



# A Scot for All Time (A Scots Through Time #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** She's got a power suit, a planner in her purse, and no time for love. He's swinging a sword, wearing a plaid, and calling her his destiny.

Determined to surprise her boyfriend Angus on the Isle of Skye, Kate Adams sets off on a sightseeing adventure, hoping to prove she's more than the predictable woman he thinks she is. But when an eccentric old woman and a mysterious brooch send her hurtling into 17th-century Scotland, Kate finds herself facing a very different kind of challenge. Survive clan wars, Highland politics, and a dangerously attractive laird who doesn't know what a hashtag is but definitely knows how to make her heart race.

Laird Connor MacLeod never expected a strange lass to turn up on his land, especially not one who fights off assassins, nearly burns down his keep, and steals his heart before he can draw his sword. But Kate is hiding more than just her name. She's hiding centuries.

With a brewing war threatening his people and Kate's only way home possibly tied to a legendary treasure his clan has sworn to protect, Connor faces his most impossible battle yet. Convincing a woman from the future to stay in the past.

She's from tomorrow. He's trying to protect yesterday.

But the only time that matters is the moments they share.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Atlanta, Georgia

Present Day

June

Everyone has something they're really good at.

For Kate Adams, it was the ability to predict how long a couple's relationship would last, even though she couldn't predict the outcome of her own relationships.

Love Lasting, currently the most popular dating app in the country, went viral when during an interview, Hollywood's hottest hunk was asked how he'd met the love of his life. The blond hottie grinned, looked straight into the camera, sending millions of women swooning, and said he couldn't have found the woman he was head over heels in love with without Love Lasting.

Even better? The actor had fallen in love with a normal, everyday woman who ran an art gallery. Enrollment numbers exploded as people flocked to the app, hoping to meet their one true love. Talk about free advertising.

As the director of engagement, it was Kate's job to boost enrollment numbers, weed out the bad apples, and promote the company brand across social media, utilizing influencers, targeted ads, and other various marketing strategies.

Now, though, she frowned, tapping a perfectly manicured nail against her desk, the metallic blue polish catching the afternoon sunlight streaming through her office window. The numbers didn't lie.

She took a moment to arrange her Erin Condren planner, the pale blue linen journal from Emily Ley that was almost too pretty to write in, and her good luck pen. The pen had a crystal on the end and the barrel was decorated with flowers. A friend had sent her the Pengems pen as a gift and she'd loved the way it felt in her hand so much that she'd ordered several more. They were refillable, so she bought pretty pens for each season, switching them out along with her planner to match the seasons and her moods, even if here in Atlanta, Georgia, the change of seasons wasn't always noticeable, other than the date on the calendar.

"Four months," she murmured, making a note in the planner with a color-coded pen. Blue for work predictions. Green for personal observations. Red for urgent matters. "Maybe five if they take that trip to Bali they mentioned."

A quick glance at the planner told Kate she had a mani/pedi appointment scheduled for next week, along with a massage. Her mom had given her a package of six massages for her birthday last year. A sigh escaped. All those years ago, her parents had been traveling around Europe on summer break from college, when they met in Rome at the Trevi Fountain, and three days later decided to get married. They had been married ever since and were still madly in love. No wonder she was such a skeptic. When your parents' whirlwind romance turned into a forty-year happily ever after, it set an impossible standard. Her older sister had inherited their romantic streak, marrying a guy she'd met at a rock concert. They'd married the next day, driving from California to Vegas, and had been happily married for ten years with four kids and counting. But Kate knew better. In her line of work, she'd seen too many "perfect" relationships crumble to believe in love at first sight.

Behind her, the skyline shimmered in the oppressive heat. Even fourteen floors up,

she swore she could feel the weight of the humidity pressing against the windows of Love Lasting's headquarters. The air conditioning hummed steadily, fighting a valiant but ultimately doomed battle against the Georgia summer heat.

Kate saved her analysis and closed the file on Couple #72-B. Tiffany and Marcus. They'd seemed so happy during their interview three months ago. Holding hands, finishing each other's sentences, planning their future with the kind of starry-eyed optimism that always made Kate's stomach clench. She'd known then, watching Tiffany's fingers drum nervously against her thigh whenever Marcus mentioned children. Had seen it in the way Marcus's smile tightened when Tiffany talked about her five-year career plan.

Four months. Maybe five. And then it would be over and they'd both change their profiles back to Actively Seeking a Relationship .

A knock at her door pulled Kate from her thoughts. Darcy, the company's perky marketing manager, leaned against the doorframe, her expression a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"Well?" Darcy asked, twirling a strand of black hair around her finger. "What's the verdict on the golden couple?"

"They'll be lucky if they make it to the Fourth of July." She closed her planner.

Darcy's shoulders slumped. "Damn. I was hoping we could feature them in our success story campaign. They photograph like models."

A dramatic sigh escaped. "Are you sure? They seem so perfect together."

"They seem perfect because they're both terrified of being alone," she replied, voice matter-of-fact rather than unkind.

“Marcus wants a traditional family. Stay-at-home wife, two kids, white picket fence. Tiffany’s building her own business and doesn’t want children until her late thirties, if at all.”

She shrugged. “They’re avoiding the conversation because they’re still in the honeymoon phase, but reality will hit in a couple of weeks.”

Darcy groaned. “Your gift is seriously depressing sometimes.”

Gift. Kate had heard that word used to describe her uncanny ability before. She preferred to think of it as pattern recognition, an analytical skill honed by years of studying human behavior. Nothing mystical about it. Just data points and probability.

“I prefer to think of it as realistic,” she replied, standing up and grabbing the insulated cup that was covered in a popsicle print. “Better to know now than waste years on something that’s doomed to fail.”

“Let’s grab lunch,” Darcy suggested, falling into step beside her as they headed toward the company cafe. “I’m starving.”

Her phone buzzed in her jeans pocket as they walked down the hallway. She pulled it out, smiling despite herself when she saw Angus’s name on the screen.

Arrived in Edinburgh. Miss you already.

She texted back.

Miss you bunches.

“Is that your Scottish dreamboat?” Darcy asked, peering over her shoulder while selecting a kale and walnut salad from the cafe’s cooler and grabbing a Diet Coke.

Kate busied herself filling her cup with the crushed Sonic ice she loved so much before grabbing a bottle of sparkling water.

“He’s in Scotland for business. Family distillery stuff. He’ll be back in a few weeks,” Kate replied, pouring the water in the cup and then carefully securing the lid.

“And then you’ll finally introduce him to your friends?” Darcy pressed as they made their way back to their office. “Or is he like Bigfoot, often discussed but never actually seen?”

Kate rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of discomfort beneath her annoyance. The truth was, she and Angus had been dating for nearly five months, but she’d been careful to keep their worlds separate. It wasn’t that she was hiding him, exactly. She just preferred to compartmentalize. Work Kate. Friend Kate. Girlfriend Kate. Neat, tidy boxes that didn’t overlap.

“You’ll meet him when he gets back,” she promised, knowing it was probably time. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have two more couples to analyze before the end of the day.”

Back in her office, Kate settled into her ergonomic chair and pulled up the next file. She tried to focus on the data points. Communication patterns, conflict resolution styles, value alignment scores. But her mind kept drifting to Angus. Five months was her longest relationship in ages. By all metrics, things were going well. He was smart, successful, respectful of her space and independence. The sex was good. The conversation was better.

So why couldn’t she predict where they were headed? The only bad part of her woo-woo gift, as her family called it, was that it only worked on other people, never for her own relationships.

Kate's analytical mind, so sharp when applied to others, turned fuzzy when she tried to examine her own relationships. It was like trying to read a book held too close to her face. All she could see were blurred shapes, not the clear picture.

Her phone rang, startling her. It was Gretchen, Love Lasting's CEO.

"Kate, do you have the latest retention numbers?" Gretchen asked without preamble. "The board meeting has been moved up to tomorrow."

Instantly, she switched gears, pulling up the relevant files. "Sending them now. Overall retention is up 12% since we implemented the new messaging system."

"Excellent. And the Tiffany-Marcus analysis?"

Kate hesitated, hazel eyes narrowed as she looked over the data. "Four months, maybe five. They're fundamentally incompatible on key life goals."

Gretchen sighed. "That's disappointing. They've been great for our marketing materials." There was a pause. "Have you ever been wrong about these predictions?"

The question hit a nerve. "Not yet," Kate admitted. "But it's not magic. It's just pattern recognition."

"Well, whatever it is, it's making us a lot of money," Gretchen said briskly. "The board loves your work. Keep it up."

Her phone buzzed again.

May need to extend my trip. Bit of family business to sort out. Will keep you posted.

Family business. Kate frowned. Angus mentioned his family often, but shared few

details. She knew he had a sister, parents who ran the family distillery, and various cousins scattered across Scotland. But the picture remained incomplete, like a puzzle missing its edge pieces.

On paper, Angus was the perfect guy. Considerate, good-looking, financially stable, and he put family first. His family owned some famous distillery off the coast of Scotland on the Isle of Skye. The image of the Scottish flag behind the photo of Angus on her phone reminded her of the guidebook tucked in her desk drawer. Scotland: Myths, Legends & Landscapes . She'd been reading it during lunch breaks, fascinated by the ancient stone circles and tales of enchanted glens.

Working at Love Lasting had cemented her belief, despite her parents and sister, that true love was something only found in fairy tales or movies. Jaded and worn out from dating, Kate had decided she was going to find someone she liked to be around, a guy with similar values and beliefs. And then, like a gift from the gods, she met Angus when her car broke down next to a field of sunflowers she'd been photographing. He owned the field, offered her a ride back to the city, and they'd been dating ever since. They shared common ground, the ability to vacation together without fighting, and a penchant for politeness. Those were the things that made a lasting partnership, not red-hot passion that burned bright and cooled just as fast.

And yet...

At night, alone in her apartment, she'd curl up with action movies where cold-hearted killers risked everything for the women they loved. Where samurai warriors found purpose in protecting those they cherished. Where heroes made the ultimate sacrifice for love. She fell asleep imagining what it might feel like to be the center of someone's world, to be loved with that kind of fierce devotion.

By the time she was ready to call it a day, Kate wanted nothing more than to curl up and watch one of her favorite action movies. Tonight she planned to watch 47 Ronin



again. The movie where Keanu Reeves saved the woman he loved, but could never have, and swore he'd search for her through a thousand lifetimes. And even though that movie ended tragically, she always turned it off with a smile, wishing someone would love her as much as the hero loved the heroine.

Maybe it was time to find another job before she was so down on love that she gave up and actually considered an arranged marriage or moved to a remote cabin in the woods to count the mountain lion population.

As much as she liked Angus, enjoyed spending time with him, and knew he was perfect on paper, Kate couldn't help but worry that her job had made her into someone who always looked for the hidden, the lies, and had made it almost impossible for her to truly trust anyone.

With her What would Dolly do? tote bag slung over her arm, she pushed her chair under the desk as her phone rang.

"Mandy. What can I do for you?"

Mandy Albertson was what Kate and her co-workers called a true believer. She'd dated almost every eligible guy within a hundred-mile radius. She and Mandy had gotten to know each other over the three years Mandy had been searching for her one true love with no success.

But that was what happened when you wanted Happily Ever After. True Love. Soulmates.

Kate let out a long breath. How many times had she told Mandy not to set the bar so high? But instead to look for Mr. Right Now? And maybe, just maybe, the guy would turn into someone she could tolerate for the next few years.

People didn't stay married forever anymore, talk about an antiquated idea, no matter how much a small part of Kate wished it were so. They changed and moved on, finding someone new. Her parents and sister were an anomaly. When asked, her mom told Kate she just knew. The same for her sister, who said they took one look at each other and knew. Talk about outliers in the world of relationships. The constant pitying looks from her family made Kate glad that her sister lived in Colorado now, and her parents had decided to visit every state, driving around the country in a huge RV with all the amenities. It was nicer than Kate's apartment.

"Kate? Are you listening?"

Mandy's voice pulled her out of the swirling thoughts. The sobbing on the other end of the phone was so loud she had to hold the phone away from her ear. When it subsided, she took a breath.

"Tell me what happened? Was it Peter?"

Mandy made a squeaking noise.

"Uh, huh." More sobbing ensued, and then the sound of Mandy blowing her nose.

"You were right. Peter dumped me for a model named Anastasia. She's so beautiful. How can I compete with a supermodel?"

Well, she'd tried to warn Mandy, to tell her that based on Peter's love bombing history, love of Sam Smith videos, and the fact that the best lingerie store in town knew him by name, were all red flags, that Kate had predicted they would be over within six months, but Mandy wouldn't listen, so sure he was the one for her.

Mandy and Peter lasted five months, two weeks, and four days. The wedding, which Kate strongly advised against, was scheduled for ten days from today. At least

Mandy's parents were wealthy, so all those lost deposits wouldn't hurt financially.

While Kate made soothing noises, she gathered up the rest of her things. Almost to the elevator, Mandy's next words stopped her in her tracks as a young intern ran into her back.

"Oops. Sorry." She glanced over her shoulder at ... Mark? Evan? Kate couldn't remember.

The guy shifted his messenger bag, pushed his glasses up on his nose, and with a glare, punched the button for the elevator.

"Wait. What?" Kate peered at the phone to make sure it was still Mandy talking, and not her older sister, who was much more practical when it came to matters of the heart.

The voice came through calm and steady, the tears banished.

"I've canceled everything, sent back all the gifts, and found my own place." A choked laugh escaped. "Well, almost everything. I'm keeping the big honking ring as payment for what he put me through."

"Good for you." As much as Kate wanted to tell Mandy to leave the online world and step out into the real world, she knew the woman wasn't ready to hear it.

"Kate. Kate, you're not listening."

She paused in the middle of digging through her bag for a hard candy grape Life Saver. She despised gummy candy in all forms and shapes, but the hard candy Life Savers were a bit of an addiction.

“I’m listening. Something about a trip?”

“Remember the honeymoon?”

There was a sound in the background, rather like boxes being shoved across a marble floor. Good for Mandy.

“How could I forget, you’re taking—you were going on my dream vacation.”

A little shriek sounded on the other end of the phone.

“No, silly. You’re going on my honeymoon. I traded in my two tickets for one first-class ticket to Scotland.”

The sound of Mandy clapping her hands together, something she did when excited, made Kate wince.

“It gets even better. I called your boss, crying and carrying on about how I found out Peter is a serial love bomber, and that plenty of women have complained, but that Love Lasting didn’t do a damn thing about him, so I was going to contact all the other women and we were going to protest in front of the building.”

Kate gasped. “I didn’t know that. I mean, I knew he was love bombing you, but I didn’t know it was part of his history. It wasn’t in his file. Why wouldn’t Ed tell me?”

She put a hand on the wall next to the elevator and wondered at something one of the IT guys had said in passing about a snippet of code for the rich guys who joined. She’d been so distracted by the hot actor news that Kate had forgotten all about it.

“I am so sorry, Mandy. If I had known, I would have permanently banned Peter from the site.”

A giggle sounded. “I might have made it up about all the women he love bombed coming to your office to protest, but based on Ed’s reaction, I’m thinking it’s true. Peter is rich, he probably donated to Ed’s favorite charity or something. Anyway, when he asked what he could do to make it up to me and to keep this whole thing between us, I told him to give you two weeks’ vacation.”

The elevator doors opened, then closed with a ping as Kate stood in the lobby, blinking, wondering if she’d fallen asleep on her feet and was dreaming.

“But, you’re leaving. You were supposed to leave in ten days. I have too much to do.”

“Not anymore.” Mandy sniffed. “You’re going. The ticket is in your name. Ed gave you the time off, so put three of your nameless interns to work and go have a blast.”

“But ... what are you going to do?”

The laugh came again, high-pitched and slightly unhinged.

“I sent Anastasia a screenshot from Peter’s phone before I left him, showing her that he’s love bombing at least three other women. How on earth he finds the time, I have no idea.”

She blew her nose again.

“Don’t worry about me. I accepted a job helping to restore Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas in the Florida Keys. Go and have fun.”

Mandy hung up, still giggling, as Kate rode the elevator from the lobby down to the parking garage in a daze. It looked like she was going to Scotland on her dream vacation. Her first vacation in over three years.

Seatbelt on, she paused, finger hovering over the button to start the car. Instead of driving out of the parking garage, she grabbed her phone and pulled up the calendar app.

“It’s fate.” She shook her head. “Not that I believe in fate, but this is perfect timing.” Then she snorted, swirling her drink in her tumbler. “Please. Love is just a mix of good timing, mutual attraction, and enough stubbornness to stick it out. Fate is just an excuse people use to justify bad decisions.”

The moment the words left her mouth, the lights in the parking garage flickered—once, twice—before steadying again.

Kate froze, her grip tightening on the tumbler. A strange silence fell over the usually humming garage.

“...Okay, that was weird,” she muttered.

She shook off the feeling and returned to her plans as she drove out of the garage. Angus always teased her about not having a single spontaneous bone in her body. He wasn’t perfect, no guy was perfect, except for fictional characters. This wasn’t a fairytale, it was real life. He had flaws, but they were things she could live with, and in time maybe they’d find the happiness that came so easily to her parents.

She’d be spontaneous. Surprise him on the Isle of Skye where he had a cottage on the land his family owned. After all, one of their issues was that she was always content to let him plan their dates. He’d said he liked it when she took charge.

As of today, Kate was going to be spontaneous. She was taking charge, getting on a plane, and going to see her boyfriend. Then she would tell him that she was ready to take things to the next level.

As she made a right at the light, a strange feeling settled in her stomach. Not quite dread, not quite excitement, but something in between. For a moment, she had the inexplicable urge to call Angus, to let him know she was coming. To make sure this was a good idea. Instead, she shoved the feeling aside. Angus was going to be so happy to see her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:51 pm*

### Chapter Two

#### I sle of Skye

1689

The mist hung heavy over Bronmuir Keep, wrapping the ancient stone battlements in a ghostly embrace. Connor MacLeod rolled his shoulders and adjusted his grip on his basket-hilted broadsword, its familiar weight an extension of his arm. The weapon had belonged to his grandfather. Smaller than the massive two-handed claymores of old, but deadly in the right hands. Across from him, Ewan circled with the wariness of a fox, his own blade catching what little light filtered through the morning haze.

“You’re slow today,” Connor taunted, feinting left before striking right, his sun-kissed brown hair falling across piercing blue eyes that narrowed in concentration.

Ewan parried the blow, the clash of steel echoing off the stone walls. “And you’re in a foul mood. Again.”

Connor grunted, pressing his advantage. His muscles burned with the effort, but the pain was welcome. A distraction from the weight that had settled on his shoulders since his father’s death.

Three months had passed, yet the burden of leadership still felt foreign, like a poorly fitted plaid. The scar above his right eyebrow, a souvenir from his first real battle, pulled tight as he frowned.



“Come now,” Ewan taunted, dancing back from Connor’s thrust. “Is that the best the mighty MacLeod can offer? My wee sister fights with more spirit.”

“Your sister is a terror,” Connor replied, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips, softening the hard planes of his face. “I’ve seen her with a wooden spoon.”

Ewan laughed, the sound carrying across the training yard where the scent of damp earth mingled with the salt tang from the sea. “Aye, and you should see her with a blade.”

He seized the moment of distraction, sweeping Ewan’s legs from beneath him with a well-placed boot. His friend landed hard on his back, sword clattering to the stones. Connor’s blade hovered at Ewan’s throat, the steel gleaming dully in the misty light.

“Yield?”

“I yield, ye great brute.” Ewan accepted Connor’s outstretched hand, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. “Though I maintain ’twas an unfair advantage. I was distracted by your ghastly face.”

“My face?” Connor arched a brow. “Have you looked in a mirror lately, man?”

“Mirrors break when I approach. ’Tis my curse to be too handsome for this world.”

Connor sheathed his sword, shaking his head at his friend’s nonsense. The training yard was coming to life as the morning mist burned away, revealing a sky the color of a bruise. Rain would come before midday, the old break in his arm, a reminder of a skirmish with the MacDonalds three summers past when they’d ventured too close to Bronmuir’s boundaries, telling him so.

From his vantage point, he could see the rugged coastline where Bronmuir Keep

stood proudly on its rocky promontory. To the north, across the sea loch and beyond the rolling hills, lay Dunvegan Castle, seat of the MacLeod clan chief. Though Bronmuir was a smaller branch of the clan, they maintained their allegiance to the main line at Dunvegan, sending men when called and paying their due tribute. To the east, the jagged peaks of the Cuillin Hills cut a dramatic silhouette against the sky, while to the south, the lands of Clan MacDonald sprawled, their ancestral enemies, whose territory at Duntulm Castle, lay on the northern peninsula of the island.

“My laird,” a voice called from the keep’s entrance. Young Callum, barely twelve summers old, stood with his chest puffed out importantly. “Moirra asks for ye. Says ’tis urgent.”

Connor nodded, clapping Ewan on the shoulder. “Duty calls.”

“It always does,” Ewan replied, tone light but his eyes serious. “Go on, then. I’ll finish drilling the lads.”

The great hall of Bronmuir Keep had seen better days. Tapestries that once blazed with color now hung faded and threadbare, much like the clan’s fortunes. Connor strode across the rush-strewn floor, the dried herbs releasing their faint, sweet scent as his boots crushed them. He acknowledged the nods of respect from those gathered for the morning meal, the aroma of oatcakes and smoked fish making his empty stomach growl.

Moirra waited by the hearth, her gray-streaked hair pulled back in a severe braid. The clan’s healer had been a fixture at Bronmuir since before Connor’s birth, and she’d never been one to mince words.

“We’re low on yarrow and comfrey,” she said without preamble, her weathered hands working a piece of wool as she spoke. “And the feverfew is all but gone. With summer upon us, we’ll need more for the wee ones when the fevers come.”

Connor rubbed his jaw, feeling the scratch of stubble. "Can we not gather more from the glen?"

"Aye, if the MacDonalds havena trampled it all in their patrols," Moira replied, her mouth a grim line. "I'll send the girls out, but they canna go far without protection."

"I'll arrange an escort," Connor said. Another task for the too-few men they had left. With Cameron captured and Brodie missing, their numbers were stretched thin as winter porridge.

Moira's weathered hand came to rest on his arm. "You look tired, lad. Are ye sleeping at all?"

"Enough," he lied. Sleep had become a luxury he could ill afford, with worries circling his mind like hungry wolves. Dark shadows beneath his eyes betrayed his exhaustion.

"Hmph." The sound conveyed her disbelief eloquently. "Your father worked himself into an early grave, and you're following the same path."

"My father was cut down by MacDonald steel," Connor corrected, his voice hardening. "And I mean to see them pay for it."

"Revenge is a poor bedfellow, Connor MacLeod." Moira's eyes, sharp as a hawk's, held his. "It gives no warmth and leaves ye colder come the dawn."

Before Connor could reply, the hall doors swung open with a bang that echoed through the stone chamber. A rider stood in the entrance, rain-soaked and mud-splattered, the smell of wet wool and horse following him inside.

"News from the south," the man called, his voice carrying across the suddenly silent

hall.

Connor strode forward, gesturing for the messenger to approach. “Speak.”

“King James has landed in Ireland with French support. They say he means to reclaim his throne, starting with Ireland, then Scotland.” The man accepted a cup of ale from a serving girl, draining it in one long swallow, foam clinging to his mustache. “The clans are choosing sides. Some for King William, others for James.”

A murmur rippled through the hall like wind through summer heather. The Glorious Revolution, they’d called it when Protestant William of Orange had taken the throne from Catholic James last year. There had been little glorious about it for the Highland clans, caught between loyalties old and new.

“And what of the MacDonalds?” Connor asked, though he suspected the answer.

“They’ve declared for King James,” the messenger confirmed. “As have the MacKinnons and most of the western clans.”

Connor nodded slowly, broad shoulders tensing beneath his linen shirt. It was as he’d expected. The MacDonalds had always been loyal to the Stuart line, and with French gold flowing into Jacobite coffers, they stood to gain much by backing James.

“What word from the MacLeods of Dunvegan?” Connor asked, his voice low. The other branch of Clan MacLeod had often charted their own course in matters of politics.

The messenger wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “They haven’t declared yet, but rumors say the chief leans toward William. They’ve always been canny about picking the winning side.”

“We must call a council,” said Old Fergus, the eldest of the clan elders. His rheumy eyes fixed on Connor from beneath bushy white brows. “The MacLeods must decide where we stand.”

“Aye,” Connor agreed, though the thought of another council filled him with dread. Hours of circular arguments while action was needed. “This evening, after the day’s work is done.”

The messenger cleared his throat. “There’s more, my laird. The MacDonalds hold your brother at their keep at Duntulm. They say they’ll exchange him for the Bronmuir Brooch and a pledge of allegiance to King James.”

A cold fury settled in Connor’s chest, tightening around his heart like an iron band. “Do they now?”

“Aye, sir. They sent riders to spread the word.”

“Then they’ll wait a long time,” Connor said, his voice dangerously soft. “The MacLeods do not bow to threats.”

The hall emptied gradually as people returned to their tasks, the buzz of conversation following them out. Connor remained by the hearth, staring into the flames as if they might offer counsel, the fire’s heat bringing a flush to his tanned face.

“What will you do?” Moira asked quietly, coming to stand beside him.

“What I must,” he replied. “What my father would have done.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

Connor’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know yet.”

The old woman sighed. “Your father was a good man, but stubborn as a Highland stag. It did him no favors in the end.”

“He died protecting our people,” Connor said sharply.

“Aye, he did.” Moira’s voice softened. “But he might still be alive had he bent a little instead of standing rigid as an oak in a storm.”

She left him then, her footsteps fading across the hall. He remained, the fire’s warmth failing to reach the cold core of dread within him. Cameron was alive. That much was good news. But the MacDonalds’ terms were impossible.

The Bronmuir Brooch was more than just a treasure. It was the heart of their clan. A Norse princess had gifted the large silver and gold brooch, set with three ancient blue stones that shimmered like the deepest waters of the loch, to the first MacLeod of Bronmuir. Legend told that it was crafted from metal taken from a Viking longship, and the stones were the tears of a selkie who fell in love with the first MacLeod laird.

For generations, the brooch had protected the clan from disaster. Connor had worn it at his father’s funeral, feeling its weight against his chest like a promise.

To surrender the brooch would be to surrender their very identity. And pledging to James would make them enemies of King William’s forces.

A fine trap, and one with no easy escape.

The rain had started in earnest by the time he made his way to the small kirk that stood within the keep’s walls. Water dripped from the eaves, creating small rivulets that ran between the flagstones. His father’s grave was still new, the earth mounded beneath a simple stone marker. Hamish MacLeod, it read. Laird of Bronmuir. Defender of His People.

No mention of the man himself. The rumbling laugh that could fill the great hall, the hands that had been gentle enough to braid a small boy's hair yet strong enough to wield a sword with deadly precision.

"I could use your counsel now," Connor said softly, the rain masking his words from any who might pass by. The cold drops mingled with the salt spray from the sea, soaking through his woolen plaid.

"The clan looks to me, but I dinna ken the right path."

The memory of his father's final moments came unbidden. Hamish, pale with blood loss, his hand gripping Cameron's as they all stood by their father's bedside. The metallic scent of blood had filled the chamber, mixing with the herbs Moira had burned to ease his passing.

"The clan comes first," he had rasped. "Always. Remember that, my sons. The MacLeods must survive."

Simple words, yet the weight of them had nearly crushed Connor in the months since. The clan must survive. But at what cost? And how could he ensure their safety when enemies pressed from all sides? It should have been Cameron standing here as laird. Steady, thoughtful Cameron who'd prepared his whole life for this burden. Not Connor, who'd been content to ride and hunt and wench while his brother learned the responsibilities of leadership.

A shadow fell across the grave, and he looked up to find Ewan standing nearby, rain dripping from his cloak, his dark hair plastered to his forehead.

"I thought I might find ye here," Ewan said, his usual levity absent. "The scouts have returned."

Connor straightened, pushing aside his private grief. “And?”

“MacDonald riders, a dozen strong, moving along our border. They’re not making any effort to hide their presence.”

“A message, then,” Connor said. “They want us to know they’re there.”

“Aye, and there’s more. They’ve brought Cameron with them.” Ewan’s expression darkened. “They’ve got him bound like a common criminal, parading him for all to see.”

His hand went to the hilt of his sword, a reflexive gesture. The leather-wrapped grip was smooth from years of use, worn to the contours of his palm. “Where are they now?”

“Camped near the stone circle at Glen Mòr. They’ve made no move to cross our lands, but they’re close enough to cause trouble if they’ve a mind to.”

“How many men can we muster by nightfall?”

Ewan’s brow furrowed. “Twenty, perhaps twenty-five, if we include the lads barely old enough to hold a sword. But Connor, we canna meet them in open battle. They outnumber us three to one.”

“I dinna intend to fight them,” Connor said, already striding toward the keep, his boots squelching in the mud. “Not directly.”

Ewan hurried to keep pace. “What, then? Ye have that look about ye. The one that usually ends with us in some manner of trouble.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, a smile tugged at his lips. “When have I ever led



you astray, Ewan MacLeod?”

“Shall I count the ways?” Ewan retorted. “There was that business with the MacDonald cattle when we were sixteen?—”

“That was your idea.”

“—and the time we ‘borrowed’ the laird’s prized stallion?—”

“Also your idea.”

“—not to mention the incident with the miller’s daughters?—”

“That,” Connor said firmly, “was entirely mutual.”

