’d gone, lass. I thought... ye’d gone because I walked away when ye were askin’ me to stay. Nay, I thought ye were lookin’ for a reason to stay, and because I couldnae give ye one, ye left.”

“I wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye,” she told him, moving closer despite everything she’d promised not to do. “To be honest, I thought that’s what I’d done, but not on purpose.”

He frowned down at her, bringing his hands up to cradle her face. “What do ye mean?”

“I lied to you before,” she said hesitantly, conscious of not ruining the moment. “A tiny white lie. I did speak to that ‘seer’ that your brother mentioned, but I swear I didn’t know that was what she was. She was just a weird, old woman to me, who happened to give me a gift and happened to tell me that it was my way back to my time.”

He dropped his hands from her face. “So, ye have found a way to return?”

“Sort of.” She swallowed thickly. “It’s like having a key, but not knowing where the lock is. Does that make sense?”

He cleared his throat, tension rippling across his face. “What did she give ye?”

“Something like a snow globe.” She took a nervous breath. “I touched it in the old healer’s chambers. All of the candles went out, and... I fainted. When I woke up, I thought I was back where I came from... and when I tell you that it crushed me, I’m not exaggerating. I wasn’t ready to go back, not at that moment.”

His eyes flashed with something like pain. “Are ye sayin’ that ye’re ready now?”

“No, but... I am going to have to go back at some point. There’s no running away from it. I’ve got people who need to know what happened to me,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “If I could call them, it might be different, but I can’t. And I won’t let my sister think she’s alone in my world. She doesn’t have any other family, just me.”

“When?”

Adeline shook her head and took hold of his hands. “It’s not as simple as that. I can’t give you a certain date or a time. I still don’t know how to actually get the key to work.” She exhaled shakily. “But I think it might be in five days’ time, give or take.”

“Five days?” Logan’s eyes burned with a fire that wasn’t quite anger, but something like it.

Adeline nodded. “I want to wait until I know how all of those people are doing. If they get better, then we’ll know it was the water that was tainted. It could be a naturally caused pollution, like a dead animal decomposing in the springs, or a crack in the bedrock letting seawater into the freshwater. Or it could be deliberate. Poison or waste or... This isn’t exactly the romantic conversation I’d pictured.”

An awkward laugh burst out of her throat. The way he was looking at her wasn’t

exactly the romantic gaze she'd imagined either. She wished she could go back to being carried into his bedroom, leaving out all of the details of her departure until after they'd said a proper goodbye. But it was too late now.

"Five days?" he repeated coldly.

She sighed, squeezing his hands. "What do you want me to say? I can't stay here, Logan."

"Then perhaps ye ought to return to yer chambers," he said quietly. "I wanted to keep ye near me so ye wouldnae disappear again, but if ye intend to leave soon anyway, I daenae need to be so watchful."

He withdrew his hands from hers and stepped back, allowing her to go.

She stayed put. "Before I leave, I want to do one last thing." She walked toward him once more, pressing her palms to his chest. "And I'd rather do it now, just in case there's another accident with the key to getting back to my time. Let's say goodbye properly now, while we have the chance."

Gripping his shirt with one hand, she ran her other hand up the back of his neck, pulling his head down. In one swift move, she rose up on tiptoe and crushed her lips against his, kissing him like it really was the last chance they had.

Logan resisted her kiss for half a second before his arms scooped her up against him. His mouth pushed against hers, hard and hot, his hands rediscovering her curves with a fierce possessiveness. It was like he was trying to keep pulling her closer, but there was no gap left between them.

Spurred on by his intensity, she pulled him to her as if they were in a passionate battle. She grabbed fistfuls of his shirt as she kissed him with everything she had, she

raked her fingernails down his muscled back, she slipped her hand over his swell bulge, coaxing a rumbling growl from the back of his throat. Her tongue brushed against his, her hands exploring him the way he'd explored her, savoring every explosive second.

This time, she planned on sharing the pleasure.

With his arms around her, he walked her backward until they came to the haphazard spread of blankets and cushions, bathed in the glow of the firelight. There, he traced his fingertip down from her lips, marking a tingling line along her throat, between her breasts, and down the flat line of her stomach. With his other hand, he gathered up her skirts, pinning them to her hips. Meanwhile, his caressing hand skimmed up the inside of her thigh, until his hand cupped her heat, bringing back a wave of delicious memories.

But before he touched her, before he gave her what she wanted, he brought his lips to her ear and whispered, "This is yer last chance if ye want me to stop. Yer last chance to stick to the rules."

"Screw the rules," she gasped as he slipped his fingers inside her.

CHAPTER 27

Adeline lay in the heat that spilled from the fireplace, writhing in pleasure on cushions of velvet and silk, a soft fur tickling her bare skin, adding an extra layer to the bliss that coursed through her. It pulsed in every cell, her entire being more alive than it had ever been.

Logan moved between her thighs, his tongue brushing against the core of her ecstasy, building her into a frenzy with every skilled stroke. And she moaned and gasped, grateful for the soundproof subterranean walls. He'd told her she could be as loud as she wanted, and she planned to test that to the limit.

"Oh, Logan... Yes, yes, like that!" she cried out, running a hand through his hair while her other hand gripped the cushion that he'd put under the small of her back to raise her hips up.

She could feel her climax racing toward her—the second of the evening. He'd already teased her with his fingers, strumming her with his thumb, taking his time to give her all the pleasure she could handle before he even thought about claiming some for himself. It couldn't be anything but magic, the way her body responded to him, like he was playing a beloved instrument that he'd been playing for years, knowing just how to get the best music out of it.

"Yes... oh... yes!"

She bucked as the wildest rush of euphoria swept through her, seizing every muscle. Her eyes squeezed shut, and her neck arched, her entire body stretching to

accommodate the power that thrummed inside her.

Logan didn't pause what he was doing, but he slowed down, letting her ride the wave without it fading too early. And ride it she did, her head spinning. She gasped out a breath, her lungs on fire, as electricity shivered from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, crackling everywhere in between.

To think I might've missed this if that egg had taken me back too soon.

The current of pleasure slowly began to recede to a few sparking pulses.

She collapsed back against the cushions, wearing a grin so wide that her cheeks hurt. Clearly, their night at the inn hadn't been a dream, as it was almost impossible to have the same dream twice.

At least for her.

"Are ye satisfied?" Logan purred, withdrawing his fingers.

His tongue grazed her inner thigh, his lips finishing with a kiss to the dip of her hip.

"Very," she murmured in a daze.

"So, ye daenae want to carry on?"

She lifted her head, shooting him a playful glare. "I didn't say that. I think you'll probably know when I'm done. I won't be able to move. I'll have melted into these cushions."

He chuckled against her skin, kissing across the flat expanse between her hips. His soft mouth was warm, each kiss like a whispered secret pressed into her flesh. And he

seemed determined to leave a hidden message across every speck of her, his kisses leaving no part out.

She didn't know why, but she'd expected him to move straight onto the main event instead of slowing things down. But she should've known to trust in him. He knew what he was doing, the air in the bedroom changing with each sensual kiss.

It wasn't a frenzy anymore, but something more... powerful, more intense, the anticipation building with each delicious moment.

"I cannae get enough of ye," he murmured, moving up her body.

Reaching her breasts, he turned his head and rested his ear against her chest, while his arm looped around her waist. He closed his eyes, smiling, as he listened to the sound of her heartbeat.

"Is it racing?" Adeline asked, running her fingers through his hair.

His smile widened. "Like a herd of horses."

"Nothing more... poetic?" She laughed.

"Have ye ever seen a herd of wild horses?"

She tilted her head to the side. "No, I can't say that I have."

"If ye had, ye'd ken they're pure poetry," he told her.

His hand came up, smoothing over the swell of her breast. And as he massaged that soft flesh, he turned his head and drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking gently.

All at once, the sparks ignited afresh. And from her core to the middle of her throat, a fine thread of bliss tingled and crackled, stretching taut with each pull of his mouth.

How am I supposed to leave this man?

No one had ever made her feel like a goddess in the bedroom before, but with him, she felt divine. He'd transformed the underground realm into a paradise, and she wasn't sure she ever wanted to leave.

His kiss slowly trailed away from her breasts, his lips tracing a line between, as he nudged her legs apart with his thigh. He moved further up, wrapping both arms around her to hug her to him. In return, she wrapped her arms loosely around his neck, pulling his head down to feel his lips on hers.

All her life, she'd thought kisses were better than sex itself, but with him—so far, at least—it was all perfection. No matter what he did, it was magic to her body, her blood singing with the kind of pleasure she'd only dreamed about before. Just his kiss alone could send sparks firing in every direction, just his touch could make her legs tremble.

And in five days' time, she was going to have to give it up.

But there's a lot that can be done in five days.

She refused to let her brain ruin any part of this for her. In fact, if living in the past had taught her anything, it was that she had to live in the moment more often. One never knew when a curse might come along to cut things short.

They kissed slowly in the firelight, taking their time. With hours until dawn, they didn't need to rush the first of what she hoped would be many goodbyes.

Soon enough, however, their kiss shifted gear, becoming hungrier as they moved together on the cushions. An echo of what was to come. She could feel his hardness sliding along her heat, the friction unbearably delicious. There were a few moments where she thought he was going to push inside her, but he held back, teasing her instead.

“If I hurt ye, let me ken,” he murmured against her neck, trailing his lips downward.

She smiled, realizing that the gruff Scottish Laird was asking for permission. “You won’t.”

“Daenae be quiet with me,” he said, his tongue tasting her throat. “I want to hear ye. I want to hear yer satisfaction.”

She had no doubt that he, and probably everyone else in the keep, would, if it was anything like the rest of what she’d experienced.

As he slid along her heat once more, her breath caught in her throat as he pushed up at the last moment. Bliss rippled up into her abdomen, her eyes closing as they joined, at last.

But it seemed he wasn’t done teasing her, as he paused there for a second or two, perfectly still. Then, just when she was about to grab him by the backside and urge him deeper into her, he read her mind.

Slowly, he eased inside, inch by inch, until he filled her to the brim.

“Did I hurt ye?” he asked, pausing again.

She shook her head, gasping out, “The... opposite.”

A moan slipped from her lips as he drew back his hips, denying her that bliss of being filled, before he pushed inside her once more. Staying like that for a moment, he caught her lips with his, kissing her slowly.

She kissed him back, savoring the slow dance of their tongues until the hunger overwhelmed them again. Their kiss gathered pace, becoming feverish and fierce, and as it did, he began to move inside her—an intense ebb and flow, his length grazing against her sweet spot with absolute precision.

Soon enough, they got carried away on a wave of passion, moving together as one as the firelight turned their bare skin golden. With every thrust, her hips met his, drawing him in deeper and deeper, while the sounds of their bliss filled the air, making the fire crackle and pop.

Adeline had never known the difference that a man's sounds could make, Logan's husky moans and blissful growls sending her ecstasy sky high, like hers was feeding off his. Deep down, she supposed it was just nice to know that he was enjoying himself as much as she was enjoying herself.

“Yes, Logan,” she panted, every thrust and push of his length against the root of her greatest pleasure driving her closer and closer to her third climax. “Oh, Logan—yes, yes!”

It hit her like a tornado, knocking the wind out of her. She clawed at his skin like a woman possessed, grabbing the firm muscles of his backside to drive him further into her. And as it raced through her, every cell carrying a bolt of lightning that forked down every vein, every limb, every muscle, every fiber of her being, she clung to him. He was her lifeboat on an ocean of euphoria, his sorcery sailing her swiftly toward paradise.

Too soon, she reached the shores of plain old Earth, her bliss ebbing away like the

tide.

“You’re... incredible,” she murmured, struggling to regain control of her breathing.

“Nay, lass, ye are.” He dipped his head and kissed her slowly, in no rush to reach his climax. And as he moved to the rhythm of their kiss, she had a feeling it was going to be a very long, unbelievably satisfying night.

An hour later, Logan finally growled Adeline’s name, stilling inside her. She sat in his lap, their arms wrapped around each other, and as he moaned her name a second time, he buried his face in her neck, marking the moment with a searing kiss against her glistening skin.

They stayed like that for a while, content to just hold one another. They were warm, they were spent, they were safe, and they were together. What more could they need?

At length, Logan pulled her down onto the cushions and blankets. Adeline wriggled off him and curled up into his side, settling her head on his chest. Gently, she caressed his skin with her fingertips while she listened to the steady beat of his heart.

It had been the best night of her life, bar none. The only thing that would’ve made it better was being able to call Emma when morning came, so she could tell her everything.

“You’re making this very hard,” she mumbled sleepily, nuzzling deeper into his chest.

He gave a throaty chuckle. “Nay, I think that’s yer jurisdiction.”

“Hey, don’t be rude while I’m trying to be sweet.” She grinned.

“Sorry.” He paused. “Ye get some rest. We daenae need to say anythin’ now.”

She suddenly yawned, her eyelids heavy. “I’ll just say goodnight for now, then.”

“Aye, lass.” He bent his head to kiss her hair. “Goodnight.”

Safe in his arms, Adeline could’ve slept for a week, as she drifted off and gave in to the exhaustion of two long, strange, life-affirming days.

So, it was a nasty surprise when an angry yell jolted her out of her peaceful slumber. She didn’t know how long she’d been asleep, and with no windows to see the sky, she had no idea what time it was... or who was shouting for Logan at the top of their lungs.

Logan stirred at the same time, blinking in confusion.

“M’laird!” the voice barked again, accompanied by a sharp thud on the bedroom door. “M’laird, ye need to come at once! M’laird, wake up!”

Logan was on his feet in seconds, running to the door, though he didn’t have a stitch of clothing on him. Meanwhile, Adeline grabbed a blanket and pulled it over herself.

“M’laird, ye’re to come to the gates.” It was Theo, breathless and pale. “It’s... a revolt, m’laird. They’re bayin’ for blood.”

Adeline stood up, holding the blanket in place. “Who are?”

“Oh... I... uh... I dinnae realize ye were... um...” Theo turned his back to them, clearing his throat. “It’s... um... well, it’s ye, Miss Adeline.”

“What do ye mean, it’s Adeline?” Logan snarled, gripping the doorjamb until his

knuckles were bone white.

Theo exhaled a shaky breath. “The villagers have gathered, m'laird. North, south, and west, from what I could see. They're... uh... demandin' to burn the witch. They're sayin' it's the only way to get rid of the curse.” He paused. “And they think the witch is her.”

CHAPTER 28

“I need ye to stay here,” Logan instructed, swiping his kilt off the floor. He did not bother to don a shirt—he did not have time for that.

Adeline wrapped the blanket tighter around herself. “I’m not staying here if they’re out for my blood, Logan. I can reason with them, the same way I reasoned with the villagers in the east.” She looked at Theo. “You said you couldn’t see anyone from the east among the mob, right?”

“I couldnae, Miss Adeline,” Theo confirmed. “They have their banners. None were from the east.” Then he turned to leave. “I’ll just...I’ll wait for ye outside.” With that, he left them alone, closing the door behind him.

“It doesnae matter, Adeline,” Logan insisted after Theo left, focusing only on her. “Even without the east, there’ll be hundreds out there. I’m nae lettin’ them see so much as yer face, lest they start throwin’ rocks.”

Anger flared in his chest as his gaze flicked to the spot where the indent of their bodies was still visible, impressed upon the wide cushions. He had experienced true joy for the first time in years—perhaps all two-and-thirty of them—and now his island had decided to turn on him, snatching that from him.

When Adeline had first arrived, he had known that her presence was like a lit taper held too close to a powder keg, but after seeing her with the villagers in the east, his fears had faded.

Now, they were about to explode.

“I’m coming with you,” she said stubbornly. “I’m not your prisoner, remember.”

Logan stalked toward her, grasping her hands in his. “Just listen to me, lass. Daenae argue, daenae protest, just listen. Heed me. Nay, ye’re nae me prisoner, but ye’re still goin’ to stay behind these four walls—these ones, right here—because I’m askin’ ye to.”

“Let me speak to them first,” she insisted. “If they’re hostile, I’ll do it your way.”

He clenched his jaw, gripping her hands a little harder than he meant to. “This isnae yer world, lass. Reasonin’ with folks who’ve got the bloodlust upon ‘em might be the way of things where ye hail from, though there’s a part of me that doubts it, but in this world, ye daenae get to say more than a word or two before they drag ye off. They’ll burn ye, and I willnae be able to stop them. I might be able to fight me way through a fair few of ‘em, but nae all.”

“I’d fight with ye,” Theo said from outside the door.

Logan grimaced. “That’s nae helpful, Theo.” He gazed down into Adeline’s eyes, needing her to listen to him. “Me men are loyal to me, aye, and they’ll fight for me if I ask ‘em, but they’ve got family down there, nay doubt about it. Do ye want a hefty number of folks to die because ye wouldnae listen to me, or do ye want to do as I say, and just... stay here? Here, ye’re safe.”

Adeline paled, shivering, though it was not cold. “People would really... die?”

“If they took ye, I wouldnae be able to help fightin’ me way to save ye. Aye, people would die.” Logan pulled her to him, pressing a kiss to her hair as he added, “Good people who’ve had some nonsense put into their heads about witches and curses. All

we have to do is wait until they tire. The gates will hold. This keep will hold, as it has for years. But ye have to do as I ask. I beg of ye.”

He heard her gulp. “If it means no blood gets spilled, then... I’ll stay.” She peered up at him. “But only if you promise that you won’t get hurt.”

“I have nay intention of gettin’ hurt,” he assured her. “Nor do I want blood gettin’ spilled. Any blood.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him tightly. “I’m... scared, Logan.”

“Ye daenae have to be. I’m here,” he said. “I swore I’d protect ye, and I willnae be breakin’ any promises. Right now, however, I have to see what’s happenin’. I quelled small rebellions before. Once I’ve seen ‘em, I’ll ken what we’re contendin’ with.”