They had reached the armory, a low-ceilinged room lined with weapons and shields bearing the MacLeod crest. The air was heavy with the smell of oil and leather, mixed with the metallic tang of steel. Connor began inspecting bows, testing their draw with his powerful arms.

“We’ll need these,” he said, selecting several. “And as many arrows as the men can carry.”

Understanding dawned on Ewan’s face. “A night raid?”

“Aye. Not to attack, but to send our own message.” Connor met his friend’s gaze. “The MacDonalds think to use my brother as bait, to draw us into a trap of their making. I mean to show them that the MacLeods are not so easily manipulated.”

“And Cameron? We canna leave him in their hands.”

“No,” Connor agreed, his voice hardening. “We cannot. But neither can we meet their demands. We need time, Ewan. Time to gather our strength and find a way to free Cameron without sacrificing everything else.”

Ewan nodded slowly. “So we rattle their cage. Let them know we’re watching.”

“Exactly. And perhaps,” Connor added, selecting a particularly fine bow for himself, running his thumb along the smooth yew, “we might create an opportunity to speak with Cameron. If he knows we haven’t abandoned him...”

“It might keep his spirits up,” Ewan finished. “Aye, ’tis worth the risk.”

He clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Choose ten men. Our best archers. We leave at dusk.”

“And the council meeting? The elders will expect ye to be there.”

Connor’s expression hardened, the scar above his eye standing out white against his flushed skin. “The elders can wait. My brother cannot.”

As Ewan departed to make preparations, Connor remained in the armory, methodically checking each arrow for straightness and fletching. The familiar task allowed his mind to work through the complexities of their situation.

The MacLeods stood at a crossroads. To the south, the MacDonalds and their Jacobite allies. To the east, King William’s forces, demanding loyalty. And caught between them, a clan weakened by loss and division.

His father’s words echoed in his mind. The clan comes first. Always.

Connor ran a thumb along the edge of an arrowhead, feeling its deadly sharpness.

Tonight, he would remind the MacDonalds that even a wounded wolf had teeth. And perhaps, if fortune favored them, he might find a way to free Cameron without plunging the clan into open war.

But as he worked, a nagging doubt persisted. What if there was no path that led to both Cameron's freedom and the clan's survival? What then would he choose?

His hand went to his chest, feeling the empty space where the Bronmuir Brooch should have been. The ancient talisman with its three blue stones remained safely hidden in the castle's secret chamber, where it had watched over generations of MacLeods, guiding them through dark times. Connor could only hope the brooch's power would reach him even now, when he needed guidance most.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:51 pm*

### Chapter Three

The suitcase lay open on the bed, surrounded by neat piles of clothing organized by category and color. Kate had been packing for three hours, which was ridiculous considering she was only going for two weeks. The problem wasn't what to bring. Her color-coded packing list took care of that, but rather the nagging voice in her head that kept asking what the hell she was doing.

Spontaneous wasn't in her vocabulary. It wasn't even in her zip code. Yet here she was, about to fly across an ocean to surprise her boyfriend, who didn't even know she was coming.

"This is what normal people do," she told her reflection in the floor-length mirror propped against the wall as she folded another sweater. "Surprise visits. Grand gestures. Being impulsive."

Her reflection looked skeptical.

Kate checked her list again. Passport? Check. Travel adapter? Check. Comfortable walking shoes, rain jacket, guidebook, toiletries? Check, check, check, check. She'd researched average temperatures on the Isle of Skye in June (cool and changeable), typical rainfall (frequent), and had even downloaded three different weather apps to monitor conditions.

So much for spontaneity.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Mandy.

Stopping by before my flight to the Keys! Got something for your trip!

Kate smiled. Normally, she'd never invite a client to her home. Professional boundaries were sacred, but Mandy wasn't just any client anymore. Six months ago, after Mandy's previous relationship imploded, Kate had found her sobbing and dangerously drunk at Velvet, a club downtown. She'd brought Mandy to her apartment, let her sleep it off on the couch, and they'd formed an odd friendship since then.

Door code is the same. I'm surrounded by luggage.

Twenty minutes later, she stared in horror at the lacy, barely there lingerie Mandy had dumped on top of her meticulously packed suitcase.

"I can't wear that," Kate protested. "It's... It's practically dental floss."

Mandy, her blonde curls bouncing as she shook her head, looked much better than someone who'd just had their heart broken should. "Trust me, Angus will love it. All men do."

"I'm not trying to seduce him," Kate said, though even to her own ears, the protest sounded weak. "I'm just going to surprise him."

"By flying thousands of miles? Honey, that's not just a surprise, that's a statement." Mandy sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to disturb the packing piles. "And statements should be backed up with action. Preferably naked action."

Kate couldn't help but laugh. "How are you so chipper? Shouldn't you be drowning in ice cream and tears right now?"

Something flickered across Mandy's face, a flash of pain quickly masked by

determination.

“I did that for the first twenty-four hours. Then I decided Peter wasn’t worth my tears.”

She shrugged. “Besides, I’m channeling all my romantic energy into you now. Someone deserves a happy ending.”

A pang of guilt rushed through her. Here was Mandy, fresh from heartbreak, pushing her toward happiness while she herself prepared to spend months on a remote island restoring a fort. “Are you sure about the Dry Tortugas? It’s pretty isolated.”

“That’s the point. No cell service, no dating apps, no chance of running into Peter and his supermodel.” Mandy glanced at her watch. “I should get going. My flight leaves in three hours.”

“I still can’t believe you’re just... leaving everything behind.”

Mandy picked up the lingerie and tucked it into a corner of Kate’s suitcase. “Sometimes you have to burn it all down to start fresh. Now, promise me you’ll wear this. At least once.”

“Fine,” Kate conceded, knowing it was easier than arguing.

After walking Mandy to the door with promises to stay in touch, she returned to her packing, adding a few more practical items to counterbalance the lingerie. As she worked, she pulled up information about the MacDonald Distillery on her tablet. The company website showed sweeping views of the rugged Skye coastline, ancient stone buildings nestled against dramatic cliffs, and rows of oak barrels aging fine whisky. According to the “About Us” section, the distillery had been in the MacDonald family for generations, producing award-winning single malts using traditional

methods.

There was a photo of Angus standing proudly beside his father, both men wearing kilts and holding glasses of amber liquid. Kate zoomed in on Angus's face, that familiar charming smile, the sandy blond hair ruffled by the wind, those green eyes that always seemed to be laughing at some private joke.

Five months. They'd been dating for five whole months, which was practically a lifetime in Kate's relationship history. Things were good between them. Comfortable. Easy. He didn't pressure her for more than she was ready to give, and he respected her need for space. They'd settled into a pleasant routine of weekend dates and occasional sleepovers, always at her place because his apartment was perpetually being renovated (or so he claimed).

If she were analyzing their relationship for Love Lasting, what would she say? The thought made her uncomfortable. She'd tried countless times to apply her "gift" to her own relationships, and much to her annoyance, it simply refused to work whenever she'd tried.

Then there was the downside of her job. Witnessing endless patterns of deception and betrayal had turned her into a jaded, suspicious woman, who scrutinized every romantic gesture. Perhaps it was better this way. She wasn't sure she could handle seeing the truth about her own situation with the same clinical detachment she applied to strangers.

Kate closed the tablet and zipped her suitcase, making sure the AirTag was tucked away in an inner pocket since she was checking the bag. This trip was about taking a chance, stepping outside her comfort zone. About showing Angus, and herself, that she could be spontaneous and romantic.

"It's going to be great," she told herself firmly. "Totally worth the anxiety."

Her flight left in six hours. She'd already arranged for a cab to the airport, had downloaded her boarding pass, and had set three alarms to make sure she wouldn't lose track of the time. Everything was under control, except for the knot of uncertainty that had taken up residence in her stomach.

Kate tried to distract herself by reading more about the Isle of Skye. She'd bookmarked several sites online and the guidebook she'd purchased was filled with gorgeous photographs of misty mountains, crystal-clear pools, and ancient stone circles. One section detailed local legends, tales of faeries, shape-shifting selkies, and time-slips where unwary travelers found themselves transported to the past.

"The Isle of Skye is known for its thin places," the book explained, "where the veil between worlds is believed to be especially permeable. The Fairy Glen, the Fairy Pools, and certain ancient stone circles are all said to be locations where one might encounter the Good Folk or experience supernatural phenomena."

A snort escaped, along with a rather dramatic eye roll. The "Good Folk" sounded like a euphemism for something decidedly not good. She flipped to the practical section about food and accommodations.

By the time her cab arrived, Kate had convinced herself that this was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. People surprised their significant others all the time. It wasn't weird or desperate or a sign that she was trying too hard. It was romantic.

The cab driver, a middle-aged man with coal black hair, hefted her suitcase into the back of the SUV. "Vacation?"

"Yes," Kate said, settling into the back seat. "I'm going to Scotland."

"Never been. My wife wants to go, see all those castles and stuff." He pulled away from the curb. "You meeting someone there?"



“My boyfriend,” Kate said, then added, “He doesn’t know I’m coming.”

The driver chuckled. “Surprise, huh? Hope he’s not the jumpy type.”

“He’ll be fine,” she said, more to herself than to the driver. “He’s always saying I should be more spontaneous.”

“Well, flying across an ocean unannounced is about as spontaneous as it gets,” the driver said, catching her eye in the rearview mirror. “Good luck.”

The airport was crowded, but Kate navigated security and found her gate with plenty of time to spare. She settled into a seat and pulled out her phone, tempted to text Angus. Just a casual message, nothing that would give away her plans, but something to confirm he was still in Scotland, still at the distillery.

Her finger hovered over his name in her contacts. What would she even say?

Hey, just checking in. Still in Scotland?

Too obvious.

Miss you, how’s the family business?

Too needy.

Before she could decide, the gate agent announced boarding for first-class passengers. She gathered her carry-on and boarding pass, her heart racing with a mixture of excitement and anxiety.

The first-class cabin was everything Mandy had promised. Spacious seats that reclined into beds, personal entertainment systems, and attentive flight attendants

offering champagne before takeoff. She accepted a glass, thinking she could use the liquid courage.

As the plane took off, she gazed out the window at Atlanta, growing smaller beneath her. For better or worse, she was committed now. In a little over eight hours, she'd be in Scotland, and shortly after that, she'd be face-to-face with Angus.

The champagne, combined with the gentle hum of the engines, soon lulled Kate into a drowsy state as she closed her eyes, letting her mind drift to thoughts of misty Scottish landscapes and the look of surprise on Angus's face when he saw her.

She must have dozed off, because the next thing she knew, the voice of the flight attendant asking the man across the aisle what he wanted to drink with dinner woke her. Kate straightened her seat and accepted the meal, some kind of Thai chicken dish that was surprisingly good for airplane food.

After dinner, with the cabin lights dimmed and most passengers settling in for sleep, Kate pulled out her guidebook again. She flipped to a section about the history of the Isle of Skye, reading about clan warfare, ancient keeps, and legendary battles.

One passage in particular caught her attention.

"The ruins of Bronmuir Keep stand as a testament to one of Skye's most tragic tales. In 1689, the laird of the clan was betrayed and murdered by his bride-to-be, a MacDonald. It was all part of a plot to end the MacLeod line. According to legend, the laird's spirit still haunts the ruins, searching for justice and for the love that was denied him."

Kate frowned. MacLeods and MacDonalds, two clans with a history of bitter rivalry, according to the book. According to the book, the main branch of the MacLeods still had a laird in residence in Dunvegan Castle on the island. Angus was a MacDonald.

She wondered if these old feuds still resonated in modern Skye, or if they were just colorful stories for tourists.

She read on, learning a little about the Jacobite risings, the Highland Clearances, and the cultural renaissance that had revitalized Gaelic language and traditions in recent decades. The history was fascinating, but eventually, the gentle rocking of the plane and the soft drone of the engines lulled her to sleep.

Kate woke to the announcement that they were beginning their descent into Edinburgh. She blinked groggily, disoriented for a moment before remembering where she was and why. A glance at her watch told her it was early morning local time. She'd sleep through most of the flight.

After landing and making it through customs, she found herself in the arrivals hall of Edinburgh Airport, suddenly aware of the enormity of what she was doing. Pure panic flashed through her before she took a deep breath.

She was here, in Scotland. But instead of immediately traveling to Skye, she had decided on a more scenic route. A three-day guided tour through the Highlands. That way, if she changed her mind at any point, she could simply sightsee all around the country for the next two weeks and Angus would never know she'd flown all this way. And if, after the tour, she still wanted to be spontaneous, then she would arrive at the distillery to surprise him.

She checked her phone. No messages from Angus. She sent a quick text to Mandy to let her know she'd arrived safely, then headed over to meet her tour guide.

"Welcome to Scotland," the cheerful guide smiled as she collected Kate and several other tourists.

"We'll be taking a lovely scenic route to the Isle of Skye, including a ride on The

Jacobite steam train, what you might know as the ‘Hogwarts Express’ from the Harry Potter films.”

Over the next two days, Kate found herself mesmerized by the breathtaking landscape of the Scottish Highlands. They journeyed across the haunting expanse of Rannoch Moor, through the dramatic valley of Glen Coe, and alongside the mysterious waters of Loch Ness. The steam train journey across the Glenfinnan Viaduct was everything she’d imagined from the films, the locomotive puffing clouds of steam against a backdrop of mountains and glens.

On the third day, they crossed the bridge to the Isle of Skye. Kate’s apprehension had transformed into excitement as they explored the Old Man of Storr and stopped for photos at the iconic Eilean Donan Castle.

When the tour finally concluded, a surge of confidence filled her. The island’s wild beauty, dramatic coastlines and misty mountains rising against pearl-gray skies, was even more stunning than Angus had described.

“Where to, lass?” the taxi driver asked, loading her suitcase into the trunk after she’d bid farewell to her tour group.

“The MacDonald Distillery, please,” Kate said, sliding into the back seat, feeling far more ready for her surprise reunion than she would have been three days ago.

The driver, an older man with a thick Scottish accent, nodded. “Aye, the distillery. Lovely place. You here for the tour?”

“Something like that,” Kate said, not wanting to explain the whole situation. “How long will it take to get there?”

“About thirty minutes, depending on the sheep,” the driver said with a chuckle. “They

have a habit of blocking the road whenever they fancy.”

As they drove through the winding roads, Kate was captivated by the landscape, a patchwork of greens and purples, punctuated by rocky outcroppings and the occasional white-washed cottage. The sky was a constantly changing canvas of clouds and sunlight, casting dramatic shadows across the hills.

True to the driver’s prediction, they had to stop twice for sheep crossing the road. During the second stop, the driver pointed to a crumbling stone keep on a nearby cliff overlooking the water.

“That there’s the ruins of Bronmuir Keep,” he said. “Ancient MacLeod stronghold, it was. There’s a wee path up to it if you’re interested in having a look. Tourists love it.”

Kate recognized the name from her guidebook. “The one with the ghost story?”

The driver nodded, his expression serious. “Aye, that’s the one. They say Connor MacLeod, the laird, was murdered by his bride. Betrayed for love, he was.” He shook his head. “Some say his spirit still walks the ruins, searching for revenge.”

“Do you believe that?” Kate asked, intrigued despite her skepticism.

The driver shrugged. “I’ve lived on Skye all my life, lass. I’ve seen things that would make a person’s hair stand on end.”

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror. “Would you like to stop and have a look? It’s on our way, more or less.”

Kate hesitated. She was eager to get to Angus, but the ruins looked hauntingly beautiful against the misty landscape. “Sure, why not? Just for a few minutes.”

The driver pulled over to a small gravel parking area and pointed to a narrow path winding up the hill. “Take your time. The distillery isn’t going anywhere.”

She climbed out of the taxi, zipping up her lightweight jacket against the cool breeze off the water. The path was steeper than it looked, and she was out of breath by the time she reached the ruins.

Bronmuir Keep must have been impressive in its day. Even now, the remaining walls stood tall against the sky, their weathered stones telling silent stories of battles and banquets, of lives lived and lost within these walls.

Kate wandered through what must have been the great hall, trying to imagine it filled with people. Fierce warriors in kilts, ladies in long dresses, servants hurrying about their duties. Had Connor MacLeod really been murdered here? Had his MacDonald bride truly betrayed him? According to what she’d read, he’d married the woman in order to bring peace between the two clans, and to free his brother whom the MacDonalds had taken for ransom.

A sudden gust of wind whistled through the ruins, carrying with it a mournful sound that raised goosebumps on Kate’s arms. Just the wind, she told herself firmly. Not a ghost, not a laird searching for justice.

She took a few photos with her phone, then headed back down the path to the waiting taxi. As she walked, she couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching her. She glanced back at the ruins, half-expecting to see a figure standing among the stones.

There was nothing there, of course. Just ancient walls and the ever-present Skye mist.

Back in the taxi, she tried to focus on the excitement of seeing Angus, pushing aside the strange melancholy that had settled over her at the ruins. The driver seemed to

sense her mood and kept quiet for the remainder of the journey, allowing her to gather her thoughts.

Finally, they turned onto a long driveway. At the end stood an impressive stone building with the words “MacDonald Distillery” emblazoned above the entrance. Several cars were parked in the lot, suggesting the place was busy.

“Here we are, lass,” the driver said, pulling up to the entrance. “The famous MacDonald Distillery. They make some of the finest whisky in Scotland, if you ask me.”

Kate paid the fare, adding a generous tip for the detour to the ruins. “Thank you for the tour,” she said, gathering her suitcase.

“My pleasure. Enjoy your stay.” The driver hesitated, then added, “And mind how you go. Some surprises aren’t always welcome.”

Before Kate could ask what he meant, he had driven away, leaving her standing alone in front of the distillery. She took a deep breath, smoothed her hair, and wheeled her suitcase toward the entrance.

The reception area was elegant, with polished wood floors, display cases showing the distillery’s award-winning whiskies, and large windows overlooking the production facilities. A young woman sat behind the desk, typing on a computer.

“Welcome to MacDonald Distillery,” she said with a bright smile. “Are you here for the tour?”

“Actually, I’m looking for Angus MacDonald,” Kate said. “Is he available?”

The receptionist’s smile faltered slightly. “Mr. MacDonald is quite busy today. Do

you have an appointment?”

“No, I’m... I’m a friend. From America.” Kate realized how inadequate that sounded. “Could you just let him know Kate is here? I’d like to surprise him.”

The receptionist looked uncertain. “I’m not sure if?—”

“It’s alright, Fiona,” a male voice interrupted. “I’ll handle this.”

Kate turned to see an older man approaching. Tall, distinguished, with the same sandy hair as Angus, though liberally streaked with gray. Angus’s father, she realized, recognizing him from the website photo.

“You must be Kate,” he said, tone carefully neutral. “Angus mentioned you.”

“Mr. MacDonald,” Kate said, extending her hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I hope you don’t mind the surprise visit. I came to see Angus.”

“Aye, well, that might be a bit complicated at the moment.” He glanced around the reception area, which had begun to fill with visitors. “Perhaps we should speak privately. This way, please.”

Confused by his reaction, Kate followed him down a hallway to a small office. The knot of uncertainty in her stomach had grown tighter. Why had she decided to be spontaneous? She was practical. This was what happened when one stepped outside of one’s normal behavior.

“Please, sit down,” Mr. MacDonald said, gesturing to a chair. He remained standing, his expression unreadable. “I’m afraid Angus isn’t here at the moment. He’s at the house, preparing for tonight’s celebration.”



“Celebration?” Kate echoed.

“Aye.” Mr. MacDonald hesitated, then sighed. “I’m sorry you’ve come all this way, but I think there’s been a misunderstanding. Angus is engaged to be married. The engagement party is tonight.”

The words hit Kate like a physical blow as she blinked. “Engaged? But that’s... That’s not possible. We’ve been dating for five months.”

Mr. MacDonald’s expression softened with what looked like genuine sympathy.

“I’m truly sorry, lass. Angus has been engaged to Amanda Albertson for years. The wedding is set for September.”

“There must be some mistake,” Kate said, her voice sounding distant to her own ears. “Angus and I... We’re together. He was just in Atlanta last week.”

“Angus travels frequently for business,” Mr. MacDonald said carefully. “I can’t speak to his... personal arrangements while abroad. But here, in Scotland, he is engaged to Amanda. Our families have been planning this union since they were small.”

The room tilted. This couldn’t be happening. It was too absurd, too cruel. She had flown across an ocean, only to discover that her boyfriend, her supposedly perfect, respectful boyfriend, was engaged to someone else?

“I think I need some air,” she managed to say, rising unsteadily to her feet.

Mr. MacDonald nodded. “Of course. Take all the time you need. There’s a garden behind the visitor center, quite peaceful. When you’re ready, I can arrange transportation to wherever you’d like to go.”

Kate mumbled her thanks and fled the office. The rolling suitcase clattered to the stone floor behind her. She was barely aware of where she was going before she found herself outside, in a small, manicured garden with a view of the sea. The beauty of it seemed to mock her as she sank onto a stone bench, her legs no longer able to support her.

Engaged. Angus was engaged. Apparently, had been engaged all along.

And the worst part? She hadn't seen it coming. She, who could predict the end of any relationship, had been completely blindsided by her own.

The irony would have been funny if it weren't so devastating.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:51 pm*

### Chapter Four

“What the actual?—”

Kate slumped over on the stone bench in the garden, staring across the green at the MacDonald Distillery, trying to make sense of the impossible. Her mind kept circling back to the same bewildering fact. Angus was engaged. Had been engaged. The entire time they were dating.

Five months of dinners and weekend trips and lazy Sunday mornings. Five months of what she'd thought was the beginning of something real. Sure, it wasn't love at first sight, but she'd thought they were good together, and she cared for him. A great deal. Otherwise, she wouldn't have dragged herself across the ocean to surprise him.

“Bloody stupid.” She muttered, liking the phrase she'd heard at baggage claim.

It had all been a lie.

She pulled out her phone with trembling hands and scrolled through her photos. There they were. Angus and Kate at a Braves game, Angus and Kate hiking in North Georgia, Angus and Kate at her company Valentine's party. He looked so genuine in every picture, his arm around her shoulders, his smile warm and inviting.

Had any of it been real?

A text notification from Mandy popped up on her screen.

Have you surprised him yet? Details, please!

Her throat tightened. Poor Mandy, so invested in her romantic adventure when Mandy's own had just imploded. And now she would have to tell her that they'd both been played for fools.

Before she could respond, a commotion near the distillery entrance caught her attention. A sleek black Range Rover had pulled up, and a small crowd was gathering. She watched as Angus stepped out of the driver's side, looking exactly as she remembered. Tall, handsome, with that easy confidence that had first attracted her to him.

Then he walked around to the passenger side and opened the door with a flourish. A woman emerged. Slender, elegant, with shoulder-length auburn hair and the kind of effortless beauty that made Kate instantly conscious of her travel-rumpled appearance. The woman slipped her hand into his, and they shared a quick, intimate kiss before turning toward the entrance.

Kate's heart stuttered. That had to be Amanda. The fiancée.

Without thinking, she stood and moved toward them, drawn by some masochistic need to confirm what she already knew. Gravel crunched beneath her feet with each determined step. The rusted iron gate creaked in protest as she pushed it open, a salt-scented breeze carried the distant cry of a seagull across the yard.

As she approached, Angus looked up and saw her. The color drained from his face.

"Kate?" His voice was strangled. "What are you doing here?"

The woman, Amanda, turned to look at Kate with polite curiosity. "Angus, darling, who's this?"

Years of professional composure kicked in, despite the emotional earthquake happening inside her, as Kate straightened her spine.

“I’m Kate Adams,” she said, extending her hand with practiced ease. “Angus’s girlfriend from Atlanta.”

Amanda’s perfectly shaped brows rose slightly, but her smile never faltered as she took Kate’s hand.

“Ah, yes. Kate.”

Her voice was soft, melodic, with a refined Scottish lilt. “I suspected there might be someone.”

Angus made a choking sound. “Amanda, I can explain?—”

The stunning woman squeezed his arm gently. “No need, darling. We’ve discussed this.”

She turned back to Kate, her eyes surprisingly kind. “Men like Angus often need to... sow their wild oats before settling down. I’ve always known that about him.”

It was as if she’d stepped into some bizarre alternate reality. The analytical part of her brain, the part that wasn’t screaming in betrayal, noted the calm calculation behind Amanda’s words. This wasn’t news to her. She’d known all along.

“Our engagement has been arranged since we were children,” Amanda continued, voice matter-of-fact.

“It’s as much a business merger as a marriage. The MacDonalds and the Albertsons have been planning to unite our distilleries since before I was born.” She smiled at

Angus with genuine affection.

“That we happen to care for each other is a fortunate bonus.”

Kate’s mind raced, processing this new information with clinical detachment even as her heart crumbled. She’d been the side piece. The foreign fling. The last hurrah before Angus settled into his predestined life.

“I see,” she said, voice surprisingly steady. “And when were you planning to mention this arrangement to me, Angus?”

Angus looked trapped, his gaze darting between the two women. “Kate, it’s complicated. What we had was real, but?—”

“What you had was temporary,” Amanda finished for him, not unkindly. “As was always intended.”

She turned to Kate. “I don’t blame you, you know. Angus can be quite charming when he wants to be. And I imagine he never explicitly mentioned his engagement.”

“No,” Kate said, the word bitter on her tongue. “He most certainly did not.”

She turned and walked away before either of them could respond, her back straight, her steps measured. Only when she was certain she was out of sight did she allow her composure to crumble.

She ducked behind a storage building, pressed her back against the cool stone wall, and slid to the ground. The tears came then, hot and furious, her body shaking with silent sobs. How could she have been so stupid? So blind? So utterly, pathetically naïve?

When the first wave of grief had passed, leaving her hollow and exhausted, Kate wiped her face with her sleeve and tried to think logically. She needed to get away from here. Find a hotel, change her flight to go home, and pretend this humiliating disaster had never happened.

But first, she needed her suitcase, which she'd left at reception.

With a sniff, Kate pulled herself to her feet and made her way back to the visitor center, taking a detour to avoid any chance of running into Angus and Amanda again. She found a restroom and splashed cold water on her face, wincing at her reflection. Red-rimmed eyes, blotchy cheeks, and hair a tangled mess from running her hands through it.

"You're fine," she told her reflection sternly. "This is not the end of the world. Men are trash. They lie all the time. You knew that already."

But Angus hadn't seemed like trash. He'd seemed genuine, considerate, respectful. The perfect boyfriend.

The perfect liar.

Kate reapplied her pale pink lip gloss, squared her shoulders, and headed back to reception. The young woman behind the desk, Fiona, looked up with a sympathetic smile that suggested news traveled fast in the distillery.

"I've called a taxi for you, Miss Adams," she said gently. "It should be here in about ten minutes. Mr. MacDonald suggested the Skye Lodge Hotel in Portree. It's quite lovely, and they usually have rooms available, even in high season."

"Thank you," Kate said, touched by the woman's kindness. "And my suitcase?"

“Right here,” Fiona said, gesturing to where it stood beside the desk. “Would you like some tea while you wait? Or perhaps something stronger? We do offer whisky tastings.”

She almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. “Whisky might be appropriate, but I think I’ll pass. Thank you, though.”

Once settled into one of the comfortable chairs in the reception area, she tried to ignore the curious glances from the staff and visitors. Her phone buzzed again, another text from Mandy.

Helloooo? Did you find him? Is he surprised? Are you guys having hot reunion sex right now?

Kate sighed, and with a single sniff, typed a response.

He’s engaged. To someone else. Will call when I can.

She hit send, then turned off her phone before Mandy could respond. No way could she handle sympathy right now, not when she was barely holding herself together.

The taxi arrived promptly, and Kate was grateful for the driver’s taciturn nature. He loaded her suitcase into the trunk without comment and drove her to Portree in blessed silence, leaving her to stare out the window at the passing landscape without having to make polite conversation.

The Skye Lodge Hotel was indeed lovely. A charming stone building overlooking Portree Harbor, with hanging baskets of colorful flowers decorating the entrance. The receptionist was efficient and discreet, checking her into a comfortable room with a view of the water.



Once alone, she flopped onto the bed and stared blankly at the wall. She should call the airline, book a return flight. She should call Mandy, give her the full story. And maybe she should order room service, eat something, take a shower.

Instead, she did none of those things. She simply sat, numb and hollow, watching the light shift as clouds passed over the sun.

Eventually, restlessness drove her to her feet. She couldn't stay in this room, not with her thoughts circling like vultures. She needed air, movement, and distraction.

With a scowl on her face, Kate grabbed her jacket and headed out, leaving her phone behind. The town of Portree was picturesque, with colorful buildings lining the harbor and narrow streets winding up the hillside. Under different circumstances, she would have enjoyed exploring its shops and cafes, taking photos to share with friends' back home.

Now, she barely registered her surroundings as she walked, her feet carrying her away from the town center and toward the outskirts. The road climbed steadily, offering expansive views of the harbor and the mountains beyond. The wind picked up, carrying the scent of salt and heather, and Kate pulled her jacket tighter around herself.

She walked for what felt like hours, letting the physical exertion burn away some of her anger and hurt. By the time she stopped to catch her breath, the town was a distant cluster of buildings below her, and the sun was high in the sky, playing hide-and-seek with the clouds. The air carried the briny scent of the sea mixed with the sweet perfume of heather blooming across the hillsides.

In her aimless meandering, Kate realized she'd ended up on some kind of trail that led away from the road and up into the hills. A weathered signpost, its wood silvered with age, indicated she was on the path to the "Old Cemetery and Ruins." Curious

despite her emotional exhaustion, she decided to continue. Ancient graves seemed fitting company for her current mood.

The path grew steeper and more rugged, winding through heather and gorse. The purple and yellow flowers brushed against her jeans, occasionally snagging the fabric. Just when Kate was beginning to regret her choice, it wasn't like her sneakers were made for hiking. The trail crested a hill, and she found herself looking down at a small, secluded valley.

Nestled within it was one of the most hauntingly beautiful places she'd ever seen. A ruined chapel stood amid a scatter of weathered gravestones, some tilting precariously, others lying flat on the ground. Beyond the cemetery, perched dramatically on a cliff overlooking the churning sea, stood the crumbling remains of what must have been an impressive stone keep.

Not just any keep. Bronmuir Keep. Where the taxicab driver had stopped and she'd explored, but she hadn't seen the little cemetery. Then again, she hadn't walked away from the keep. The whole scene was bathed in the afternoon's muted light, giving it an otherworldly glow while the distant crash of waves provided a somber soundtrack.

Drawn by the peaceful solemnity of the place, Kate made her way down into the valley. The gravestones were ancient, their inscriptions worn away by centuries of wind and rain. Her fingers traced the faint remnants of letters on one marker, feeling the cool, rough texture of the stone beneath her fingertips. The chapel was little more than a shell, its roof long gone, its walls crumbling. But there was a strange comfort in its endurance, in the way nature had begun to reclaim it with ivy and moss.

Finding a flat boulder near the edge of the cliff, Kate sat and gazed out at the water. The sea stretched endlessly before her, a vast expanse of steel gray that melted into the horizon. White-capped waves crashed against the rocks below, sending up sprays of foam that glittered in the sunlight. The cemetery must have served the keep and its

inhabitants for generations.

A while later, she stood, stretching, then wandered among the graves, occasionally stopping to trace a name or date with her fingertip. These people had lived, loved, fought and died on this island, their triumphs and tragedies long forgotten.

It put her own heartbreak into perspective, somehow. A century from now, who would remember or care that Kate Adams had been foolish enough to fall for a man who was engaged to someone else?

As the sun dipped lower, casting long shadows across the cemetery, Kate became aware of another presence.

An old woman stood near the chapel ruins, bent and gnarled as the ancient rowan tree that grew beside the path. She wore a heavy wool cloak despite the mild afternoon, and her silver hair streamed loose in the wind.

Kate hadn't noticed her arrival, which was strange given the open landscape. It was as if the old woman had materialized from the very stones of the ruins.

"Good afternoon," she called, not wanting to startle the woman.

The old woman turned, fixing her with a penetrating gaze. Her eyes were dark and fathomless, set in a face lined with countless wrinkles.

"Ye've come at last," she said, her voice surprisingly strong. "I've been waiting."

Taken aback, she blinked. "I'm sorry, but I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

The old woman made a sound that might have been a laugh. "No mistake, lass. Ye're

the one with the broken heart, are ye not? The one who can see the end for others, but couldn't see her own?"

The wind blew, sending a chill across her cheek, an icy caress. How could this stranger know about her "gift"? About Angus?

"Who are you?" Kate asked, taking an involuntary step backward.

"Just an old woman who tends to these stones and the memories they hold," the woman replied, her weathered hand gesturing to the surrounding gravestones. A sly smile played at the corners of her mouth. "Though some might call me by other names."

The rational part of her brain suggested the woman was probably just an eccentric local, perhaps not entirely sound of mind. But something deeper, more instinctive, whispered that there was more to her than met the eye. She swallowed hard.

"What do you want with me?" she asked.

The old woman's lips curved in a smile that transformed her face, making her seem suddenly younger, almost mischievous.

"It's not what I want with ye, lass. It's what ye want for yerself."

She cocked her head, studying Kate.

"Ye came seeking love, did ye not? And found betrayal instead."

"How do you know that?" Her throat tightened.

"I know many things," the old woman said simply. "I know ye have a gift for seeing

the end of love in others, but not in yerself. I know ye build walls to protect yerself, then wonder why ye're alone. And I know ye dinna trust men after all ye have seen."

Each word struck like a physical blow. She felt exposed, vulnerable, as if this strange old woman could see right through to her core.

"What do you want?" Kate repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

The old woman moved closer, her dark eyes never leaving Kate's face. "The question is, what do you want? Do ye want to go back to yer safe, orderly life, where ye can predict everyone's heartbreak but yer own? Or do ye want something more?"

"I don't understand," she said, though a part of her felt she did, somehow.

"There are thin places in this world," the old woman said, gesturing around them. "Places where the veil between what is and what could be grows transparent. This is such a place." She pointed to a flat stone set on the ground near the chapel entrance. "And that is such a door."

She looked at the stone, unremarkable except for a spiral pattern carved into its surface, the lines almost worn away by time and weather. "A door to what?"

"To what ye need," the old woman said cryptically. "Not what ye think ye want, mind, but what ye truly need."

"And what's that?" she asked, unable to keep the skepticism from her voice despite the eerie certainty that this was no ordinary encounter.

The old woman's smile deepened, a hint of kindness softening her sharp features. "Love, lass. Real love. The kind that doesn't end."

A bitter laugh escaped. "All love ends. That's the one thing I know for certain."

"Is it now?" The old woman's eyes twinkled. "Then perhaps it's time ye learned otherwise."

She reached into the folds of her cloak and pulled out a small object, which she pressed into Kate's hand. It was a gold and silver brooch, ancient and tarnished, shaped like a Celtic knot with three blue stones set in its center.

"When ye're ready," the old woman said, "come back here. Stand on the stone, wear the brooch over yer heart, and make yer choice."

"What choice?" Kate asked, staring down at the brooch, warm in her hand.

But when she looked up, the old woman was gone. Kate spun around, searching the cemetery, but there was no sign of her. It was as if she had vanished into the gathering dusk.

Kate looked back at the brooch in her hand, tracing its intricate pattern with her fingertip. The metal was warm to the touch, warmer than it should have been after being held in the old woman's cold hands.

"This is crazy," Kate muttered to herself. "I'm talking to hallucinations now. Perfect."

But she slipped the brooch into her pocket all the same.

The sun dipped in the sky, casting long shadows across the cemetery. Kate decided she should head back to town before it got too dark to find her way. But as she turned to go, her gaze fell once more on the spiral stone by the chapel entrance.

A door, the old woman had called it. A door to what she needed.

Kate shook her head, trying to clear it of such fanciful notions. She was exhausted, heartbroken, and clearly not thinking straight. What she needed was a hot meal, an even hotter shower, a good night's sleep, and a plane ticket home.

### Chapter Five

“Make it go away,” she muttered, throwing an arm across her face to block out the spotlights and the drums. With a groan, Kate turned to see it was not a spotlight, but pale gray light filtering through the hotel room curtains and the gentle patter of rain against the window.

Her head throbbed, a dull reminder of the whisky she’d consumed at the pub next door with several boisterous Australians last night. Not her finest moment, but the group of kids enjoying their gap year had been a welcome distraction and the burn of the alcohol had at least temporarily numbed the ache in her chest.

She stretched, wincing as her muscles protested. Yesterday’s hike had left her sore, though the physical discomfort was almost welcome. At least it was a distraction from the emotional turmoil roiling through her. How could she have been so clueless? With a groan, she rolled onto her side and found herself staring at the brooch on her nightstand.

Had that strange encounter with the old woman at the cemetery actually happened? In the harsh light of day, it seemed more like a bizarre dream or a whisky-induced hallucination. Yet the brooch was undeniably real, its tarnished metal gleaming dully in the weak light, the stones at its center catching what little illumination filtered through the curtains.

“I should turn it in,” she murmured to herself, running a finger along the Celtic knot pattern. “It probably belongs to someone or was meant to be left at the grave of someone’s ancestor.”



With a sigh, she forced herself out of bed and into the shower. Under the blissfully hot spray, she tried to formulate a plan. The logical thing would be to book a flight home, lick her wounds, and try to forget Angus MacDonald had ever existed. But the thought of returning to Atlanta, facing Mandy's sympathy and her colleagues' knowing looks, made her stomach clench.

No, she decided as she toweled off. She'd come all this way. She might as well see something of Scotland before she left. Scotland had always been on her bucket list. The ticket was paid for, the vacation approved, so she would stay, travel around the country and she'd go home with a few souvenirs and scenic photos instead of just a broken heart.

Dressed in jeans and a light sweatshirt, Kate ventured downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. The hostess seated her by a window overlooking the harbor, where fishing boats bobbed in the gentle swells and seagulls wheeled overhead despite the drizzle. She'd braided her hair and left her face bare since the rain would just wash the makeup away, anyway.

"Will you be staying with us long?" the hostess asked as she poured Kate a cup of strong tea.

"Just a few days," she replied, accepting the steaming cup gratefully. "I thought I'd do some sightseeing while I'm here."

The woman nodded approvingly. "Wise choice. Skye has much to offer beyond distilleries." Something in her tone suggested she knew exactly why Kate had arrived on the island and why her plans had changed. News evidently traveled fast in small towns, even when you were a stranger.

After a hearty Scottish breakfast consisting of the eggs and toast she'd ordered, not the black pudding the server had tried to convince her to try, Kate was fortified

enough to face the day. She stopped at the front desk to inquire about local attractions and was handed several brochures featuring fairy pools, ancient stone circles, and dramatic coastal landscapes.

“The weather should clear by afternoon,” the clerk assured her. “Perfect for exploring.”

Outside, the rain had indeed lessened to a fine mist that beaded on her navy jacket but didn’t soak through. Kate stopped in at a small shop on the corner, purchasing a bottle of water and, on impulse, a roll of Life Savers. The familiar candy was comforting, a small taste of home.

She wandered through Portree for a while, browsing shops filled with woolen goods, Celtic jewelry, and whisky. But her thoughts kept returning to the cemetery and the mysterious old woman. Before she quite realized where she was headed, Kate found herself on the path leading out of town, retracing yesterday’s steps.

The climb seemed easier today, perhaps because she knew where she was going. The mist clung to the heather, transforming the landscape into something ethereal and otherworldly. By the time she crested the hill overlooking the cemetery, the rain had stopped entirely, though heavy clouds still hung low in the sky.

The ruins looked different in this light, softer, more melancholy. The weathered gravestones stood among the wet grass, and the crumbling keep on the cliff seemed to blur at the edges, as if it might dissolve into the mist at any moment.

Kate made her way down the path, hiking boots squelching slightly in the damp earth. The cemetery was deserted, no sign of the old woman or anyone else. She wandered among the gravestones, reading the inscriptions that were still legible. Generations of MacLeods lay beneath her feet, their lives, loves, and feuds long forgotten.

Eventually, she found herself standing before the chapel ruins. The spiral stone the old woman had pointed out was there, set into the ground near the entrance. It looked ordinary enough, just a flat slab of gray stone with a faint spiral pattern carved into its surface, nearly worn away by countless footsteps over the centuries.

Kate pulled the brooch from her pocket, turning it over in her hand. The metal was warm, warmer than it should have been after being carried in her pocket on a cool, damp day. She traced the Celtic knot with her finger, feeling the intricate pattern beneath her skin.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered to herself. “I should just turn this in at the hotel.”

But instead of putting the brooch back in her pocket, she found herself pinning it to her shirt, right over her heart as the old woman had instructed. It felt heavier than it looked, a solid weight against her chest.

Almost without conscious thought, Kate stepped onto the spiral stone. The ground felt solid beneath her feet, no different from any other patch of earth in the cemetery. What had she expected? A trapdoor to open and swallow her whole?

She closed her eyes, feeling totally ridiculous. The wind had picked up, carrying with it the scent of rain and salt and something else. Something green and ancient.

“What do I really want?” she whispered to herself.

The answer came unbidden. To be loved. Truly, deeply, permanently. To find someone who would never lie to her, never betray her. Someone who would see past her defenses to the woman beneath.

But those were just fairy tales. Love always ended. That was the one constant in her life, the one truth she could count on. She’d seen it time and again, predicted it with

unerring accuracy. Except in her own case. She'd been blind to Angus's betrayal, willfully ignorant of the signs that should have been obvious.

Kate opened her eyes, blinking away unexpected tears. This was silly. Standing on an ancient stone in a Scottish cemetery, pinning her hopes on some local superstition. She should put this whole humiliating episode behind her.

She lifted one foot off the stone, but something made her pause. A strange stillness had fallen over the cemetery. The wind had died completely, leaving an eerie silence broken only by the distant crash of the waves against the cliffs. The clouds overhead seemed frozen, no longer drifting across the sky.

And was it her imagination, or had the brooch grown even warmer against her chest?

"I wish..." The words slipped out before she could stop them. "I wish for a love that doesn't end. Someone to love me above all else."

The moment the words left her lips, the world around her changed. The wind returned with sudden violence, whipping her braid across her face and nearly knocking her off her feet. The clouds overhead darkened and swirled, and a crack of thunder split the air.

The brooch pinned to her shirt glowed red, so hot she reached up to tear it off, but her fingers seemed to pass through it as if it were made of smoke. Her body felt strange, insubstantial, as if she too were turning to mist.

A wave of dizziness washed over her, and Kate swayed on her feet. The cemetery around her began to blur and shift, the gravestones wavering like reflections in disturbed water. The chapel ruins seemed to flicker, stones rising from the ground and reassembling themselves before her eyes.

“What’s happening?” she tried to say, but no sound emerged from her throat.

The last thing she saw before darkness claimed her was the old woman standing by the rowan tree, a knowing smile on her weathered face.

\* \* \*

Kate came to slowly, awareness returning in fragments. Cold stone beneath her cheek. The smell of damp earth and wood smoke. The distant sound of voices on the wind.

Her head throbbed, a steady pulse of pain behind her eyes. Had she fainted? She must have hit her head when she fell.

With a groan, she pushed herself into a sitting position, one hand going to her temple. Her fingers came away clean. No blood, at least. Small mercies.

It took her a moment to register that something was wrong. Very wrong.

The cemetery was gone.

Or rather, it was still there, but completely transformed. The weathered, tilting gravestones had been replaced by newer markers, their inscriptions crisp and clear. The chapel, which had been little more than a shell with crumbling walls, now stood abandoned, its roof intact.

And beyond the cemetery, where the ruins of Bronmuir Keep had stood...

“It can’t be—” Kate’s breath caught in her throat.

A small castle rose against the sky, solid and imposing, its gray stone walls unbroken

by time. Smoke curled from several chimneys, and a flag snapped in the breeze from the highest tower. The flag bore the MacLeod clan crest, a bull's head encircled by a belt of blue and silver, with three small ravens perched atop a crown above the shield. Unlike the traditional MacLeod crest from Dunvegan, this one featured a crossed claymore and dirk beneath the bull, marking this branch of the ancient family with its own distinct identity. She recognized it from the brochures in the hotel.

"This isn't possible," she whispered, scrambling to her feet.

Her knee buckled, and she reached out to support herself against the nearest gravestone. The stone was smooth and relatively new, the inscription easily legible.

Here lies Morag MacLeod, beloved wife of Ian and mother to his sons. Taken by fever in the Year of Our Lord 1688. May she rest in peace.

1688.

Kate's knees nearly gave out again. She staggered back from the stone, heart racing.

"No," she said aloud, her voice sounding strange to her own ears. "No, this isn't real. I'm dreaming. Or hallucinating. Or?—"

Or what? What other explanation could there be for what she was seeing?

She pinched herself, hard, on the soft flesh of her inner arm. The sharp pain made her wince, but nothing changed. The castle still stood where ruins had been just moments before. The chapel remained whole, not the crumbling shell she remembered.

Kate fumbled for her phone, thinking she could call for help. But her pockets were empty. No phone. No water bottle. But at least she had the roll of Life Savers she'd purchased that morning. Her hand went to her heart. It was gone. The brooch was

missing as well.

She looked down at herself, half-expecting her clothes to have changed as well, but she was still wearing her jeans, hiking boots, jacket, and light blue sweatshirt. At least that was something.

A movement at the edge of her vision made her turn sharply. A figure was approaching from the direction of the castle. A man, tall and broad-shouldered, moving with purpose across the open ground.

Her first instinct was to hide, but where? The cemetery offered little in the way of concealment, and running would only draw attention. Besides, perhaps this person could help her make sense of what was happening.

So she stood her ground, watching as the man drew nearer. He was dressed strangely, in what looked like a long-sleeved linen shirt and a plaid draped over one shoulder, secured with a belt at his waist. Dark hair fell to his shoulders, and even from a distance, she could see the wariness in his stance. A few guys in town wore kilts with hiking boots, but this guy... He looked like one of the action heroes in the movies she loved.

When he was about twenty feet away, he called out something in a language she didn't understand. His voice was deep and commanding, with a thick Scottish accent that made the foreign words roll like thunder.

"I'm sorry," Kate called back, trying to keep her voice steady. "I don't understand."

The man paused, then switched to heavily accented English. "Who are ye, and what business have ye on MacLeod lands?"

"My name is Kate Adams," she replied, fighting to keep her voice level. "I'm... lost. I

need help.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, his gaze sweeping over her strange clothing. He said something else in that foreign language. Gaelic, she realized belatedly, then reverted to English.

“Ye’re dressed most strangely, lass. Where do ye hail from?”

“America,” Kate said automatically, then winced.

The man’s brow furrowed slightly. “The colonies? Ye’ve come a fair distance then. What brings ye to our shores?”

Kate turned in a slow circle, heart hammering in her chest. The rugged landscape stretched out before her, rolling green hills, jagged cliffs, the distant sparkle of the sea. But there was no town with its quaint shops, no paved roads, no boats with motors bobbing in the harbor. Not a single plane crossed the sky, no power lines cut through the landscape, no cars or buses or trains, anywhere to be seen. Just wilderness, a dirt path, and a castle that looked whole and inhabited rather than the crumbling ruin she’d visited that morning.

It was true. Somehow, impossibly, she had traveled back in time. The gravestone had said 1688, but that was when Morag died. What year was it now?

Before she could formulate a response, the world began to spin. The shock, the impossibility of her situation, crashed over her like a wave, and Kate swayed on her feet.

“I don’t...” she began, but couldn’t finish the thought.

The last thing she saw before darkness claimed her again was the man lunging



forward, his expression changing from suspicion to alarm as she collapsed.

\* \* \*

For the second time in what felt like minutes, Kate drifted back to consciousness. This time, she was lying on something softer than stone. A narrow bed, she realized, with a rough woolen blanket drawn over her. The smell of wood smoke was stronger here, mingled with unfamiliar herbs and the distinctive scent of tallow candles.

She kept her eyes closed, trying to make sense of what was happening. Had she dreamed the whole thing? Maybe she'd never left the hotel? Maybe she'd had some kind of breakdown after confronting Angus and had been taken to a hospital?

But the sounds and smells around her were too vivid, too alien to be a modern hospital. She could hear the crackle of a fire, the low murmur of voices speaking that same rolling language she couldn't understand, the distant barking of dogs.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. She was in a small, stone-walled room with a single narrow window. The glass was thick and uneven, distorting the view outside, but she could make out a courtyard below. A fire burned in a small hearth, filling the chilly room with warmth and flickering light. Simple furniture. A chair, a small table, and a chest completed the sparse furnishings.

And standing near the door, watching her with intense blue eyes, was the man from the cemetery.

Up close, he was even more imposing. Tall and broad-shouldered, with a face that could have been carved from the same granite as the castle walls. His features were striking rather than conventionally handsome. A straight nose, high cheekbones, a strong jaw darkened with stubble. A thin scar ran through one eyebrow, giving him a slightly dangerous air.

But it was his eyes that held her attention. A deep, penetrating blue that seemed to look right through her.

“Ye’re awake,” he said, his voice deep and resonant. “I thought perhaps ye’d sleep until the morrow.”

Kate pushed herself up on her elbows, wincing as her head protested the movement. “Where am I?”

“Ye’re at Bronmuir Keep, home of Clan MacLeod,” the man replied, watching her carefully. “I am Connor MacLeod, laird.”

Connor MacLeod. The name sounded familiar — She gasped before she could stop herself, a chill running down her spine despite the warmth of the room.

His eyes narrowed instantly, suspicion hardening his features. “You know me? Have we met before, lass?”

Kate’s mouth opened, then closed. The knowledge sat heavy within her. That, according to the guidebook, Connor MacLeod would be murdered by the woman he was to marry. But how could she possibly explain that? He’d think her mad. Or worse, a witch.

“I... no,” she managed. “Your name just reminded me of something I heard.” A weak excuse, but better than the truth.

Connor studied her face, clearly unconvinced. “What exactly did you hear about me all the way from the new world?”

Kate’s mind went blank for a moment. Time travel? It couldn’t be real. There had to be some logical explanation. A dream, hallucination, elaborate historical reenactment.

Yet the ache in her muscles, the smell of peat smoke, the calloused hand of the man before her, it all felt terribly, impossibly real.

“Nothing specific,” she lied. “Just... clan histories. I’m interested in Scottish heritage.”

Her hands shook as she hid them under the covers. “What year is it?” she blurted out, unable to contain the question any longer.

Connor’s eyebrows rose slightly. “The year of our Lord sixteen hundred and eighty-nine,” he replied, his tone suggesting he found the question odd but was humoring her. “June, to be precise.”

1689. She had traveled back in time more than three hundred years.

The room seemed to tilt again, and Kate closed her eyes, fighting the wave of dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Ye’re unwell,” Connor observed, taking a step closer. “Moirra said ye had no visible injuries, but perhaps ye hit yer head.”

“I’m fine,” Kate managed, though she felt anything but. “Just... disoriented.”

Connor studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “Ye said you are from the new world,” he said finally. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” Kate agreed, seizing on the simplest truth. “I’m a long way from home.”

“The colonies,” he said after a moment. “Ye’re from the English colonies across the sea?”

Connor's expression didn't change, but something flickered in his eyes. Recognition? Doubt? It was impossible to tell.

Kate hesitated. What could she say that wouldn't sound completely insane? She couldn't tell him she was from the future. He'd think her mad or, worse, a witch. But she needed some explanation for her strange clothes, her accent, her lack of knowledge about this time.

Relief flooded through her. Of course. The American colonies existed in 1689, even if the United States didn't. "Yes," she said quickly. "Exactly."

He didn't look entirely convinced, but he nodded slowly. "And how did ye come to be alone in our cemetery, dressed so strangely, with no possessions or companions?"

That was the question, wasn't it? How had she ended up here? The old woman, the brooch, the wish... it all seemed like a fever dream now, too fantastical to be real. Yet here she was.

"I was..." Kate began, then faltered. What could she say? "I was traveling. There was a storm. I must have hit my head and... gotten lost."

It sounded weak even to her own ears, and Connor's expression made it clear he didn't believe her. But to her surprise, he didn't press the issue.

"We've seen no shipwreck," he said finally, his voice measured. "But we'll search the shore for debris. If your vessel truly went down nearby, the tide will bring something to us."

He uncrossed his arms, clearly done with her. "Ye'll stay here until ye're well enough to travel," he said instead, his tone making it clear it wasn't a suggestion.

“Moirra will tend to ye. When ye’re recovered, we can discuss how to return ye to yer people.”

With that, he turned to go, his plaid swinging with the movement.

“Wait,” Kate called, a sudden panic seizing her at the thought of being left alone in this strange place and time. “Please?—”

Connor paused at the door, looking back at her with those penetrating blue eyes. “Rest,” he said, his voice softening slightly. “Ye’re safe here, lass. No harm will come to ye under my roof.”

Then he was gone, the heavy wooden door closing behind him with a solid thud that seemed to underscore the finality of her situation.

Kate sank back against the rough pillow, staring up at the stone ceiling.

1689.

She was in Scotland in 1689, in a castle that would be nothing more than ruins by her time, speaking to a man who had been dead for centuries.

The weight of her shirt suddenly felt wrong, and she patted the spot where the brooch should have been. A chill ran through her that had nothing to do with the cold stone beneath her.

When ye’re ready, come back. Stand on the stone, wear the brooch over yer heart, and make yer choice.

She’d made her choice, all right.

And now she was trapped in the past with no idea how to get home or if she even could.

### Chapter Six

Time travel. Actual, honest-to-goodness time travel. The kind of thing that happened in movies or books, not to practical, analytical women from Atlanta who worked for dating apps. Kate stared at the ceiling, trying to make sense of her situation.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts. The door opened to reveal an older woman with iron-gray hair pulled back in a severe bun. Her face was weathered but kind, with deep lines around her eyes that suggested she laughed often.

“Ah, ye’re awake,” she said, bustling into the room with a bundle of fabric in her arms. “I’m Nessa. I tend to the household here at Bronmuir.”

“Kate Adams,” Kate replied automatically, pushing herself to a sitting position. Her head still throbbed dully, but the dizziness had passed. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

Nessa set the bundle on the foot of the bed. “The laird would like ye to join him when ye’re dressed. I’ve brought ye some proper clothes.” She eyed Kate’s jeans and sweatshirt with undisguised curiosity. “Though I’ve never seen the like of what ye’re wearing. Is that how all lasses dress in the colonies?”

“Not exactly,” Kate hedged. “It’s, um, practical for traveling.”

Nessa made a noncommittal sound, the look on her face suggesting that Kate might as well run around naked. “Well, ye’ll want something more... suitable. Here.”

She shook out the bundle, revealing a simple linen shift, a woolen dress in a faded blue, and various other items Kate couldn't immediately identify.

"I can dress myself," Kate said quickly when Nessa moved to help her.

The older woman raised an eyebrow. "As ye wish. Though ye'll need help with the laces."

Left alone, she examined the clothing with growing dismay. No zippers, no buttons, just laces and ties.

With a shrug, she popped the last two Life Savers candy in her mouth and tossed the telltale wrapper in the fire in the hearth.

The shift was straightforward enough, a simple linen garment that slipped over her head. The stockings were thin and delicate, requiring care as she rolled them up her legs, and the leather shoes pinched uncomfortably at the toes. The dress, however, was another matter. After several minutes of struggling, she had to concede defeat.

When Nessa returned, she didn't comment on Kate's failure, just efficiently helped her into the dress, tightening the laces at the back.

"There now," Nessa said, stepping back to survey her work. "Ye'll do. The dress is a bit large, but it will serve until we can make ye something proper."

Kate looked down at herself. The dress was indeed loose, hanging awkwardly on her frame, but it was clean and warm. The woolen fabric was rougher than anything she'd ever worn, scratching slightly against her skin. She went to the ceramic washbasin on a nearby stool that was filled with cool water, splashing her face before undoing her braid, and running a wooden comb through her tangled hair. With practiced fingers, she wove her dark strands back into a simple braid, though a few wisps refused to



stay put.

“Um,” Kate stammered, her cheeks flushing. “Is there a... bathroom I could use?”

Nessa’s brow furrowed in confusion before understanding dawned on her face.

“Ah, the privy. Follow me.”

She led Kate down a narrow stone corridor to a small chamber jutting from the keep’s outer wall. A wooden bench with a hole cut into it stretched across the space, positioned over a deep shaft that dropped straight down the castle wall.

The room was cold and drafty, with only a narrow slit window providing dim light. A bucket of ash sat in the corner, used in place of modern paper.

The pungent smell made Kate’s nose wrinkle, but she quickly did her business and hoped she’d find her way home soon. Back to hot showers and running water, not to mention electricity.

Emerging from the privy, she found Nessa waiting. “Thank you,” she said, surprised by how genuine the words felt. “I appreciate your kindness.”

Nessa’s expression softened slightly. “Ye’ve had a shock, that much is clear. The laird wishes to speak with ye now, if ye’re able.”

Kate nodded, fighting down a flicker of nervousness. Connor had been intimidating enough the first time she’d encountered him.

But what choice did she have?

The woman bustled down stone corridors lit by torches and the occasional narrow

window. The castle was a maze of passageways, stairs, and small rooms, all built of the same solid gray stone. With a jolt, Kate realized to these people the castle was simply home, not a tourist attraction.

They descended a narrow spiral staircase and emerged into a large hall. A fire roared in a massive hearth at one end, filling the space with warmth and flickering light. It might be June, but it was cold inside the stone keep. Then again, she was used to the heavy humid air of Atlanta.

Long wooden tables lined the sides of the room, though they were empty now. At the far end, on a slightly raised dais, sat a single chair, currently occupied by the man himself, Connor MacLeod.

He was speaking to a young man who stood beside the chair, gesturing with one hand as he made some point. The young man nodded, then noticed their approach and murmured something to Connor, who looked up.

Those intense blue eyes fixed on her, and she felt a strange flutter in her stomach that had nothing to do with fear. In the better light of the hall, she could see him more clearly. His dark hair was pulled back from his face, revealing strong features that seemed carved from stone. He wore a linen shirt open at the throat and the same plaid draped over one shoulder that she'd seen earlier. A sword hung at his side, an actual, honest-to-goodness sword.

"Leave us," he said to the young man, who nodded and retreated to the far end of the hall. "Nessa, wait nearby. The lass may have need of ye."

Nessa curtsyed slightly and withdrew, leaving Kate standing alone before the dais.

For a long moment, he simply studied her, his expression unreadable. Kate forced herself to meet his gaze steadily, though her heart was hammering in her chest.

“Ye look more yourself,” he said finally. “The clothes suit ye.”

“Thank you,” Kate replied, unsure if it was actually a compliment. “And thank you for your hospitality.”