She pressed a kiss to his chest, just below his collarbone. “I trust you.”

His heart glowed with affection for the woman in his arms, hearing those three words. It was like he had been waiting for her to say them, waiting for her to see him as more than the provincial Laird who lacked refinement. Although, it was his lack of refinement that would keep her from harm if this revolt turned violent.

“Stay warm,” he told her, bending his head to kiss her. “I willnae be long if I can help it.”

She kissed him back, grabbing his face before he could pull away. Her lips were hot and urgent on his, her body melting against him, as if she could not be close enough. It was the kind of kiss that a wife gave to a warrior before he left for war, not knowing if they would ever see one another again.

Aware that time was not on his side, Logan reluctantly broke the kiss. But before he

made his way out of the chamber, he brought his hand to rest on her heart. It beat wildly, like a trapped bird.

“I’m comin’ back for this,” he whispered. “Daenae be afraid. If we have to leave the island, so be it.”

He kissed her once more and withdrew, storming out as a dark cloud gathered over his head. He had expected better from his clan.

“When did they arrive?” Logan asked Theo as soon as he stepped out of the chamber, and the other man hurried along at his side.

“Nae long ago,” Theo replied. “One of the watchmen saw the torches in the distance. Came to wake me. I dinnae believe him at first, thought it might be lightnin’ or somethin’, but then I saw it with me own eyes. There’re hundreds of ‘em, m’laird.”

A muscle twitched in Logan’s jaw, his hands balling into fists. “Where are me maither and sister?”

“They’re takin’ refuge at the top of the tower,” Theo replied. “Yer brother is still asleep where ye left him, but there are men headin’ there to move him up to the tower. I ken his fever has gone down, but he wouldnae be strong enough to fight if the villagers break through the gates.”

Logan sniffed. “I’m nae sure he would fight, even if he wasnae sick.” His mind raced as he pressed on through the maze of hallways, darting between thoughts of Adeline and Oliver. “I havenae behaved toward him as I should’ve. There are things I forgot, things I... ignored because all I saw when I looked at him was our faither. If we survive this, it’s me solemn vow to be better to him. Adeline noticed it right away, but... I couldnae see it. Couldnae remember.”

“Aye, well, he hasnae exactly been well behaved toward ye either,” Theo muttered. He had never much liked Oliver. “I’ll be honest with ye, I’ve always kept a keen eye on him, ever since we were lads. Always had this awful feelin’ that he was goin’ to do somethin’ to ye.”

Logan frowned. “I might nae be his favorite person in the world, but he wouldnae harm me.”

“Are ye certain of that?” Theo cast him a sideways glance.

“Aye, I am.”

Theo shrugged. “Who am I to tell ye otherwise? I’m just someone who has been watchin’ him like a hawk since he was old enough to start envyin’ ye.”

They continued in on pensive silence, the thick walls of the keep muffling any sounds coming from without. Yet, beneath that dense quiet, Logan could just hear the rumble of dissent. It was cold out there, and the longer they stood waiting to burn their witch, the angrier they would become, the cold stoking the fire of their fury.

He pictured Adeline, safe below the earth, warming herself by the hearth. Even if the villagers made it through the gates, they would not be able to reach her there.

What if she leaves? What if the fear is too much?

His stomach clenched with dread. He had not considered that. After all, she still had the key to get back home. He did not know what it was or how it worked, but what if she used it while he was gone? What if she thought that was the only way to help him out of this mess?

Nay . She said she dinnae ken how it worked either. She touched it, she fainted, but

she dinnae go back to where she came from. She stayed right here.

That soothed him, but only a little.

Before long, they had climbed the winding staircases that led to the very top of the keep, where the wide, square tower stood guard over the island. The door to Adeline's guest chamber was open, and from inside, Logan heard the whispers of frightened, feminine voices.

"Who's there?" his mother's voice called out.

"It's me and Theo," Logan replied, poking his head into the room. "We're goin' up to see what's afoot. Both of ye, stay away from the windows and keep the shutters closed."

Moirra was hiding under a pile of blankets and furs, just like the night Adeline arrived. "I hate this," she muttered from within the mound. "They daenae ken her like we ken her, but how do ye tell a horde of fools that a beautiful, wonderful, intelligent woman isnae a witch?"

That was precisely the question that Logan kept asking himself. He had seen what a frenzy of fear could do to ordinary, good people. He had seen other women burned before, accused of crimes they likely had not committed.

He had seen the masses turn, becoming a frothing tide of menace and violence. But that had been under his father's reign, and he refused to be anything like that man.

"I'll be down shortly," Logan said, ducking back out of the bedchamber.

Up ahead was a wooden ladder that slanted up toward a trapdoor in the ceiling. For years, it had not been climbed for anything but leisure and the joy of taking in a

beautiful view, so it felt strange to climb it for a darker purpose.

The bolt on the trapdoor stubbornly refused to budge for a few minutes, the metal rusted. But with a hard shove from Logan, it finally gave. He pushed the wooden flap up, a sharp gust of icy air blasting him in the face.

Pulling himself through the gap, the kiss of a snowflake pinched his cheek. He turned his gaze skyward, squinting at the gloom. The sun rose late in the winter, but it was not quite light enough to be nearing, nor was it quite dark enough to be night. They were somewhere in the small hours of the morning, he guessed. Three or four o'clock.

He checked with Theo.

"It's half past four, m'laird," the man-at-arms replied. "I really am sorry that I had to... um... disturb ye. I dinnae realize that ye'd taken Miss Adeline downstairs with ye. If I kenned, I would've... well, I still would've had to wake ye, but I might've been less brutal about it. Knocked on the door a wee bit lighter, so as nae to frighten the lass."

Logan looked at the high wall that surrounded the top of the keep, coming up to his chest. He could not see beyond it to the mob below, and they could not see him, but soon, he would address his people—the clan he had sacrificed so much for.

"We were sayin' goodbye," he said, a lump forming in his throat.

Theo's eyebrows shot up. "She's leavin'?"

"Aye. She was meant to be leavin' in five days, but I have a feelin' she might have to go sooner," Logan answered. "It all depends on what happens next."

“But ye cannae just let her go, m'laird,” Theo protested. “Ye’re fallin’ in love, the pair of ye. I’ve seen it with me own eyes! What if she doesnae come back? What if somethin’ happens to her while she’s makin’ her journey home? Are ye goin’ to go with her?”

Logan turned around and stared at his friend. “It’s nae love, Theo. Daenae say that. I cannae have ye sayin’ that.”

“But it is, m'laird!” Theo argued. “I have four sisters, m'laird. Ye think I daenae ken what love looks like when I see it? I’ve seen ‘em all swoon and sigh enough, and I’ve seen how it all changed when they met their husbands—the married ones, anyway. It wasnae swoonin’ and sighin’, it was almost... serious. It’s all in the eyes, m'laird, and ye and Miss Adeline both have it in yers.”

Logan shook his head, closing his eyes. “Nay, Theo, I cannae have ye sayin’ that. Nae now. Nae if I want to keep me wits about me.”

After the night he had just had with Adeline, he had no doubt that she had stolen his heart and would keep it, wherever she went. She was the woman he had been waiting so long for, to be the Lady of this keep at his side.

Yet, that could never be. Indeed, he had already come to the conclusion that if it could not be her, it would be no one. But imagining how life would continue without her was not something he could think about right now.

“Ah... I see,” Theo said quietly. “Pretend I dinnae say anythin’.”

Sucking in the frosty air, the snowflakes cooling his face, Logan approached the wall.

The moment he looked over, a fiery orange light filled the darkness. It glowed from every torch, wielded by every villager who had come to seize Adeline, making it look

like the entire world was on fire.

In truth, his world was.

The mob had come to the southern gates, rather than the heavy wooden door of the main entrance. Both were locked through the night, but it was little comfort. If they wanted to break through, they would find a way.

“Burn the witch!” someone bellowed, spotting Logan standing behind the wall. “M’laird, burn the witch! Free us from this curse!”

“Burn her!” another screamed. “She took the lives of all me family! Burn her!”

“She willnae rest until we’re all dead and buried!” a third howled. “Burn her, free us! Give us the witch!”

With sick dread, Logan’s gaze drifted to a stake that was, at that very moment, being erected behind the mob of hundreds. Bales of dry hay were being stuffed beneath the rickety wooden platform, logs and twigs leaning against it. A pole was in the center, where Adeline would be bound and trapped as the flames devoured her.

“M’laird!” Theo hissed, his eyes wild.

“I see it, Theo,” Logan replied dismally, trying to think of what to say.

How could he reason with these people who wanted their pound of flesh?

Theo grabbed his arm. “Nay, m’laird—look!”

The stocky man-at-arms was not looking at the mob, as Logan was. His eyes were trained on something else down below. Something moving in the courtyard,

approaching the keep gates—the only thing standing between the mob and their objective.

She moved slowly, like a woman sentenced to the gallows. She moved without fear, her head held high. And as she continued her approach to the gates, even the mob fell silent.

“Adeline,” Logan hissed, breaking into a sprint.

She had disobeyed him. Despite everything he had said, she was on her way to try and reason with a mob who wanted nothing but her death.

And he did not know if he could reach her before she reached them.

CHAPTER 29

Adeline tried to keep her shaky legs steady as she made her way across the slippery flagstones.

It's all going to be fine . It's all going to be fine. I'll talk to them, they'll see that I'm no threat, and this will just be a bad dream, forgotten by tomorrow.

She imagined herself returning to Logan's bedchamber victorious, having extinguished the issue with her power of persuasion. He'd be livid with her, sure, but she'd soon calm him down. Maybe they could pick up where they'd left off before they'd fallen asleep, putting them both back in a good mood.

"It's the witch!" someone screeched from beyond the gates.

Faces leered through the iron bars of a portcullis. It seemed sturdy, but she didn't know how much she trusted 18 th -century metal.

She'd never had so many fingers pointed at her at once, nor had she ever been the target of so many vicious glares. The villagers' expressions almost didn't seem real, burning with the kind of hatred people reserved for murderers and worse. But she was just a 21 st -century doctor doing her best to get along in a world that was alien to her.

She hadn't killed anyone, she hadn't hurt anyone. She'd tried to do the opposite.

"I'd like to take a moment to introduce myself," she began, hoping they couldn't hear the tremble in her voice.

She needn't have worried, she doubted they could hear anything she said over the top of their screaming and yelling. The bombardment of pure, hateful noise thundered through the gates, throbbing in her ears. They despised her. She felt it, deep in her bones, like a disease spreading quickly.

"Excuse me!" she shouted louder, putting up her hands. "Excuse me! If you'd give me a second of your time, I can put your minds at ease! Excuse me! I need you to listen to me!"

"Cover yer ears!" someone yelled. "If ye hear the sound of her voice, she'll bewitch ye!"

A few of the villagers did just that while continuing to scream obscenities at her, detailing exactly what they'd do with her when they caught her. She'd never felt sorry for a roast turkey before, but with visions flashing in her head of burning to a crisp at the stake, she vowed never to eat a bite of Christmas turkey again.

If she could get out of this alive, that was.

"Will you just listen!" she boomed, in the loudest voice her lungs could muster. It echoed through the courtyard, pinging off the walls as if there was a crowd of Adelines. "Whatever you think I am, I'm not!"

The villagers stopped their baying, staring at her. She wasn't sure if that was worse than the screaming.

"I'm not a witch!" she shouted. "I know you'll all think, 'Oh, well, that's what a witch would say,' but you'd be burning an innocent woman. You don't even know me. You don't know my story. You don't know what I've been through or why I'm here, and instead of charging in, all guns blazing, you should at least pause to ask!"

The front line of villagers blinked in confusion.

“I’m just a woman,” Adeline went on. “A healer, to be exact. Someone who can bring good things to this island, not bad. I haven’t cursed anyone. I wouldn’t know how, unless you mean swearing at them, but I’d bet you’re all guilty of saying some rude things in the heat of the moment. People in glass houses and all that.”

“Glass houses?” someone muttered from the crowd. “Why would ye have a glass house?”

Adeline groaned inwardly. “Look, if you won’t believe me , then have a few people ride to the east and ask the villagers there what they think of me. I came here to help with the curse, but I wasn’t the one who cast it.” She smoothed her clammy hands down the front of her dress to dry them. “I’ve already helped people there. Your Laird’s brother is one of them. He’s inside right now, and if you’ll all just wait a few days instead of demanding my blood this instant, I’m sure he’ll tell you himself.”

That you’re all correct and I am a witch .

Oliver hadn’t exactly seemed thrilled by her when he’d spoken about her before.

“She’s tryin’ to hoodwink ye!” a gruff voice barked from somewhere further back. “Daenae listen to her! I’ve got family in the east—she hasnae done anythin’ to help ‘em!”

Adeline tried to find the source of the accusation, but the crowd was too dense, the light of the torches too bright.

“I have helped them! Go and ask them yourself. I’m serious. Why don’t you all just go home, send a couple of people to investigate, and when they tell you what I’ve done in the east, we can all pretend this didn’t happen. I won’t hold a grudge.”

“She cursed the north, she cursed the east, and she’ll come for the west and the south soon enough!” the same voice boomed, angry and masculine. “If she’s helped the east, it’s only to avoid suspicion! She would be the only one who can undo the curse she cast on ‘em!”

Change the freaking record!

The man’s warning rippled through the mob, whipping them up into a frenzy all over again. Fingers resumed their pointing, scowls flashed, expressions hardened, makeshift weapons waved wildly, and Adeline realized that Logan had been right. She wasn’t in her world, and these people couldn’t be reasoned with. They were at fever pitch, and she lacked the persuasive medicine to cool them off again.

They surged forward. Hands wrapped around the iron bars, rattling the portcullis. Arms reached through, swiping aimlessly, trying to grab at her, though she had a few steps of safe space between her and the bars.

“Please, listen to me!” she urged, the opal egg burning a hole in her apron pocket. She didn’t want to have to use it to save herself.

Leaving on bad terms, putting this mess squarely in Logan’s hands, was the very last thing she wanted now.

I need my five days.

She clasped her hands together like a prayer.

“Please! You’ve got it all wrong! I know you’re fired up, but you’ve got it all wrong!” she shouted, losing her mind a bit.

For years after the loss of her parents, she’d been a people-pleaser. Having so many

people hating her at once, refusing to listen to her side of the story, was more than her frazzled brain could bear.

She didn't realize she was moving closer to the iron bars. But in her need to be heard, her feet edged her forward with each plea she made, closing her safety gap. It was like some other force was nudging her onward, pulling her within reach of the swiping hands.

As fingernails scratched the front of her dress, a light went off in her head. She blinked down at the wet flagstones, then up at the mob right in front of her. She hadn't meant to get so close. The fingernails hadn't managed to grasp any fabric, but she could feel the graze of them on her stomach—it chilled her to the bone.

They really did want her dead.

All of a sudden, arms grabbed her around the waist and hauled her backward. Not a moment too soon either. One of the villagers had half-squeezed himself between two of the bars, and if she'd stayed standing where she was, he would've been able to snatch her and pull her toward the bars.

A blur went by her as she struggled to stay upright, the arms gone from around her waist.

Logan...

Logan jogged up to the portcullis and, in one swift move, drove his foot hard against the side of the man trying to squeeze through. The villager flew backward, knocking down anyone who was standing too close like bowling pins.

It caused a ripple effect, the mob unsteady, everyone jostling and shuffling back to give those who'd fallen some room. A few didn't seem to care that there were people

on the ground, surging forward to clamor for Adeline's execution.

"Burn the witch!" they howled over and over, an eerie chant.

"She's bewitched our Laird!" another voice, gruff and masculine like the one before, cried out in a haunting lament. "She's cursed him to do her biddin'! See how he came to her rescue and kicked one of our own! She's addled his mind with her witchery!"

Adeline trembled, watching the events unravel. "No," she whimpered softly, "you've got it all wrong. So wrong."

"What did I tell ye?" Logan growled, stalking back toward her.

He swept her up into his arms, a grim expression straining the muscles in his handsome face. He wouldn't even look at her as he carried her from the courtyard back into the relative safety of the keep, kicking the heavy wooden door shut behind him. It wasn't nearly enough to keep out the sound of his people, ten times as incensed, demanding her immediate execution.

"Do ye think I told ye to stay in me chambers to amuse meself?" he muttered, finally meeting her tearful gaze. "I ken ye're an intelligent lass, Adeline—probably a hundred times more intelligent than I'll ever be—but that was the single most stupid thing I've seen ye do since ye came here. Why could ye nae just trust me? I could've told 'em I'd already sent ye away, I could've told 'em plenty of white lies to satisfy 'em, but now that they've seen ye, they're never goin' to relent."

Adeline swallowed past the lump in her throat, struggling to blink back the tears welling up in her eyes. She knew she'd been idiotic. So stupid, to think that she knew better than someone who lived here and understood the nature of mobs like that. It wasn't just foolish, it was peak arrogance on her part.

“I’m sorry,” was all she could say.

“Sayin’ ye’re sorry cannae do anythin’ now,” he replied tersely. “Ye heard ‘em yerself—they think I’ve been bewitched, and now nothin’ I say is goin’ to persuade ‘em otherwise. All ye had to do was stay in that room, Adeline! It wasnae like I asked ye to weave me a tapestry or carve me a sculpture. Ye just had to sit by the fire and wait.”

Adeline gulped. “I know. I know, and I’m sorry. I... just thought I could help you out. I was wrong. I... I’m sorry.”

His expression softened as he began to carry her up the stairs to her chambers. “I wish I could stay angry at ye, but it’s nae yer fault—nae really. Ye have a heart of gold, and ye see the best in everyone.” His voice hitched. “I kenned it when me brother spoke to ye so coldly, and ye still tried to defend him. I kenned it when ye dinnae ask for anythin’ in return from the eastern villages. But the trouble is, here in this world, soft hearts get trodden on.”