Connor leaned forward slightly, resting his elbows on his knees. “Now, perhaps ye can tell me who ye truly are and how ye came to be in my graveyard.”

Kate swallowed hard. She’d been thinking about this since waking. What could she possibly say that wouldn’t sound insane?

“My name is Kate Adams,” she began, sticking to the truth as much as possible. “I’m from... the colonies, as you said. I was traveling when I was separated from my companions.”

Connor’s expression didn’t change, but something in his eyes suggested he didn’t believe her. “And how did ye come to be alone, without guardsmen, a companion, provisions or proper clothing, wandering in MacLeod territory?”

“I got lost,” Kate said, which was true enough. “I don’t remember exactly how I ended up in your cemetery. I think I might have hit my head.”

“Ye were wearing the strangest garments I’ve ever seen,” Connor observed. “Not the dress of any colony I know of.”

Kate’s mind raced. “They’re... practical for travel. Where I’m from, women dress differently.”

“Indeed.” Connor’s tone was dry. “And where exactly is that? Which colony?”

“Massachusetts,” Kate said, the first colonial name that came to mind. “Near

Boston.”

Connor nodded slowly. “And what brought ye to Scotland? A woman traveling alone is most unusual.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Kate insisted. “I was with... friends. We were separated in the storm.” The lies were piling up, but what choice did she have?

“A storm,” Connor repeated. “Yet we’ve had fair weather these past days, and no word of any ship foundering on our shores.”

Heat crept up her neck. “I don’t know what to tell you. I was traveling, there was a storm, and then I woke up in your cemetery.”

Connor stood suddenly, descending the two steps from the dais to stand directly before her. He was even taller than she’d realized, towering over her by nearly a foot.

“Ye’re hiding something,” he said, voice low and intense. “I can see it in your eyes. What is it ye’re not telling me?”

Kate took an involuntary step backward. “I’ve told you everything I can.”

It wasn’t a direct lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either. How could she tell him she was from the future? That in his time, his castle was a ruin, and he had been dead for centuries?

Connor’s eyes narrowed. “Are ye a spy? Sent by the MacDonalds or the McKinnons?”

“What? No!” Kate exclaimed, genuinely shocked. “I don’t even know who those people are!” Well, she did know a rat with the last name MacDonald, who was from

Skye... damn the cheating, lying bastard to hell.

“They’re rival clans,” Connor said shortly. “And we’re in the midst of troubled times. King James flees while William and Mary take the throne. The Highlands are divided in their loyalties.” He paused, studying her reaction. “And what of the war? The French and their Indian allies have been causing trouble in the colonies for years now. Surely ye’ve felt its effects?”

Kate’s mind went blank. War with the French in America? Around the late sixteen hundreds? She cursed herself for texting through history classes, preferring to analyze relationship patterns in literature instead of memorizing dates and conflicts.

“I... my family lives in the countryside far from the fighting,” she stammered, hoping her answer was plausible.

Connor’s expression hardened. “Strange that a colonial woman would be unaware of a conflict that threatens her homeland.” He stepped closer, his voice dropping. “I think ye’re not who ye claim to be at all.”

“I’m not a spy,” she insisted, her heart racing. “I’m just... lost.”

Connor studied her face for a long moment, seeming to weigh her words. Finally, he stepped back.

“I don’t believe you’re telling me everything,” he said, “but I don’t think ye’re a spy either. Ye lack the guile for it.”

She wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or offended.

“For now, ye’ll remain at Bronmuir as my guest,” Connor continued. “Until we can determine the truth of your story and find a way to return ye to your people. If they

truly exist?”

“They exist,” Kate said firmly, though of course they wouldn’t be born for centuries. Her parents and sister wouldn’t be worried yet. They knew she’d gone to Scotland, so they wouldn’t expect to hear from her until she returned. But when she didn’t... they would be frantic. She swallowed hard. Not the time to worry about something you can’t do anything about, she told herself. Figure out how to get home first.

Connor’s mouth quirked in what might have been the ghost of a smile. “We shall see. In the meantime, ye’ll be given quarters and clothes, and the freedom of the keep, under supervision, of course.”

“You’re keeping me prisoner?” Kate asked, her voice rising slightly.

“I’m offering ye shelter and protection,” Connor corrected. “Would you prefer I turn ye out to fend for yerself? A woman alone in the Highlands wouldn’t last a day.”

He had a point, and she knew it. Whatever had happened to her, however she had ended up here, Bronmuir Keep was probably the safest place for her at the moment.

“No,” she conceded. “Thank you for your... hospitality.”

Connor nodded, apparently satisfied. “Ye’ll dine with me tonight. Perhaps with food and wine, you will remember more about how ye came to be here.”

It wasn’t a request, and Kate didn’t treat it as one. “Of course.”

“Nessa,” he called, and the older woman reappeared from wherever she had been waiting. “Show Mistress Adams to the east chamber and see that she has everything she needs.”

“Aye,” Nessa said, with a small curtsy.

“Until tonight,” Connor said to her, inclining his head slightly before turning back to talk to two men that had approached from the right.

Dismissed, Kate followed Nessa from the hall, feeling the gaze of the people on her back the entire way.

The east chamber proved to be a smaller room than she’d spent the night in, but it looked comfortable with a narrow bed, a chest, chair, and a small table. A tiny window looked out over the courtyard, offering a glimpse of the bustling life of the castle below.

“The room you were in last night is for guests. This will be yer chamber while ye’re here,” Nessa said, gesturing around the room.

“There’s water in the pitcher for washing, and I’ll see to clothes later.” The woman paused. “It would be best to put your... your traveling garments in the chest here by the bed. People talk.”

She got it. Rarely were women who were deemed different treated well in the past, that much had stuck from ancient history classes.

“Thank you,” Kate said, sinking into the bed. “Nessa... What’s happening? With the king, I mean. Connor mentioned something about it.”

Nessa’s expression grew guarded. “Ye truly don’t know? Where have ye been these past months?”

“I’ve been... in the colonies. News travels slowly,” Kate said lamely. “Please, I’d like to understand.”

The housekeeper sighed. “King James fled to France last year, and William and Mary were crowned in his place. But many in the Highlands remain loyal to James, especially those of the Catholic faith. There’s unrest throughout Scotland.”

“And the MacLeods? Where do they stand?”

“They have not declared for one side or the other as of yet, but they will declare for James, I’m sure of it. The laird’s father, Hamish, was murdered by the MacDonalds three months past.” Nessa’s voice dropped to a near whisper. “Ambushed while returning from a neighboring clan gathering. ’Twas a cowardly act, even for those treacherous dogs.”

“I’m sorry,” Kate said, genuinely sympathetic. “That must be difficult for Connor.”

Nessa gave her a sharp look. “Ye speak familiarly of the laird.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Kate said quickly. “I just... he told me his name.”

“He is Laird MacLeod or Himself to ye,” Nessa corrected, though her tone was gentle. “Mind yer place, lass. You’re a stranger here, and these are dangerous times.”

She nodded, chastened, making a mental note to pay attention and try to fit in. “I understand. Thank you for explaining.”

The woman seemed to soften slightly. “Ye seem a decent enough lass, despite your strange ways. Rest now, ye’re pale as the moon and need sleep. I’ll return to fetch ye for supper.”

Left alone, she moved to the window, looking out at the courtyard below. Men and women moved about their daily tasks. Carrying water from the well, tending to livestock, mending tools. It was like watching a living history exhibit, except this was



real. These people weren't actors though, they were simply living their lives. 1689. It was crazy, but here she was.

Kate touched the spot where the brooch had been. Without it, how could she possibly get back to her own time? Would standing on the stone at the chapel work without the brooch?

A wave of despair washed over her. What if she was stuck here forever? No electricity, no running water, no antibiotics, none of the comforts and safety nets of modern life. Just endless days of scratchy wool dresses and suspicious glances from a man who was supposed to be long dead. A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Come in," she called, turning from the window.

A young woman entered, carrying a basin of steaming water. She was perhaps thirteen or fourteen, with a freckled face and red hair tucked under a simple cap.

"For washing, mistress," she said, bobbing a curtsy as she set the basin on the table. "Mistress Nessa sent me to see if ye needed aught else."

"No, thank you," Kate said, smiling at the girl. "What's your name?"

"Aileen, mistress," the girl replied, looking surprised at being asked. "I'm one of the kitchen maids."

"Thank you, Aileen," Kate said warmly.

The girl curtsied again and turned to go, then paused at the door. "Is it true what they're saying? That ye fell from the sky into the graveyard?"

Kate suppressed a smile. "Not exactly. I got lost and ended up there."

Aileen looked disappointed. “Oh. Well, that’s not nearly as exciting as what Rob’s been telling everyone.”

“Who’s Rob?”

“One of the stable lads. He says ye’re a fairy woman come to grant the laird a wish.” Aileen’s eyes widened. “Are ye?”

“No,” Kate said firmly. “I’m just a lost traveler.”

Aileen looked skeptical, but nodded. “If ye say so, mistress. Supper will be served at sunset. Nessa will come for ye.”

After the girl left, she sank back onto the bed, laughing despite herself. A fairy woman? Well, it was better than being accused of witchcraft, which she’d half-expected and seriously was no laughing matter. Women didn’t speak their minds, so she’d have to be careful in what she said and did in order to fit in.

Her amusement faded as she considered her situation. She was trapped in 1689 Scotland with no clear way home, dependent on the goodwill of a man who clearly didn’t trust her. And if what she remembered from that guidebook was true, Himself was living on borrowed time.

Unless, of course, history could be changed.

The thought sent a chill down Kate’s spine. What if her presence here already was changing things? What if every word she spoke, every action she took, altered the course of events?

And if that were true, could she save Connor from his fate?

The question lingered in her mind as she washed, dipping the rag in the basin of warm water, trying to prepare herself for whatever the evening might bring. One thing was certain, dinner with the laird promised to be anything but dull.

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### Chapter Seven

Connor leaned against the battlements, gaze fixed on the strange woman who paced the courtyard below. A fortnight had passed since she had appeared in the graveyard, and still he had no notion of what to do with her. Kate Adams. Even her name was peculiar.

She moved with purpose, her steps quick and determined as she walked the perimeter of the yard. Her strange garments had been replaced with a simple gown, though she still wore those odd leather shoes she'd arrived in, saying the ones he'd provided hurt her big feet. He'd had to hide his smile as the lass did have overlarge feet. He turned and grinned, admiring her rather fetching backside.

"Still watching her, are ye?" Ewan appeared at his side, a knowing smirk on his face.

He straightened. "I'm observing a potential threat."

"Aye, she looks terribly threatening." Ewan's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"A wee slip of a lass who doesn't even know how to sew, cook, tend a fire or milk a cow." He scratched at his chin.

"I could understand if she were from a noble family, but her speech." He made a face. "She swears like a sailor. That's no a noble lass."

"She speaks strangely," Connor agreed, his eyes narrowing. "And she has knowledge no woman should possess."

Yesterday, he'd overheard her discussing battle tactics with young Fergus, offering insights about flanking maneuvers that had the lad wide-eyed with wonder. She'd given the boy clever advice about how to outmaneuver the older lads who'd tossed him in the cesspit. Something about using their size against them and staying downwind. What woman knew of such things?

"Perhaps she's a spy for the MacDonalds," Ewan suggested, though his tone made clear he thought the idea ridiculous.

"Mayhap." Connor wasn't convinced of it himself. If the MacDonalds wanted to place a spy in his midst, they'd have chosen someone who could blend in, not a woman who drew every eye with her strange manner of speaking and her complete ignorance of basic household tasks.

Below, Kate had stopped her pacing and was now examining a patch of herbs in Moira's garden. She crouched down, touching the plants with careful fingers, her head tilted in concentration. The morning sun caught her chestnut hair, highlighting strands of gold that hadn't been visible in the dim light of the hall.

"She's bonny enough," Ewan commented. "For an English lass."

"She claims to be American," Connor corrected automatically, then frowned at himself for the defense.

"American?" Ewan's brow furrowed. "You mean from the colonies?"

"Aye. Did ye hear what the lass said this morn?" Connor asked. "Said she missed hot running water. Then she coughed and asked wee John about horses. Mistress Kate is rather strange."

Ewan nodded. "Aye, and her manner of speech is peculiar. Uses words I've never

heard before.” He paused, glancing at Connor. “Might she be a fairy?”

“Nay. Touched in the head is more like.” Connor frowned, watching Kate navigate between the busy workers below. There was something different about her, something he couldn’t quite place. Either she was mad or... well, he wasn’t sure what the alternative might be. Yet when she spoke, there was a clarity in her eyes that didn’t match with madness.

“She’s hiding something,” he said finally. “Of that I’m certain.”

“Will ye keep her, then?” Ewan asked, interrupting Connor’s thoughts.

“She’s not a stray dog to be kept or cast out,” Connor replied, though in truth, that was exactly the decision he faced. “She has nowhere to go, by her own admission.”

“Aye, ’tis summer. The crossing to the mainland will be easier now with calmer seas. We could arrange passage on a ship to the colonies,” Ewan suggested. “Though she’d need an escort and companion for propriety’s sake.”

Connor rubbed his jaw in frustration. “Any word of shipwrecks along the coast? Or vessels running aground?”

“None,” Ewan replied, shaking his head. “We’ve had scouts checking the shores for leagues in both directions. No debris, no bodies, nothing to suggest where she might have come from.”

With Cameron still held captive and the MacDonalds testing their defenses, Connor couldn’t spare a single warrior or servant for such a journey. Even if he could find someone willing to make the months-long voyage, the cost would drain resources the clan desperately needed.

“She may stay until we can determine her true purpose,” he decided. “But she’ll earn her keep.”

Ewan snorted. “Doing what? She nearly burned down the kitchen yesterday trying to make porridge.”

He winced at the memory. The entire keep had filled with acrid smoke, and Nessa had banned Kate from the kitchens thereafter.

“She can...” He searched for a task she might manage without disaster. “She can mend garments.”

“Have ye seen her needlework?” Ewan raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t trust her to sew a button on my shirt.”

Connor sighed. Kate’s attempts at sewing had been pitiful, her stitches crooked and uneven. She’d pricked her fingers so many times that the cloth had been spotted with blood, and she’d cursed in a most unladylike manner throughout the entire ordeal.

“Then she’ll learn,” he said firmly. “Everyone has a purpose at Bronmuir. She’ll find hers.”

Ewan clapped him on the shoulder. “As ye say, laird.” His use of the title was deliberate, a reminder of his position and responsibility. “I’ll leave ye to your... observations.”

Connor scowled at his friend’s retreating back. Ewan was too perceptive by half. Yes, he’d been watching Kate more than was strictly necessary, but it was only to assess the threat she might pose. It had nothing to do with the way her eyes flashed when she was challenged, or how her smile transformed her face when she was pleased.

Nothing at all.

\* \* \*

The great hall buzzed with activity as servants prepared the midday meal. Connor sat at the high table, reviewing the inventory of supplies with his steward. The spring planting had gone well, and the early summer crops showed promise, but with the MacDonald threat, they needed to ensure they had enough provisions should more conflict arise.

His concentration broke when Kate entered the hall. She moved differently than the other women, with a directness that was almost masculine. She didn't duck her head or step aside for the men in her path. She expected them to move for her, and surprisingly, they did.

She caught his eye across the hall and gave a small nod of acknowledgment. No curtsy, no deference to his position. Just that nod, as if they were equals. It should have angered him, this lack of proper respect, but instead, he found himself nodding back.

"My laird," his steward said, drawing his attention back to the ledger. "About the plantings?—"

Shouts erupted from the hearth, drawing everyone's attention. Young Willy, one of the kitchen boys, stood trembling beside an overturned pot, its contents spreading across the rush-covered floor. His small face had gone white as the cook advanced on him, brandishing his wooden spoon like a weapon.

"Ye witless fool!" the man's voice boomed across the hall. "That was meant for the laird's supper!"



Before Connor could step in, Kate had already positioned herself between the terrified boy and the cook's approaching fury.

"He didn't mean to," she said, her voice steady but gentle. "Look at the floor here. It's uneven. Anyone could have stumbled."

"He knows better than to carry it without a proper grip," the cook insisted, trying to push Kate out of the way.

She held her ground, chin lifted. "He's just a child. We all make mistakes."

Her eyes softened as she glanced at Willy. "Let's get this cleaned up."

The cook looked at Connor, clearly expecting him to put this presumptuous woman in her place. Instead, he found himself saying, "The lass is right. No harm done that can't be mended."

The tension in the hall eased, and the boy gave Kate a look of such gratitude that Connor felt a twinge of something like admiration. She'd stepped in without hesitation, defending someone weaker than herself.

As the mess was cleaned up, she knelt beside the boy and spoke quietly to him. Connor couldn't hear her words, but he saw the boy's shoulders relax, saw the small smile that crept onto his face. When she ruffled his hair and sent him back to his duties, the lad went with his head held higher as he followed her out of the hall.

"She has a way with the children," his steward observed.

He grunted noncommittally, but he couldn't deny the truth of it. The children of the keep, initially wary of the stranger, had taken to following Kate about like ducklings after their mother. She made up outlandish stories of metal carriages that moved

without horses and boxes that showed people speaking and moving as if they were present in the room. Nonsense, of course, but the children were enchanted.

His thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched scream from outside. Connor was on his feet in an instant, hand going to the dirk at his belt as he strode toward the door. The sound came again, a child's terrified cry, and he broke into a run.

Outside the keep, chaos reigned. People were shouting and pointing toward the millpond, where little Morag, the blacksmith's daughter, thrashed in the water.

Connor sprinted toward the pond, but he was too far away. Morag's head disappeared beneath the surface, and his heart lurched painfully in his chest. Then a blur of movement caught his eye. Kate, running faster than he'd ever seen a woman move, skirts hiked up past her knees as she ran.

Without hesitation, she plunged into the water, fully clothed. For a moment, both she and Morag were gone from sight, and the world seemed to hold its breath. Then Kate surfaced, the child clutched against her chest, both of them gasping for air.

He reached the pond's edge as Kate swam toward the shore, her gown plastered to her body, her hair streaming with water. She handed Morag to her father, who had arrived just behind Connor, his face ashen with fear.

"She's all right," Kate panted. "Just scared and cold."

The blacksmith clutched his daughter to his chest as the lass cried, murmuring prayers of thanks. Around them, the gathered crowd exhaled collectively, relief palpable in the air.

Connor reached down and lifted Kate by the arms, helping her up the slippery bank. She was shivering, her skin cold to the touch, but her eyes were clear and steady as

they met his.

“You can swim,” he said, unable to keep the surprise from his voice. Few women in the Highlands could swim, few men, for that matter. The water was too cold, the skill rarely needed, not to mention the water spirits.

“My parents taught me when I was little,” she replied, teeth chattering.

He swept her into his arms in one fluid motion, ignoring her startled gasp and subsequent protests as he cradled her against his chest, her sodden clothes soaking through his shirt.

“Put me down! I can walk perfectly fine,” Kate insisted, though her trembling betrayed how cold she truly was.

“Aye, and leave a trail of water through the entire keep?” He tightened his grip as she squirmed. “Be still, lass.”

Connor was acutely aware of the clan’s eyes following them as he strode back through the gates toward the keep, their daily tasks forgotten in favor of this unexpected spectacle. He could feel the heat of her blush against his neck, though whether from embarrassment or their proximity, he couldn’t tell.

“Nessa,” he called out to the housekeeper, who was already hurrying to keep pace with his long strides as he carried Kate through the great hall. People stopped their tasks to stare at their laird carrying the dripping woman, but Connor paid them no mind as he took the stairs two at a time.

“See that she’s given dry clothes and warmed properly.”

Only when he reached Kate’s chamber did he set her down, stepping back quickly as

Nessa bustled in behind them.

Ewan waited at the bottom of the stairs, arms crossed and wearing a knowing smirk that he chose to ignore.

“Not a word,” Connor warned as he descended.

Ewan raised his hands in mock surrender. “I said nothing, my laird.”

“Your face says plenty.” Connor strode past him, heading back to the hall. He needed to finish the inventory, to focus on the practical matters of running the clan. He did not need to think about the way Kate had looked with water glistening on her skin, or the courage it had taken to dive into the pond without a moment’s hesitation.

He did not need to think about her at all.

\* \* \*

Night had fallen, and the keep was quiet. Connor sat alone in his study, a cup of whisky in hand, staring into the flames of the hearth. The events of the day played through his mind, particularly Kate’s rescue of young Morag.

A soft knock at the door roused him from his thoughts.

“Enter,” he called, expecting Ewan with some matter of clan business.

Instead, she stood in the doorway, wearing a clean gown with her hair still damp but neatly braided. She looked uncertain, hovering at the threshold.

“May I speak with you?” she asked.

Connor gestured to the chair opposite him. "Come in."

She closed the door behind her, improper, but he didn't comment on it, and took the offered seat. For a moment, she said nothing, just stared into the fire as if gathering her thoughts.

"I wanted to thank you," she finally said.

Connor frowned. "For what?"

"For letting me stay. For not throwing me out when I can't even cook a simple meal without nearly burning down your home."

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth.

"I know I'm not exactly earning my keep."

"You saved Morag today," he pointed out. "That's worth more than any number of perfectly cooked meals."

She looked up, surprise evident in her expression. "You're not what I expected."

"And what did you expect?"

"I don't know. From the stories I've heard about Highland lairds, I thought you'd be more..." She gestured vaguely.

"Barbaric?" he supplied dryly.

She had the grace to look embarrassed. "Something like that."

He leaned back in his chair, studying her. In the firelight, with her guard down, she looked younger, more vulnerable. Not at all like a spy or a threat.

“You’re not what I expected either,” he admitted.

“No?” Her brow arched. “And what did you expect?”

“I’m not certain.” He took a sip of his whisky, considering. “Not someone who would dive into a pond without thought for her own safety. Not someone who would stand up to the cook to protect a lad she barely knows.”

A comfortable silence fell between them, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Connor found himself relaxing in her presence, the wariness he usually felt around her easing.

“I still don’t know what to make of you,” he said at last. “A woman from the colonies, traveling alone.” His tone suggested how improper he found the notion.

“I know it’s... unusual.” She smoothed her skirts, a gesture he was beginning to recognize as nervousness.

“But sometimes circumstances leave us little choice.”

“And what circumstances brought you here?” He couldn’t keep the suspicion from his voice. “Why did you leave the colonies?”

She met his gaze steadily. “Loss. Change. A need to start fresh.”

“Your family?” he asked, the question careful, measured.

“Gone.”

“No husband?” The question escaped before he could consider its propriety.

Her chin lifted slightly, then faltered. “I’m... I’m a widow,” she said, the words coming out awkwardly, as if she were trying them on for the first time.

Connor caught the hesitation, the slight tremor in her voice that betrayed the lie. Still, he found himself relieved at her answer, false though it might be. A widow would be far more acceptable to house here at the keep than an unwed maiden. The clan would gossip either way, but at least with a widow, propriety could be maintained.

“I see,” he said, choosing not to challenge her deception. “And how long have you been...” He let the question trail off.

“Long enough,” she replied firmly, her composure returning. “Though I fail to see how that’s relevant to my staying here.”

He found himself fighting back a smile at her spirit. Even in her obvious discomfort, she maintained her defiance.

“You may stay at Bronmuir,” he said, the decision crystallizing in his mind. “For as long as you need.”

Relief washed over her face. “Thank you. I was supposed to stay with a cousin in Edinburgh. A distant relation on my mother’s side. But I received word just before leaving that she’d passed from fever.”

Kate’s voice softened. “By then, it was too late to change my journey. I promise I’ll learn to be useful here. I can?—”

He held up a hand, stopping her. “We’ll find what you’re good at. Everyone has a place here.”

She nodded, rising from her chair. "I should let you rest. It's been a long day."

"Good night, Mistress Adams," he said softly, standing.

She paused at the door, looking back at him. "Good night."

After she left, Connor remained standing, staring at the closed door. The woman was a mystery, one he wasn't sure he should try to solve. She disrupted the orderly running of his keep, challenged his authority, and carried herself with a confidence that both intrigued and unsettled him.

And yet, when Morag had almost drowned, Kate hadn't hesitated. She'd acted with courage and decisiveness, risking herself for a child she barely knew. That wasn't the action of a spy or someone with ill intent.

It was the action of someone with honor.

Connor returned to his chair and whisky, watching the flames dance in the hearth. Whatever Kate was... from the colonies, a spy, or simply a lost soul, she was now under his protection. And a MacLeod always protected his own.

Even when his own good sense told him that he might come to regret it.



### Chapter Eight

Two weeks. She'd been stuck in the past for a little over two weeks. Kate wasn't going to lie, it had been difficult, especially for someone who was used to speaking her mind. But as the days passed, she found herself growing accustomed to the rhythm of life in the late seventeenth century, though "accustomed" was perhaps too strong a word. "Less shocked" might be more accurate.

It might be mid June but with the clouds, every other day rain, and wind off the ocean, it was cold. If she had to guess, she'd say it was in the mid-fifties. Nessa had three dresses and underthings made for her. Today, Aileen had helped her put on the simple linen shift and a woolen kirtle in a deep forest green that laced up the front. The fabrics were rougher than anything she'd worn before, but she had to admit they were surprisingly comfortable. And warm, which was essential in a stone castle that sat on a cliff by the ocean.

When she descended the narrow spiral staircase, Kate found the hall bustling with activity. Women carried baskets of freshly baked bread, men discussed the day's tasks, and children darted between them, somehow avoiding a collision through some sixth sense Kate couldn't fathom.

"Ah, there you are," called a serving woman, waving her over. The woman was directing a group of younger girls in setting up trestle tables. "Sleep well, did ye?"

"Surprisingly, yes," Kate answered, which was mostly true. The bed, a straw-filled mattress on a wooden frame, was nothing like her memory foam at home, but exhaustion had been an effective sedative.

“Would you help with the bread?” the servant asked, gesturing to where several women were slicing thick loaves.

Kate nodded, grateful for something to do. Standing around feeling useless wasn’t her style, and keeping busy helped distract her from the impossible situation she found herself in.

As she worked alongside the women, Kate listened to their conversation, picking up fragments about clan matters. They spoke in a mix of Gaelic and heavily accented English, switching between the two to include her in the conversation.

“... third raid this month...”

“... poor Hamish, God rest him...”

“... the laird carries too much on his shoulders now...”

A younger woman, Bonnie, sighed heavily. “My cousin says the MacDonalds are demanding twice the usual tribute for Cameron’s return.”

“Aye, and that’s not all,” added a woman with fiery red hair, leaning in closer. “I heard they want the MacLeod Brooch itself. They say they’ll exchange him for it and a pledge of allegiance to King James.”

Gasps erupted from the circle of women, their hands momentarily stilling on their work.

“The brooch?” another woman scoffed, though Kate noticed her face had paled slightly. “Dougal MacDonald reaches too far. No MacLeod would ever surrender such a treasure.”

“What brooch?” Kate asked, curious about their reaction. “What does it look like?”

Could it be the same one the old woman had given her?

The women exchanged glances, and an uncomfortable silence fell over the group.

“’Tis just an old family heirloom,” the woman said dismissively, returning to her mending with renewed vigor. “Nothing that would interest an outlander such as yourself.”

Nessa cleared her throat. “Enough gossip for one day. These linens won’t mend themselves.”

Kate nodded, but her thoughts were scattered. She needed to see it for herself. If the stones in the brooch matched the one she’d been given in the cemetery, perhaps it might hold the key to sending her back to her own time. Kate made a silent resolution. Somehow, she would find a way to get her hands on the brooch.

Instead of asking more about the brooch, she focused on cutting even slices of bread. It was harder than it looked.

Nessa appeared at Kate’s side, startling her. “You’re doing that wrong,” she said bluntly.

“What’s wrong with it?” Kate looked down at the bread she’d been slicing.

“Too thin. We’re not feeding birds here.” Nessa took the knife and demonstrated, cutting pieces nearly twice as thick as Kate’s. “Like this.”

“Right. Sorry.” She took the knife back, mimicking Nessa’s technique.

As the morning progressed, Kate found herself assigned to increasingly simple tasks, which she suspected was due to her obvious incompetence at most household chores. By midday, she was relegated to carrying water from the well. Physical labor, but requiring minimal skill.

On her third trip back with filled buckets, she nearly collided with Connor as he strode into the courtyard.

“Careful,” he said, steadying her with a hand on her arm.

The touch sent an unexpected jolt through her, and water sloshed over the rim of one bucket. She stepped back quickly. “Sorry. I didn’t see you.”

Connor eyed the buckets. “Nessa has put you to work, I see.”

“I volunteered,” she said, which wasn’t entirely true, but sounded better than admitting she’d been demoted to water carrier after proving useless at everything else.

A hint of amusement crossed his face. “Did you, now?”

“I don’t like sitting idle.” Kate shifted the buckets, which were growing heavier by the second. “And I thought it might help me... fit in.”

Connor studied her for a moment. “Walk with me,” he said abruptly. “After you’ve delivered the water.”

It wasn’t quite a command, but it wasn’t exactly a request either. Kate nodded and continued toward the kitchens, wondering what he wanted to discuss.

When she returned to the courtyard, Connor was waiting, his tall figure silhouetted

against the stone archway, muscled arms on display. He gestured for her to follow him, and they walked in silence until they reached a small garden tucked against the inner wall of the keep. It was a humble space, with hardy herbs and a few flowers, but it offered a measure of privacy.

“You’ve been asking questions,” Connor said without preamble.