“That’s a great pity,” she murmured, settling her head on his shoulder. “Every world, yours and mine, would be a better place if more people had gentler hearts.”

Logan sighed. “I cannae argue with that.”

“But... what are you going to do?” She shuddered every time she thought of the mob outside.

He shook his head. “I daenae ken, but between me, ye, me maither, me sister, and Theo, we’ll think of somethin’.” He paused. “Daenae worry about it right now.”

“How can I n—”

His mouth caught hers, a kiss so fierce that she was glad she was in his arms, or she'd have been knocked off her feet by the force of it.

Within half a second, the mob disappeared from her mind, replaced with the warm glow of kissing him again. They were both alive, they were both okay, and this was the blissful reminder.

Her hand slipped into his soft hair, tugging gently, pulling him closer. All the while, he kept carrying her up the winding staircase, so familiar with his home that he didn't need to look where he was going.

"Do ye ken how fast I had to run down these steps to get to ye?" he murmured, pulling back for a moment.

She shook her head. "If you had banisters, you could've slid all the way down."

"I thought... I was about to lose ye, lass." His voice was throaty, laced with a pain that furrowed his brow. "I saw ye walkin' across the courtyard, and me heart nearly left me body. It was Theo who noticed ye. I daenae have enough coin in me coffers to thank him for that, 'cause if I'd been a few seconds slower, they would've..."

He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, unable to finish his sentence. He didn't need to. Adeline had already imagined the myriad tortures and slow deaths they could've inflicted on her if they'd gotten their hands on her out there.

"I'm so sorry," she said softly, stroking her fingertips across his stubbled jaw.

He mustered a sad smile. "We're nae gettin' our five days, are we?"

"I think it's still too soon to tell," she replied, her heart already breaking.

There were serious consequences to breaking the boundaries they'd set, for the sake of self-preservation. By damning the rules that night, exploring one another completely, they'd made it impossible to pretend that they were just a brief fling or a vacation romance.

Her heart and mind and soul ached for him as much as her body, and she suspected it had already started calling to him the moment she'd run her hands over his chest in the dungeons on that first night and declared him the man of her dreams.

Her choice of words hadn't been an accident. Logan was the man of her dreams. The problem was, she had to wake up, whether she liked it or not.

The mob was her alarm clock, and if they couldn't be snoozed, she'd have no option but to rise and shine... without him. Back where she came from, three hundred years apart.

CHAPTER 30

Logan's family had sought sanctuary in the two rooms at the top of the keep's tower. The women were on the right, occupying Adeline's room, while the men had taken the left.

Every so often, Adeline walked between the rooms to see how Oliver was faring. As far as she knew, he hadn't woken up since they'd visited Jonah on the cliffs, though he no longer felt hot to the touch.

Still, Adeline busied her mind with routine, changing the cloths on Oliver's forehead, tipping sanitized water into his mouth, throwing a few more logs in the fire when it started to dim. He'd had some tonic a few hours ago, and she was counting down the minutes until she could feed him some more, just to give herself something else to do.

She hated being idle.

"I daenae mean to tell ye what to do," Theo said shyly as she entered the men's room for the fifth time in half an hour, "but there hasnae been any change in Master Oliver. Ye daenae need to keep tendin' to him. I can manage, and ye should probably get some rest."

Adeline smiled wearily. "Do you really think I can have myself a nice nap when there's a stake out there with my name on it?"

She'd glimpsed it from the topmost battlements of the tower, after claiming she needed fresh air. Really, she'd just wanted to see the mob again, hoping beyond all

hope that they might've gotten bored, given up, and gone home.

They hadn't.

"Miss Adeline, I daenae think they've carved yer name on it," Theo said, frowning in confusion. "That would be somethin' like sorcery if ye ask me."

Adeline had to laugh. "It's just something people say where I come from. I don't think there's any sorcery behind it."

"Oh." Theo blushed.

On a man as huge as him, with muscles the size of boulders, it was an odd, weirdly endearing sight.

Adeline went over to Oliver anyway and repeated the comforting routine of changing his cold compress, before rearranging his blankets for the millionth time. "Do you know where Logan went?"

"Hmm?"

"Logan. Do you know where he went?"

Theo gave a non-committal shrug. "Said somethin' about goin' to speak to the men, to prepare 'em for what might come. Usually, it'd be me that does that, but he insisted on doin' it himself. The lads will like that. If there are orders to be given, they're more likely to obey if the orders come from the Laird himself."

"What happens if they don't?"

Theo squinted at her. "If they daenae what?"

“Obey. What if they think what all those people out there are thinking?” Adeline fought back visions of the villagers sweeping through the keep in search of her, while Logan’s soldiers stood back and let them come for her.

Theo snorted. “They wouldnae disobey him, Miss Adeline. Even if they daenae agree with the fight, they’ll fight all the same. Och, in his faither’s day, I daenae think there were too many at all who wanted to do that bastard’s biddin’, but they still did it. Aye, I think there were a few absconders, but most just did as they were told.”

“Are you allowed to call the previous Laird a bastard?” Adeline chuckled nervously.

She wondered how much Theo would tell her if she pressed him for more information.

Theo’s eyebrow arched upward. “For a man like that, ye can call him whatever ye like. Bastard is the kindest word I could think of.” He shuddered slightly. “Most evil man ye could ever meet. Decided bein’ a Laird wasnae enough amusement for him, so he turned this island into a stronghold for his piracy.”

“He was a pirate?” Adeline’s eyes bugged, picturing peg legs and parrots and tricorne hats.

Theo nodded. “Sailed out with his fleet of five ships. They’d lie in wait for any other ships passin’ by, they’d board ‘em, and they’d take everythin’. Rarely left any soul alive, and if they did, it was always women. I wasnae a soldier then, but me faither was. He saw things he wouldnae ever speak of, but ye could see it in his eyes—it haunted him.”

“Was Logan ever... like that?” Adeline felt sick, her skin crawling.

Theo looked at her as if she were mad. “Nay, hasnae ever been and never will be. His

faither tried to make him bloodthirsty, aye, but it's nae in his nature. He fought battles and won, but only when he had to, and there hasnae been a battle here for a fair while. The Laird sought peace and achieved it."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Of course, it might've been different if his faither had lived longer and had longer to twist him into some reflection of himself, but he died ten years ago—drowned after an English navy vessel sank his ships. The Laird took the reins of this island at two-and-twenty and transformed it into somethin'... good." Theo shrugged. "Now, all we have are fishin' boats."

Adeline chinned down at Oliver. "What about him?"

"Just like his faither," Theo replied curtly. "Well, maybe nae so violent, but he draws trouble to him like his faither did. Has caused his brother nay end of bother."

At that moment, the chamber door flew open, and a figure raced in. Breathless and pale, he beckoned to Theo. Somehow, he was familiar to Adeline, but she couldn't quite remember where she'd seen him before.

"Och, it's ye!" The man blinked at Adeline. "I reckon ye daenae ken me, but I ken ye."

Adeline froze. "You do?"

"I was one of the lads who found ye on the beach," he replied, smiling. "If I'd kenned the trouble ye were goin' to cause, I might have put ye in a boat and pushed ye out to sea. But there's naught we can do about that now, eh?"

She vaguely recalled two men looming over her, before Logan had appeared.

Whether or not this man was one of the two, she had no idea, but if he said so, she wasn't going to contradict him.

"The Laird needs ye in the armory," the man said, turning his attention back to Theo. "There's somethin' else comin' toward the keep, and if they've made themselves a batterin' ram, we'll be firin' arrows before noon."

He sounded way more excited than someone should be about firing arrows at his fellow islanders.

The man looked back at Adeline. "I ken it doesnae matter, but I daenae think ye're a witch. If ye were, ye'd have flayed us where we stood for seein' ye in yer bearskin."

"Excuse me?" Adeline almost choked on her own spit.

"That bearskin ye were wearin'," the man said, and Adeline immediately relaxed. He hadn't seen her naked, after all. "I still reckon ye're some warrioress from the northern islands. They're wild out there."

Theo got up. "She's nae a warrioress, and, aye, she's nae a witch. She's a healer from Wales. Honestly, do ye nae listen to anythin' that goes on around this keep?"

"Nae really," the man replied, striding out of the room, with Theo in lumbering pursuit.

Alone in the bedroom with Oliver sleeping soundly, Adeline took the opportunity to sit down in the chair that Theo had vacated. Peering anxiously at the door, then back to the sleeping figure in the bed, making sure no one was there to watch her, she carefully took out the little fabric-wrapped parcel she'd been carrying around with her.

Setting it on her lap, she carefully unwrapped the cloth until she reached the almost pearlescent egg. She stared hard at it, shoving her hands under her thighs so she wouldn't be tempted to touch it.

How do I get you to work, huh?

If this was her emergency escape route, she needed to make sure there weren't any obstacles in her way.

Just then, she noticed something she hadn't seen before. Letters, sewn into the silky, silver square of cloth with thread that was only half a shade darker. Perfect camouflage.

Gingerly, she separated the silver cloth from the rough, golden cloth underneath and used the latter to wrap the egg back up. That done, she brought the silver cloth to her eyes and started turning it this way and that.

In a certain light, the letters stood out, revealing a message. Or rather instructions.

Hold this token in your hands,

Wish your way to foreign lands,

But wait, leave no room for doubt,

Wish hard to find your way out.

In a moment of need, hold this gift tight,

And wish your way back into the light.

Ironically, she wished it was a little bit clearer. When it came to instructions, there couldn't be any room for errors. But as she continued to read the passage over and over, the words became as simple as hurling a snow globe at a wall and wishing not to be alone.

All she had to do was hold the egg and wish herself back to where she came from, but with one caveat: she couldn't have any second thoughts.

"Does that mean... I'll never get back?" she whispered to the silvery cloth as if it could answer her.

Wishing to return to 2023 was as easy as pie, sure, but leaving no room for doubt? If a single thought of Logan popped into her head while she was holding the egg and making her wish, she'd just pass out and wake up again in the same place. Or worse, she might pass out and be returned to the moment she landed on the island, before she met him.

Slowly wrapping the egg back into its layers, she pocketed it and got to her feet. As she made her way to the door, she cast one last glance back at Oliver, watching the rise and fall of his chest to make sure he really was asleep.

Satisfied, she was about to cross the wide hallway to her room, to join Moira and Sophie, when an almighty cry shuddered up from somewhere below.

A scream of "help!" that made her blood run cold.

CHAPTER 31

“I’ve got him,” Logan said, throwing his uncle’s arm over his shoulder. “Can ye make it up the stairwell?”

Dallas grimaced, blood seeping into his torn shirt, beneath his leather jerkin. “Aye, I can. They havenae taken me legs from me yet.”

“What happened?” Logan asked, gripping his uncle’s waist to bear most of his weight.

Together, they made their shambling ascent up the narrow stone staircase to the top of the tower. It would be the safest place for an injured man, though Logan was already calculating the loss.

Dallas was a fearsome fighter, even in his advanced age, and invaluable if a battle broke out between the keep and the villagers.

Dallas wheezed through every breath, concentrating on the steps. “I’ll tell... ye when... I can rest meself. If I kened... that I’d be walkin’ into a horde of... madmen and women, I would’ve... stayed in the east.”

“I dinnae even realize ye’d left the keep,” Logan said apologetically. “I’d have sent riders out to fetch ye back if I had.”

Dallas flashed his nephew a wry grin. “Aye, well, I assume ye were... rather distracted with that... pretty lass, who... has caused all this.”

“She dinnae cause all this,” Logan replied curtly. “It’s people harpin’ on about witches and curses and all that nonsense, when there’s nay such thing. Aye, there are things in this world that cannae be easily explained, but I ken what’s real and what isnae. If only they would, too, we wouldnae be in this situation.”

After all, Adeline appearing out of nowhere was nothing if not proof that some kind of magic existed, but as far as he was concerned, it had only proven the existence of the good kind. The “curse” was just a sickness, like the Black Death or a winter cold. There was no sorcery to it.

Dallas’s face twisted into a mask of agony, his breath ragged as they continued up the staircase. He did not attempt to say another word until they reached the tower, where Logan carried him into Adeline’s bedchamber, startling the three women who were waiting there.

“Dallas?” Sophie jumped to her feet. “Are ye well? What happened to ye?”

Moira gaped at Dallas. “There’s blood on yer shirt, Uncle.”

“Aye, I ken,” Dallas replied shakily. “It’s nay more than a scratch. Daenae fret.”

Adeline did not immediately leap into action, her gaze distant. It was the first thing Logan noticed, for while he had been busy rallying his men and giving orders, he had not ceased thinking about her.

Every moment he spent away from her, he worried that she might not be there when he returned. But there she was, pale and pensive, staring off into the distance.

“Adeline!” Sophie shouted. “Can ye do somethin’ for him?”

Adeline snapped out of her trance. “Huh?”

“He’s been hurt,” Sophie said. “Ye must aid him.”

“Right, of course.” Adeline looked at Logan, flashing him an apologetic smile. “First, you need to tell me what happened. I have bandages, but if you have something alcoholic, like whisky or anything like that, that would be useful.”

Sophie pulled a shocked face. “I daenae think this is the time for drinkin’, Adeline.”

“It’s not for me, though all of us could probably use a stiff drink right now. It’s to clean the wound,” Adeline explained.

Sophie’s cheeks reddened. “Oh, I see. Well, in that case—Moira, go and fetch a bottle of somethin’ potent. The stuff ye’re nae allowed to drink. Bring it as fast as ye can.”

As Moira took off out of the door, Logan helped Dallas the rest of the way to the bed, where he laid him down. Adeline stepped in without hesitation. With Logan’s assistance, the two of them removed Dallas’s leather jerkin, revealing the torn and blood-soaked shirt beneath.

But as Adeline reached out to find the source of the bleeding and begin treating him, Dallas caught hold of her wrist.

“Daenae touch me,” he said coldly. “I willnae take yer help, Miss Adeline. I cannae, until I ken the truth.”

“The truth?” Adeline frowned, pulling her arm back.

Dallas grimaced. “I wish I could have the faith in ye that me nephew does, but... I bring news from the eastern villages, and it’s nae the fortunate kind.”

He draped his arm across his stomach, protecting his wound from her. “I rode there... after I’d passed on yer message of boilin’ the water, Miss Adeline. I was expectin’... to see joyful faces. I was expectin’ to hear... of the wonders of all yer healin’. In truth, I wanted to... send a few of ‘em to the other villages to... spread the word of yer skills, but what I saw wasnae... what I had hoped for.”

“What do ye mean?” Logan frowned down at his uncle, his heart lurching.

Dallas cleared his throat, wincing as he pulled himself higher up the bed. “They’re... dyin’.”

“What?” Adeline gasped.

Dallas licked his dry lips. “I think I... spoke plainly enough. They’re dyin’. I watched it... happenin’. Vomitin’ blood, foamin’ at the mouth, faces bulgin’ like they were bein’ strangled to death by... unseen hands.” He paused to catch his breath. “It’s happenin’ all through the villages. I had to... be sure. Ye havenae helped any of ‘em, Miss Adeline. Ye’ve... made ‘em sicker. It’s the north all over again.”

“No.” Adeline shook her head, the last hint of color draining from her face. “That’s not possible. If that were true, Oliver would be getting sicker, but he’s getting better. His fever is gone, his blood pressure has come down, as far as I can judge. His heartrate is evening out, and Sophie said he’s been waking up intermittently. He’s my benchmark—from him, I can gauge what should be happening to everyone else.”

Dallas narrowed his eyes at her. “The villagers think it... was the tonic.”

“But Oliver had the tonic, and he’s fine,” Adeline insisted, looking frantically in Logan’s direction. Tears glittered in her eyes. “It can’t be the tonic, unless...”

Logan went to her. “Unless what, lass?”

“Well, the symptoms... they sound like acute poisoning—the vomiting, the frothing, the difficulty of breathing, the... dying.” She shook her head, as though she were trying to rattle the pieces into place. “I swear to you, I didn’t put anything in the tonic that isn’t in the one Oliver has been taking. I made it the same every time. If there have been sudden changes like the ones Dallas is describing, then someone must’ve tainted the tonic after I left. Poisoned it.”

Logan put his arm around her waist, pushing back a lock of hair that had come loose from her ribbon. “I believe ye, lass. I ken ye’re nae a witch, and I ken ye wouldnae do anythin’ to harm others.” He smiled, hoping to reassure her. “Maybe there just wasnae good enough medicine here to help them.”

“But that’s what I’m trying to explain,” Adeline urged. “Oliver is getting better. That means the medicine is working. This is deliberate sabotage, Logan, to make me look like a witch who curses people. I’m not saying this is about me—I don’t think it is, actually. I think it’s about you .”

Logan furrowed his brow. “Me?”

“Aye, ye!” Sophie piped up. “Even I can see that. Someone wants to make ye look like ye’ve been corrupted.”

Adeline nodded eagerly. “Exactly. Someone wants to make you look bad. Someone wants to make it look like you associate with witches, and that you’re bewitched by one,” she went on, her eyes widening as if it was all beginning to make sense. “It’s not a coincidence that there’s a mob outside on the same night that someone has poisoned the villages I went to. I’d bet my panda onesie that it’s a back-up plan.”

Logan tilted his head to the side. “How so?”

“Say we’d managed to persuade your people that I’m not what they’re saying I am,”

she explained. “They’d have all gone home, and there’d have been no harm done, right?”

He nodded. “Right.”

“But if that same mob suddenly got wind of the fact that I’d done some healing in the east and everyone there started dying, they’d be back here with their torches and pitchforks faster than you can say, ‘hocus pocus.’ It’s a back-up plan!” Anger glinted in her beautiful eyes. “They’ve poisoned people to try and get to you—they’ve killed people, your people, Logan. Now, it’s up to you to figure out who hates you enough to do that and, more importantly, why.”