Kate tensed. “I’ve been trying to understand where I am. Is that a problem?”

“It depends on what you’re trying to understand.” Connor’s gaze was direct, assessing. “My people say you’re curious about our troubles with the MacDonalds. About my brother.”

She sighed. Of course, the women had reported her eavesdropping. “I wasn’t prying. Not intentionally. People talk, and I listen.”

“Why does it interest you?”

“Because I’m here,” Kate said simply. “Because whatever’s happening affects everyone in this keep, including me, for as long as I’m stuck here. And because—” She hesitated.

“Because?” He prompted.

“Because you look exhausted,” Kate finished honestly. “And I’m guessing it has something to do with these troubles I keep hearing about.”

His expression softened slightly. He gestured to a stone bench, and they both sat, careful to keep a distance between them.

“The clan has faced... difficulties in recent months,” he said after a moment. “My

father was murdered this spring. Cut down by MacDonald steel while defending our lands.”

“I’m sorry,” Kate said quietly.

Connor acknowledged this with a slight nod. “The leadership should have fallen to my older brother Cameron, who had been groomed for it his entire life. But he was captured during a border skirmish with the MacDonalds just a fortnight after our father’s death.”

“They’re holding him for ransom?”

“Aye. A sum we cannot easily pay, especially after a poor harvest.” Connor’s jaw tightened. “And my youngest brother, Brodie, who might have helped negotiate, has been missing these five months past. The MacDonalds demand more than just gold. They want allegiances declared in matters where choosing any side means making powerful enemies.”

Kate absorbed this. “Missing how?”

“He said he was going to see about a horse. He never returned.” Connor’s voice was controlled, but Kate could hear the strain beneath it. “Then we received word he was in Edinburgh, but after that... nothing.”

“That’s a lot to deal with all at once,” Kate said, understanding better now the weight she’d seen in his eyes.

Connor gave a humorless laugh. “And you haven’t even heard about my sister yet.”

“Elspeth?” Kate asked, remembering a name she’d caught in the women’s conversations.

His eyebrows rose slightly. “You have been listening carefully.”

She shrugged. “It’s a habit. I’m a researcher by profession.”

“And what exactly do you research?”

“People,” she answered, then added with a touch of irony, “I specialize in conflict resolution and difficult personalities. Which is proving more useful than I expected.”

That earned her a brief smile before Connor’s expression sobered again. “Elspeth is another... complication. She eloped six months ago with a MacKenzie man. Against my father’s wishes.”

“I take it that’s a problem because...?”

“The MacKenzies have been our rivals for generations,” Connor explained. “Not enemies, precisely, but not allies, either. My father forbade the match. Elspeth defied him.”

“And now?”

“Now she lives with her husband’s clan, and my father went to his grave unreconciled with his only daughter.”

Connor’s voice held a complex mix of anger and regret.

“She hasn’t returned, not even for his funeral.”

Kate considered this. “Have you invited her back?”

He looked at her sharply. “It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?” She challenged gently. “She’s your sister.”

“She made her choice.” His tone made it clear the subject was closed.

They sat in silence for a moment, the summer breeze rustling the herbs around them. A question had been forming in Kate’s mind since her arrival, and now seemed as good a time as any to ask it.

“Connor, the old graveyard, where you found me...”

He looked at her with sudden suspicion. “Aye, by the ruins of the chapel. What about it?”

She chose her words carefully. “I’m trying to understand how I got here. The last thing I remember before waking up in your arms was being in that graveyard.”

Connor studied her for a long moment, rubbing the stubble on his cheek. “It’s not far, just beyond that rise.”

“I’d like to visit,” Kate said. “Maybe it would help me remember something.”

“It’s not safe for you to wander alone.”

“I’m not asking to go alone. I’m asking for permission to go with an escort, if necessary.”

He considered this, then nodded slowly. “I can spare a man to accompany ye tomorrow, if the weather holds.”

“Thank you.” Kate felt a surge of hope. If she could find the flat stone with the spiral at the chapel, find the old woman... ask if her brooch was the same as Connor’s



brooch...

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, rising from the bench. “The path isn’t easy, and I’m not convinced you’ll find what ye’re looking for.”

Kate stood as well. “I have to try.”

Something in her voice must have conveyed her determination, because Connor’s expression softened. “Aye, I suppose you do.” He hesitated, then added, “We all seek our way home, one way or another.”

The simple statement, tinged with his own longing, caught at her heart. For a moment, they stood looking at each other, an unexpected connection forming between them.

Then he cleared his throat and stepped back. “I should return to my duties. And the cook will be wondering where her water carrier has disappeared to.”

Kate smiled. “I’m probably promoted to vegetable peeler by now.”

“A prestigious position,” Connor said, the corner of his mouth lifting. “Don’t let the power go to your head.”

The small joke surprised her, and Kate laughed. “I’ll try to stay humble.”

\* \* \*

The next morning dawned clear and cold. Kate dressed quickly in the warmest clothes Nessa had provided, including a woolen cloak that smelled faintly of heather and smoke.

Connor was waiting in the courtyard with a stocky, middle-aged man whose beard was more gray than brown.

“This is Fergus,” Connor said. “He’ll accompany you to the old graveyard and back. He knows the path well.”

Fergus nodded to her, his expression neutral. “We should be off soon, if we’re to return before dark.”

“I’m ready,” Kate assured him, trying to contain her eagerness.

He handed her a small bundle. “Some food for midday,” he explained. “The path is longer than you might expect.”

Their fingers brushed during the exchange, and she felt that same strange jolt as yesterday. She quickly tucked the bundle into the pouch at her waist. “Thank you.”

“Fergus will keep you safe,” Connor said, his eyes serious. “But stay close to him, and return directly. The weather can change quickly this time of year.”

Kate nodded. “I will.”

As they set out through the gate, she glanced back to see him watching them, his tall figure silhouetted against the stone walls of the keep. He raised a hand in farewell, and she returned the gesture before turning to follow Fergus down the path.

The journey took longer than Kate had anticipated. What had seemed like a short distance when she was lost and confused turned out to be a winding route through hills and over streams. Fergus was not much of a talker, answering her occasional questions with grunts or single words, which suited her fine. She was too busy planning what she would do when they reached the graveyard.

Find the stone with the strange spiral marking. Look for the old woman. Go home.

By the time the ancient stone walls of the graveyard came into view, Kate's heart was pounding with anticipation. This was it. Her chance to find answers. To go home to her own time.

As they entered through the gate, her heart lifted slightly at the sight, though it was still jarring to see everything so different from her first visit. The stone markers stood proud and new, their inscriptions sharp and clear in the fresh-cut stone. The chapel was whole, its walls solid and roof intact. It was a far cry from the crumbling ruins she remembered from her own time.

She searched systematically, walking up and down the rows while Fergus watched from the shade of an old yew tree. Many of the inscriptions she could read were in Gaelic or Latin, the letters crisp as if newly carved.

She hesitated, but there was no stone in front of the door as she stepped inside the chapel, marveling at how different it was from when she'd first seen it in her own time.

Instead of scattered stones and stubborn weeds, the floor was smooth though there was an air of neglect about the place. The walls reached up to meet a sturdy timber roof, and pale light filtered through the windows.

"Looking for something specific?" Fergus asked, speaking more words at once than he had all morning.

"I'm not sure." Kate shook her head. "It's so beautiful. Why isn't the chapel used? We had services at the keep on Sunday." Kate asked, noting the thin layer of dust on the altar.

Fergus shifted uncomfortably. “Too exposed. After the MacDonalds started their raids, the laird moved services to the keep’s chapel. Safer that way.” He crossed himself. “Though some say it’s bad luck to abandon God’s house.”

Kate ran her fingers along the worn stone of a window ledge. “It seems wrong, letting it stand empty.”

“Aye, well, better empty than filled with MacDonald warriors lying in wait.” Fergus’s voice held a bitter edge. “They’ve used holy ground for ambush before.”

That explained Connor’s insistence on an escort. She made one final circuit of the chapel, searching for any sign of the spiral stone or the mysterious old woman, but didn’t find anything. No woman waiting in the shadows, no magical brooch hidden in a corner. No spiral markings anywhere. Just dust, silence, and the weight of centuries pressing down on her.

As they made their way back to the keep, Kate scrutinized every woman they passed on the road, but not a single one was the ancient figure she remembered. She was no closer to finding her way home than she had been a little over two weeks ago.

The sun was setting by the time they returned, painting the sky in shades of purple and gold. Connor stood at the gate, his expression revealing nothing as they approached.

“Find what you were looking for?” he asked as she passed through the gate.

She shook her head, feeling the weight of disappointment settle over her. “No. But thank you for letting me try.”

His eyes softened slightly. “Sometimes,” he said quietly, “what we’re looking for isn’t where we left it.”

She wasn't sure if he was trying to offer comfort or warning her against future searches. Either way, she was too tired to puzzle it out now. She nodded her thanks and headed inside, leaving Connor and Fergus to discuss whatever men discussed in the gathering darkness.

That night, as she lay in her narrow bed listening to the wind howl outside her window, Kate faced an uncomfortable truth. What if she was stuck here forever? The old woman, the brooch, the magical stone. None of them seemed to exist anymore.

The thought of being stuck here should have terrified her. Instead, she found herself wondering what Connor had meant about things not being where we left them.

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### Chapter Nine

Kate had seen her share of tense business meetings, but nothing quite compared to watching a Highland chief try to negotiate his brother's release while looking like he wanted to throw his dirk across the great hall. The vein in Connor's temple throbbed as he read the latest message from the MacDonald clan. His jaw clenched so tight she worried he might crack a tooth.

From what she had learned, Connor wasn't engaged and wasn't seeing anyone, so either the guidebook was wrong or it hadn't happened yet? And what if this unknown MacDonald woman tried to murder him? It wasn't like she could tell him how she knew what was coming. No, if it looked like a MacDonald woman might enter the picture, then Kate would figure out what to do.

Seated at a wooden table, the uncomfortable bench making her butt go numb, Kate stayed to the periphery of the hall as the room buzzed with whispered conversations and concerned looks. Even Nessa had abandoned her usual brisk efficiency, hovering near the kitchens and twisting her apron in her hands.

"They ask for more than we can give," Connor said finally, his voice carrying across the hall. "The Bronmuir Brooch and three hundred head of cattle."

Ewan cursed colorfully. "They ken well we don't have that many cattle to spare."

This was just like the Jensen merger last spring, one party deliberately asking for the impossible to see how desperate the other side was. They'd wanted to merge Love Lasting with Hook Me Up, which was a hook up app, while Love Lasting was a

relationship app. Talk about a bad idea, not that anyone had asked what she'd thought. The deal had fallen through when the CEO of Hook Me Up hosted a party at a strip club and was caught on video with two strippers in a compromising position. His wife was not amused.

Connor crumpled the message in his fist. "They willna have the brooch nor will I let them bleed us dry."

"Better the clan's wealth than Cameron's blood," someone muttered from the back of the hall. "He is the eldest and should be laird."

She watched Connor's shoulders tense at the words. The weight of leadership sat heavy on him. It was in every line of his body. Part of her wanted to go to him, to share what she knew about negotiation tactics and finding leverage. But how could she explain that she'd learned it all in business school and by watching action movies without raising suspicions?

As she watched him rake his hands through his envy-inducing, thick sun-kissed hair in frustration, she knew she had to try. His brother's life depended on it. And maybe she could help without revealing exactly how she knew what she knew.

Once the hall had mostly cleared out, she approached him. He still sat at the high table, legs stretched out in front of him, staring at the crumpled message as if it might suddenly reveal better news.

"You know," she said casually, settling onto the bench next to him, but keeping a careful distance, "I once watched two shepherds argue over grazing rights near my home."

The lie felt awkward on her tongue, but she pressed on. "The clever one didn't focus on the land at all. He offered something his neighbor needed more."

Connor's blue eyes lifted to meet hers. "And what has that to do with this?"

Kate caught the scent of him as he turned. Leather, pine, and something distinctly male that made her pulse quicken. She forced herself to focus. "Maybe the MacDonalds are asking for the brooch and the cattle because they think that's what will hurt you most." She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant while her heart raced. "What if you offered something else? Something they need but can't easily get?"

"Such as?"

What would a Highland clan value besides livestock? Kate thought quickly. "Grain for the coming winter? Extra weapons?" She paused, then added carefully, "Or perhaps information about their rivals?"

Connor's expression sharpened. "Continue, lass."

"Well, from what I've heard people saying, the MacDonalds have been feuding with several clans."

Thank goodness she'd been paying attention to the gossip in the castle.

"Maybe they'd rather have intelligence about their enemies than a few hundred cattle they'd have to feed through the winter. Or the brooch."

She shrugged. "You could give them a fake brooch. Unless they know exactly what it looks like..." she trailed off.

A slow smile spread across Connor's face. "Aye, and I happen to know the MacKinnons are planning to expand their territory in the fall."

"Information like that might be worth more than cattle." She could almost see the



wheels turning in his head as he considered the possibility.

He looked at her with new appreciation, a laugh rumbling in his chest. “Are ye certain you’re not Scottish, lass? The brooch is a fine idea indeed. They’ve never laid eyes on it. Might work well in our favor.”

Connor leaned forward, eyes intense. “Tell me, where did you really learn to think like this?”

Kate’s stomach dropped. “My father let me listen in on his business dealings.”

“You’re different from any woman I’ve ever known.” He didn’t sound angry, just curious. Then he laughed. “It would explain why ye are shite at womanly tasks.”

A snort escaped. “Maybe you just haven’t known many women,” she deflected, earning another surprised laugh from him.

“Touché.” He sat back, watching her with that penetrating gaze that made her feel like he could see right through her carefully constructed story. “Will you help me draft a response to the MacDonalds?”

“Me?” Kate squeaked. “Shouldn’t you ask your advisors?”

“My advisors would have me gather the clan and raid MacDonald lands.” Connor’s mouth twisted wryly. “I think I prefer your approach.”

And that was how she found herself spending the afternoon helping a Highland chief compose a counter-offer. She kept her suggestions subtle, phrasing them as questions rather than direct advice. “What if you mentioned the MacKinnon information first? Make them really think about what they might be missing? Then grudgingly say you would give them the brooch?”

“Aye, they will think they are weakening us by taking possession of the brooch.” Connor nodded, adding a few lines to the message. His handwriting was surprisingly elegant.

“And here, we’ll remind them winter is coming. Cattle need feeding, but information...” He smiled grimly. “Information can keep a clan safe.”

“Exactly! That’s a perfect value proposition,” Kate said enthusiastically, then froze when Connor looked at her curiously. “I mean, it’s a good... trade... suggestion.”

He frowned slightly but continued writing.

Kate found herself relaxing as they worked, almost forgetting when and where she was. This felt familiar. The back-and-forth of negotiation, the strategic planning. Only the scratching of the quill pen and the occasional blast of cold air through the hall reminded her she wasn’t in her office back in Atlanta.

From across the room, she caught Angus, one of the older clan members, watching them with narrowed eyes. His gaze was calculating as it moved between her and Connor. She looked away quickly, pretending not to notice.

“There.” He sat back, looking satisfied. “What do you think?”

She read over the message carefully. It was perfectly crafted, suggesting the trade of information while hinting at other possibilities, neither accepting nor rejecting the original demands. It left the door open for further negotiation while making it clear the MacLeods weren’t desperate. “It’s perfect,” she said honestly.

“Thanks to ye.” He rolled up the message and sealed it. “Though I still don’t understand how you know so much about negotiation.”

Her chest tightened. “I’m observant,” she said lightly. “And I listen more than I talk.”

“Aye, that you do.” He studied her for a long moment. “Whatever your secrets, I’m glad you’re here.”

The warmth in his voice made her breath catch. She stood quickly, needing to put some distance between them before she did something stupid like tell him the truth. That she was a time traveler. “I should go, I told Moira I’d help her clean the stillroom.”

“Kate.” His voice stopped her halfway to the door. “Thank ye.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and fled to Moira’s stillroom where she proceeded to nearly ruin the healer’s carefully dried herbs. She’d found what she thought were weeds mixed in with the medicinal plants and had tossed them into the fire. Moira’s exasperated sighs when she discovered Kate had burned her prized feverfew couldn’t dampen her spirits. She’d helped, or at least tried to help. She’d made a difference, even if it was learning what not to do.

That night, lying in her narrow bed, she smiled up at the darkness. For the first time since arriving in the past, she felt truly useful. The fact that Connor’s blue eyes and rare smile kept appearing in her thoughts was just an unfortunate side effect of spending the day with him. Nothing more.

She rolled over, punching her lumpy pillow into submission. She was here to help save Cameron and then figure out how to get home. Not to notice how Connor’s whole face transformed when he smiled, or how his presence filled a room, or how his voice got deeper when he was thinking hard about something... Not to mention the accent... and the muscles, and that perfect face.

“Oh, stop it,” she muttered into her pillow. “This is not a fairy tale. You are not

falling for a Highland chief.”

But as she drifted off to sleep, she couldn’t quite convince herself she was telling the truth.

### Chapter Ten

Connor walked ahead on the narrow deer path, pausing every few paces to ensure Kate didn't need assistance. The morning mist clung to the hills, the air crisp and clean. He'd risen before dawn, restless after another night of troubled dreams about Cameron. The message to the MacDonalds had been sent, but waiting for their response left him feeling hollow and useless.

He needed this, a few hours away from the weight of being laird. And for reasons he couldn't quite explain, or perhaps didn't want to examine too closely, he wanted Kate with him.

The wind whipped around them as Kate plodded up the steep, rocky path. Her boots slipped on loose stones, sending tiny avalanches tumbling down the hillside. He suppressed a grin when she mopped her brow with her sleeve, cursing under her breath.

"Are you certain this mysterious destination is worth all this... exercise?" She called out, huffing and puffing.

He turned, brow furrowed in confusion. "Exercise? What manner of word is that?"

"Oh," Kate panted. The heather-scented breeze cooled her flushed cheeks. "It's when you... move your body to become stronger. Like training, but not for battle."

Connor's lips quirked into a half-smile as he watched her navigate the treacherous ground, her skirts gathered in one hand while the other reached for purchase on the

rocky slope.

“Ye mean to tell me people in Boston move about just to become stronger? With no purpose?”

“Something like that,” she managed, accepting his hand as he helped her over a particularly challenging section.

“Not much farther now,” he assured her, his deep voice carrying on the wind.

“You said that an hour ago,” she grumbled, even though a smile lit her face.

“Impatient, are we?”

“Just wondering if you’re lost and too proud to admit it.” She released his hand the moment she was on level ground.

“A MacLeod, lost on his own lands?” Connor pressed a hand to his chest in mock offense. “You wound me, lass.”

The path narrowed further as they made their way through the heather-covered hills. The morning mist clung to the ground, and the scent of peat and wet stone filled the air around them.

“Mind your step here,” he warned. “The ground’s treacherous after yesterday’s rain.”

A rather unladylike snort escaped as she said, “Yesterday? It seems like it rains almost every day.”

Connor shrugged, a smile on his face. “Aye, but today ’tis just a wee mist. Now yesterday, that was a proper smirr . Though if ye want real rain, ye would like the

dreich . That's when it's gray and dreary and the rain doesna stop. Or there's the drookit , that's when ye get so soaked through ye look like a drowned rat. And then there's the stoating , when the rain bounces right off the ground, and the haar , though that's more of a thick fog that rolls in from the sea..."

"Okay, okay!" Kate laughed, holding up her hands in surrender. "I get it. You Scots are completely obsessed with the weather."

The sound reached them before the sight, a soft rushing that grew steadily louder as they approached. Connor watched her face, waiting for the moment when she would hear it too. Her head tilted slightly, brow furrowing in concentration.

"Is that a waterfall?" she asked.

"Aye." He gestured for her to follow. "Just around these rocks."

The path ended abruptly at a curtain of hanging vines. Connor pushed them aside, revealing the hidden sanctuary beyond. "After you."

She stepped through, and he heard her soft gasp of surprise. The sound pleased him more than he cared to admit.

The pool lay in a small, sheltered hollow, fed by a waterfall that cascaded down moss-covered rocks. The rain gave way to sunlight slanting through a gap in the surrounding cliffs, catching in the spray and creating a rainbow that arched across the crystalline water. Wildflowers dotted the banks, their colors vibrant against the lush green.

"Connor, it's..." She turned in a slow circle, taking in the secluded beauty. "It's magical."

“I found it when I was a lad of ten,” he said, moving to stand beside her. “I was hiding from my brothers after stealing the last of cook’s honey cakes.” The memory brought a smile to his lips. “I’ve never shown it to anyone else.”

She looked at him then, something unreadable in her expression. “Why show me?”

It was a fair question, one he’d asked himself, as he’d impulsively invited her on this morning trek. Why indeed? Because she’d helped him craft the message to the MacDonalds when his own thoughts had been too clouded by anger? Because she’d shown more sense and strategy than half his advisors who clamored for war? Or was it something else entirely, the way her eyes lit up when she solved a problem, how she spoke her mind without fear, unlike any woman he’d ever known?

“I thought you might appreciate it,” he said finally, the words inadequate to his own ears. “And I wanted to thank you. For your help with the MacDonald message.”

Kate seemed to accept this, turning back to the pool. “Can we go closer?”

“Of course. Mind your step, the rocks can be slippery.”

They picked their way down to the water’s edge. Connor found a flat boulder near the pool and gestured for Kate to sit. He settled beside her, careful to leave a bit of space between them.

“The locals call this Lochan nan Sithichean ,” he said. “Part of Coire na Creiche .” He leaned back on his hands, letting the peace of the place wash over him. “Legend says a spirit dwells in these waters, one who grants wishes to those pure of heart.”

“Do you believe that?” Kate asked, her voice softer than usual.

He considered the question. As a boy, he’d certainly believed. Had whispered his



deepest wishes into the pool, hoping the spirit would hear. As a man...

“I believe there’s magic in the world,” he said carefully. “Not always the kind from tales, but magic nonetheless.”

She trailed her fingers through the clear water, creating ripples that expanded outward. “What kind of magic, then?”

“The magic of a perfect dawn. Of a sword balanced just right in your hand.” He paused, watching her profile. “Of finding exactly what you need when you least expect it.”

She looked up then, her eyes catching the light. For a moment, neither spoke, and Connor felt something shift between them, something as delicate and powerful as the mist rising from the pool.

“There’s another part to the legend,” he said, his voice rougher than he intended. “It’s said that if two people with true hearts come to the pool together, the spirit will bless their... connection.”

“Connection?” Kate arched a brow, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Heat rose to his face. “Mo chreach, woman, must you make me say it? Their love. The spirit blesses their love.”

Her smile widened. “I’m just trying to understand the local traditions.”

“My mother brought me here once, told me the stories,” he said, the memory suddenly vivid. “Said someday I might bring someone special.” He hadn’t thought of that day in years. His mother’s gentle voice, her hand smoothing his hair as she spoke of love and magic.

“You must miss her,” Kate said quietly.

“Aye.” The simple word contained volumes. “She would have liked you, I think. She had little patience for fools.”

Kate laughed, the sound echoing off the rocks. “Is that a compliment?”

“From a MacLeod? Absolutely.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “Thank you for bringing me here. It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

“You haven’t seen much of Scotland then,” Connor replied automatically, then regretted his words when her expression clouded.

“No, I suppose I haven’t,” she said, looking away.

He cursed himself silently. There was clearly more to her story than she was willing to share, and his careless words had reminded her of whatever burden she carried.

“Would you like to see the cave behind the waterfall?” he asked, hoping to recapture the easy moment they’d shared.

Her eyes lit up. “There’s a cave?”

“A small one.” He stood and offered his hand.

This time, she took it without hesitation.

The path behind the waterfall was narrow and slick with spray. He led the way, keeping a firm grip on Kate’s hand. The roar of falling water filled his ears as they

slipped behind the curtain of white, emerging into the cool dimness of the cave beyond.

It was smaller than he remembered, barely large enough for both of them to stand upright. Water dripped from the ceiling, and the walls glittered with embedded minerals that caught what little light filtered through the falls.

“It’s like being inside a jewel,” Kate said, voice hushed with wonder.

Connor watched her explore the small space, touching the damp walls with reverent fingers, her face alight with joy. Something twisted in his chest, something dangerously close to tenderness.

“The clan elders say the cave was formed by the tears of a fairy whose mortal lover was killed in battle,” he said, leaning against the wall. “She wept for a hundred years, and her tears carved out this hollow in the rock.”

Kate turned to him, her expression thoughtful. “You know a lot of sad stories.”

“Most Highland tales end in tragedy,” he admitted. “But not all. Some speak of great love that transcends death itself.” He paused, surprised by his own words. He wasn’t given to romantic notions, yet here he was, speaking of love and magic like a lovestruck youth.

“And do you believe in that kind of love?” Kate asked, her voice barely audible above the waterfall.

Connor found himself moving closer, drawn by something he couldn’t name. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “My parents had it, I think. But I’ve always had the clan to think of, my brothers to protect.”

“That sounds lonely,” she said softly.

“At times.” He was close enough now to see the droplets of water clinging to her eyelashes. “But necessary.”

“Is it?” She tilted her face up to his, and for one breathless moment, he thought she might close the distance between them.

Instead, she stepped back, nearly stumbling on the uneven floor. He reached out instinctively to steady her, his hands finding her waist. Through the fabric of her dress, he could feel the warmth of her skin, the slight tremor that ran through her body at his touch.

“Kate,” he began, though he wasn’t sure what he meant to say.

“We should go back,” she said quickly, her cheeks flushed. “Before someone notices we’re missing.”

Connor released her, immediately feeling the loss. “Tha thu ceart,” he murmured. “You’re right.”

They made their way back through the waterfall in silence. The morning had grown warmer, the mist burning off to reveal a clear blue sky. He helped her back to the boulder where they’d sat earlier, noticing how she carefully maintained distance between them.

Had he imagined the moment in the cave? The way she’d looked at him, as if seeing something in him no one else had bothered to look for?

Kate wrung out the hem of her dress, avoiding his gaze. “So, did you ever make wishes here as a boy? What did you wish for?”

The abrupt change of subject was transparent, but he allowed it. “Many things. To be the best swordsman in the clan. For my father’s approval.” He smiled ruefully. “For Cameron to stop hiding my boots.”

She laughed, the tension between them easing slightly. “Did any of your wishes come true?”

“I became a fair hand with a sword,” he conceded. “The rest...” He shrugged. “Perhaps the fairy found me wanting.”

“I doubt that,” Kate said, with such sincerity that he felt something catch in his throat.

“Would you like to make a wish?” he asked, gesturing to the pool.

She hesitated, then nodded. “How do I do it?”

“Just close your eyes and think your wish. The spirit will hear.”

Kate turned to the pool, closing her eyes. Connor watched as her lips moved silently, her expression one of such longing that it made his chest ache. He knew she must be wishing to return home, back to the mysterious place she came from. The thought brought an unexpected pang of sadness.

“Ready,” she said finally, turning back to him. “Don’t you want to know what I wished for?”

“No,” Connor replied, following Highland tradition. “It won’t come true if you tell me.”

As they made their way back around the rocks, a shout met their ears. Ewan appeared on the path, his expression urgent.

“Connor!” he called. “I’ve been searching half the morning for you.”

He straightened, instantly alert. “What’s happened?”

“A message from the MacDonalds.” Ewan handed him a sealed parchment, his eyes flicking briefly to Kate. “They’ve responded to our offer.”

The peaceful bubble of the morning shattered. Connor broke the seal, scanning the contents quickly. His jaw tightened as he read.

“What is it?” Kate asked, coming to stand beside him.

“They reject our terms,” he said grimly. “They demand the brooch in exchange for Cameron’s life. If we don’t deliver it by sundown tomorrow...” He couldn’t finish the sentence. The threat against his brother was too terrible to voice aloud.

“What exactly does it say?” Kate asked.

His eyes darkened as he translated the Gaelic. “They claim the brooch is their rightful property. They’ll execute Cameron if we don’t surrender it within the fortnight.” He crumpled the parchment in his fist. “They say they have proof it was stolen from their clan generations ago.”

“They’re bluffing,” Kate said with certainty. “This is a negotiation tactic. They want you to panic.”

Ewan made a choking sound. “With respect, mistress, you know nothing of clan politics.”

“I know people,” Kate retorted. “And this—” she tapped the parchment, “—is written by someone who wants you to think they hold all the cards. But they don’t. Besides,

you planned for this. You have the replica brooch ready.”

He studied her face, finding nothing but conviction there. “What makes you so sure they’ll accept it?”

“Look at the language. ‘The brooch or consequences will be dire.’ It’s vague. If they were really going to kill Cameron, they’d be explicit about it.” She handed the message back to him. “They need him alive as leverage. This is posturing. And they won’t know the difference between the real brooch and your copy.”

Ewan looked between them, clearly bewildered by Connor’s willingness to listen to a woman’s assessment of clan warfare. But he had seen the wisdom in Kate’s strategy before, and something in her confidence steadied him now.

“We need to return to the keep,” he said, making his decision. “I want to speak with the council before we make the exchange.”

As they gathered their things and prepared to leave the sanctuary of the pool, Connor caught her watching him with an unreadable expression.

“What?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “Just... Don’t let fear guide your decision. That’s what they want.”

He nodded, grateful for her steady presence despite the turmoil churning inside him. The peaceful interlude at the pool seemed a lifetime ago now, the almost-moment in the cave, a dream quickly fading in the harsh light of reality.