Logan hesitated. “I cannae think of anyone who would do such a thing.”

Meanwhile, Dallas eyed Adeline closely, in a manner that made Logan close his arms tighter around her, to protect her from his glare.

“If it’s nae ye, then... I have me suspicions, but—” Dallas turned his attention back to his nephew. “—ye willnae like what I have to say, any more than ye liked what I just said.”

“Daenae dare!” Sophie exclaimed, wagging her finger at him. “I ken what ye’re goin’ to say, and I willnae hear any of it. It isnae his brother. I ken everyone in this keep thinks Oliver is some wicked devil, as morally bereft as his faither was, but he’s nae like that. He’s troubled, aye, but he’s nae a murderer nor a poisoner.”

Dallas sighed, holding his stomach. “If ye mentioned his name, there must be a part of ye that thinks it might be true. I ken he’s yer wee boy and ye want to protect him, but... I reckon ye have yer doubts about him, too.”

“Oliver?” Logan swallowed thickly, trying to imagine it.

His brother definitely did not have much love for him, but he could not fathom the notion of Oliver poisoning entire villages just to punish him. Oliver was a drinker, a brawler, an occasional thief, and a general degenerate—he was not an evil schemer.

Then again, if Logan was deemed unfit to rule, the Lairdship would go to his younger brother.

“Miss Adeline just said that Oliver has been drinkin’ the same tonic and gettin’ better. I ask ye, he wouldnae poison his own medicine, now, would he?” Dallas said, bolstering the possibility in Logan’s mind.

“No, it’s not him,” Adeline replied suddenly. “How could it be?”

Logan gazed at her, clinging to the hope that his uncle was wrong. “What do ye mean?”

“He’s been here since we left Red Briar, and you were watching over him while he was convalescing in that cottage,” she said. “Plus, he was sick. You can fake a lot of things, but you can’t fake a raging fever. In his condition, he wouldn’t have been able to sit up, much less go around, poisoning the jars of tonic everyone had. And nobody was having a reaction like that when we left, so it must’ve been done sometime between when we left and now. Closer to the latter, if you consider the sudden onset of symptoms.”

Dallas narrowed his glassy eyes. “He could’ve asked someone to do it for him.”

“I wouldnae,” a new voice growled, followed by the creak of the door opening. “If I was goin’ to poison someone, I’d do it with me own hands. And as the lass said, I wasnae in any condition to do it.”

Everyone turned in surprise as Oliver stumbled into the room. He gripped the jamb to

hold himself upright, swaying slightly. He had a ghostly pallor, his lips cracked and bleeding.

Sophie rushed to his side, holding him up. “I ken ye wouldnae do a thing like that, sweet boy. I told them so.”

“I heard,” Oliver said, wincing. “But I am astonished that ye would speak for me, Miss Adeline, after everything I said about ye.”

Adeline shrugged. “You had a fever. You can’t trust what anyone says when they have a sky-high temperature. Besides, I’m not an idiot—I can see how some of the things I say and do might seem like sorcery to the people here, even if it’s actually just the result of a very long, very expensive education.”

“Well.” Oliver cleared his throat. “I happen to have another suggestion, if I may?”

Logan watched the faces of those around him, feeling as if he was missing something. Maybe he was being naïve, but he still could not think of a single person who would want to do him harm. There were countless who might wish some inconvenience upon him, but not harm. As for the “why” that Adeline had suggested, that was even more of a mystery to him.

At least Oliver would’ve made sense .

“Ye might remember that I wasnae unconscious the whole time I was festerin’ at Red Briar,” Oliver began, his expression blank. “I saw Miss Adeline speakin’ with someone by the cottage. I saw me brother mutterin’ by the fireplace about how he was goin’ to stay away from Miss Adeline.”

Logan’s eyes widened. “I beg yer pardon?”

Oliver raised a hand, smiling slyly as he demanded silence, and continued, “I saw more than ye might think, as I drifted in and out of unconsciousness. Heard more.” He directed his pointed gaze at Logan. “I saw Theo weepin’ on the porch over his sisters. But the strangest thing I saw was someone creepin’ back from the woods in the early hours of the mornin’ we departed Red Briar. Someone who shouldnae have been there, but should’ve been here at the keep, as instructed.”

Adeline’s head snapped toward Dallas. All of a sudden, she broke away from Logan’s arms, marching to the bedside. Lightning fast, she grabbed Dallas’s shirt and pulled it up... revealing nothing but a vivid smear of red. Plenty of it. Blood, but not his.

“You’re not hurt at all,” she said thickly. “And you were there when I collapsed, when you shouldn’t have been. In fact, I don’t think I ever stopped to wonder why you were there, in the old healer’s chambers, at that exact moment.”

Oliver coughed into his hand, his eyes glinting. “The cottage door was open. I saw him carryin’ somethin’ from the woods. Looked like a jar of somethin’. The kind ye’d find in the old healer’s chambers.”

“It was you,” Adeline hissed, stepping back.

It was you...

A vision flared in Logan’s mind of a figure stealing through the hallways of the keep with a bundle in his arms. A mewling bundle. Baby Oliver. Logan had pushed the memory so far down that he had thought it was forever buried, but there it was, illuminated in a flash of lightning that glared through the window—a face he knew, carrying his baby brother out of the keep.

Logan had followed as far as he dared. He had not seen the face again, for the man

was stealthy, but there was no denying it.

“It was ye,” he echoed, staring at his uncle. “Of course, it was ye. Ye’ve been tryin’ to do this since Oliver was a bairn, hopin’ to get rid of us.”

Dallas’s face cracked into a cold grin as his hands slowly clapped together in a dry applause. “Five-and-twenty years later, ye finally figured it out.”

CHAPTER 32

“Och, but I cannae give ye all the praise,” Dallas said, flashing a wink at Adeline. “Where ye hail from, the lasses must be cleverer than the lads. How did ye ken it was poison, eh? How could ye be so sure, so quickly, that it wasnae Oliver? Ye nearly had me head spinnin’, ye put it together so swiftly. I’m almost disappointed in meself.”

Adeline felt Logan’s arms around her, pulling her away from Dallas. “You should be,” she snarled, thinking of the villagers she’d done everything to help—all for nothing. “You made a huge mistake, but I think you know that already, don’t you?”

“Aye.” Dallas sighed. “I wasnae certain I could convince me dear nephew that ye were a witch, nay, but I was certain I could convince him that ye’d made mistakes of yer own with that tonic. Thought it might make him angry enough to at least put ye in the dungeons for a night, where I could dispatch ye meself. Suppose I dinnae realize that the two of ye were so... inseparable. Och, Logan, yer faither would be horrified.”

Logan maneuvered Adeline behind him, his whole body trembling with rage. The kind of all-consuming anger that she hadn’t seen from him before, not even at the beginning, when he thought she was a threat. This was the absolute fury of betrayal.

“Ye wanted the island that badly?” Logan hissed. “How many have ye killed, eh? How many have ye hurt?”

Dallas shrugged. “That depends if ye’re askin’ in general, or recently.” He pointed an accusatory finger at Adeline. “Though, really, ye should be blamin’ her for more folks dyin’ than needed. If she hadnae figured out that there was somethin’ in the

water, the villagers in the east would've been sick for a while, nothin' more. Aye, a few of 'em might've died, but nae so many."

"You did the same thing in the north, didn't you?" Adeline hissed.

Dallas chuckled to himself. "Well, it wasnae any witch, that's for certain." He cast Logan a withering look. "But it wasnae because I wanted the island. I wanted ye to struggle, nae live peaceably. I wanted the islanders to turn against ye, like they turned against yer faither and me. And when ye got so furious with Oliver that ye sent him off the island altogether, I saw me chance to wreak havoc."

"That doesnae make a jot of sense," Logan cut in, one arm stretched out behind him to stop Adeline from doing something stupid.

He was right to do so, for she wanted to strangle the life out of his uncle for taking the lives of people she'd helped.

Dallas groaned as if he was bored by the conversation already. "Nay one would be able to blame him for the curse—a changeling curse—since he wasnae here. They'd blame ye, and they'd start wonderin' if ye were like yer faither, after all, summonin' dark forces here to the island. The longer it continued, the more they'd begin to doubt ye." He sniffed at Oliver. "Then, of course, ye had to ruin it by comin' back."

"I think ye ruined it by bein' inept," Oliver fired back.

At that moment, for no good reason whatsoever, an odd laugh began to bubble up the back of Adeline's throat. She felt it, rising up from her chest, and though she clamped a hand over her mouth, there wasn't a thing she could do to stop it from spilling out.

The rest of the room, including Dallas, stared at her as if she'd grown two heads. Maybe she had. It wouldn't have been the most ridiculous thing to happen since

Christmas Eve.

“You weren’t riding around out of the goodness of your heart at all,” she said, struggling to contain her mad laughter. “You were stirring up a fuss, weren’t you? A new plan that started when I arrived, I’m guessing. I bet you thought all your Christmases had come at once when I appeared, huh?”

Dallas said nothing, his nostrils flaring with contempt.

Adeline, however, couldn’t be stopped. “You rode around all the villages, probably having the time of your life, telling everyone that there was a witch at the keep who’d weaved her spell on your poor nephew. Lord have mercy, you’ve been a busy, little boy, putting all your ducks in a row.”

Dallas glowered at her. Men like him could bear all the injuries in the world, but they couldn’t stand getting struck right in the ego.

“You must’ve thought we were the biggest idiots alive,” she went on, feeling a little bit mad. “I bet you had a silly little grin on your face all night, thinking you were about to knock everyone out in one fell swoop. How did you think it’d go, huh?”

His scowl darkened, while her mocking laughter only got louder.

“Let me guess—the villagers would take me and burn me, Logan would be dethroned and thrown in the dungeons for being an unfit laird, and you’d put poison in Oliver’s tonic to finish him off. Then, maybe, you’d oh-so reluctantly take the Lairdship for yourself? Could be—you’d even marry Sophie if she’d have you. And because girls here don’t inherit, Moira wouldn’t be a problem at all.”

Dallas’s lip curled. “Ye really do think ye’re a clever lass, eh?”

“Tell me which part I got wrong,” Adeline challenged. “I’d say I was right about the poison, too. It was a back-up plan. You probably panicked when you saw how quickly I won over the eastern villages, and figured I might do the same with the mob, so you had to think of something really damning.”

The older man folded his arms across his chest, resembling a petulant child. “Either way, I got what I wanted.”

“See,” Adeline said, tugging on Logan’s arm, “this is what I meant when I told you about second sons and inferiority complexes. He had to live in his brother’s shadow, and then he had to live in yours. It’d be enough to drive anyone insane—evil people, anyway.”

Dallas propelled himself forward, baring his teeth. “I dinnae live in me brother’s shadow! Daenae say that to me again if ye want to keep yer tongue!”

Logan’s fist blurred through the air, connecting with his cheek. “And dinnae speak that way to her again if ye want to keep yers!”

“If I had to place a bet, I’d say that you didn’t dare try and usurp your brother,” Adeline carried on, lining herself up for the final blow. “He wasn’t like Logan or Oliver. He’d have ripped your tongue out if he even felt an inkling of rebellion from you. You were scared of him, but you wanted his validation.”

Dallas flinched, cradling his injured cheek.

“Again, I’m no psychiatrist,” Adeline said, smiling, “but I’d wager you didn’t know your father too well. So, your brother took the place of a father, and though you hated him, you loved him, too. This”—she gestured to Logan and Oliver—“is just you getting your own back for the hate part. For what you felt you deserved after your brother died. You’ve played the long game, waiting for the perfect opportunity.

Between me and Oliver, we gave it to you.”

Dallas began to laugh, the sound sending a chill up her neck. “I’ll grant it to ye, ye’re sharp as a blade, Miss Adeline.” He met her gaze, his eyes the spitting image of Dr. Platt’s. “But I did this for me brother. He ’couldnae have been more disappointed in the sons he raised. I was the son he should’ve had. I was everythin’ he wanted his true sons to be, while they were weak and soft, ruined by their maither.”

“I’m glad that neither of them is like their faither!” Sophie hissed, before turning her back to the entire scene. Her shoulders shook, her hand to her mouth. Clearly, it was all too much for her.

“At least ye wouldnae have died the weaklin’,” Dallas snarled, chinning at Oliver. “I’d have made it look like ye killed the great Laird of Gibson. The peaceful warrior himself, murdered by his own brother as a mercy, while he was languishin’ in gaol for bein’ bewitched by a sorceress. And killed himself to spare his honor, afterward. I’d have made ye a tragic hero, Oliver, but ye couldnae keep yer mouth shut. I could’ve even made ye Laird.”

Oliver sneered. “I’ve never wanted to be Laird. Ye’d ken that if ye’d bothered to pay attention. Then again, why would ye pay attention to someone ye tried to kill as a baby?” His sneer transformed into a wry smile. “Let’s be honest, ye should’ve kenned ye wouldnae succeed in this, since ye werenae even capable of gettin’ rid of a helpless bairn.”

In the blink of an eye, Dallas rocketed forward, propelling himself upward until he was on his feet. He leaped off the end of the bed, lunging at Oliver. A flash of silver caught Adeline’s eye. Dallas had a blade, and it seemed he intended to finish what he’d started when Oliver was a baby.

Time slowed down to a dizzying crawl as more than one figure darted toward Oliver.

“Logan, no!” Adeline yelled, stumbling as Logan pushed past her, running toward his brother.

With Logan’s broad back blocking her view, she couldn’t see what was happening. Both Logan and Dallas had skidded to a halt right in front of Oliver, but neither was moving. Yet, their bodies were shaking like they were under great strain, their muscles working overtime. Adeline could even see the tendons rippling across Logan’s shoulders and down his back.

She edged cautiously over to Sophie, craning her neck to get a better vantage point.

Immediately, she wished she hadn’t. Logan had one hand wrapped around Dallas’s wrist, the other gripping the blade, the deadly point of it no more than a few inches from Oliver’s face. If he hadn’t been sick, maybe Oliver could’ve staggered out of the way, but Adeline guessed that if Oliver let go of the doorjamb, he’d collapse. His legs were already shaking, his eyes wide as he stared at the tip of the blade.

“Ye cannae stop me,” Dallas snarled. “Even if ye defeat me, even if ye take this dagger out of me hand, yer people will never again accept ye as their Laird. Ye’re poisoned, in their eyes. Ye’ve had a spell cast on ye. They willnae ever trust that the bewitchin’ is gone unless ye let ‘em burn that clever lass of yers. Even if ye send her away, they willnae trust ye. They want her dead, and ye’ve already made yer choice—that lass above yer people. Me brother wouldnae have hesitated.”

Logan’s forehead creased with the strain of holding back the dagger’s momentum. “Do ye ken what else yer brother wouldnae have hesitated to do?”

Dallas sniffed. “What?”

“Kill a traitor,” Logan replied as the dagger slowly, painfully, began to turn back toward Dallas.

The older man still had obvious strength, but he was no match for Logan. It was like the end of an arm-wrestling match, where the underdog suddenly turned the tables on the undefeated champion. At least, that was what the look on Dallas's face telegraphed as his gaze fixed on the glinting blade.

"Logan, nay!" Sophie cried out, watching in horror.

"Ye heard yer maither, Logan," Dallas drawled. An empty taunt, his words laced with real fear.

Logan kept turning the blade toward Dallas. "I daenae want to do this, Uncle. I've adored ye me whole life. I've trusted ye, relied on ye, sought yer wisdom, but either I do this now with yer pride intact, or I do this later after ye've endured a trial for all yer crimes. And I cannae promise the island will be as kind as me. Ye ken what we island folks do to traitors. Ye've done it with yer own hands, at me faither's orders, often enough."

Adeline refused to imagine what Logan was referring to. Judging by the twist of Dallas's mouth, it wasn't pretty.

"Turn around," Sophie said. She put her arm around Adeline's shoulders, physically forcing her to turn her back to what was happening. "Ye daenae want to see it, I promise ye."

Even with her back turned, Adeline still closed her eyes and covered her ears. She sang Christmas songs in her head, pretending she was sitting in the hot pools with the man she was falling in love with. All the while reminding herself that this was 1705 and not 2023. Logan was just keeping his family safe in the only way he could.

If Dallas had come for you, what would you want Logan to do? she asked herself silently, between frantic rounds of Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree.

The answer didn't surprise her, but it did soothe her.

Despite her efforts, she could still hear Dallas mocking Logan, not at all remorseful, even now. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of a blade cutting through flesh. And then she heard nothing.

"Is it over?" she said, a few minutes later.

No one answered.

"Sophie?" She opened her eyes to find the older woman staring at the door.

Hesitantly, Adeline turned around, purposefully avoiding to look at Dallas' body. There, framed in the doorway, was Theo, holding Moira in his arms. She seemed unharmed, but her eyes were wide and terrified, her lips trembling as she clung to the man-at-arms.

"They've broken through," Theo said, his voice catching. "It willnae be long 'til they start comin' up the stairs. I daenae think there's much time."

CHAPTER 33

The choice had never been between Logan's people and the woman he was in love with. The choice had always been, from the very beginning, between Adeline's safety in her world, and Adeline risking her life by staying in his.

Far below the tower, Logan heard the sound of doors flying open, and the drumming of footfalls on the flagstones. They were pouring in for one purpose and one purpose only: to find Adeline and burn her at the stake. And there were too many for him and his men to fight off, unless he wanted to have a deserted island.

"The staircase is narrow," he said thickly. "They'll struggle to get up here in a swarm, but we cannae go anywhere either. Once they find the right staircase, they'll fill this tower in nay time at all."

Adeline rushed up to him, putting her arms around him. "We can go up to the viewpoint. They might be able to get up the staircase, but they won't get up the ladder. Not if we knock it down after ourselves."

"Aye, the ladder," he said softly, his mind already planning ahead. "I'll take Adeline up. The rest of ye, hold yer ground between these two chambers. They're nae here to harm ye. As far as they ken, ye're nae 'bewitched' as I am. If they threaten ye, I'll come back down to try and reason with 'em once more."

Theo bowed his head. "I'll defend 'em with me life."

"As will I," Oliver said, offering a knowing, sad smile to his brother. "Ye'd best

hurry, else they'll be here before ye can get the ladder down."

Logan ushered Adeline out of the room, toward the wooden ladder. Guilt twinged in his belly, that he could not give his mother and sister the chance to say a proper goodbye, but if he wanted Adeline to live, it had to be now. And she had to be none-the-wiser until they were up on the top of the tower.

Her grip on him told him that she was not ready to leave, but there was no choice. There had never been a choice. Now, he was making it for her.

She climbed up first, pulling herself into the snowy world above. He followed, reaching down to pull the ladder through behind him.

"A lot of them are still outside the gates," she said, peering over the wall. "Maybe they've changed their minds."

Logan closed the trap door. "Maybe."

The sun had not yet fully risen, the winter skies preferring to keep the world in darkness. Meanwhile, thick snow clouds shrouded whatever dusky light might have pierced through, relieving themselves of their feathery, icy burden. A few flakes kissed Logan's skin, and as he looked over at Adeline, he watched her catch one on her tongue.

How am I supposed to let ye go?

His heart broke, knowing what had to be done. It would hurt like nothing he had ever felt before—but no matter.

"Do ye have what the seer gave ye?"

He already knew the answer, but delaying the inevitable for a few more minutes could do no harm now. If the villagers breached the top of the keep, they still would not be able to get through the trap door.

Adeline froze. “Why are you asking that?”

“Ye ken why I’m askin’, lass,” he replied, moving toward her. “Ye need to use it. Now. They’re comin’, and they willnae cease until ye’re gone. I’d rather ye went this way than the other.”

To punctuate his point, shouts echoed from the room just below them. The villagers were quicker than he had anticipated. They were already at the top of the keep.

“Logan!” Oliver’s voice yelled urgently. “Now! Do it now!”

A thud struck the trap door.

“Logan!” It was Theo’s voice, this time. “They have a ladder!”

Panic thrummed in Logan’s veins as he pushed Adeline toward the farthest corner of the tower. He stood in front of her, determined to use himself as a human shield if he had to. After all, he had no idea how long her vanishing trick would take, but he would stand right there, blocking anything that came until she was safe.

“Ye have to go, love,” he urged.

Adeline shook her head wildly, her eyes brimming with tears. “I can’t leave, Logan. I don’t want to leave. I said we had at least five days. I want those five days, Logan. I want more than five days.” She grasped fistfuls of his shirt. “I’m not ready. Logan, I don’t want to leave you, because I—”

“Please,” he interrupted, his heart cracking in his chest. “I can walk in a world where ye get a future, even if I’m nae where ye are, but I cannae live in a world where ye die because of me. I willnae bury ye in this soil, nae unless ye’re gray and old, and we’ve had forever together. Daenae ask me to do that. Daenae ask yer sister to mourn ye, nae kennin’ where ye went either.”

A strangled sound escaped her throat, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Leave,” he pressed, the banging on the trap door getting louder with every passing second. “Now, love. It has to be now.”

She shook her head. “Not before I do this.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him to her. His arms slipped around her waist, hugging her close as their lips met in a desperate kiss. It was like they were trying to say everything they did not have time to say with their kiss, embracing until they could not breathe, for though Logan had known this day would come, he still was not ready for this to be the last goodbye.

But one of them had to break the kiss first, and it did not seem fair to make Adeline do it.

Slowly, he pulled back. “We daenae have any more time, love.”

“I know,” she whispered as fresh tears fell, her face crumpling. “I know.”

With shaky hands, she reached into the pocket of her apron. She pulled out what looked like a little parcel wrapped in hessian and set it on the wide surface of the wall.

Her face contorted with sorrow as she unpeeled the material. A shiny egg sat in the

center, glittering as the snow came down around them. Somehow, it seemed to have a light of its own, glowing in the gloom.

“I don’t even know if this will work,” she said quietly, flinching as a deafening blast hit the trap door. A dull clink followed.

They had managed to get the trap door’s hinges off or were starting to.

She cupped her hands around the little egg and closed her eyes. With tears melting the snowflakes that fell on her skin, her mouth began to move. He could not hear everything she was saying, but two words jumped out at him: I wish...

I wish ye would return to yer time . I wish ye would be safe from this, even though I’ll miss ye with all me heart.

Thunder grumbled from the belly of the snow clouds overhead, making the stones beneath Logan’s feet shudder. In the distance, lightning forked—the second time in his life that he had seen snow and lightning at the same time. On the day she arrived and the day she departed.

But as Adeline gazed at him, the egg clutched in her hands, her eyes widened. “Logan!” she screamed. “Behind you!”

A second later, she was gone... and something hard struck him in the back of the head.

He stumbled forward, dazed by the throbbing pain.

“M’laird!” a startled voice cried. “Och, I dinnae mean to hit ye! I was aimin’ for... I thought I saw... Are ye alone up here, m’laird? I could’ve sworn ye had that witch with ye.”

Logan whirled around, unleashing a blood-curdling cry, right in the face of the man who had struck him. “I am alone up here,” he growled. “And if I were a less kind laird, I’d have ye beaten for what ye just did to me.”

“It must be me eyes playin’ tricks,” the man apologized, bowing his head. “I thought I saw somethin’ when that lightnin’ hit.”

Logan stormed past the man to the trap door and jumped right down without bothering to pause for the ladder. As his feet hit the floor below, the throng of villagers came to an abrupt halt. What they had been trying to do, he was not sure, but they appeared to be making some kind of human pyramid to reach the very top of the tower.

He ignored them all, shoving his way through the crowd until he reached the top of the staircase. But he did not stop there, forcing his way downward. He had expected some sort of attempt to fight back, some of the villagers maybe trying to seize him so they could throw him in the dungeons, but it seemed that no one dared to touch him as he descended.

And like some kind of charmer, the villagers slowly began to follow him, more and more of them joining the exodus out of the keep until he doubted there could be any of them left inside.

He kept walking, right out of the gates, and made his way to the stake they had erected for Adeline. It would not be used to burn anyone, but it would be the perfect stage for what he had to say to these people.

As he stood on the wooden platform and waited for the masses to gather, his gaze turned upward to the square tower. Four figures stood at the wall where Adeline had just been. His family, safe and sound. It was a small comfort, but it did not even begin to ease the ache in his chest, where his heart had splintered into a thousand

pieces.

“Have I been ungenerous?” he began, his voice echoing across the island wilderness.

The crowd seemed surprised by the question.

“In the ten years that I have been yer Laird, have I ever given ye reason to doubt me?” he continued.

A rumble drifted through his rapt audience, many of them shaking their heads.

“Have I brought peace and prosperity to our wee island, after years of me faither’s tyranny? Have I done everythin’ within me power to gain yer trust and give ye me trust in return? Have I worked tirelessly to undo everythin’ that me faither did, so we could be a content and honorable island once more, never wantin’ for anythin’ without havin’ to steal or pillage?”

The crowd nodded, mumbling their assent.

“So, tell me, why could ye nae put yer faith in someone that I invited here as an honored guest?” he barked, his eyes stinging with tears that he could not spill.

At least half of the gathered villagers dropped their chins to their chests, suddenly shamefaced despite their former furor.

“I ken ye’re wary of newcomers. I was, too!” he shouted, his lungs on fire. “And ye were right, in a way—Adeline was special, but she wasnae a witch. She was a healer with a heart of solid gold. A healer who refused to take a single coin in payment for the work she did in healin’ the sick.”

“Aye, but she dinnae!” someone dared to shout. “They’re dyin’ in the east. I came

from there meself!”

Logan found the man who had raised his voice, leveling a deadly glare at him. “That wasnae any misdeed of Adeline’s. That was the cruel scheme of me uncle, Dallas.”

Drawing in a breath, determined for them all to hear the truth, he began to tell the tale that had ended in Dallas’s death. A story of a bitter uncle with second-son inferiority complex, who had sought to take the Lairdship for himself by pitting two brothers against each other, using Adeline’s arrival as the perfect vessel to add to his evil plan.

“She left the island of her own accord because she couldnae bear the thought that all those she’d helped were now sufferin’ again,” he bellowed, a tear escaping his eye. “The man who did all of this ought to be standin’ here, burnin’ for his crimes. But in protectin’ me brother, I had to give him his sentence quicker. Adeline had hopes of stayin’ to help more of ye, nae with the curse that wasnae a curse, but with yer ailments.

“She could’ve helped laborin’ maithers, she could’ve prevented bairns from dyin’ young, she could’ve eased yer aches and pains, she could’ve done a thousand things here on this island without askin’ for anythin’ in return, but ye believed me wicked uncle—a man ye all despised ten years ago.” His voice wavered for just a second. “Now, she’s gone. Ye got what ye wanted, but I’d ask ye all to wonder at what cost. We’ve just lost the most valuable thing our island ever had.”

And I’ve just lost the woman I love .

That part was just for him, and for the lonely nights to come.

“Away with ye!” he barked. “All of ye. Leave!”

With that, he jumped down from the wooden platform and stomped his way back to

the keep, ignoring the mumbled apologies as he passed.

He did not want to hear them. Indeed, he was not ready to forgive, and he sure as heck would never be able to forget.

CHAPTER 34

Adeline awoke in darkness. Not the snowy morning gloom of her island paradise, but the black of true night, peppered with starlight. Only a sliver of moon offered any light to see by, but it wasn't her eyes that told her she was back in her own time—it was her nose. From somewhere nearby, she could smell gasoline.

Slowly, she sat up... and instantly regretted it. A blinding headache split her skull in two, her hand flying up to her forehead to somehow squash the pain back inside. Dizziness blurred her vision, prompting her to take deep breaths until she felt steadier.

Glancing down at her legs, she saw the petticoats and dress that Sophie had lent her. Never to be returned. And there was sand beneath her, cold and damp.

She tried to get her eyes to adjust to the darkness

I might be wrong . I might be imagining the smell of gasoline.

Nothing looked familiar, but then again, it did appear to be the middle of the night, and since she wasn't in her apartment, she could've been anywhere. She was pretty certain she'd wished to go back home, Dorothy-style, but what if the powers-that-be had landed her somewhere else, like her old home? Her childhood home.

"I don't have any money," she realized aloud.

If she had overshot her landing, winding up back at her childhood home, she had no

way of getting back to her apartment in New Jersey.

She patted her skirts, just in case, and dug around in her apron pocket, forgetting that the shiny opal egg wasn't there anymore. She'd had it in her hands, but her hands were empty. Still, that didn't stop her from feeling around in the sand, thinking she might've brought it with her and dropped it somewhere.

It's gone .

Her heart sank.

But one thing remained, tucked into her sleeve. She'd mistaken it for a piece of the sleeve itself, but upon closer inspection, it shone silver in the dim light.

“How the...”

She opened the square of silver cloth, turning it this way and that to try and reveal the sewn-in words. No matter how many ways she tried to get it to catch the moonlight, the conclusion stayed the same—the words had vanished.

I'm never going back, am I?

Understanding hit her like a tidal wave, knocking the air out of her lungs. It was a delayed reaction, but then she'd just traveled three-hundred-plus years through time and space, leaving behind the man of her dreams. A few things were bound to need a minute to catch up.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged her legs, burrowing her face in the gap between. Rocking slowly, not caring if anyone thought she was a weirdo, she let the tears come. They poured out of her, her chest racked with aching sobs that threatened to shrivel her lungs into a pair of raisins. Before she knew it, she was

wailing, alone on a strange beach, far away from the place she wanted to be.

It was an acute pain that no medicine could treat. An agony she'd felt once before, when her grandparents had sat her and Jane down to tell them that their mom and dad were gone. A ten-car pile-up, no survivors.

“Hey!” a voice shouted, jolting her out of her misery. “Hey, are you okay?”

Rubbing her eyes, Adeline squinted in the direction of the voice. Two figures were making their way toward her, walking a small terrier that nearly made her burst into tears all over again.

“Miss, are you okay?” a young man repeated.

The woman at his side, presumably his girlfriend, looked deeply concerned. “Have you been drinking? Do you want us to call someone for you? Do your friends know where you are?”

They were all good questions, but Adeline had some of her own.

“What date is today?”

“April 1 st .”

Adeline stared at the woman. “You’re joking?”

“No, it’s April 1 st .” The woman checked the smartwatch on her wrist. “Well, technically, April 2 nd . It’s just past midnight.”

Adeline took a steadying breath. “And where am I?”

“Keansburg,” the woman replied, frowning. “Seriously, can we call someone for you? You look like you’ve been through it if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Adeline snorted. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Somehow, she’d been gone for three months.

“Did you get mugged?” the man asked.

Adeline shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

And not unless you count having your heart ripped out...

“I think we should call the police, anyway,” the woman insisted. “You might have hit your head or something.”

Adeline peered up at her. “No police, but there is someone you can call for me.”

It was one of the only two numbers she knew by heart. Emma had sat her down one day and demanded that she memorize her phone number, just in case she ever got her phone stolen.

Adeline had never suspected it might come in handy, but nor had she expected to be sitting on a beach in 1700s clothing, missing a dead man that she’d kissed goodbye only minutes ago.

How long had already passed in his world since she’d left? A few hours? A day? A few days?

The woman dialed the number and wandered off a short distance. Meanwhile, the terrier approached Adeline, sniffing her curiously.

“Hello, beautiful,” Adeline croaked, thinking of Weasel.

The terrier nosed her hand, and fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

“She’s on her way,” the woman announced, walking back. “Said she’s going to break every speed limit, since you’ll be headed to the police station anyway.”

Adeline stroked the terrier. “I hadn’t thought about that,” she mumbled, mostly to herself. “I guess they’ll want to know where I’ve been for three months.”

Frankly, she had no idea what she was going to tell them. It might not have been April Fool’s Day anymore, but who would believe a story like hers?

Dead on her feet, with the taste of weak coffee clinging to her tongue, Adeline allowed Emma to half-carry, half-drag her toward the waiting car. She’d been at the police station for what felt like hours, going through the same questions again and again.

Not because the story she’d made up didn’t sound believable, but because when people went missing for three months, there was usually more to the story. Or so the police kept telling her.

“My boss was a creep, I got fired, I couldn’t bear the thought of being stuck in my apartment until I found a new job, so I took off,” she’d explained calmly. “I left a note, but it must’ve gotten lost. And, stupidly, I didn’t realize I’d left my phone behind until I was about five states away.”

“But... surely you took your own car?” the policewoman had asked, incredulous.

Adeline had shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to hitchhike, so that’s what I did.”

At last, probably realizing that they'd never get anywhere with her, they'd signed her out and let her go with a warning not to just "take off hitchhiking" again. Even to Adeline's ears, it sounded ridiculous, but not as ridiculous as the truth.

The second they were inside the car with the engine running, Emma turned to her. "Are you going to tell me what really happened, or are you going to keep feeding me the same crap you told the cops?" She grabbed Adeline's hand. "You've had me worried sick, Addie! I've been waiting for three months for the cops to call me up and tell me that they found your body buried in some ditch. The least you owe me is an explanation."

"You wouldn't believe me," Adeline said quietly. "Neither would the cops."

Emma leaned in, her brow creased with concern. "Was it a cult, Addie? Did they kidnap you?"

"A cult?" Adeline had to laugh.

"It's the only thing that explains the clothes. Like, I know you don't give a damn about fashion, but this..." Emma gestured to Adeline's dress, "I don't get it. Not to mention the fact that you can't stop crying. What the hell happened, Addie?"

Adeline touched her cheek. It was wet again.

"Come on, you can tell me," Emma urged. "Then, you can tell your sister. She's been calling every day for news. Keeps threatening to come back from Scotland, but I told her there was no point, since no one had any news."

Adeline smiled at that, wondering if she should fly out. Maybe if she did, she wouldn't feel so far away from Logan.

“For real, Addie.” Emma’s tone had an edge to it, her patience waning. “It was like you just vanished off the face of the Earth. They checked all the CCTV around your apartment, but you weren’t in any of the recordings. There’s one bit where it showed you coming home from the hospital, right before you called me on Christmas Eve, but then... nada . The cops said it must’ve been the storm messing with the cameras, but I’m not buying it. A storm can’t knock out every camera.”

Adeline gave her best friend’s hand a nervous squeeze. “Take me home, if I still have one, and I’ll tell you everything on the way. I think there’s still a bottle of wine in the cupboard—we’re both going to need it.”

“If you still have one?” Emma scoffed. “Who do you think has been paying your rent while you’ve been goodness knows where, getting brainwashed by the freaking Manson Family?”

Adeline grimaced. “I’ll pay you back, I swear.”

“You can pay me back by starting at the beginning, and not stopping until you get to the part where some stranger called me, telling me you were on Keansburg beach in a Halloween costume,” Emma huffed, pulling away from the curb.

So, Adeline did, staring straight ahead at the road so she wouldn’t have to see her best friend’s face change, no doubt sagging with the realization that she had lost her mind.

CHAPTER 35

Half an hour later, the car screeched into the parking garage of Adeline's apartment building. Emma parked and got out without a word, plucking a set of keys from her pocket as she walked on ahead. Adeline ran to catch up, willing her best friend to say something about the story she'd just told her.

Instead, Emma pressed on, powering up the stairs to Adeline's floor. She opened the door to Adeline's apartment and marched into the kitchen, where she promptly took a bottle of red wine out of the cupboard—a gift from a patient—and set about pouring two huge glasses.