Yet as they made their way back along the path, he found himself drawing strength from the memory. From her belief in him. From the magic of the place they’d shared,

however briefly.

Perhaps the fairy had granted him a wish after all. Not one he'd made as a boy, but one his heart had made only recently, without him even knowing.

The wish for someone who saw him clearly, who understood the weight he carried, who made him feel less alone.



### Chapter Eleven

Kate's fingers were numb. She'd been waulking wool for what felt like hours, though the sun hadn't moved much in the sky. The rhythmic thumping and singing helped pass the time, but her shoulders ached. She was seated between Nessa and a young girl named Mary at the long wooden table where the women worked the wool.

The sharp smell of urine used to clean the wool made her wrinkle her nose. She'd nearly gagged when Nessa explained what they used, but apparently, it was the best way to get the lanolin out. Kate had a new appreciation for her washer and dryer.

"Keep the rhythm," Nessa called out. "We'll never get done at this rate."

The women began another song, their voices rising and falling as they passed the wet wool down the table. She tried to join in, but stumbled over the Gaelic words.

"Here." Moira passed her a flask. "A wee dram will help loosen your tongue."

Kate took a sip and immediately started coughing. The whisky burned all the way down. "That's... potent."

The women laughed. Mary patted her back. "You'll get used to it."

Three more passes of the flask and she was feeling much warmer. The Gaelic words didn't seem quite so difficult anymore. When they finished the current song, she grinned at her companions.

“Want to learn a drinking song from my...village?”

Nessa frowned, but the other women nodded eagerly.

“99 bottles of beer on the wall, 99 bottles of beer...” Kate started singing, demonstrating the counting down part.

Soon the women were enthusiastically joining in, though they changed it to “whisky in the hall.” Their voices grew louder with each verse. She caught sight of Connor walking past the open door, doing a double-take at the raucous singing. She gave him a little wave, feeling bold from the whisky.

He shook his head, but she could have sworn she saw a smile tugging at his lips before he moved on, his plaid swishing against his legs as he strode away.

Kate found herself smiling, too. Back home, she’d never done anything like this. Sitting with a group of women, singing and working together. Her job had her analyzing relationships from behind a screen, not building them over shared labor and whisky. There was something oddly comforting about it, despite the aching shoulders and the disgusting smell.

“Tell us about your village,” Mary asked during a break, her work-roughened hands smoothing her simple brown wool kirtle.

Kate paused, mentally scrambling for details about Boston that wouldn’t raise suspicions. These women believed she was from the colonies, Massachusetts specifically, and she needed to keep her story consistent.

“Boston is... larger than most villages here,” she began carefully. “It sits on a harbor with many ships coming and going. The streets are laid out near the water, with houses built close together. Most are made of wood, though some of the wealthier

families have brick homes.”

She thought about what would be relevant to these 17th-century women. “There’s a large market where people trade goods from all over. Fish is plentiful, of course, being so close to the sea. And there are several churches with tall steeples that you can see from almost anywhere in town.”

Kate smiled, adding details she recalled from a weekend trip a year ago. “The winters are harsh, with bitter cold winds coming off the water. But spring brings beautiful flowering trees and summer days that can be quite hot.”

“I would not want to leave the clan.” Mary pursed her lips. Though only seventeen, her weathered face and calloused fingers made her appear the same age as Kate, who had turned twenty-nine back in March. “Do you miss your family?”

Her chest tightened as she adjusted her dove gray dress, the wool itchy against her skin. The other women wore similar plain dresses in muted browns and grays, with white linen caps covering their hair, though Kate refused a cap, preferring to braid her hair to feel the air on her neck.

“Yes, very much.” She took another sip from the flask, letting the whisky’s burn steady her nerves and lend credibility to the tremor in her voice. “I lost my husband nearly two years past.” Kate’s fingers tightened around the flask as she wove her tale, making sure not to deviate from the story she’d told Connor.

“I was supposed to stay with a cousin in Edinburgh, a distant relation on my mother’s side. But I received word just before leaving that she’d passed from fever.” Her voice softened, the genuine loneliness of her situation seeping into her words. “By then, it was too late to change my journey.”

One of the older women clucked her tongue sympathetically. “Two years a widow, ye

say? Well then, lass, it's high time ye found yourself another husband. A bonny thing like you shouldn't be alone in the world."

The scent of fresh bread wafted from the kitchen as the women worked the wool.

"Our laird needs a wife," Mary said with a knowing smile, her eyes twinkling despite the shadows under them from years of hard work. "He watches you when you're not looking."

"He does not." She felt her cheeks grow warm, and not just from the whisky. The other women's knowing looks made her face flush even deeper.

"Aye, he does," several women chimed in, giggling as they continued waulking the wool, all of the tipsy.

"Back to work," Nessa ordered, her keys jangling at her waist as she surveyed them with stern authority, though Kate caught the older woman hiding a smile behind her hand. The housekeeper's graying hair was neatly tucked under a spotless white cap, her black dress marking her higher status among the servants.

As they resumed their work, a pretty girl with black hair joined them, standing next to Mary, wringing her hands.

"What's wrong?" Mary asked.

"Nothing. I just..." The girl's eyes were red as if she'd been crying. "Archie asked me to walk with him after supper."

The other women immediately started offering advice and congratulations. She studied the girl's face and body language, years of analyzing relationships kicking in automatically. Isla was nervous but not in the excited way of someone in love. There

was tension in her shoulders, worry in her eyes. And she'd seen the young man, Archie, had taken his measure a few days ago.

"He's a fine catch," one woman said. "Your father will be pleased."

"I suppose..." Isla twisted her apron. "But what if?—"

"He'll break your heart within a fortnight," Kate said absently, the whisky making her forget her place. When she realized she'd spoken aloud, she clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean?—"

But it was too late. The women had gone silent, staring at her. Isla burst into tears and fled the room.

"How dare you say such a thing?" Mary jumped up. "Archie is my brother, and he's a good man."

"I didn't... I just..." Kate looked helplessly at Nessa, who was frowning deeply.

"Perhaps you've had enough whisky for one day," Nessa said firmly. "Go get some fresh air."

She stumbled to her feet, mortified. Talk about a big mouth. Kate hurried to the far corner of the garden, leaning against the cool stone wall. What had she been thinking? She couldn't go around casually predicting the end of relationships. These people already thought she was strange enough.

But she knew she was right. She'd seen it hundreds of times in her work at Love Lasting. Archie was the charming young man who rushed into courtship without really being ready for commitment. And Isla clearly had doubts she was trying to ignore.

Sure enough, ten days later, Archie was seen kissing the miller's daughter behind the stables. Isla was heartbroken, but she would recover. Unfortunately, the accuracy of Kate's prediction had not gone unnoticed.

She heard the whispers as she walked through the keep. Women crossed themselves when she passed. Some of the servants took to leaving sprigs of rowan on her pillow as protection against evil.

"Pay them no mind," Connor told her one evening as they walked along the battlements. He'd taken to seeking her out more often lately, though she tried not to read too much into it. "They're just superstitious."

"They think I'm a witch," Kate said miserably. "All because I have a knack for seeing when relationships won't work out."

"Are you?" His voice was teasing. "A witch?"

"No!" She smacked his arm, then immediately pulled back. But somehow it felt natural with him. "I just... I've seen a lot of relationships. I know the signs."

His expression suddenly turned serious, his brow furrowing as he glanced around to ensure they were alone. "We should not jest about witchcraft," he said, his voice dropping lower. "Such accusations have led women to terrible fates. Even in jest, such words can take root in fearful minds."

He was quiet for a moment, looking out over the darkening hills. "How does it work? This ability of yours?"

Kate hesitated, unsure how to explain her career in dating app analytics to a 17th-century Highland chief.

“It’s not magic,” she said carefully. “I just... observe. People show who they are if you pay attention. Archie, no offense to Mary’s brother, but he has wandering eyes. Always looking at the next pretty girl. And Isla, she was nervous, not excited. When you’re truly in love, there’s joy beneath the nervousness.”

He studied her face, his blue eyes intent. “And can you predict your own heart as well as others’?”

The question caught her off guard. “No,” she admitted. “I’m terrible at that part. Always have been.”

“Interesting.” Something flickered in his eyes that made her pulse quicken. “And what signs do you see for us?”

Kate’s heart skipped. “Us?”

“The clan,” he clarified quickly. “Our future.”

“Oh.” She ignored the slight disappointment in her chest. “I’m not actually able to see the future, you know. I can just tell when two people aren’t right for each other.”

“Like Isla and Archie?”

“Exactly. He wasn’t ready to settle down, and she knew it deep down but was trying to convince herself otherwise because everyone said they’d be a good match.” Kate sighed. “I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“Perhaps.” Connor turned to face her, his expression serious in the fading light. “But you saved her from a worse heartbreak later. Sometimes truth is worth a little discomfort.”

Kate met his eyes, struck by the warmth there. For a moment, she forgot about the whispers and the rowan sprigs. She forgot about being trapped in the wrong time. She just existed in this moment with Connor, feeling strangely at peace.

Then he reached out, hesitantly, and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. His fingers were calloused but gentle, and something about the tenderness of the gesture made Kate's breath catch. This man who commanded warriors with a single word, who carried the weight of his clan's survival on his shoulders, could be so unexpectedly kind.

A raven cawed overhead, and she jumped, breaking the spell.

"I should go in," she said quickly. "The wind is cold."

"Aye." There was definitely disappointment in his voice now. "Sleep well, Kate."

She hurried inside, heart pounding. She had to be more careful, not just with her predictions, but with her growing feelings for Connor. She didn't belong here, no matter how right it felt sometimes.

In her chamber, she found fresh rowan sprigs on her pillow. She gathered them up, meaning to throw them in the fire, then stopped. Maybe a little extra protection wasn't such a bad thing, even if you didn't believe in it. She tucked them under the bed and crawled under the covers, trying not to think about the way Connor had looked at her as the sun set.

The irony wasn't lost on her. She could predict everyone else's romantic disasters with eerie accuracy, yet here she was, falling for a man who lived centuries before she was born. So much for her relationship expertise. Her "gift" was useless when it came to her own heart, especially when that heart was leading her straight into impossible territory.



She was definitely in trouble.

### Chapter Twelve

The wind howled through the stones of Bronmuir Keep like the roof was going to come crashing down on her head. Rain lashed against the narrow window of Kate's chamber, the droplets transformed into tiny projectiles by the gale-force winds. The shutters rattled, and she wondered if they had tornadoes here in seventeenth-century Scotland?

Sleep was impossible. She had tried, oh, how she'd tried, but the combination of the storm's fury and her racing thoughts kept her wide awake. She'd counted sheep, recited dating app statistics in her head, and even tried the meditation technique Mandy had insisted would "change her life." Nothing worked.

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit," she muttered, the Southern drawl she'd spent thousands of dollars on vocal coaching to eliminate slipping back as her stress mounted.

"This storm's got more drama than a pageant queen with a broken heel."

With a sigh of defeat, she tossed back the heavy woolen blankets and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The stone floor sent a shock of cold through her bare feet, and she quickly slipped on the soft leather slippers Connor had given her.

Lightning flashed, briefly illuminating her small chamber. In that instant of brightness, the room looked almost modern, just a bed, a trunk, a small table with a basin. Then darkness swallowed everything again, and the thunder that followed seemed to shake the very foundations of the keep, making her wish for electricity so

she could flood the room with light.

The night was pitch black except for when lightning split the sky as she moved to the window, peering out through a gap in the shutters. During those brief flashes, she could see the courtyard below, rain-slicked and deserted, and beyond that, the angry, churning sea.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the battlements, and Kate froze. For a split second, she thought she saw a figure, but not a guard, slinking along the top of the wall, a dark silhouette against the briefly lit sky. Then darkness fell again, and she couldn't be sure if her eyes had deceived her.

"Who in tarnation would be out in this?" she whispered, her accent thickening further. "That's crazier than a sprayed roach."

The wind changed direction, and suddenly the rain was hammering directly against her window. Kate stepped back, startled, as water found its way through the shutters and sprayed her face.

She wiped her face with the edge of her shawl and turned away from the window. Maybe she was just seeing things. The keep was full of guards, so surely one of them would notice if anything was amiss.

But something felt wrong. Call it instinct, call it her finely tuned BS detector, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

She lit a small candle from the dying embers in the hearth and made her way to the door. The hallway outside was dark and drafty, but at least it was dry. She hesitated, considering whether this midnight wandering was really a good idea, then shrugged. What else was she going to do? Lie in bed and listen to Mother Nature's temper tantrum?

The candle created a small bubble of light around her as she moved quietly down the corridor. The stone walls amplified the storm, making it sound as if she were walking through the very heart of it. Kate had always hated thunderstorms, a childhood fear she'd never quite outgrown, but there was something almost exhilarating about being inside this ancient fortress while nature raged outside.

As she reached the top of the staircase that led down to the great hall, she paused. Had she heard something? She held her breath, listening intently. There it was again, a sound that didn't belong to the storm. A scraping, like metal against stone.

"Hello?" she called, immediately regretting it. If it was nothing, she'd look foolish. If it was something, she'd just announced her presence.

No answer came, just another rumble of thunder that seemed to last forever. Kate shook her head. The storm was making her jumpy.

She continued down the stairs, the stone cold beneath her slippered feet. The great hall was dimly lit by a few dying embers in the central hearth. Servants slept on pallets along the walls, their forms barely visible in the gloom. During the day, this space was the heart of clan life, full of people, noise, and activity. Now it was eerily quiet, the only sounds the soft snoring of the sleeping servants and the howling of the wind outside. How on earth were they sleeping through the storm?

Kate crossed to one of the narrow windows and peered out. Another flash of lightning revealed the courtyard, still empty, and the battlements above. This time, she was certain, a figure was moving along the top of the wall, hunched against the rain.

"Who would be out in this mess?" she whispered.

The guards, of course. Connor had men patrolling at all hours. But something about the way the figure moved didn't seem right. Then again, she had become paranoid

since working for Love Lasting, always expecting the worst of men.

Kate waited for another lightning flash, but when it came, the battlements appeared empty. Unsettled, she turned away from the window. The candle in her hand flickered, casting strange, dancing shadows on the walls. Maybe she should go back to her chamber. Clearly, this midnight wandering was feeding her imagination.

As she turned toward the stairs, a muffled thump came from somewhere above, barely audible over the storm. Kate froze, straining to hear. Had she imagined it?

No. There it was again, a shout, cut short.

Moving as quietly as possible, she made her way back up the stairs and along the corridor that led to the upper levels of the keep. She knew Connor's chamber was on this floor, as were those of his most trusted men.

The corridor was dark and empty. Kate raised her candle higher, trying to see farther ahead. The flame cast eerie, dancing shadows on the stone walls.

"Connor?" she called softly, not wanting to wake the entire keep if this was just her imagination running wild.

No answer.

She continued forward, her slippers quiet on the stone floor. At the end of the corridor was a narrow staircase that she knew led up to the battlements. As she approached, Kate noticed something dark and wet on the floor.

She knelt down, raising the candle to see better.

Water. A small puddle on the stone floor.

That wasn't unusual, given the storm. Except...this puddle was nowhere near a window or door. And it wasn't just water, it was tinged with something darker.

When she realized what she was looking at, Kate's blood ran cold.

Blood.

She stood up quickly, her heart hammering against her ribs. "Connor!" she called, no longer caring about waking anyone. "Help!"

The door at the end of the corridor burst open, and a man she'd never seen before emerged from the stairwell. He wore the plaid of the MacDonalds. She recognized it from Connor's descriptions. The man's face was hard, focused. Water dripped from his hair and clothes, forming puddles on the floor. In his hand, he held a dagger, its blade dark with blood.

An intruder. A MacDonald in the heart of MacLeod territory. He had to have inside help to breach the keep's defenses. Connor had a traitor in his midst.

The man's eyes widened in surprise when he saw Kate, then narrowed dangerously. "Well, well," he said, his voice a low growl. "What have we here?"

Shaking, she backed away. This couldn't be good. The feud between the clans was at a breaking point, with Cameron still held captive. If a MacDonald had infiltrated the keep...

"Stay back," she warned, trying to keep her voice steady despite the fear coursing through her. "The guards will be here any moment."

The MacDonald laughed, a harsh sound that sent chills down her spine. "No one can hear you, lass. The wine and whisky put them all to sleep, likely for hours." He

shrugged. “Those who did not partake will not hear anything over the storm. ’Tis why I chose this night.”

That explained why the corridor wasn’t full of MacLeod men. They’d been drugged, and she had stuck to water after all the whisky she’d imbibed the day before during the wool waulking work.

He advanced toward her, the bloody dagger still in his hand. “And who might you be? Not a MacLeod, with that strange accent.”

Kate continued to back away, thinking. She had nothing to defend herself with, no weapon, no plan. Just the cold stone wall at her back and a murderer approaching.

“I’m warning you,” she said, her Southern accent now in full force. “You come one step closer, and I swear I’ll scream louder than a pig caught under a gate.”

The MacDonald man’s eyes widened slightly at her strange expression, but his advance didn’t slow. “Scream all you want, lass. Everyone is asleep and the storm will swallow yer words.”

He lunged at her as she dodged to the side, slippers sliding on the stone floor. She stumbled, caught herself against the wall, and ran.

Behind her, she could hear the man’s heavy footsteps gaining on her. She darted down one corridor, then another, desperately trying to put distance between them, to find help, or a weapon, anything.

The keep was a maze, especially in the dark, and soon Kate realized she had no idea where she was. The storm continued to rage outside, thunder crashing overhead as if in accompaniment to her frantic flight.

She rounded a corner and found herself facing a narrow staircase spiraling upward. With no time to hesitate, she gathered her chemise in one hand and began to climb, taking the steps two at a time.

The stairs seemed endless, winding higher and higher. Kate's lungs burned, her legs ached, but the sound of pursuit kept her moving. Finally, she burst through a wooden door and found herself on the battlements, the highest point of the keep.

The full fury of the storm hit her like a physical blow. Rain lashed her face, and the wind threatened to knock her off her feet. Lightning flashed almost continuously, turning night into fractured day, followed by thunder so loud it seemed to shake the very stones beneath her.

In the brief illumination, she saw a crumpled form on the walkway, a young MacLeod warrior, his throat cut, his eyes staring unseeing at the stormy sky. The assassin's work.

Kate staggered forward, searching desperately for another door, another staircase, any escape route. But there was only the narrow walkway of the battlements, with the sheer drop of the keep's outer wall on one side and the inner courtyard far below on the other.

She was trapped.

The door behind her crashed open, and the MacDonald man emerged onto the battlements. Rain plastered his hair to his scalp and soaked his plaid, but the dagger in his hand gleamed in the lightning flashes.

"Nowhere to run now, lass," he called over the howl of the wind.

Kate backed away, feeling the rough stone of the parapet against her back. The man



advanced slowly, savoring her fear.

“Why are you doing this?” she shouted, trying to buy time, though she doubted he could hear her over the storm.

“For my clan,” he replied, close enough now that she could see the cold determination in his eyes. “The MacLeods will fall, one by one. Starting with their chieftain.”

He raised the dagger.

In that moment, Kate saw movement behind him, another figure emerging onto the battlements. A MacLeod guard, his sword drawn, moving silently toward the man’s back.

Hope surged through Kate, but it died just as quickly. The man must have seen something in her expression change, because he began to turn, the dagger still raised.

There wasn’t time. Kate acted without thinking. As the MacDonald man turned, she lunged forward and shoved him with all her strength.

Time seemed to slow. The MacDonald man’s eyes widened in surprise as he stumbled backward. His arms windmilled, trying to regain his balance. For one terrible moment, he teetered on the edge of the battlements.

Then he was gone.

Kate rushed to the edge and looked down just in time to see the MacDonald’s body strike the rocks far below, where the sea crashed against the base of the cliff. The next wave swept over the rocks, and when it receded, there was nothing to be seen.

“Mistress!” The guard was at her side, pulling her back from the edge. “Are you hurt?”

Kate couldn’t answer. Her whole body was shaking, and a strange buzzing filled her ears. She had just killed a man. Pushed him to his death. The reality of it crashed over her like the waves below.

“Mistress Kate,” the guard’s voice seemed to come from very far away. “You’re as pale as death. Come away from the edge.”

She allowed herself to be led back toward the door, her legs moving mechanically. The rain continued to lash her face, mingling with tears running down her cheeks.

“What happened?” the guard asked, having to shout over the storm.

Kate opened her mouth to answer, but no words came. Instead, a wave of nausea swept through her, and she doubled over, retching.

The guard held her shoulders, steadying her as she emptied her stomach onto the stone battlements. When there was nothing left, he guided her through the door and down the winding stairs, one arm around her waist to keep her upright.

By the time they reached the bottom, the keep was in an uproar. Either the effects of the drugged wine and whisky had worn off, or someone else like her and the guard had managed to wake everyone. Word of the intruder and the dead guard had spread, and MacLeod warriors rushed to secure the castle. Angry voices called for vengeance, and servants huddled in frightened groups, whispering among themselves.

“Kate!”

Connor’s voice cut through the chaos. He pushed through the crowd, his face a mask

of concern and fury. When he saw her, pale and trembling in her rain-soaked chemise and shawl, something in his expression changed.

“What happened?” he demanded, taking her from the guard into his own arms. “Are you hurt?”

Kate tried to speak, but her teeth were chattering too hard to form the words. Connor cursed under his breath and swept her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing.

“Get Moira,” he ordered the nearest man. “And find me dry blankets. Now!”

He carried her to the great hall, where the fire was being built up to a roaring blaze. Setting her gently in a chair near the hearth, Connor knelt before her, his blue eyes intense as they searched her face.

“Kate,” he said, his voice gentler now. “Tell me what happened.”

The warmth of the fire began to penetrate her frozen limbs, and she found her voice at last.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she whispered, her accent still thick with stress. “The storm... I saw someone on the battlements. I knew somethin’ wasn’t right. I just knew it.”

Connor nodded encouragingly, his hands rubbing her cold arms.

“A man. A MacDonald. He killed one of your men.” The words came in short bursts, her breathing still uneven. “He tried to kill me. I ran. The battlements. He followed me.”

Understanding dawned in Connor’s eyes. “The guard said you pushed a man from the wall.”

Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "I didn't mean to kill him. I just... he was going to kill the guard. And then me. I just wanted to stop him."

Connor's hands tightened on her arms. "You did what you had to do. You saved a life tonight. Many lives."

"I killed someone," she whispered, the full weight of it settling on her shoulders. In her time, she'd never even fired a gun, let alone taken a life.

"Aye," Connor said solemnly. "And it's a terrible thing. But he was here to do harm. You stopped him."

Moira arrived then, carrying a steaming cup of something that smelled of herbs and honey. She took one look at Kate and clucked her tongue.

"Drink this, lass," she said, pressing the cup into her hands. "It will calm your nerves and help you sleep."

Kate sipped obediently, the warm liquid spreading through her chest. It tasted of chamomile and something else she couldn't identify, something bitter but not unpleasant.

"The MacDonald man," she said suddenly, looking up at Connor. "What does it mean? Why was he here?"

Connor's face darkened. "It means the MacDonalds grow bold or desperate. To send an assassin into my keep..." He shook his head. "They'll pay for this," He spoke quietly. "There is a traitor amongst us."

"Cameron," Kate said, remembering the captured brother. "Will they hurt him because of what I did?"

“Nay,” Connor assured her, though a flicker of worry crossed his face. “We have been going back on forth and they need him alive for ransom. They don’t yet know their man has failed. Likely, they will think he lost his footing and was swept away by the sea.”

“What happens now?” Kate asked, the herb tea beginning to work its magic, dulling the sharp edges of her shock.

“Now, we prepare,” Connor said grimly. “We are to meet the MacDonalds in a sennight to discuss Cameron’s ransom. This changes nothing, except perhaps the terms I’ll demand.”

Kate nodded slowly, her eyelids growing heavy. “I’m sorry I caused such a ruckus. I should’ve just stayed in my room like a proper lady.”

A ghost of a smile touched Connor’s lips. “If you had, lass, I might be lying dead now instead of Young Ian. Your ‘ruckus’ likely saved my life.”

Kate wanted to say more, to ask what this meant for the already strained relations between the clans, to understand the politics at play. But the warmth of the fire, the soothing tea, and the emotional exhaustion of the night conspired against her.

The last thing she remembered was Connor’s strong arms lifting her once more, carrying her back to her chamber. As consciousness slipped away, she felt him brush a gentle kiss across her forehead.

“Sleep, mo chridhe ,” he whispered. “You’re safe now.”

### Chapter Thirteen

Kate had never seen so many people determined to be cheerful in the face of danger. Two days after the assassination attempt, Connor had organized a celebration, ostensibly to honor the summer solstice, but everyone knew it was really to boost morale after the MacDonald assassin's infiltration of the keep.

Even still, she could feel the undercurrents of tension rippling through every interaction. While people laughed and danced, Kate saw them watching each other, searching for signs of treachery among familiar faces. As the newcomer, she was an easy target for their fears and mistrust. Whispered conversations died the moment she approached. A few clan members shifted away when she joined them. Even Nessa, who had begun to warm to her, now watched her when she thought Kate wasn't looking. The mounting distrust threatened to unravel the fragile threads she'd begun to form here, and she couldn't help but wonder if this was exactly what the MacDonald laird had intended all along.

The great hall was near to bursting. Trestle tables had been pushed to the sides, laden with food and drink. A trio of musicians played in the corner. The pipes, fiddle, and bodhrán had people clapping in time and dancing. The hall was warm from the massive fire and the press of bodies, the air thick with the smell of roasted meat, ale, and woodsmoke.

Kate stood near one of the tables, nursing a cup of watered wine. She'd learned her lesson about Highland whisky the hard way.

"You should eat something," Nessa appeared at her side, pressing a wooden trencher

into her hands. The plate held a slice of venison, some oatcakes, and some kind of fish stew. Kate's stomach lurched at the thought of food. She'd barely eaten since that night on the battlements.

"Thank you," she said anyway, not wanting to seem ungrateful. "It looks delicious."

The woman, who basically ran the keep for Connor, studied her face. "Troublesome dreams?"

Kate nodded, not surprised she'd guessed. "Every time I close my eyes, I see him falling."

"'Twas him or you, lass. And likely others as well." Nessa patted her arm. "The first killing is always the hardest."

The first killing. As if there would be more. Kate suppressed a shudder.

"In my ti—" she caught herself. "Where I come from, most people never have to kill anyone."

"You come from a peaceful place indeed." Nessa looked skeptical.

"Not exactly peaceful," Kate murmured. "Just... different."

Across the room, Connor was deep in conversation with his men. He'd spent the last two days strengthening the keep's defenses, questioning everyone about the night of the storm, trying to identify who might have helped the MacDonald assassin gain entry. The investigation had yielded nothing conclusive, and the tension within the castle walls was enough to send Kate fleeing to the gardens or anywhere else where she would be outside.

Even now, as he spoke with his warriors, he caught her eye. Their gazes locked, and something warm unfurled in her chest. He'd been like this since that night. Watchful, protective, seeking her out whenever they were in the same room.

"Himself hasn't taken his eyes off you all evening," Nessa observed, following her line of sight.

"He's just being cautious," Kate replied, though she knew it wasn't entirely true. Something had shifted between them.

Before Nessa could utter some sarcastic retort, the music changed, shifting to something slower and more melodic. People began pairing off for a dance.

"Go on," the woman said, giving her a gentle push. "Live a little. You survived for a reason."

Kate hesitated. She'd learned a few Scottish dances during her time at the keep, but she was far from proficient. And dancing with Connor seemed... dangerous, somehow. Not because of any physical threat, but because of the way her heart raced whenever he was near.

But Nessa was right. She had survived. And sitting on the sidelines nursing her trauma wasn't going to help anyone. Taking a deep breath, she set down her trencher and cup, only to look up to see Connor making his way over to her. The firelight caught the angles of his face, softening his usually stern features. Her breath caught when his blue eyes met hers.

"Would ye honor me with a dance?" he asked, extending his hand, the muscles in his forearms rippling.

Her heart skipped at the unexpected invitation. In that moment, with the warm glow



of the fire highlighting his rugged features and a rare smile playing at his lips, he was breathtakingly handsome.

“I would like that very much,” she said, placing her hand in his.

His palm was warm and callused against hers as he led her to the center of the hall where other couples were already moving to the music. Kate was acutely aware of the eyes following them. This was the first time they’d danced together, and in this small community, such things were noted.

“I should warn you,” she said as they took their positions, “I’m not very good at this.”

“Then it’s fortunate you’ve found yourself in the arms of the finest dancer in the Highlands,” Connor replied, a playful glint in his eyes. “I won’t let you falter, lass.”

The dance began, a pattern of steps that brought them together, then apart, then together again. Connor’s hand at her waist guided her through the turns, his touch gentle. She found herself relaxing into the rhythm, letting the music and his lead carry her.

“You’re doing well,” he murmured during a moment when they were close. “Though I suspect you weren’t being entirely truthful about your dancing abilities.”

“I have a good teacher,” she replied, then immediately flushed at how flirtatious it sounded.

His eyes crinkled at the corners, and a rare, full smile graced his features. “Aye, that you do, and he’s rather enjoying the lesson.”

They moved apart again, joining hands with other dancers to form a circle, then returning to each other. Each time they came together, she felt the connection

between them strengthen, like a thread being pulled taut.

“I never properly thanked you,” he said during their next close pass.

“For what?”