Still in silence, she carried the glasses to the living room and sat down, sliding one glass across the coffee table toward Adeline.

"I'll expect you to be ready to tell me the actual truth by the time you finish that," Emma said, at last. "Whatever you've been through, I'm here for you, but I can't help you unless you come clean. We can speak to the proper authorities whenever you're ready, but don't feed me the wildest fantasies you can think of and think I'll believe you because it's just mad enough that it might be true."

Adeline took the glass, staring down into the dark red liquid. "It is true, Emma." She sighed, disturbing the surface of the wine. "I fell in love with a man who has been dead for more than three hundred years."

"And I think you went through something so traumatic that you're suffering from major PTSD, and this is a story your brain has made up as a coping mechanism,"

Emma replied, making Adeline wish she'd never told her any tidbits of medical knowledge whatsoever.

Adeline took the silver cloth out of her apron pocket, rubbing it between her thumb and forefinger to soothe herself. "I thought I was suffering from a catastrophic brain injury on the first day. I went through every possible, logical explanation for what was happening to me. But... it was real. He was real," she said firmly.

"His skin smelled of woodsmoke and salt. His eyes were cobalt blue, with these little flecks of gold in them, and a freckle in his left iris," she went on, closing her eyes to remember... but the image of him was already beginning to fade. "When he kissed me, nothing else mattered. And when we... y'know—Emma, I've never felt anything like it. It was like we were made for each other, and he just... knew exactly what I wanted. If I think about it, any of it, I'll be red as a beet in seconds."

Emma sipped her drink anxiously. "You've been alone for a long time, Addie, and under a huge amount of stress."

"This cloth was given to me by a seer. She told me, 'If ye ever wish to return,' and handed it to me. There was an opal egg inside, with glittery bits like my old snow globe," Adeline continued, ignoring Emma's assessment. "But when it came down to using it, I didn't want to come back. I wanted to stay, which is... wild, I know, but—he would be worth never having running water. He would be worth giving up everything modern."

Emma sighed. "Addie, I think we should take you to the hospital."

"I made a difference there!" Adeline insisted, her patience wearing thin. "I didn't know what the heck I was doing, but I helped. I know things that could help them, but... now I'm here, and I'm sitting in my apartment, and it doesn't feel at all like home anymore. I was in love for the first time in my life, and I had to leave, not

because it was time, but because—”

A sob cut off the rest of her words. Clutching the stem of her wine glass, she hunched over as pain ricocheted through her chest, her broken heart struggling to beat the same as before. And as she sat there, fighting for control of herself, strange sounds slipped from her tight throat—the sounds of a wounded animal, suffering.

“Someone was running toward him when I left,” she murmured through heaving sobs. “They had a club of some kind. I disappeared before I could see what happened, but... all I can think about is that he got hurt and there’s nothing I can do about it. They were all fighting to protect me—Logan and his family—and I didn’t get to say goodbye. Didn’t want to say goodbye.”

Whether it was the pained sounds coming out of her or something on her face or something in the story, she didn’t know, but when she looked up at her best friend with bleary eyes, Emma’s expression had changed completely.

“You’re really not making this up, are you?” Emma whispered, like it was something that couldn’t be spoken out loud.

Adeline smiled through her tears. “You said it yourself—the storm couldn’t take out all of the cameras. I wasn’t in any of the recordings because I vanished from this room. I wished I wasn’t alone. I threw the snow globe, and... poof , I got sucked through time to him.”

“So, definitely not kidnapped by a cult from the parking garage?”

“Did the cameras in the parking garage pick me up?”

Emma pursed her lips. “No.”

“Look, this is why I didn’t say a word to the cops, but if you were to take what I’m wearing and run it through some kind of carbon dating, it would prove what I’m saying,” Adeline said, sensing that her friend was truly beginning to believe her. “It happened, Em.”

Emma took out her phone. “Give me a minute. What was his name?”

“Logan Anderson, Laird of Gibson, early 1700s.” Adeline crossed her fingers, praying he hadn’t died the day she left.

Emma’s eyes slowly widened to the whites, the glare of her phone reflecting in them. “Holy crap,” she mumbled. “He exists. Well, existed.”

“When did he die?” Adeline braced herself.

“1758.”

Eighty-five . He lived a long time.

“Did he marry?” she asked thickly.

Emma thumbed through whatever article she was looking at. “It doesn’t say. However, it does say that the location of his castle is a bit of an archaeological mystery, so they’re not too sure where he’s buried or where he lived. The reference for his death is from a book that was found in... somewhere called Inverary, in 1965, among a bunch of other old books.”

Adeline’s heart clenched, wondering if she’d even be able to find the island if she tried to. Maybe she could lead archaeologists there and...

And what? Find his grave?

She didn't want the history book version of him. She wanted the flesh and bone version, to kiss her and make everything okay again.

"Addie," Emma said, her tone serious, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think we need to get you back to your man."

Adeline blinked. "You do?"

"As long as you promise to visit if you can," Emma replied. "If not, how about you leave me a message? Write it somewhere that archaeologists will find. Keep me updated."

Adeline's heart soared, only to come crashing down again. "That's just it, though," she murmured, holding up the silver cloth. "I think I missed my only shot at happiness. It doesn't matter if I want to—I can't get back."

She was stuck in 2023.

Meanwhile, three hundred years in the past, Logan had become someone he did not recognize. His temper was short, his mood bleak, his general demeanor unpleasant to be around, always snapping and snarling at anyone who tested his patience. But time itself was the thing that grated on his patience the most, the weeks since Adeline's departure dragging by at an almost mocking pace.

He spent most of his days tending to his duties with a grim determination, putting up walls, fixing what was broken, helping his people to recover from the events that had led to his loss.

Indeed, the only good news he received in Adeline's absence was that the spread of Dallas's poisoning had not been as broad as the man claimed. With so much to do on the night he brought a mob to Gibson Keep, it seemed Dallas had only managed to

taint a few of the tonic jars. And just two villagers had died from ingesting it.

“I thought I told ye nae to bother me anymore?” a gruff voice declared as Logan rode up the shallow slope to the lonely hut on the cliff’s edge.

With nothing better to do that morning, Logan had decided to pay Jonah a visit. There had been a note on Adeline’s writing desk that said, Jonah McBray, six-week check-up. And though it had not quite been six weeks, Logan thought he ought to finish the work that Adeline had started, if only to feel closer to her.

“Aye, and I told ye that I wouldnae cease pesterin’ ye until ye’re nae here anymore,” Logan replied, glad to be away from the keep for a while, on his own.

Theo and Moira had been following him around like puppies, constantly asking, “Are ye well? How are ye feelin’ today? Can I fetch ye anythin’?”

Logan knew they meant well, but there were moments where he just wanted to be left alone. He was in mourning, in a way, after all.

The terrier shot out of the now-repaired hut, jumping up at Logan’s legs as he slid down from the saddle. He crouched to scratch the dog between the ears. “Ye look plumper than ye did before. Has yer master been spoilin’ ye?”

“Been nickin’ me food right off me plate, more like!” Jonah retorted. “I swear that dog kens I cannae move too fast, these days. I turn me back for a second, and me breakfast is gone.”

Logan laughed, surprised by the sound. “How is yer back?”

“Nae so bad,” Jonah replied, coming out of the hut. “That lass kenned what she was doin’, I can tell ye that.”

Logan's laugh faded. "Aye, she did."

"Have ye heard any word from her?" Jonah settled into one of the porch chairs, gesturing for Logan to sit in the other. "I expect she's happy to be back where she belongs, around her family and that."

Logan exhaled stiffly. "I wouldnae ken. I have nay way of writin' to her."

"How did ye invite her to the island in the first place if ye have nay way of writin' to her?"

"It's a long story."

Jonah nodded, a smirk on his lips. "Wouldnae have naught to do with the seer, now, would it?"

"What?" Logan froze.

Jonah chuckled to himself. "Ye think me a dolt because I live out here on me own, but I see more than ye ken. And I ken that lassie wasnae from any part of this world." He shrugged. "Well, the seer told me, anyway. She visits from time to time, tells me things she cannae tell anyone else while we have a nip of somethin' strong. Everyone needs someone, m'laird—even two old goats like her and me."

"She told ye about Adeline?" Logan could not believe his ears.

Jonah picked up a jar of his home-brewed liquor, pouring two hearty measures into clay cups. "She tells me everythin'. I suppose I'm the only one she kens willnae say aught to anyone, and willnae judge." He passed Logan a cup. "Then again, I'm tellin' ye, so I cannae be that trustworthy. In me defense, she said I could. That I should, truth be told, if ye ever came by again."

“Does she ken how I can see her again?” Logan drained his cup in one go, his nerves jittering excitedly.

Jonah refilled his cup. “I think she wanted me to be the bearer of bad news.” He sipped his own drink, his eyes squinting at the churning sea. “She thought ye might try to find her, but she’s taken herself to the northern islands for a while.”

“What for?”

Jonah shrugged. “How should I ken? We’re nae that friendly with one another. I daenae pry, and neither does she.” He paused. “But she said to tell ye that she’ll look for a token while she’s there, but ye shouldnae raise yer hopes. The blessing that sent Adeline here doesnae always take kindly to men.”

“A token?” Logan’s mind conjured up an image of the pearly egg nestled in the silver cloth.

Jonah cast him a knowing look. “Even if ye had one, would ye leave?”

“I... daenae ken.”

“I think I do.” The old man smiled. “I think ye’d want to, but ye wouldnae be able to. Ye’re a laird, after all. Ye’ve got people who rely on ye, even if ye’re nae bein’ too pleasant to ‘em right now—if gossip is to be believed, anyway. And if ye want to go somewhere else, the way Adeline did, ye cannae be havin’ second thoughts.”

The moment the words left Jonah’s lips, Logan knew he was right. No matter what he felt for Adeline, he had a duty to fulfill. If traveling to her was even possible, he would never feel comfortable, always thinking of the people he had abandoned. It seemed that, on either end, he would be left questioning himself.

Besides, a clever, amusing, beautiful woman like her deserved so much more than a dead man in living clothing. That was what he knew he would be in her present.

“Aye, well, it’s enough for me that she was saved from the stake and gets to live a long life,” he said, more to himself than to Jonah. “Doesnae matter if it’s nae with me.”

Jonah snorted. “Aye, and I’m the King of Scotland.” He paused, sighing. “Nay one wants to be alone, m’laird. Nay one chooses it. Bein’ alone isnae enough for anyone, so daenae be a martyr. Ye might nae be able to see her again, but daenae pretend that ye daenae miss her. That’s the worst thing ye can do.”

“How do ye ken that?”

Jonah’s eyes tightened. “Because I’ve done it, and that’s why I sit here with me dog, on me own. It’s only now that I’m older that I’ve remembered to miss me wife.”

“How do ye get over the grief, though?”

Jonah shook his head, tutting. “Ye dinnae, m’laird. With a lass like her, ye dinnae.” He smiled. “Or get yerself a dog.”

Staring out at sea, the liquor warming his belly, Logan drew in a deep breath of the salty air and wondered if Adeline was out there, thinking about him. If she was trying to find a way back, or if she had decided that her world was exactly where she belonged.

CHAPTER 36

Adeline wandered to her bedroom with a cup of coffee in hand. She couldn't deny it was nice to have coffee again, but she'd have preferred to have the edge of her fatigue taken off by Logan. She'd have preferred to have a few other things taken off by Logan, too—namely, the comfy clothes that she'd quickly readjusted to.

She walked into the boxy walk-in closet and sat down cross-legged, setting the coffee down on the carpet. It had been two days since she'd been found on the beach, and already, she was going out of her mind with boredom. If she'd been allowed to go back to work, she'd have had something to distract herself from what she'd lost, but her job had been filled in her prolonged absence.

Although, some of the nurses had posted about her on social media while she'd been missing, which made her feel like her time at the hospital hadn't gone entirely unnoticed.

Opening her phone, she checked for any messages from Jane. She'd tried calling, but the grumpy person on the other end had informed her that Jane would be out in the field for a few days, and the island where they were working didn't have any cell service. So, it seemed Adeline would have to wait to give her sister the good news that she was back... and that she was thoroughly miserable about it.

“Right, where is it?” she mumbled to herself, skimming her fingertips along the cardboard boxes that lined the wall.

Emma had mentioned that she'd put away a few things for Adeline while she was

gone, storing them for when—or if—she came back. And Adeline wanted her book on survival medicine. She had a delivery message dated December 27th that said it had arrived, so it had to be in there somewhere, thrown in a box with whatever else Emma had tidied away.

Her fingertips settled, instead, on the box she'd searched through on the night she found Logan. Her box of old memories.

Curious, she dragged it toward her, waving away the dust that puffed up. She opened it, not really sure what she was expecting. The old school reports unleashed a stale, library scent, while her old medals glinted. Pictures crinkled as she moved them aside, digging into the corner of the box.

“Shut up,” she gasped, her fingertips touching something smooth and solid.

She grabbed the object and pulled it out, her heart in her throat as she realized what it was. A black, hinged box. The same one that used to hold the snow globe.

“Of course, it's here,” she muttered to herself, feeling stupid.

For a moment, she'd forgotten that the snow globe was gone. Emma had probably cleaned it up and dumped the bits in the bin, or the police had it as evidence. But the box it came in had no reason to be gone.

Nevertheless, she opened the box, bracing for the sight of bare black velvet.

She almost passed out as a chocolate-box cottage in a forest, surrounded by glittery deer and frosty pine trees, stared back at her. There wasn't a single crack in the glass globe. It was exactly as it used to be before she'd smashed it against the wall, right down to the pie cooling on the windowsill and the doves roosting in a tree.

Did Emma buy me a new one?

It didn't seem likely. Emma would have mentioned it if she had.

But something had repaired it, so perfectly that there wasn't a visible flaw.

Confused, Adeline pulled the silver cloth out of her pocket and held it up to the closet light. As she tilted it slightly to the left, words began to appear, as if someone was sewing them into the fabric in real-time, right before her eyes.

Once more, and then no more,

A choice that must be made,

Wish hard and clear and have no doubt,

Of the place you wish you had stayed,

A final leap that then will close,

A price that must be paid.

All the pieces slotted together in her head. The seer gave her the cloth for a reason. It wasn't just to wrap up the opal egg, it wasn't just to give instructions—it carried the time-travel juice within it. And when Adeline had come back to her time, that cloth had worked its magic on the snow globe, giving her one last chance to choose happiness.

A token.

"I could go back," she whispered, overwhelmed and overjoyed and hesitant all at

once.

But what about Jane?

She cursed the cell service of rural Scotland.

She jumped up, grabbing clothes from her closet, putting on as many as possible. Her warmest sweaters, several pairs of underwear, her favorite pajamas, her favorite t-shirt, and threw her borrowed dress on top of it all. This time, she was going back to Logan prepared. She was aware that it might cause a few upsets in the future if archaeologists found her clothes in an ancient site, but at least it would give them something interesting to mull over.

That done, she sent a text to Emma, explaining that she'd left two letters: one for her, one for Jane. And if she could send the letter on to Jane, she'd be eternally grateful.

All she had left to do was write the letters, which proved a lot more difficult when she was bundled up in ten layers of clothing. She kept the notes as brief but heartfelt as possible, telling them both that she loved them dearly and that she was taking off so that she could finally be with the love of her life and be of use to a lot of people with her medical degrees. After all, that had been her purpose all along.

If she could, she would've written pages and pages to Jane, detailing everything that had happened since she'd gone missing. But it seemed kinder, somehow, to keep the letter vague. She didn't want her sister to worry that she was having a mental breakdown. She just wanted her sister to know that, where she was going, she would be blissfully happy.

And I can leave a message for Emma, passed down through the ages, if there's something I desperately want Jane to know.

That alleviated the slight pinch of guilt in her stomach.

“In a way, Jane,” she said out loud, “I’ll be closer to you. You just won’t know I’m there.”

Folding up the notes and writing Jane and Emma’s names on them, respectively, Adeline jogged back to the tiny walk-in closet and picked up the heavy snow globe. She held it for a moment, frowning at the festive scene.

“This isn’t where I did it.”

Panicking slightly, she took the snow globe to the living room and sat down where she’d sat on Christmas Eve. She couldn’t muster a violent rage like last time, since she didn’t have anything to be angry about, but she hoped it wouldn’t matter, as long as everything else was the same.

With a deep breath, she shook the globe as hard as possible, crying out, “I don’t want to be alone!”

The living room stayed where it was. No thunder or lightning rattled the skies outside. It hadn’t worked.

Was it the wrong time of day? The wrong time of year? Maybe the seer could’ve put down a few more instructions, to help her along.

Then, it dawned on her, a smile stretching from ear to ear.

She waited for the glittery snow to settle and then immediately shook the globe again, so hard that her wrists began to ache. And as she did so, she shouted at the top of her lungs, “I wish to be with him!” and threw the globe at the wall.

The glass shattered, and the world shattered with it. Thunder boomed overhead, the sky outside the window turning black, lightning cracking downward with a flash of blinding light.

And with that flare of hope, Adeline passed out.

EPILOGUE

Logan stared up at the vaulted ceiling of his bedchamber, unable to sleep. It was the same, most nights—him lying awake, thinking about Adeline, wondering what she was doing.

He was beginning to lose the memory of her face, the details hazy. And the more he tried to claw it back, the less defined it became, until he feared he might lose the true memory altogether.

A loud knock jolted him upright.

“Come in!” he called.

Theo burst into the room, wild-eyed and panting. “A woman,” he wheezed. “On the beach. Now.”

Logan could not believe his ears. Indeed, he wondered for half a second if he had fallen asleep and was in the midst of a dream.

“A woman!” Theo repeated, twice as loud. “On the beach!”

It was no dream. Theo would not be yelling at him in a dream.

Logan was up and on his feet in the blink of an eye, forgetting his shirt and fastening his kilt around his waist as he ran. If Adeline was lying there on the sand, he would not feel the cold.

He tore through the keep like a man possessed, barreling out onto the shrubby field that led up to the lip of the beach where he had first encountered her. He jumped the shelf of earth that separated soil from sand and sprinted down the last stretch to the fishing boats.

Rounding the corner of one boat, he stopped in his tracks. Adeline was already sitting up, looking around her in confusion. Looking for him.

“Ye came back,” he choked out. “Love, ye came back.”

Adeline scrambled to her feet and threw herself into his arms. “I thought I’d gotten the wrong spot. I don’t know why I thought you’d be waiting for me, but... you’re here now. You’re here, and I’m here, and—”

He kissed her quiet, hoisting her up into his arms. Her legs locked around his waist, her hands caressing his face as she kissed him back, melting into the memory of what they had cherished before.

And just like that, it was like a great weight had lifted off Logan’s shoulders.

He had hoped and prayed without much faith at all, yet there she was, solid and real, kissing him back the way he had dreamed about a thousand times.

“Take me to bed,” she whispered against his lips.

He grinned. “Aye, m'lady. Whatever ye wish.”

With her clinging to him like she never intended to let go, he carried her back to the keep, knowing he was holding the most precious cargo in his arms.

After two months away, she was finally home.

They had rushed to reach Adeline's old bedchamber, but once the door was closed behind them, Logan had no desire to be hasty. He wrapped his arms around Adeline, dipping his head to catch her mouth with his, pressing a longing kiss to her lips.

A dream he would have waited forever to feel again, returned to him.

"I love ye," he murmured, lifting his hand to brush the windswept hair away from her face.

She smiled up at him. "I love you, too. I've thought about nothing but saying that ever since you cut me off on the tower."

"I couldnae hear it, kennin' I was about to say farewell to ye for what I thought was forever," he told her, kissing her brow.

She cradled his face in her hands, bringing his head back down so she could kiss him again. "I thought that might be why," she said, brushing her lips against his.

They stayed like that for a while, wrapped up in one another's arms, their kiss slow and tender, both aware that they did not have to worry about the other being gone in the morning. They could take all the time they needed, exploring one another.

Not pausing in his kiss, Logan walked Adeline backward to the bed in a leisurely sort of dance, relishing the satisfaction of having her back where she belonged—right there, in his arms, being kissed and adored by him.

As her thighs bumped against the edge of the bed, they toppled onto it together. Logan's hand came down to break her fall, his other arm tight around her waist, and he laid her down more gently onto the soft mattress. She smiled up at him, and he took a moment to just gaze into her eyes, hardly able to believe that she was really there.

He bent to kiss her, scooping her against him as he rolled them onto their sides. His hand caressed the curve of her waist... and paused.

“What is that?” he asked.

“What?”

He rolled her onto her back and sat up, easing up the hem of her dress. Beneath, she wore layers of curious clothes that he had never seen before.

She burst out laughing. “I’d completely forgotten about all that. I know I’m probably not supposed to, but I wanted to bring a few things with me for when it gets really cold.”

“I suppose I ought to start undressin’ ye now. We might be here for a while,” he teased as he set to work.

It was the gift that kept on giving, peeling away the layers, revealing more of her exquisite figure with each unveiling. Soon, Logan glimpsed bare skin, noting the two unusual undergarments she wore: a very short sort of corset, and a very small pair of drawers. Several, actually.

“I’ve missed ye,” he confessed, peeling her undergarments down her thighs and then dropping them to the floor.

Adeline ran her fingertips down his bare chest, sighing. “I’ve missed you so much, and I wasn’t even waiting that long. I can’t imagine what it was like for you.”

“That doesnae matter now,” he told her, freeing her from the peculiar half-corset.

He pulled her onto his lap and kissed the curve of her neck, smoothing his hands

across her arched back, reveling in the heat of her. He'd wished for it on the colder nights when sleep had not come easily, if at all.

"Never leave me side again," he murmured against her collarbone, tracing kisses down to her pert breasts.

"I won't," she moaned as he drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking gently.

Meanwhile, his hand skimmed down the flat of her stomach, seeking out the heat between her thighs. His fingertips touched the pulse of her swollen bud, already anticipating the cries of bliss that would slip from her lips.

He circled that hidden pearl in slow strokes, while his mouth explored every inch of bare skin he had almost forgotten, letting the hazy details grow sharp again in his mind. And as he savored her, she savored him in return, her kisses dancing across his shoulders and down his throat, her tongue tasting his chest, his lips, his neck.

His breath caught in his throat as her fingertips deftly unfastened his belt, her hands peeling away the coarse wool of his kilt. And as she touched him, he had to catch her by the wrist.

"I want this to be slow," he told her, smiling.

She pretended to pout. "As long as you keep doing what you do so well, I suppose we can save this for another day." A grin brightened her eyes. "Any day. We've got them all ahead of us."

"Aye, love, we do. As many as we're blessed with, 'til we're gray and old."

She chuckled. "And still doing this, I hope."

“Aye, we will,” he promised, gliding his manhood along her folds.

She gasped and tilted her hips, telling him exactly what she wanted. He was only too happy to oblige. Smiling, he pressed a searing kiss to her lips, holding her close as he eased himself inside her. A shiver of bliss rippled through him as he sank deeper into that sweet warmth, all the way to the hilt, where he stilled for a moment to let her adjust.

In that pause, he let himself believe it was real—they were united again, joined together, entwined as one. Nothing could be better, other than the love that spurred it all.

Adeline clung tightly to him, her hips moving in a slow ebb and flow, rocking back and forth against his length.

“Aye, love,” Logan growled, sliding his hand over the swell of her backside, guiding her movement.

A soft moan slipped from her parted lips as she arched her back, her slender neck curved, and sank into the rhythm of their bodies. All he could do was marvel at her ethereal beauty as she swayed and writhed, teasing him toward a conclusion that he would hold back for as long as necessary, until she was thoroughly and completely satiated.

With that in mind, he strummed her swollen bud and dipped his head to draw her nipple into his mouth once more, listening to the sounds of her pleasure. It was the best way to know what she liked, and he planned to dedicate his life to knowing everything she liked.

They moved together as one in the warmth of her bedchamber, for he had kept the fire lit every night, even in her absence. A beacon of faith that she would come back

to him, as long as she knew there was somewhere to go back to.

Their silhouettes, cast upon the walls, were one body, one soul, one heart, their gasps and sighs filling the air. Adeline's panting breaths intensified, her hips quickening their rhythm. She grasped his shoulders, sinking her fingernails into his flesh, and rode him toward the conclusion of her desire.

Her fierce gaze met his, her lips crashing against his, while he sank into her again and again, relishing each plunge. And not once did he pause in lavishing his attention on that secret pearl, for it was the key to her greatest bliss.

"Oh, my love!" she cried out, her body seizing. "Yes, my love! Yes!"

She gripped his shoulders harder as her climax struck, rippling through her entire being like a wave on the ocean, quivering this way and that. Her thighs trembled around his hips, color creeping up her cheeks as she threw her head back, savoring the intense rush before it ebbed.

He knew the moment it faded, for she collapsed against him, melting into his embrace. She kissed his neck lazily, making her way up to his mouth, where he felt her blissful smile.

"I missed you," she whispered. "I can't describe how much."

He brushed a lock of sweat-dampened hair behind her ear, smiling. "I guarantee that I missed ye more," he told her. "But there's somethin' I've been wonderin'."

"What is it, my love?" She moved against him, making his breath hitch.

He smiled at her wildness, in love with every facet of her. "What brought ye back?"

“The snow globe.”

He shook his head. “That’s nae what I meant. I mean, what did ye wish for? Did ye wish nae to be alone again, as ye did before?”

She pulled back slightly, so she could gaze more deeply into his eyes. Shy, she gave a small shake of her head. “No, not that.”

“Then what, love?”

Her eyes widened, her tender smile like pure magic to him, as she whispered, “I wished to be with you.”

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:22 am

One Year Later

Adeline's eyes flew open, and a sharp breath puffed out of her lips. Her hand slipped beneath the blankets to settle on the monumental swell of her belly. A moment later, another hand covered hers.

CHAPTER 1

“Ye need to be wed, Me Laird.”

Keith O’Neil reclined in his chair, letting his gaze fall lazily over the dimly lit room. His one good eye settled on the weathered face of Abraham. It was not that he didn’t expect such comments—in fact, he had grown accustomed to them—but that did not mean that he welcomed them.

Abraham raised an eyebrow. “Am I mistaken?”

Sitting beside him, Banner Thompson shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The years had etched lines near his eyes, seemingly more evident in the low light.

Banner met Keith’s hard gaze, offering his usual half-smile. “He speaks the truth. It is time ye considered finding a wife,” he advised, measuring his words carefully. “It can only benefit ye now.”

Keith, however, did not see the value in such, and his expression, he knew, made that all too clear. Never had he expressed an interest in being wed.

The room fell quiet. The usual chatter seemed to have been extinguished and left behind the hush of smoke. Keith, seated at the head of the long table, leaned forward with his elbow resting on the worn surface, his cheek against his knuckles. He could feel the warm leather of his mask against his hand.

“It is just... perhaps ye should let go of yer insecurities...” Banner seemed to regret

his choice of words as soon as they left his lips. Keith was watching him, the way a cat watches a mouse before pouncing.

Banner hesitated, reconsidering his words. “I only meant to say, marryin’ a lassie from a reputable clan would strengthen yer position. Having a son would only make it more so... and as ye ken, ye cannae have an heir without a wife. If ye have no intention of marrying—” He paused, making sure that he held the room’s attention. “Perhaps it is time to pass the title to someone else.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the room, stoking Keith’s anger. Each glance and word directed at him felt like kindling to a flame. Every man at the table sensed it, their anticipation was palpable. All eyes turned towards Keith, waiting, breaths held.

Sitting straight and cocking his head to the side, he narrowed his gaze on Banner specifically. “Repeat all that ye have just said.”

“He will be wed before our next meeting,” a voice declared, cutting through the silence like a sharp blade. Keith did not look back at her where she stood. He only listened to the rustle of her skirts and the soft tap of her shoes on the stone floor.

Katherine O’Neil, his grandmother, moved to his side. She held herself with an elegance and pride that was marked by her lineage. “I will ensure that Keith has a bride by the next council meeting.” Her voice floated through the room, addressing it as a whole, though her piercingly blue eyes seemed fixed on Banner and Abraham.

Banner nodded, offering a polite smile. “Aye. If anyone can convince him, it is ye.”

Abraham, who did not believe that women were meant to be within earshot of these conversations or meetings, did not try to hide his disdain. He cleared his throat, and his mouth tightened into a thin line. “No disrespect, Me Lady, but if he doesnae?

What would ye suggest, then?"

Keith gave her a sideways glance.

Katherine, unbothered by her grandson's temper, met his gaze head-on, her eyes filled to the brim with a silent challenge and promise. Keith seethed inwardly, his jaw clenched so tightly, it felt as if his teeth might shatter.

She turned her attention back to the rest of the men at the table, a pleasant smile painted on her face. "He will be wed, Abraham Turner. Ye have me word."

Keith had heard enough. He rose, his imposing frame towering over everyone in the room. Tall and strongly built, his broad shoulders showed his strength as clear as day. "This meetin' is over. Safe travels," he said, casting one last glare at Banner and Abraham before turning away.

Each step towards the door only fueled his anger. The room was an ocean of whispers, and the quiet voices flooded him like waves. At the door, his hand on the handle, he could not ignore the words that then washed over him like a tidal wave.

Keith glanced over his shoulder. "Say that again, but louder, old man."

Abraham did not bother to act surprised, making it obvious that he had intended to be heard.

Since his earliest memories, Keith had known Abraham Turner. He had been a close friend of his parents but had never shown the same affection for Keith. Abraham was shorter and stockier, but he still commanded attention as he stood from his seat.

"Come now, there is no need..." Banner started, his voice trailing off.

Abraham moved towards Keith. “We need a laird who can provide for his people, not paint them.”

“Are the people on me land starving?” Keith challenged.

“No,” Abraham admitted, followed by a sigh. “But they need stability. Ye are a clever lad, Keith, but sometimes, ye are too much of a fool for yer own good. A wife and sons are a promise of stability.”

If I dinnae leave now, I will have blood on me hands.

Still gripping the door handle, Keith turned away, his disgust and annoyance poorly concealed. He did not want them to see how furious he truly was. He did not know of many lairds who were openly disrespected by their own men, but he did not imagine it happened often or for long.

“Ye had best mind yer tongues. I am yer Laird.” His voice chilled the room, and he felt all eyes on him. “I pray all of ye havenae forgotten.”

Keith stepped into the hallway and took a deep, grounding breath. Inside, voices continued to murmur, filled with doubts and voicing their uncertainties. Banner and Abraham continued to express their reservations loudly.

As the door closed behind him, Katherine’s voice rang out like a bell. “One month. Not a single day more.”

The study was perhaps Maisie Lennox’s favorite place in the castle. As she stood before the seemingly endless shelves that lined the walls, her eyes scanned the spines of the books. Her fingers brushed against each title, and a long sigh escaped her lips.

All of the written works she had come to love were before her, but there was

something more that she craved. She moved and faced the room, letting her gaze drift almost in a bored way. The flames in the fireplace flickered hungrily as the sound of turning pages broke the silence. Leona and Isobel sat reading. Their faces, partially hidden behind their books, showed how engrossed they both were.

Maisie cleared her throat, her brows raised.

Leona was the first to look up, her bright smile spreading across her face. “What is the matter, Maisie?”

Isobel, who seemed more annoyed by the intrusion than truly interested, cocked her head to the side and shot Maisie an incredulous look. “Ye have an entire library at yer disposal, and ye are bored?”

Maisie’s frown deepened. “It isnae boredom, ye ken. I just... yearn for somethin’ more interesting and new, something I havenae read before. Something like that—”

“Aye, aye, like that book,” Leona interjected, chuckling.

The book was said to have been written by a woman, an accomplishment in itself that had grasped and held Maisie’s curiosity. She had heard of it in hushed tones, almost as if it were some rare treasure—and in truth, to her, it was.

Isobel, uninterested in the conversation, resumed her reading. Her nose was pressed to the pages of some historical tale about a king. “Ye willnae find it.” She sighed, not bothering to look back up. “There are only a handful of copies, and ye couldnae afford it with yer allowance.”

“Perhaps I could write to Caelan and ask him?” Leona suggested.

Maisie sunk into a plush chair, sighing. “That would take too long.”

Leona offered a sympathetic smile. “Yer braither will return within the month.”

“A month is an eternity,” Maisie grumbled, her voice overflowing with frustration.

The real issue was not when her brother would return. It was something worse that had been weighing heavier and heavier on her mind. Soon, Maisie would be presented to various Highland Lairds, and she would have to be required to play the role of a demure lady.

Resting her chin in her palm, she looked at her friends. “Do ye ken who Maither suggested?” she asked, changing the subject to what really bothered her.

Leona sighed, closing her book and setting it down. “Aye, I ken.”

One of the first men who had asked about her was Oliver Fraser, an ancient widower with daughters who were older than Maisie herself. This Laird did not have an heir to his lands and was anxious to have a son. Maisie shuddered at the thought, remembering seeing the very same laird at Leona and Caelan’s wedding.

“I willnae do it,” Maisie promised.

Leona and Isobel nodded.

“I think I ken another way to get the book,” Maisie said, her gaze moving to the window. She couldn’t dwell on the old Laird too much, or she would be sick.

Outside, the sky was a dark navy hue, the sun had fallen into the mountains, and the moon was creeping across overhead.

Leona’s mouth tightened as if she could see the mischievous twinkle behind Maisie’s eyes. “Maisie,” she sighed. “Ye ken we only borrow from family.”

Maisie shrugged. “There are other ways to find a book.”

“Who would have such a book?” Isobel frowned, doubt in her tone.

“The Beastly Laird.”

Both women looked at her in pure shock.

Leona shook her head, her brows furrowed with concern. “Oh, God, no. I dinnae think it would be wise to even consider it,” she said. “He is a tyrant. Not even Caelan would make a deal with him.”

“And no one has seen him in years, aside from those in Castle MacDean,” Isobel noted. “No one is welcome there. I have heard rumors of the torture within the dungeons of the castle. They say he does ungodly experiments on anyone who displeases him.”

Maisie sat and watched, noting how their faces had turned a pale shade. She leaned back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling. Wooden beams stretched across the room from end to end, and cobwebs that had been missed by the maids seemed more obvious than before.

I dinnae fear some ugly laird too afraid to step outside.

“Maisie.” Leona’s voice was stern, which came as a surprise.

Maisie looked at her, frowning. “Aye, Leo, I am listening.”

“I ken ye well enough to know that ye may hear, but ye dinnae always listen.” Leona could not contain her half-hearted smile. “I will speak to yer maither about this Laird Fraser business, but ye must promise ye willnae do anything reckless.”

Maisie nodded, though she did not mean it. She needed something to excite her before she settled on whatever doomed fate was waiting for her.

If the Beastly Laird of Castle MacDean has it, I will get it one way or another.

CHAPTER 2

“I have no plans to—” he started.

In the dimly lit corridor, his voice seemed to echo throughout the halls like a war cry. Keith stood face-to-face with his grandmother, taking in her weathered face and noticing the fine lines that had seemed to only become deeper with each passing morning. Yet, there was a hint of mischief behind her eyes, a sure sign that she remained sharp as ever.

“It doesnae matter what ye have plans for, Keith.”

He looked down at her, his mouth a tight line. “I am the Laird—”

“Ye are... for now.” Katherine frowned.

It had been days since the last council meeting, and Katherine had been pestering him constantly, mentioning ladies and their fathers, gatherings, and letters. Keith did not care for it and wanted no part of it. He had told her over and over again that he had no intention of finding a wife.