“For saving my life.” His gaze was intense, searching her face. “The MacDonald was headed for my chamber. If you hadn’t stopped him...”

Kate swallowed hard. “I just reacted. I didn’t think.”

“Sometimes thinking only slows us down.” His hand squeezed hers. “You have good instincts.”

She wasn’t sure that was a compliment. Back home, she’d prided herself on her analytical mind, her ability to think through problems. Acting on instinct had never been her style. But here, in this time and place, perhaps instinct was what kept her alive.

The dance ended, and they stood facing each other, slightly breathless. The hall had grown warmer, or perhaps it was just the heat rising to Kate’s cheeks under his steady gaze.

“Would you like some air?” he asked, nodding toward the door that led to the inner courtyard.

She nodded, not trusting her voice. He offered his arm, and she took it, letting him guide her through the crowded hall and out into the cool night.

The courtyard was quiet, the sounds of celebration muffled by the thick stone walls. Above them, stars glittered in a clear sky, so much brighter than Kate had ever seen

them back in Atlanta. The moon cast everything in silver light, transforming the ordinary keep into something magical.

“Beautiful,” she murmured, tilting her head back to take in the night sky.

“Aye,” Connor agreed, though when she glanced at him, he wasn’t looking at the stars.

A blush crept up her neck. She dropped her gaze, suddenly self-conscious.

“How are you truly?” he asked, his voice gentle. “After what happened?”

She considered deflecting, giving the same answer she’d given Nessa and everyone else who asked. That she was fine, that she was coping. But something about the quiet darkness and Connor’s genuine concern made her want to be honest.

“I keep seeing his face,” she admitted. “The moment he realized he was falling. The surprise in his eyes.”

Connor nodded, understanding in his expression. “The first time I took a life, I was thirteen. A raid on our cattle. I didn’t sleep properly for weeks after.”

“Does it get easier?” she asked, then immediately shook her head. “No, don’t answer that. I don’t think I want it to get easier.”

“It doesn’t,” he said anyway. “Not if you have a soul. But you learn to live with it. To remember why ’twas necessary.”

They walked slowly around the perimeter of the courtyard, their arms still linked. The night air was cool, carrying the scent of the sea and the earthy smell of summer.

“I’m not used to violence,” Kate said after a while. “Where I come from, most disagreements are settled with words, not swords.”

“Sounds peaceful,” Connor observed.

“It is, in some ways. But people still hurt each other. They just do it differently.”

He was quiet for a moment, considering her words. “You speak as if you come from another world entirely.”

Kate’s heart skipped a beat. She’d been so careful not to reveal too much about herself, but sometimes it slipped out. “Sometimes it feels that way,” she said carefully.

“One day, perhaps you’ll tell me more about this peaceful place,” he said, his tone light but his eyes serious.

“Perhaps,” she agreed, though the thought of explaining modern transportation, smartphones and dating apps to a seventeenth-century totally hot Highland warrior made her head spin.

They had completed a full circuit of the courtyard and now stood near the door. The sounds of music and laughter spilled out into the night, but neither of them moved to go back inside.

“Thank you for the dance,” Kate said, breaking the silence. “And for the fresh air.”

“My pleasure,” Connor replied. His eyes searched her face in the moonlight, and for a moment, she thought he might kiss her. Her breath caught in her throat at the possibility.

But then a guard called from the battlements, reporting the changing of the watch, and the moment was broken.

“I should return,” Connor said, regret evident in his voice.

“Of course,” Kate nodded, trying not to show her disappointment. “A laird’s work is never done.”

He smiled at that. “Truer words were never spoken.”

They returned to the great hall, where the celebration continued unabated. He was immediately swept up by a group of men, and Kate found herself back at the periphery, watching the festivities with a strange sense of detachment.

Despite the warmth and noise of the hall, a chill crept over her. The brief respite in the courtyard with Connor had been just that, a respite. The reality of her situation remained unchanged. She was stranded in the past, caught in the middle of a clan feud, with blood on her hands and no clear way home.

The thought followed her like a shadow as she made her excuses and retired for the night.

\* \* \*

The man’s face contorted with shock as he fell backward, arms windmilling uselessly. His mouth opened in a silent scream that was lost to the howling wind. Kate reached for him, too late, her fingers grasping empty air. She ran to the edge of the battlements, looking down in horror as his body struck the rocks below with a sickening crack that somehow carried over the storm.

But when she looked down, it wasn’t the MacDonald assassin lying broken on the

rocks. It was Connor, his blue eyes open and staring, accusing her. You did this , they seemed to say. You killed me .

“No!” Kate screamed, the sound tearing from her throat. “Connor! No!”

She jerked awake, heart pounding, the scream still echoing in her ears. For a moment, she didn’t know where she was. The darkness was absolute, disorienting. Then slowly, her chamber came into focus, outlined by the faint glow of moonlight through the window.

A nightmare. Just a dream.

Kate sat up, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. Her chemise was damp with sweat, and she was shivering despite the embers still glowing in the hearth.

The images from the nightmare were still vivid. Connor’s broken body, his accusing eyes. She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyelids, trying to banish the vision.

A soft knock at her door made her jump.

“Kate?” Connor’s voice, low and concerned. “Are ye all right?”

Had she screamed aloud? She must have, for him to have heard.

“I’m fine,” she called back, her voice raspy. “Just a nightmare.”

There was a pause, then, “May I come in?”

She hesitated. She knew it wasn’t proper, him being in her chamber at night. But

propriety seemed a small concern compared to the terror still gripping her.

“Yes,” she said finally.

The door opened, and he slipped inside, closing it quietly behind him. He wore a linen shirt and trews, his feet bare, hair tousled from sleep. He must have come straight from his chamber.

“I heard ye cry out,” he said, moving to light a candle from the embers in the hearth. The small flame cast a warm glow over the room, pushing back the shadows.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” Kate said, drawing the blankets up to her chin, suddenly conscious of her state of undress.

“You didn’t, mo chridhe ,” he assured her, setting the candle on the small table beside her bed. “I was already awake.”

In the candlelight, she could see the concern in his eyes, the furrow between his brows. Without asking, he sat on the edge of her bed, the mattress dipping slightly under his weight.

“Was it the assassin?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, not trusting her voice. Then, because it wasn’t the whole truth, she added, “And you.”

He arched a brow as he tilted his head at her, waiting.

“In the dream, it was you who fell,” she explained, the words catching in her throat. “You who died.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes. “Ah,” he said softly. “That explains why you called my name.”

Had she? Kate couldn’t remember.

“It felt so real,” she whispered, a shudder running through her. “I could hear... when he hit the rocks. I could hear it.”

Connor’s face softened with compassion. Without a word, he gathered her into his arms, pulling her close against his chest.

Kate hesitated only a moment before leaning into his embrace. His arms closed around her, strong and secure, and something inside her broke. The tears came then, hot and fast, soaking into his shirt as she pressed her face against his chest.

“Has anyone in your family...” he murmured, his hand stroking her hair, “ever had the ability to see things before they happened?”

“Are you worried about dying?” She pulled back slightly, looking up at him through tear-stained eyes. The words from the guidebook came back to her, and while she knew she couldn’t reveal them without telling him how she knew, Kate made a vow to watch, and if a MacDonald woman came calling under a flag of truce, she would tell him then and only then.

He held her tighter, one hand continuing its gentle motion through her hair, the other firm around her waist. He didn’t answer, just held her, a solid presence in the storm of her emotions.

Gradually, the sobs subsided, leaving Kate exhausted but somehow lighter. She became aware of his heartbeat under her ear, steady and strong. His hand continued its gentle motion through her hair, soothing her like a child.



“Better?” he asked after a while, his voice a rumble she felt against her cheek.

Kate nodded, not yet willing to pull away from the comfort of his embrace. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I’m not usually so... emotional.”

“There’s no shame in it,” Connor said. “What you did, what you saw, it would shake anyone.”

She lifted her head to look at him, struck by the sincerity in his voice. In the candlelight, his features were softer, the usual stern set of his jaw relaxed. His blue eyes reflected the small flame, turning them almost gold at the center.

“You’re a good man, Connor MacLeod,” she said softly.

Something changed in his expression, a warmth kindling in his eyes. His gaze dropped to her lips, and Kate’s breath caught. Slowly, giving her time to pull away, he leaned forward as every nerve in her body went on high alert.

The blast of a horn shattered the moment.

He jerked back, his head turning toward the sound. “The dawn patrol,” he said, regret clear in his voice.

“You should go.” Kate nodded, trying to hide her disappointment.

He hesitated, clearly torn. Then, with a sigh, he rose from the bed. “Try to rest,” he said, his voice gentle. “I’ll have Moira bring you something to help with the dreams.”

“Thank you,” Kate said, already missing the warmth of his presence.

At the door, he paused, looking back at her. For a moment, it seemed he might say

something more. But then he simply nodded and slipped out, closing the door quietly behind him.

She lay back against the pillows, fingers touching her lips where his kiss would have landed. The nightmare's grip had loosened, replaced by a different kind of tension, a yearning for something more.

Outside, the sky was beginning to lighten with the first hint of dawn. Kate watched the gradual change through her window, her thoughts drifting between the man who had just left and the life she had left behind.

For the first time since arriving in this century, she found herself wondering what it might mean to stay.

### Chapter Fourteen

Connor had received many unwelcome messages in his time as laird, but the one currently clutched in his hand made his stomach twist into knots. He read it again, hoping the words might somehow rearrange themselves into something less troubling.

They did not.

He stood at the window of the study, watching raindrops trace erratic paths down the glass. The weather matched his mood. Gray, unsettled, threatening to break into something more volatile at any moment.

“My laird?” Ewan’s voice came from the doorway. “Is everything all right?”

He turned, the tightness in his jaw making his head pound. “No,” he said simply. “It’s Elspeth.”

Ewan’s expression shifted immediately from curiosity to concern. Despite the rift between Connor and his younger sister, everyone at Bronmuir knew how deeply he cared for her. “What’s happened?”

“She’s with child.”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with implication. An unwed woman with child was scandal enough, but the daughter of a clan chief in such a state was catastrophic.

“The MacKenzie lad?” Ewan asked, his voice carefully neutral.

He nodded, crumpling the parchment in his fist. “Aye. The same lad who, it seems, neglected to mention he already has a wife in Inverness.”

“And has also conveniently sworn allegiance to William of Orange,” Ewan added, his voice dropping as he spoke the name of the Dutch usurper.

The overthrow of King James II had thrown all of Scotland into chaos, with clans declaring for one side or the other, often based on which adversary had declared for the opposite. Connor’s jaw tightened. While the MacLeods were Catholic and had publicly declared for King James like most Highland clans, Connor privately believed William’s grip on the throne would hold. It was an unpopular opinion so he kept it to himself, knowing many would see it as betrayal to even think James wouldn’t return to power, which was why Clan MacLeod had not publicly declared for a side yet.

“As if her choice of husband wasn’t insult enough,” Connor said bitterly. “She tied herself to a family that would betray everything we stand for.”

“And what of Elspeth now?” Ewan asked. “Where has she gone?”

“She’s been banished.” Connor moved to the hearth, tossing the crumpled message into the flames. He watched it blacken and curl. A fitting end to such bitter news. “She’s living alone in a cottage. None of the clans will have her now.”

The thought of his sister, stubborn, headstrong Elspeth who had defied their father to follow her heart, living in isolation, carrying a child whose father had betrayed her, made Connor’s chest ache. Yet beneath the concern lay a more complicated emotion. A simmering anger that had never fully cooled.

“She made her choice,” he said, as much to himself as to Ewan. “She chose the

MacKenzies over her own blood.”

“She chose love,” Ewan said quietly. “Or what she thought was love.”

Connor shot him a sharp look. “Are you defending her?”

“Nay, my laird. Simply...observing.”

He turned back to the fire, watching the last of the parchment dissolve into ash. Elspeth had always been willful, even as a child. He remembered her at six years old, climbing the tallest tree in the orchard after he’d told her it was too dangerous, her small face alight with determination. She’d made it halfway up before slipping, and Connor had caught her, his heart nearly stopping with fear. She’d looked up at him with those same MacLeod blue eyes and said, “I would have made it if you hadn’t distracted me.”

That was Elspeth, always convinced she knew best, always ready to charge headlong into danger if it meant proving a point.

“Who brought the news?” Connor asked, pushing the memory aside.

“A crofter from the western shores. Said a woman fitting Elspeth’s description paid him to deliver the message.”

“And what else does she want? Gold? Shelter?” The bitterness in his voice surprised even Connor. “Having exhausted the hospitality of her husband’s family, does she now remember she has a brother?”

Ewan shifted uncomfortably. “The message only contained news of her condition. No request for aid.”

That gave Connor pause. Elspeth had always been proud, another trait they shared, but to send word of her predicament without asking for help? That wasn't like her.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Kate stood in the doorway, her expression hesitant.

"I'm sorry to intrude," she said. "Moirra sent me with these." She held up a bundle of dried herbs. "For your headache?"

Connor hadn't mentioned a headache to anyone, but the dull pounding behind his eyes had been building all morning. Moirra's uncanny ability to sense such things never ceased to amaze him.

"Thank you," he said, gesturing her in.

Ewan bowed slightly to them both. "I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you require anything else."

As the door closed behind him, she approached, setting the herbs on the desk. "Moirra says to brew these in hot water and drink it all, even though it tastes terrible."

Despite everything, the corner of his mouth lifted. "Moirra's remedies always taste terrible. I think she does it on purpose."

"Probably. She strikes me as the type who believes medicine should be punishment as well as cure." Her smile faded as she studied his face. "It's more than a headache, isn't it?"

He hesitated. His sister's predicament was clan business, private. But something about her direct gaze, the genuine concern in her eyes, made him want to unburden himself.

“My sister, Elspeth,” he began, turning back to the window. “She’s with child. Unmarried.”

Kate was quiet for a moment, absorbing this. “The man is a MacKenzie?”

“Aye. And it seems he wasn’t free to marry her in the first place. He already has a wife.” Connor’s hands clenched into fists. “To make matters worse, the MacKenzie’s have declared for William of Orange.”

“The new king?” Kate asked, then seemed to catch herself. “I mean, the one who took over when James fled to France?”

Connor looked at her sharply. Sometimes Kate’s knowledge, or lack thereof, of current events puzzled him. “William is no king of mine, nor of any true Highlander. James is our rightful sovereign, regardless of what Parliament or the Lowlanders say.”

Kate nodded, accepting the correction. “And the MacKenzies support William?”

“Aye. They always align themselves with whoever holds power in Edinburgh.” The contempt in his voice was unmistakable. “The MacKenzie turned her out when he found out she was living in sin with the lad.”

“Oh.” The single syllable carried a wealth of understanding. “That’s... awful.”

“Aye,” Connor agreed, watching the rain intensify, lashing against the glass now. “She’s living alone on the far edge of my lands.”

“Will you help her?” Kate asked, moving to stand beside him at the window.

Connor sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t know.”

“Because you’re still angry with her?”

He glanced at her, surprised by her directness. “She abandoned her family, her clan. Ran off with a man she barely knew, from a family with ties to our enemies. A family that now supports a Protestant usurper.”

“She fell in love,” Kate said softly. “People do all kinds of foolish things for love.”

“Love?” He scoffed. “If it was love, he wouldn’t have lied to her. Wouldn’t have left her alone to face the consequences of his actions.”

She was quiet for a long moment, her gaze on the rain-soaked landscape beyond the window. “Where I come from, we have a saying. Blood is thicker than water.”

“We say that here as well.”

“Family ties are stronger than other relationships. When everything else falls away, blood remains.” She turned to face him fully. “She’s your sister. Your blood.”

“She betrayed that blood when she chose the MacKenzies.”

“Did she? Or did she just make a mistake?” Her voice was soft. “We all make mistakes, especially when we’re young and think we know everything.”

Connor thought again of Elspeth in the orchard, so certain she could climb that tree. So devastated when she couldn’t. He’d carried her back to the house after she twisted her ankle in the fall, her small arms wrapped tightly around his neck, tears soaking his shoulder.

“She’s proud,” he said finally. “Too proud to ask for help directly.”



“Maybe she’s afraid you’ll turn her away,” Kate suggested. “Rejection from her husband’s family would be painful, but rejection from her brother? That might be unbearable.”

He moved away from the window, pacing the length of the study. Her words struck uncomfortably close to the truth. He and Elspeth were too similar in many ways. Both stubborn, both fiercely independent, both too proud for their own good.

“The MacDonalds would see it as weakness,” he said, thinking aloud. “If I take her back after she chose our enemies. The other Jacobite clans might question our loyalty to King James.”

“Maybe,” Kate conceded. “Or maybe they’d see it as strength. The strength to forgive, to put family above politics.” She paused, her gaze thoughtful. “From what I’ve seen of Highland life, your people respect strength above all else. But there are different kinds of strength, aren’t there? The strength to hold fast to your principles, yes, but also the strength to show mercy when it’s needed.”

A snort escaped. “Aye, I’ve shown mercy. I didn’t kill the lad.” He ran a hand through his hair. “But only because he already has three babes with his wife.”

He stopped pacing, struck by her perspective. In the clans, mercy was often viewed with suspicion, forgiveness with contempt. But there was another kind of strength in it, a strength his father had never understood or valued.

“The babe will be born a bastard,” he said, voicing another concern. “With no name, no inheritance. And with MacKenzie blood, the blood of our king’s enemies.”

“The baby will be your blood too,” Kate pointed out. “Your nephew or niece. Innocent of their father’s crimes or political allegiances.”

He hadn't thought of it that way, that the child Elspeth carried was as much a MacLeod as a MacKenzie. His kin. His responsibility.

"I need to think on this," he said finally. "There's more at stake than just Elspeth's welfare. The clan looks to me for leadership in these uncertain times."

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. "Of course. It's a big decision." She moved toward the door, then paused. "For what it's worth, I think forgiveness is never wasted. Even if it's not earned, even if it's not asked for. It heals the one who gives it as much as the one who receives it."

And wasn't she the hypocrite? She hadn't forgiven Angus, but then again, she'd come to realize since she'd been here that she hadn't really loved him. Only thought he'd make a decent husband, more of a partnership than a loving marriage.

With that, she slipped out, leaving Connor alone with his thoughts and the persistent drumming of rain against the windows.

Connor spent the remainder of the day in a fog of indecision. He went through the motions of his duties. Reviewing the keep's defenses, settling a dispute between two crofters, but his mind kept returning to Elspeth.

His sister had always been the heart of their family, even as a child. Where their father was stern and their brothers boisterous, Elspeth had been a bright spark of joy and mischief. After their mother died, she'd taken on the role of lady of the keep with a grace that belied her fifteen years, managing the household and caring for their youngest brother, Brodie, with a fierce devotion.

And then she'd met Alasdair MacKenzie at a gathering of the clans. Within a fortnight, she'd declared her intention to marry him. When their father forbade it, citing the long-standing tensions between their families and the MacKenzies'

questionable political loyalties, Elspeth had slipped away in the night, leaving nothing but a note explaining her choice.

Connor had been the one to find it, to break the news to their father. He'd watched as rage and grief warred on the old man's face, had stood silently as he declared Elspeth dead to them. And though he had never spoken those words himself, he hadn't contradicted them either.

Now, standing on the battlements as evening approached, watching the rain finally give way to a stunning sunset, Connor wondered if his silence had been its own kind of betrayal.

"You look troubled."

He turned to find Murtagh making his way slowly along the wall. He'd been injured in a skirmish a while back. His clansman's recovery had been painfully slow. But he was alive, and for that, Connor was profoundly grateful.

"Should you be up here?" Connor asked, concern overriding his surprise. "The stones are slick with rain."

Murtagh waved off his worry. "I'll not heal any faster lying abed like an invalid. Besides," he added with a ghost of his old smile, "the view is better up here."

Connor couldn't argue with that. The rain had cleared the air, and the setting sun cast a golden light over the landscape, turning the wet stones of the keep to burnished bronze.

"I heard about Elspeth," Murtagh said after a moment. "And her... complicated situation."

Of course he had. News traveled fast within the keep, especially news of this nature.

“What will you do?” His oldest friend asked when he didn’t respond.

“I don’t know,” Connor admitted. “What would you do?”

Murtagh considered this, his gaze on the distant horizon. “I’d bring her home,” he said finally. “She’s your sister. Whatever mistakes she’s made, she’s still a MacLeod.”

“My father wouldn’t have agreed.”

“He isn’t here.” Murtagh’s voice was low. “You’re laird now. You make the decisions.”

Connor felt the weight of those words settle on his shoulders. Aye, he was laird now. The responsibility was his, but so was the authority. He could choose a different path than their father would have.

“The MacDonalds—” he began.

“Will think what they will, regardless of what you do,” Murtagh interrupted. “Better to act with honor and let them judge as they may.”

“And what of our loyalty to King James?” Connor pressed. “Taking in someone connected to a family that supports William?—”

“Elspeth didn’t swear allegiance to William,” Murtagh pointed out. “The man who betrayed her did. And now our enemies, the MacDonalds, who are also our supposed Jacobite allies, have cast her out in her time of need.” He shook his head. “If that’s what loyalty to James means, I’d question the value of such alliances.”

He was startled by the bluntness. “You sound like a man who questions his own loyalties.”

Murtagh’s gaze was steady. “I question nothing except the wisdom of letting politics dictate how we treat our own blood. King James wouldn’t ask that of you. He’s a man who values family above all else. Isn’t that why he fled to France? To protect his wife and son?”

Honor. The word resonated within Connor. Was it honorable to abandon his sister when she needed him most? To let his pride and anger, or worse, political considerations, overrule the bonds of blood?

Kate’s words from earlier echoed in his mind. Forgiveness heals the one who gives it as much as the one who receives it.

“I’ll send for her,” Connor decided, the words bringing an unexpected sense of relief. “Tomorrow, at first light.”

Murtagh nodded, satisfaction evident in his expression. “Good. It’s past time she came home.”

They stood in companionable silence as the last light faded from the sky, stars beginning to emerge in the darkening expanse above.

“Kate suggested as much,” Connor said after a while. “That I should forgive Elspeth, bring her home.”

“Did she now?” Murtagh’s tone was carefully neutral, but he caught the hint of a smile.

“She’s a wise woman, your Kate.”

“She’s not my Kate,” Connor protested a bit too quickly.

“No?” Murtagh raised an eyebrow. “The way you look at her suggests otherwise.”

Heat rose to his face as Connor was grateful for the dim light that hid his reaction. “She’s... different,” he said finally. “Unlike any woman I’ve known.”

“Aye, that’s plain enough to see. She doesn’t simper or flatter. Speaks her mind, that one. Sometimes I wonder where she learned such boldness.”

“Sometimes too bold,” Connor agreed, thinking of their conversations about clan politics, about his leadership, about the complicated loyalties of the Scottish clans. Kate never hesitated to challenge him, to offer a different perspective. It was refreshing, if occasionally maddening.

“She sees things clearly, though,” Murtagh observed. “Not clouded by old feuds or clan rivalries. There’s a wisdom in that, especially in these troubled times.”

Connor had the same thoughts. Kate’s outsider perspective often cut through the tangled web of Highland politics, offering insights he might have missed. “Aye,” he agreed. “She does.”

“You could do worse,” Murtagh observed.

Connor shot him a warning look. “We’re discussing Elspeth, not my... not Kate.”

“Of course,” Murtagh agreed, though his smile suggested he wasn’t fooled by the deflection. “Speaking of whom, I believe I see her in the courtyard.”

Connor followed his gaze. Sure enough, she was crossing the courtyard below, a basket over her arm, likely returning from gathering herbs with Moira. Even from this

distance, he could see the grace in her movements, the way she paused to speak with one of the kitchen lads, her head tilted in that attentive way she had when listening.

“Go on, then,” Murtagh urged. “Tell her your decision about Elspeth. I’d wager she’ll be pleased.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Rest. Don’t overtax yourself.”

Murtagh’s laugh followed him down the narrow stairs. “Advice you might consider taking yourself, Connor.”

The courtyard was quieter than usual, the earlier rain having driven most indoors. Kate looked up as he approached, a smile lighting her face that did strange things to his pulse.

“Connor,” she greeted him. “How’s your headache?”

“Better,” he said, though in truth, he’d forgotten all about it. “I’ve made a decision. About Elspeth.”

Kate’s expression grew serious, attentive. “And?”

“I’m sending for her tomorrow. Bringing her home.”

The smile that broke across Kate’s face was like sunrise, warm and bright and full of promise. “I’m glad,” she said simply.

“As am I,” Connor admitted, surprised to find it was true. The decision, once made, felt right in a way he hadn’t expected. “Thank you for your counsel earlier. It helped me see things more clearly.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Kate demurred. “You would have come to the same conclusion on your own.”

“Perhaps,” Connor allowed. “But it might have taken longer. I can be...” He searched for the right word.

“Stubborn?” Kate suggested, eyes twinkling. “Obstinate? Hard-headed?”

“I was going to say ‘deliberate,’” Connor said dryly.

Kate laughed, the sound light and musical in the quiet courtyard. “That’s a very diplomatic way of putting it.”

He found himself smiling in response, drawn in by her mirth. “I can be diplomatic when the occasion calls for it.”

“I’m sure you can,” Kate agreed, still smiling. “It’s just not your first instinct.”

“And what is my first instinct, do you think?” The question came out more softly than he’d intended.

Kate’s smile gentled, her eyes searching his face. “To protect,” she said after a moment. “To bear burdens alone. And to put duty before all else.”

He was struck by the accuracy of her assessment, by how clearly she seemed to see him. “You’ve been paying attention,” he said, his voice low.

“I notice things,” Kate replied, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “It’s a habit.”

A habit that made her uniquely perceptive, challenging, and fascinating to him. Connor found himself wanting to know more about her habits, her thoughts, her life



before she came to Bronmuir. But those were questions for another time.

“I should go,” Kate said, breaking the moment. “Moira’s waiting for these herbs.”

He nodded, reluctant to see her leave but aware of the eyes that might be watching from the keep’s windows. “Of course.”

She took a step, then paused, looking back at him.

“I think Elspeth is lucky,” she said. “To have a brother who can put family above politics.”

Before Connor could respond, she was gone, crossing the courtyard with swift steps. He watched her until she disappeared into the keep, her words echoing in his mind.

A brother who can put family above politics.

Her choice of words struck him. They could have been spoken by a Highlander born and bred, yet sometimes Kate seemed to view their world through different eyes, as if she stood outside their conflicts, seeing them with a clarity he could only envy.

He wasn’t sure if forgiveness was what he felt yet, but he was willing to try. For Elspeth, for the babe she carried, and perhaps, in some small way, for himself. And if bringing his sister home raised eyebrows among their Jacobite allies, so be it. Some bonds ran deeper than politics, deeper even than loyalty to a king.

With a last look at the darkening sky, Connor turned and made his way back to the keep, already planning the journey to retrieve his sister. It wouldn’t be easy. Few things worth doing ever were, but for the first time since receiving the news, he felt certain it was the right path.

Elsbeth was coming home. The rest, they would face together, as family. As MacLeods.

The rain continued to fall as Connor made his way to his chambers, turning over the decision he'd made. Bringing Elsbeth home was right. He felt certain of it now, but it would not be without complications.

In his private chamber, he found Ewan waiting with a stack of correspondence that required his attention. Most were routine matters. Reports from the outlying farms, requests for arbitration in minor disputes, but one letter bore the seal of Clan MacDonald.

"This arrived while you were on the battlements," Ewan said, his expression carefully neutral.

He broke the seal and scanned the contents, his jaw tightening with each line. "The MacDonalds bicker over terms for my brother's return. They press for our formal declaration for King James," he said finally. "They say our silence makes our loyalty suspect."

"And what will you tell them?" Ewan asked.

He moved to the hearth, staring into the flames. "That Clan MacLeod stands with King James, as we always have." He spoke the words with conviction, though a small, pragmatic voice in his mind whispered that William's grip on the throne would likely hold. It was a thought he shared with no one, not even Ewan.

"You dinna believe James will return, do ye?" Ewan asked quietly.

Connor's head snapped up, surprised by his friend's perception. "I'll declare for James publicly," he said carefully. "The clan expects it, and most Highland families

support his return. But privately..." He paused, choosing his words with care. "I fear William's hold on the throne may be stronger than many wish to believe."

"A dangerous opinion to voice aloud," Ewan observed.

"Aye, which is why I havena spoken it until now." He ran a hand through his hair. "The MacDonalds and other Jacobite clans would see it as betrayal to even think James willna return to power."

"Yet you'll bring Elspeth home, despite her connection to a family that supports William?"

"She's blood," Connor said simply. "Whatever her politics, she remains a MacLeod."

Ewan nodded, satisfaction in his eyes. "Good. The lass has suffered enough for one man's betrayal."

Connor returned to the letter, considering his response. He would affirm his clan's loyalty to James, as tradition and politics demanded. But he would also make it clear that his sister's return was not a matter for debate or judgment by other clans.

"I'll send our counteroffer for Cameron and our formal declaration to the MacDonalds tomorrow," he decided. "Along with men to bring Elspeth home."

As Ewan left to make the arrangements, he found himself thinking of Kate again. Her perspective, so free from the entanglements of clan politics, had helped him see his way clear. Family above politics. It was a simple principle, yet one so often forgotten in the complex web of Highland alliances.

### Chapter Fifteen

Three hours on horseback had turned Kate's legs into quivering masses of jelly, and they still had miles to go before reaching MacDonald territory. The fiery ache that burned through her thighs made her wonder if she'd ever walk normally again.