“Laird Clyde will be arriving soon with his daughters,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Ye will discuss the usual business, but above all else, we will encourage discussions of weddin’ his oldest daughter.”

Keith frowned. He knew of Laird Clyde’s daughters, and the oldest, Ailis, was said to be bonny. It was a strategic move, one that could only strengthen his clan and, in turn,

protect his people. Yet, the very idea left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He took a deep breath, in an attempt to mask his annoyance and anger. “Does she even ken what she is gettin’ into?” he asked, his voice rising.

Keith knew he was not someone that was easy on the eyes.

Katherine cocked her head to the side, her gaze narrowing as her mind worked on a clever retort, but he would have no part of it.

Keith, his fists clenched and his muscles tight, let out a bitter little laugh. “Aye, no doubt she will ken me as a monster. Isnae that what all lassies dream of? Weddin’ a beast.”

The air between them was heavy. Katherine’s relentless gaze bored into him, digging deep and taking hold of his nerves. She swallowed back whatever she had planned to say and offered him a slight bow, dismissing them both from the conversation, but it was Keith who walked away first.

His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, mostly curses. The Laird of MacDean moved along the stony hallways, hearing his own breath echoing in the air. His entire body was tense, caving inward on itself. He felt sweat dripping from his forehead, slipping underneath the leather mask.

The stone walls of the corridor were quiet witnesses to his anger. He barely seemed to notice the servants scurrying past with their heads bowed. Most seemed to fear him, and he had come to find peace in that. The further he kept them at bay, the better.

None of the servants made to acknowledge him but one. The maid had stopped dead in her tracks as she approached him, her eyes wide as they fell onto his partially covered face before her gaze swooped to his feet. He gave her nothing more than a

sideways glance as they passed each other wordlessly.

He did not know her. Perhaps she was new. Truly, he did not care.

Keith continued to walk on, his mind spinning.

On either side of the walls were portraits of the Lairds and Ladies who had come before him. He knew them all, each brush stroke, each name, and their history. Someday, his face, or part of it, would be there as well.

He looked away as he came across the final portraits on the wall. Their eyes seemed to follow him as he moved even quicker still. His parents' faces were proud and kind, but their memories did nothing but make him upset.

Dinnae look at them .

As he reached the heavy wooden door leading up to the tower, he yanked it open with a forceful jolt. The hinges cried out in protest, and the sound echoed through the corridor. He wasted no time and stormed up the spiral flight of stairs that wound their way up to the heavens.

With each step, the narrow windows set in thick stone let in more and more light. At the top, the glow from outside revealed the room. Unfinished paintings leaned against the curved walls, their canvases speckled with vibrant shades of red.

There was no other color on his palette, only various shades of blood and fire.

An easel stood in the middle of the room, the canvas blank.

Keith's brushstrokes were bold and unrelenting, the red paint dripped like blood on the stark white canvas. Each stroke drove him deeper and deeper as swirls of crimson

soon took shape and formed into warriors.

As he painted, the sun dipped lower into the sky, casting long shadows over the room. The dying light only seemed to clash against his work, deepening the shadows. Like it often did, time slipped through his fingers like sand, and the world beyond his tower became forgotten.

He did not like the idea of his life being dictated by his council and grandmother.

If Faither were alive... No.

He shook his head, locking that thought into the back of his mind. It would not do him any good to think of his parents now.

He thought about Ailis—he had met her years prior—but the only image that came to his mind was the way she had reacted to him before. Would she recoil when she came face-to-face with him again? He would not blame her if she did, of course. He knew how he appeared.

By the time he finally stepped back from the easel, the room was dark, and the painting before him was almost black. He stood there, his heart racing as his mind settled. All the stress he had felt was painted red, forced onto the canvas before him. He sighed, wiping his brow with the back of his hand before turning to the door.

His hand rested on the wooden surface, his fist clenched, his jaw tight, as he tried to settle himself once more. Part of him knew that he did not have much of a choice, especially if he planned to keep his position, and that there were vultures circling him in the skies and within his own walls.

I willnae wed the Clyde lass.

Oh, Maisie, what have ye gotten yerself into?

Her heart raced as she rushed through the dimly lit library of Castle MacDean. She was almost certain that everyone could hear it thundering. The ill-fitted skirts rustled around her as she walked, keeping a steadfast pace but not going fast enough to draw any attention to herself. Her disguise as a scullery maid seemed to hold up, but she could not afford to let her guard down for even a moment.

With the stolen book pressed against her apron, she tried desperately to keep the smile off her face. The Beastly Laird had an incredible collection, which thankfully had been sorted by the name of the titles. Finding the novel, the Laird's Mistress, had been so very easy. It took all of her will not to open the pages there and then, but she was not about to risk it all.

As her trembling hand clutched the handle of the door, she could hardly believe her luck. Everything had gone so smoothly at this point, but she knew she was still on borrowed time. She pushed the door open, using her shoulder to brace it, and then slipped into the hallway.

Leona and Isobel are likely to believe it.

She could already hear Leona's chastisement paired with Isobel's lecture about the danger she had put herself in. Maisie smiled to herself, celebrating prematurely her small victory.

As she walked, her head low, she felt a sudden chill.

"Ye there, stop!"

Maisie froze, her heart skipping a beat. She turned slowly, her eyes meeting those of a man who seemed to emerge from the shadows. He was tall, lean, with golden hair

that framed his square jawline. He took a step towards her, his head cocked to the side as his eyes took her in. The man was not eying her the way that most men did. This was something more—he was scrutinizing her.

Doubt washed over her, and she swallowed hard. She had two options: stay and come up with a convincing lie, or run.

Maisie turned on her heel and bolted, ignoring the commands being shouted from behind. The man was catching up with ease, and she knew he would catch her if she didn't act fast.

She cursed under her breath as she continued to run, swearing mostly at the clothing that was restricting her movement. Her eyes moved frantically along the many doors that lined the corridor.

How many rooms does this damn castle have?

When she had arrived in the early hours of the morning, she had made an effort to plan an escape route in case something like this had happened, but any memory of where that was had been washed away. Panic was setting into her bones, and she knew she was lost within the halls.

The hallway was only lit by the moonlight filtering in through the windows of the castle. Shadows seemed to grow and move on their own as she continued.

Maisie glanced over her shoulder. She did not see the man, but she sure could hear him; the sound of his steps drowned out all other noise.

I need to hide, now.

The door to her side creaked open, and she slipped inside, shutting it carefully and

soundlessly. Her trembling hands grasped the heavy bar, securing the door as firmly as she could. She sighed and turned, leaning against the wood as she caught her breath.

Inside, the room was gently illuminated by the soft, flickering glow of a crackling fire. Her chest heaved as she fought to steady her breathing, each inhale a struggle against the beating of her heart. Maisie strained her ears, listening for any tell-tale sign of the man who had been pursuing her.

I will wait a wee bit and then leave.

Her eyes wandered across the bedchamber, past the large bed, the mirror on the other side, and the tapestries that lined the walls. Eventually, her gaze settled on the window.

How high is it?

She stepped forward, wondering if she had caught a glimpse of her potential escape route. She approached carefully, contemplating the risks and rewards.

A heavy sigh escaped her. Too high.

Suddenly, she was pulled back with startling force. The scream in her throat was muffled by a hand covering her mouth. She pushed back against the man behind her, driving her elbow into his chest. He grunted. The sound seemed a mix of annoyance and amusement.

Then, she felt it, something cool and sharp against her throat. Her entire body turned to ice, and her feet rooted to the spot as her muscles tensed. It was a blade—cold, hard steel.

The man behind her was large, built of pure muscle, with an unwavering grip. His voice was deep, sultry, and enough to send shivers through her entire being.

“Well, what have we here?”

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It went without saying that Keith was not expecting a maid to enter his chambers in the middle of the night, especially while he was changing into his nightclothes. The element of surprise had awoken an involuntary surge through him, causing him to act without much thought. His hand pressed the knife firmly against her throat while the other covered her mouth to stifle her screams.

He held her firmly against him, her head nestled just beneath his chin.

She is tall for a lass .

His senses were flooded with a blend of confusion and something else he could not quite place. He took a deep breath, taking in her scent. It was a subtle hint of something sweet and floral.

She smells good.

Unable to help himself, he leaned in closer, his lips hovering near her ear. The words slipped past his tongue in a command, his voice low and husky. “Dinnae ye scream when I release ye, aye?”

She nodded.

His fingers reluctantly left her mouth, though the blade at her throat remained.

“Who are ye?” he demanded, his voice sharper than the blade. He struggled to make sense of why the maid had entered in such a way. She was not known to him.

“I would be more inclined to answer ye if ye werenae holdin’ a knife to me throat,” she snapped, her voice teeming with defiance.

He hesitated, caught in a web of curiosity and caution. Slowly, he lowered the knife, letting his grip loosen on the hilt. He gently took her by the shoulders, turning her around to face him.

The moment her face came into view, he was stunned.

“I got lost,” she said. A most obvious lie.

He cocked his head to the side, his eyes taking her in completely. The maid was beautiful, perhaps the most bonny lass he had ever seen. But it was her eyes that seemed to trap him. There was defiance and determination behind the blue-gray shade which bored into him with a piercing intensity that almost made him breathless. Her fear was skillfully shrouded behind her glare.

Dark as night hair had been braided and set to frame her face, an updo that most servant women wore. There was something about her, though, something that made him question who she truly was. Perhaps she was newly hired, but based on her appearance and the way she held herself, he was not sure that she was even a maid at all. She seemed fleetingly familiar.

Was she a spy? An assassin?

He frowned. Is she one of Laird Clyde’s daughters?

Her gaze, having briefly held his, drifted downward to his bare chest, tracing his torso, to where his breeches hung at his hips. Her sharp intake of air did not go unnoticed. Keith’s brow furrowed as he glanced down as well, seeing the crimson stain on his skin and clothes.

In a voice laced with tension, she asked, “Is that...”

Keith felt his face grow warm as her large eyes met his. He raised his brows, shaking his head. “’Tis nae blood if that is what worries ye,” he told her with a small chuckle, sensing her discomfort. His words seemed to ease her a bit but not much. “Now, again, who are ye?”

“If it isnae blood, then what is it?” Her eyes narrowed, doubting him.

“I dinnae believe ye are in a position to be askin’ questions,” he said.

She frowned, taking a step back. “I think ’tis a fair thing to question.”

She isnae wrong.

“Ye barge into me chambers and hound me with—”

“I will happily leave,” she said bluntly, eyeing the door behind him. She stepped to his side, hoping to get past.

Keith reached out, his arm blocking her way, as a smirk formed on his lips. “Ye will stay here until I allow ye to leave. And before ye can, ye will answer when I ask ye.”

The woman sighed, seemingly defeated. Whoever she was, she certainly was no servant. How she spoke to him, the way she held herself, it was all telling him that she was something more.

“Ye arenae a maid,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. “I dinnae ken who ye are, but I ken that ye arenae.”

“How can ye tell? I’ve been a maid me whole life!”

Keith shook his head. He reached out, taking her hand in both of his. His fingertips traced the soft, uncalled skin as his eyes followed the pattern he made over the lines of her palm. “These are the hands of a lady.”

She let out a sharp breath as if his touch stung her.

He could see her mind was working on her lie, twisting and turning it so that she could trick him further. He dropped her hand. “If ye are plannin’ to tell me no truths, then I will have no choice but to hold ye here.”

Part of him meant it. He wanted to know who she was.

“Ye are covered in blood,” she stated. “What makes ye think I would wish to be here with ye?”

He shrugged as he turned his back to her, walking over to his wardrobe across the room. Keith faced her as he began to untie his breeches, pulling at the laced string as he looked back at her. The look of shock on her face and the flush of her cheeks was almost unbearable.

“What the hell do ye think ye are doing?” she hissed.

She recognized him almost immediately—the Beastly Laird. Keith O’Neil was not someone she had planned or hoped to run into. His dark, wavy hair fell in loose waves, reaching down to his broad shoulders, seemingly framing eyes that glistened like pools of ink. The flickering firelight turned his skin into smooth ivory, casting shadows that only emphasized the planes of hard muscle in his chest and stomach.

God, he might as well be in the nude.

His state of undress made her flush.

But the thing that made her certain of his name and title was the leather mask that covered the right side of his face. She could not help but wonder what was hidden beneath the supple material.

She also could not deny her curiosity about what was underneath...

Maisie shook her head, willing the thought away.

He broke the silence, his voice laced with an air of nonchalance. "If me attire offends ye, it only seems proper that I strip it from meself."

"Not necessary," Maisie snapped. Doubt nagged at her, clawing into her mind and refusing to release her. The dark crimson that was splattered on his breeches and torso had to be blood. It was unsettling, but she still managed to summon enough courage to ask again, "Is it blood? If it isnae blood, then what is it?"

His response was dull, almost bored. "Answer me question first."

He is exasperating.

Maisie turned towards the door, her resolve hardening. "I have had quite enough of this," she declared, determined to put some distance between them. "Keep yer clothin' on until I leave, at least."

Clutching the book hidden in her apron tightly, she reached for the door handle and began to open it when, suddenly, it slammed shut with a force that made her heart skip a beat. The Beastly Laird stood behind her, his hands on either side of her head, his palms bearing the weight of his body against the door. Maisie was trapped between his solid frame and the wood.

She turned fast to face him, anger and frustration swirling behind her eyes. Her glare met his unwavering gaze. Clenching her fists, she forced her most ladylike smile and

cocked her head to the side. “Let me leave, now.”

His voice was measured and flat as he leaned in closer, his eyes boring into hers as a devious smile spread across his face. “Oh, aye. I will let ye leave,” he promised, “once ye give me what ye’re hidin’ in yer skirts.”

There is no way he kens.

Her stomach churned with unease, but she did not falter. Maisie leaned forward, standing on her toes to face him completely. “Ye dinnae frighten me, Keith O’Neil. And ye cannae intimidate me with blood on yer skin and yer quiet words.”

The tension between them faded as he rolled his eyes. “’Tis paint.”

“Paint?”

Keith stepped back. “Aye, paint.”

She still was not convinced, but what reason did he have to lie? Maisie frowned and then let out a long, uneven breath. Part of her was still not convinced, but she shrugged off her doubt.

Keith raised his brows. “So, again , what are ye doin’ in me bedchambers in the middle of the night? And what is it that ye are hiding?”

Hesitating and wrestling with the truth, she eyed him. Then, with a reluctant sigh, she decided she had no choice but to come clean. She reached into her apron and retrieved the small, leather-bound novel she had plucked from the library.

Maisie held it up for him to see as she looked away, annoyed that she had been caught.

He arched a brow, giving her an incredulous look. “A book? Truly?”

Maisie nodded and handed it to him. When he took it, their fingers brushed for the briefest of moments. A shiver ran through her, and she quickly pulled her hand back, clenching her fist at her side. “Truly.”

“I have never met a book thief.” He chuckled.

Embarrassed, she looked away. “I am not a thief.”

“Oh, forgive me. Is that yer copy of the Laird’s Mistress? ”

She swallowed. “Not quite...”

“And I can assume me own copy is where I left it?”

“I had every intention of returnin’ it.”

He chuckled. “Why didnae ye just write to borrow it?”

She could not help but scoff at the question. “Ye dinnae have the most tender reputation, Laird MacDean . And to be fair, how well would ye receive such a strange request from a stranger?”

He nodded in reluctant agreement, his expression softening. “Aye.”

“I just...”

“Ye just what?”

Maisie grimaced, her bravado seemingly crumbling as she admitted, “If I am to be honest, I craved an adventure, something... something more . I didnae intend to be

caught, especially not by ye.”

Her last adventure before being wed to some old man.

Keith frowned as his brow furrowed. After a moment, he held out the novel for her to take. She hesitated, confused but pleased to have it back once more.

The Beastly Laird looked down at her, his eyes narrowed as his thoughts seemed to ebb and flow. “Tell me, how did ye end up here?”

She looked back at the door. “One of yer guards noticed me.”

He nodded, not surprised. Anyone would likely notice her.

“Do I truly not look like a maid?” she asked, unable to hide her disappointment.

Maisie had planned meticulously. She had even spent time observing her own maids to mimic their mannerisms. She had borrowed clothes and styled her hair in a similar fashion. All of those steps had been taken, yet this man seemed to see right through her disguise.

He shook his head. “I am afraid not. There is no hidin’ yer standing.”

“So, ye ken, then?”

“I ken ye are no maid.” He nodded slowly. “But not who ye are.”

Should I tell him?

“I am Maisie Lennox, the sister of Laird MacNicols.”

Keith eyed her, obviously questioning if she was being truthful or not. Something

crossed his face, something that sparked and died out immediately.

He stepped back from her and offered a stiff bow. “Me Lady,” he stated. “Does yer braither ken that ye have been invading other clan lands, stealing books, and lockin’ yerself in strange men’s chambers?”

Her face grew hot. “He is away.”

“And ye dinnae wish for him to ken?”

She nodded. “I would appreciate yer discretion, aye.”

Keith looked down at her, and his eyes narrowed as an amused look crossed his face. The soft stubble that framed his jawline grew taught as he suppressed a smile. For some time, neither said anything. Instead, they stared at each other.

Maisie was growing more and more restless.

“Ye can keep the novel,” he said finally.

A rush of relief washed over her until his next words hung in the air.

“Ye may borrow any book ye desire from me libraries. However, there is a wee condition.”

Her heart sank as she waited with bated breath. What condition could he possibly have for this? Her stomach twisted in knots as her mind raced with all of the things that a man could want from a woman.

Maisie braced herself, clutching the book close to her chest, noticing how it almost touched his chest as well. This was, she realized then, the closest she had ever been to a man she did not know.

“And what is the condition?” she dared ask, looking him in the eye.

He offered her a crooked smile. “Ye must marry me.”