The Highland landscape stretched before them, breathtaking in its wild beauty, with rolling hills of purple heather and imposing mountains that pierced the clouds, but she found it difficult to appreciate the scenery when every step of the horse sent shockwaves of pain through her body.

"We'll rest here," Connor announced, gesturing toward a small clearing beside a burbling stream. "I'll water the horses while ye stretch your legs."

Kate had never been so grateful for a break in her life. She attempted to dismount with some semblance of grace, but her stiff legs betrayed her. She slid awkwardly from the saddle and would have crumpled to the ground if he hadn't appeared at her side, strong hands steadying her.

"Easy," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear. "Your muscles will loosen with movement."

His touch sent an entirely different kind of tremor through her body, one that had nothing to do with saddle soreness and everything to do with the way his blue eyes crinkled at the corners when he looked at her. Since their almost-kiss three nights ago, there had been a new tension between them, a heightened awareness that made even casual contact feel charged with possibility.

“Thanks,” she managed, taking a wobbly step back. “I think I need to walk for a bit.”

Connor nodded, expression unreadable. “Don’t wander far. The MacDonalds have been known to patrol these borders.”

“I’ll stay within sight,” she promised.

As he moved away to confer with the four warriors who accompanied them, she took careful steps toward the stream, wincing with each movement. The journey to exchange the replica brooch for Cameron had been planned with meticulous care, but nothing had prepared her for the physical reality of traveling through the Highlands on horseback.

What she wouldn’t give for a nice comfy car. With music, soft leather seats, and speed. A sigh escaped. Well, at least the horses were cute.

She knelt by the stream, splashing cold water on her face and taking a moment to collect her thoughts. The fake brooch, crafted to mirror the MacLeod heirloom, was safely stowed away in Connor’s sporran. Kate had been stunned by the flawless detail when he’d shown it to her the night before their departure. The fine etching, the weight of it in her palm, even the gemstones looked every bit as luminous as the real ones.

“They’ll believe it,” he’d said with quiet certainty. “It’s near enough to the original that none among the MacDonalds will ken the difference.”

Kate nodded, trusting in the confidence that burned behind his steady gaze. The real Bronmuir Brooch was too precious, too closely tied to the MacLeods’ legacy to be surrendered, no matter the risk. Still, she couldn’t stop the tight knot in her stomach. This was real life, not some historical action movie.

“You’re thinking too hard again.”

Kate looked up to find Ewan standing beside her, holding out a small cloth bundle.

“Oatcakes,” he explained. “You’ll need your strength.”

“Thanks.” She accepted the food with a grateful smile. “Is it that obvious?”

“Your face gives you away,” he said, dropping down beside her with the easy grace of someone accustomed to long journeys.

“When you’re worried, you get this little line right here.” He tapped the space between his eyebrows.

“I’m that transparent, huh?”

“Only to those who are paying attention.” Ewan glanced meaningfully toward Connor, who was studying a map with intense concentration. “Some more than others.”

Heat flooded her face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ewan’s knowing smile told her he wasn’t fooled for a moment. “Of course not. Just as I’m sure the laird doesn’t find excuses to seek your company at every opportunity.”

“He’s just being hospitable,” Kate protested, though the flutter in her stomach suggested she hoped otherwise.

“If you say so.” Ewan rose fluidly to his feet. “We’ll be riding again soon. Best finish those oatcakes.”

As he walked away, she bit into the dense, slightly sweet cake, watching Connor from beneath her lashes. He stood tall and commanding, his profile sharp against the backdrop of mountains, the wind ruffling his dark hair. Something about him seemed to belong to this wild landscape, as elemental and enduring as the ancient stones that dotted the hillsides.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to remember that she didn't belong here, that her life in the twenty-first century awaited her return. Sometimes, in quiet moments like these, the future seemed like a distant dream, less real than the solid earth beneath her feet and the man who occupied more and more of her thoughts.

"Mount up," Connor called. "We need to reach the pass before nightfall."

With a sigh, Kate brushed crumbs from her skirts and prepared to face another few hours of torture in the saddle.

\* \* \*

They had been riding for another hour when she noticed the thin wisp of smoke rising from a small valley to their left. It was barely visible against the cloudy sky, but once spotted, unmistakable.

"Connor," she called, pointing. "Is that smoke?"

He reined in his horse, his expression sharpening as he followed her gesture. "Aye. There shouldn't be anyone living this close to the border." He exchanged a look with Ewan. "It could be a trap."

"Or someone in need of help," she couldn't help adding.

His jaw tightened, but after a moment's consideration, he nodded. "We'll investigate,

but cautiously. Kate, you stay with Fergus and Alec. The rest of us will go and see.”

“But—” She began to protest.

“This isn’t a negotiation,” Connor cut her off, his tone brooking no argument. “If it’s a MacDonald ambush, I need to know you’re safe.”

The intensity in his eyes silenced her objections. She nodded reluctantly, watching as Connor, Ewan, and the warrior named Donald veered off the path toward the smoke.

“Don’t worry, lass,” Fergus said, his weathered face creasing in a reassuring smile. “The laird knows what he’s about.”

Kate wasn’t worried about his competence. She’d seen enough to know he was more than capable of handling himself in dangerous situations. What bothered her was being left behind, treated as someone who needed protection rather than a partner in this journey.

They waited in tense silence, the minutes stretching interminably until Ewan appeared at the crest of a small hill, waving them forward.

“It’s safe,” he called. “But you’ll want to come quickly.”

Curiosity piqued, she urged her horse forward, following Fergus and Alec toward a small stone cottage nestled in a hollow between two hills. It was a humble dwelling, with a thatched roof and a small garden that looked well-tended despite the harshness of the environment.

Connor stood by the door, his expression a complex mixture of emotions that Kate couldn’t fully decipher. As she dismounted, he moved to her side.



“It’s Elspeth,” he said quietly. “She’s here, not at the western edge of the island, as we believed.”

Kate’s eyes widened. “Your sister? But I thought?—”

“So did I.” Connor ran a hand through his hair, a gesture she’d come to recognize as a sign of inner turmoil. “She’s been living here alone for nearly two months.”

Before she could respond, the cottage door opened, and a young woman stepped out. Even at a glance, the family resemblance was unmistakable. The same striking blue eyes as Connor, the same proud bearing, though softened by feminine grace. Her condition was also evident. The gentle swell of her belly clearly visible beneath her simple dress.

“Brother,” Elspeth greeted him, her voice cool. “I dinna expect to see ye here.”

“Nor I you,” Connor replied. “Your message said you were living near the fishing settlement. To the west.”

A flicker of something, guilt, perhaps, or defiance, crossed Elspeth’s face. “I was. Until they made it clear I was no longer welcome with a MacKenzie bastard in my belly.” She lifted her chin. “I’ve managed well enough on my own.”

Kate watched them, the tension between them so thick she thought she could reach out and touch it. Connor’s posture was rigid, his expression guarded, while Elspeth seemed to be bracing herself for rejection.

“This is Kate,” Connor said abruptly, gesturing toward her. “She’s a... guest at Bronmuir.”

Elspeth’s gaze shifted to her, assessing her with a directness that reminded her

strongly of Connor. “You’re not from the Highlands,” she observed.

“No,” Kate agreed, stepping forward with a smile. “I’m from... quite far away, actually.”

“The new world,” Connor said. “Her ship was wrecked on our shores.”

Elsbeth’s eyebrows rose slightly, but she nodded. “Well, any friend of my brother’s is welcome in my home, humble though it may be.” She stepped back, holding the door open. “Come in, all of you. I have stew simmering, and you must be hungry from your journey.”

The interior of the cottage was small, but surprisingly cozy. A fire burned in the hearth, casting warm light over the single room. Simple furnishings, a table, two chairs, a narrow bed in the corner, were arranged with care, and bundles of dried herbs hung from the rafters, filling the air with a pleasant, earthy scent.

“It’s lovely,” Kate said sincerely, noting the small touches that made the space feel like a home. A colorful woven blanket on the bed, wildflowers in a clay jar on the table.

“It’s enough for me,” Elspeth replied, stirring the pot that hung over the fire. “And for the babe when it comes.”

Connor, who had been standing awkwardly by the door, finally spoke. “How do you survive out here, Elspeth? Winter will be harsh in these hills.”

“I trade with the crofters in the valley, herbs and remedies for supplies. Mother taught me well before she passed.” His sister ladled stew into wooden bowls, her movements brisk. “I’ve always been resourceful, Connor. You know that.”

“Aye, but this is no place for a woman alone, especially one with child.”

Elspeth’s expression hardened. “Would you have me return to the MacDonalds, where I’m treated as less than a servant? Or perhaps to Bronmuir, where Father declared me dead to the family?”

“Da is gone,” Connor said quietly. “And I never agreed with his judgment.”

A heavy silence fell over the room. Kate watched the conflicting emotions on Elspeth’s face. Hope warring with pride, longing with the fear of further rejection.

“I sent for you,” Connor continued. “The day before we left. The messenger should have reached you by now.”

Elspeth stilled, her hand tightening on the ladle. “Sent for me?”

“To come home.” Connor’s voice was gruff but sincere. “To Bronmuir, where you belong.”

Kate had to swallow, seeing him interact with his sister, the olive branch he extended despite the complicated history between them. She’d known he’d decided to bring Elspeth home, but seeing him actually make the offer, witnessing the vulnerability beneath his stoic exterior, touched her deeply.

Elspeth’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “And what of the babe? A child born without a father’s name?”

“The babe is a MacLeod,” Connor said firmly. “My niece or nephew will be welcomed as such.”

A single tear slipped down Elspeth’s cheek, quickly wiped away. “The clan?—”

“Will follow their laird’s lead,” Connor interrupted. “And their laird says you and your child are MacLeods.”

The siblings stared at each other, years of hurt and misunderstanding hanging in the balance. Then, slowly, Elspeth nodded.

“I will consider it,” she said, her voice steady despite the emotion in her eyes. “But I cannot leave today. There are preparations to make, things to gather.”

“We continue to MacDonald territory,” Connor explained. “To negotiate Cameron’s release. On our return journey, we’ll stop for you.”

“Cameron?” Elspeth’s face paled. “What’s happened to Cameron?”

As he briefly explained the situation, Kate found herself studying Elspeth more closely. Despite her obvious pregnancy and isolation, there was a resilience about her that Kate only wished she had. His sister had made a mistake in trusting the wrong man, but rather than crumbling under the weight of scandal and rejection, she had forged a life for herself and her unborn child. It was impressive, especially considering the limited options available to women in this time.

After the meal, which was surprisingly delicious given the simple ingredients, Connor and his men stepped outside to discuss their route, leaving Kate alone with Elspeth.

“He’s changed,” Elspeth observed, clearing the bowls from the table. “My brother. He seems... softer somehow.”

She smiled. “I wouldn’t let him hear you say that.”

His sister laughed, a light sound that transformed her serious face. “No, I suppose not.

Connor has always prided himself on his strength. But there's strength in gentleness too, something our father never understood."

"Your brother is a good man," Kate said. "He was worried about you."

"Was he?" Elspeth paused, vulnerability flashing across her features. "I thought... after I left the way I did..."

"Family is complicated," Kate said, thinking of her own parents, their expectations and disappointments. "But it's also precious."

Elspeth studied her curiously. "You speak as if from experience."

"I've made my share of mistakes," Kate admitted. "And I've learned that forgiveness, when offered sincerely, is a gift to both parties."

"You're not what I expected," Elspeth said after a moment. "For a woman in my brother's company."

Her cheeks warmed. "We're not, I mean, Connor and I aren't?—"

"Perhaps not yet," Elspeth interrupted with a knowing smile. "But I see the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching."

Before Kate could formulate a response to that startling observation, the door opened and Connor stepped back inside.

"We need to continue if we're to reach the meeting place by nightfall," he announced.

His sister nodded, moving to embrace her brother. After a moment's hesitation, Connor's arms came around her, holding her carefully, as if she might break.

“Be safe,” Elspeth murmured. “The MacDonalds are not to be trusted.”

“I know,” Connor assured her. “Ye have three days to pack up your belongings, then we ride for home.”

As they prepared to leave, Kate found herself drawn to the small shelf above Elspeth’s bed, where a familiar glint caught her eye. A brooch. Not as elaborate as the Bronmuir Brooch, but similar in design, with a small blue stone set in silver.

“It was my mother’s,” Elspeth explained, noticing Kate’s interest. “The only thing of hers I took when I left.”

The brooch, so similar to the one that had brought her to this time... Could it possibly work the same way? If she could borrow it, perhaps try it at the ancient cemetery where she’d first arrived...

“It’s beautiful,” she said, her voice sounding strange to her own ears.

Outside, the men were already mounted, waiting. As Kate climbed awkwardly into her saddle, she glanced back at the cottage where Elspeth stood in the doorway, one hand resting protectively on her belly.

The sight stirred something deep within Kate. A longing she hadn’t fully acknowledged until now. Not just for home and the familiar comforts of the twenty-first century, but for connection, for belonging, for the kind of love that endured despite mistakes and misunderstandings.

As they rode away, her thoughts turned to her own secret, the truth of her origins that she kept hidden from Connor. If he knew she was from the future, would he look at her differently? Would the trust they’d built crumble under the weight of such an impossible revelation?

The brooch. If she told him the truth, perhaps he would let her borrow the Bronmuir Brooch, just long enough to see if it could send her home. But the thought of leaving, of never seeing him again, never knowing what might have developed between them, filled her with an unexpected ache.

“You’re quiet,” Connor observed, drawing his horse alongside hers.

She managed a smile. “Just thinking.”

“About my sister?”

“Partly,” she admitted. “She’s remarkably strong, living out here alone.”

Connor nodded, pride evident in his expression. “MacLeods are stubborn by nature. It serves us well in difficult times.”

“Must run in the family,” Kate teased, trying to lighten her own mood.

The smile he gave her in return, rare and genuine, made her heart skip. “Aye, so I’ve been told. Usually by you.”

They rode in companionable silence for a while, the beauty of the Highland landscape unfolding around them. Kate found herself memorizing details, the particular shade of blue in the sky, the way the heather moved in the wind, the solid presence of Connor beside her, knowing that someday, whether tomorrow or years from now, she would have to leave this place, this time, this man.

But not yet. Not today.

### Chapter Sixteen

Kate slipped through the early morning mist, a small basket of provisions clutched in her hands. Connor had left at dawn with Ewan and two other men to scout the MacDonald meeting place, leaving strict instructions that she remain at camp. But she'd never been particularly good at following instructions, especially when they involved sitting idly by while others took action.

The path to Elspeth's cottage wasn't difficult to retrace. Kate had paid careful attention during yesterday's journey, noting landmarks and the gentle curve of the hills. Not to mention it was the only road or path around.

She paused at the crest of the hill, looking down at the cottage where a thin tendril of smoke rose from the chimney. What was she doing here, really? A snort escaped. Yes, she was avoiding her own problems and her indecision about whether to tell Connor the truth about when she came from.

With a sigh, she continued down the slope. Breathing heavily, she stood at the door, trying to catch her breath before she knocked softly. For a moment, there was silence, then the sound of movement inside.

"Who's there?" Elspeth's voice carried a note of wariness.

"It's Kate. From yesterday? I've brought some supplies."

The door cracked open, Elspeth's blue eyes, so like Connor's, peered out suspiciously before recognition dawned. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon." She opened



the door wider. "Come in."

The cottage was even cozier in the soft morning light, the fire casting a warm glow over the simple furnishings. Elspeth wore a faded blue dress, her dark hair braided loosely over one shoulder.

"My brother doesn't know you're here, does he?" Elspeth asked, taking the basket and setting it on the small table.

She smiled sheepishly. "Not exactly. He's scouting ahead with some of the men."

Elspeth's lips curved in a small smile. "So you're as headstrong as you seem. No wonder my brother is so taken with you."

"I wouldn't say taken," Kate protested, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. "We're just... friends."

"If you say so." Elspeth began unpacking the basket. Oatcakes, dried fruit, a small wedge of cheese, and a jar of honey. "This is generous. Thank you."

"I thought you might need a few things before the journey back to Bronmuir," Kate said, settling onto one of the wooden stools.

Elspeth's hands stilled over the basket. "I haven't decided if I'm going."

"Oh." She tried to hide her surprise. "I thought... after yesterday..."

"Connor offered out of duty," Elspeth said quietly. "Not because he wants me there."

"That's not true," Kate countered. "He's genuinely concerned for you."

Elsbeth gave her a measured look. “You dinna know our history.”

“Then tell me,” Kate suggested gently. “Help me understand.”

His sister was quiet for a moment, her fingertips tracing the grain of the old table. When she finally spoke, her voice was low, steady with the weight of memory.

“I was father’s favorite. The only daughter after five sons. He spoiled me, I suppose, even as he ruled the others with an iron will. He expected greatness from his sons, most especially Cameron. As the eldest, he was meant to inherit the lairdship. Father pushed him harder than the rest, demanded more, always more. It made Cameron strong, but it also made him keen to be seen for who he was, not just the heir.”

She nodded, imagining what it must have been like growing up in a household ruled by such expectations.

“But Connor...” Elspeth went on, her gaze drifting, eyes clouded with things long kept buried. “He was two years younger than Cameron. And though our father never spoke it plain, we all knew he never saw Connor as fit to lead. Said little, thought too much. Too quiet. But after our mother passed, it was Connor who held us together. He did the work that earned no glory but mattered most. Tended wounded after raids. Took food to crofters in the snow. Looked after me.”

She swallowed hard. “When our father soured with grief and rage, it was Connor who stood before me. Took the blame. Shielded me from his disappointment, the lash of it.”

Her voice thickened. “And how did I repay him for that kind of love? I followed my foolish heart and ran off with a MacKenzie. I brought shame to our name and left Connor with the broken pieces. I havenae seen him since that night. I can only imagine what wrath our father visited down on him, but I know who bore the brunt.

Always Connor.”

Emotion swelled in her voice, proud yet trembling. “I hurt the only brother who never once hurt me. And I’ve no right to ask his forgiveness.”

“You fell in love,” Kate said softly. “That’s not a crime.”

“It is when yer clan’s been feudin’ wi’ his longer than any of us can remember,” Elspeth replied with the wry ghost of a smile. “But love makes fools of us all, does it not? I believed what Alasdair swore, that his people would welcome me, that we’d build a fine life together.” Her hand drifted to rest protectively over the swell of her belly. “I didna ken he was already promised to another.”

She winced. “I’m so sorry.”

Elspeth straightened her spine, pride stiffening her frame. “Dinna be. I made my choice. And I’ve learned to live wi’ what followed. But Connor...”

She exhaled long and slow. “He tried to stop me, ye ken. That night. Met me at the gates. Begged me to think again. Said no good would come of loving a MacKenzie.”

“He was trying to protect you,” Kate said.

“Aye, he was. And I flung his care back in his face. Told him he was just like father. Controlling. Blind to what mattered.” Her lips parted as if to say more, but it took a moment for the words to come. “The last thing I said to him was that I hoped never to see him again.”

The weight of that admission hung in the air between them. She could imagine the scene, a younger Connor, desperate to protect his sister from what he saw as a terrible mistake. A headstrong Elspeth, determined to follow her heart regardless of the cost.

“People say things they don’t mean when they’re hurt or angry,” she said finally. “I’m sure Connor knows that.”

“Perhaps.” His sister moved to the small window, gazing out at the misty hills. “But there’s knowing and then there’s forgiving. I’m not sure he’s capable of the latter, not after what my actions cost the clan.”

“What do you mean?”

“The feud between the MacLeods and MacKenzies has always been bitter, but my... indiscretion made it worse. Alasdair used my feelings to gain information about Bronmuir’s defenses, about patrol schedules and vulnerable points.”

Elsbeth’s voice was hollow with self-recrimination. “I didn’t realize what I was doing at the time, but the result was a raid that cost three MacLeod lives.”

Kate inhaled sharply. “Connor never mentioned that.”

“He wouldn’t. He’s too honorable to lay that blame at my feet, even though we both know where it belongs.” Elspeth turned back to face her. “So you see, it’s not as simple as coming home. Some wounds run too deep for healing.”

“I don’t believe that,” Kate said firmly. “If I’ve learned anything in my life, it’s that it’s never too late to mend what’s broken. Especially between family.”

His sister studied her curiously. “You speak as if from experience.”

She thought of her own family. Her parents’ disappointment when she’d chosen a career in the dating industry over law school, the months of strained conversations and awkward holiday dinners before they’d finally reached an understanding. “Let’s just say I know something about stubborn pride and the damage it can do.”

“And were you able to mend what was broken in your family?” Elspeth asked.

“Yes,” Kate said softly. “It took time, and humility on both sides. But worth it, in the end.”

Elspeth was quiet for a moment, considering. “You care for my brother, don’t you? Not just as a friend.”

The direct question caught her off guard. “I... It’s complicated.”

“Life usually is,” Elspeth said with a small smile. “But I see the way you speak of him, the light in your eyes. And I saw how he looked at you yesterday, like a man who’s found something precious and unexpected.”

Kate’s heart fluttered at the observation. Had Connor really looked at her that way? “Even if that were true, I won’t be here forever.”

“None of us will,” Elspeth replied, misunderstanding her meaning. “But that’s all the more reason to seize happiness where we find it, isn’t it?”

Before she could respond, a shadow fell across the doorway, followed by a sharp knock that made both women jump.

“Kate?” Connor’s voice, tight with barely contained anger, cut through the morning stillness. “Are you in there?”

His sister shot Kate a sympathetic look. “My brother sounds displeased.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” she muttered, moving to open the door.

Connor stood on the threshold, his expression thunderous. Behind him, Ewan waited

with the horses, studiously avoiding eye contact.

“What part of ‘stay in camp’ was unclear to you?” Connor demanded.

Kate lifted her chin. “I brought Elspeth some supplies. I didn’t go far.”

“These borders are not safe,” Connor said through gritted teeth. “The MacDonalds patrol regularly, and if they found you?—”

“But they didn’t,” Kate interrupted. “I’m fine. I just wanted to help.”

His jaw worked as he visibly struggled to control his temper. “We need to return to camp. Now.”

“Don’t be angry with her, brother,” Elspeth said, stepping forward. “Kate was kind enough to bring me provisions. Something I’m in need of, living alone.”

His gaze shifted to his sister, his expression softening almost imperceptibly. “You shouldn’t be alone out here, Elspeth. It isn’t safe.”

“So you’ve said,” she replied. “Though I’ve managed well enough these past months.”

A tense silence stretched between the siblings, years of hurt and misunderstanding creating an almost tangible barrier. She looked from one to the other, seeing the same stubborn set to their jaws, the same pride in their bearing. They were so alike, these two, both too proud to take the first step toward reconciliation.

“Elspeth told me about the night she left,” Kate said quietly. “About what she said to you.”

Connor's eyes narrowed. "That's between my sister and me."

"Is it?" Kate challenged. "Because it seems to me that you're both carrying around guilt and hurt that's poisoning any chance of healing. You think you failed to protect her, and she feels responsible for betraying the clan."

"Kate," Connor warned, but she pressed on.

"Life is too short and too precious to waste it on pride. Believe me, I know." She gestured to Elspeth. "Your sister needs her family. And you need her too, whether you'll admit it or not."

For a moment, he looked like he might argue further. Then, with a sigh that seemed to come from the depths of his soul, he turned to Elspeth.

"Is this true? Do you blame yourself for the raid?"

Elspeth nodded, unable to meet his eyes. "I was blind. Foolish. I told Alasdair things I shouldn't have, never suspecting he would use them against our clan."

"You weren't the only one who was blind," Connor said quietly. "I knew something was wrong. His interest in you seemed... convenient. But I was so focused on proving myself to our father, on being the perfect son and warrior, that I didn't see the danger until it was too late."

Elspeth looked up, surprise evident in her expression. "You blame yourself?"

"How could I not? I'm your older brother. I should have protected you better."

The admission hung in the air between them, raw and honest. Kate held her breath, watching as years of misunderstanding slowly began to unravel.

“I don’t need your protection,” Elspeth said finally. “I never did. What I needed, what I still need, is your acceptance. Your love, despite my mistakes.”

“You’ve always had that,” Connor replied, his voice rough with emotion. “Even when I was angriest, even when father disowned you... You’ve always been my sister. Nothing changes that.”

Elspeth’s eyes filled with tears. “I’ve missed you. All of you. Even Bronmuir, with its drafty halls and father’s ghost lingering in every corner.”

“Those halls don’t have to be drafty,” Connor said, a hint of a smile softening his features. “And father’s ghost holds no power over us now. Come home, Elspeth. Let me, let us, take care of you and the babe.”

For a long moment, Elspeth hesitated, years of independence warring with the longing for family and security. Then, slowly, she nodded.

“Alright. I’ll come.”

The simple acceptance broke something open between them. Connor crossed the small room in two strides, pulling his sister into a careful embrace that spoke more eloquently than words.

Kate watched, her own eyes stinging with unshed tears. This was what mattered, she thought, these moments of connection, of healing.

Later, as they rode back to camp, Connor kept his horse close to Kate’s, the earlier anger seemingly forgotten.

“That was a foolish risk,” he said, but the heat had gone from his voice. “The MacDonalds?—”



“I know,” Kate interrupted. “It was reckless. But I couldn’t just sit in camp doing nothing when I knew Elspeth was alone and pregnant and probably scared, even if she’d never admit it.”

Connor studied her for a moment, his blue eyes thoughtful. “You have a way of seeing through people’s defenses. It’s... unnerving.”

“Is that a compliment or a complaint?” Kate asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Both, perhaps.” A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Though I’m grateful for it today. What you did for Elspeth and me... I won’t forget it.”

The simple sincerity in his voice warmed her more than any elaborate praise could have. “She loves you. She just needed to know you still love her too, despite everything.”

“I’ve never stopped,” he admitted. “But pride... It’s a difficult thing to overcome.”

“Tell me about it,” Kate said with feeling. “I come from a long line of stubborn people myself.”

“Your family in America,” Connor said. “You rarely speak of them.”

She tensed slightly, aware that she was treading on dangerous ground. “There’s not much to tell. My parents wanted me to follow a different path than the one I chose. It caused some tension.”

“And now?”

“We’ve reconciled,” she said truthfully. “They’ve come to accept that I need to make my own choices, even if they don’t always understand them.”

Connor nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him. “Family is... complicated. But essential.”

“Yes,” she agreed softly. “Essential.”

They rode in companionable silence for a while, the beauty of the Highland landscape unfolding around them. She found herself stealing glances at his profile, admiring the strong line of his jaw, the quiet confidence in his bearing. He had shown such vulnerability with Elspeth, such capacity for forgiveness. Would he be as understanding if he knew the truth about her?

The thought of the brooch tucked safely in Connor’s sporran nagged at her conscience. She should tell him the truth, about who she was, where she came from, how she had arrived in his time. He deserved that honesty, especially now, when trust was growing between them.

But what if he didn’t believe her? What if he thought her mad, or worse, a witch? The 17th century was not known for its tolerance of the inexplicable. And even if he did believe her, would he help her return to her own time? The thought of leaving him, of never seeing him again, created an ache in her chest that was becoming harder to ignore.

“You’re quiet,” Connor observed, breaking into her thoughts.

She managed a smile. “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“Choices,” she said honestly. “The ones we make, the ones we regret, the ones we’re still facing.”

His gaze was penetrating, as if he could sense the weight of the decision she was wrestling with. “Sometimes the hardest choice is the one we know we must make, but fear to face.”

“How do you know which choice is right?” Kate asked, the question slipping out before she could stop it.

“I don’t know that we ever can, not with certainty,” Connor replied thoughtfully. “But I believe that when we act from love rather than fear, we rarely go wrong.”

The simple wisdom of his words struck her deeply. Was she acting from love or fear? Was her reluctance to tell him the truth about herself born of genuine concern for his reaction, or was she simply afraid of losing what they were building together?

As they crested a hill, the camp came into view below, a small cluster of tents beside a stream, smoke rising from a cooking fire. Tomorrow they would meet with the MacDonalds, attempt to negotiate Cameron’s release. The danger was real, the stakes impossibly high.

Kate was just shifting in the saddle to get a better look when Connor’s voice cut into her thoughts.

“You disobeyed me.”

The heat of his words made her blink, caught off guard. “What?”

“I told ye to stay with Fergus and Alec. You didn’t.”

“I just—” She blinked in surprise, then lifted her chin. “I was worried. I didn’t go far, and when I saw there was no danger, I?”

“You don’t ken what danger looks like out here.” His tone wasn’t angry exactly, but there was steel threaded through it. “If that had been a trap, you’d have been the first to fall into it. I give orders for a reason, not to hear myself speak.”

Her pulse pounded, and she fought the urge to lash back. He wasn’t wrong, even if her pride bristled at the reprimand. “I wasn’t trying to ignore you. I just thought?—”

“That you knew better than a man who’s lived on these lands his entire life?”

She dragged in a breath and let it out slowly. “No. I only wanted to help.”

“I ken that. But help me by staying alive,” he said softly. “Next time I give an order like that, I expect ye to heed it. I’ll not risk you.”

The words stung more for the care woven between them. The fear she’d glimpsed in his eyes earlier was still there, hidden behind frustration and responsibility.

She swallowed. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

He held her gaze for a long moment before nodding. “Good.”

The tension between them lingered, taut and crackling, until finally he let out a long breath, his voice softening. “Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked, surprised.

“For Elspeth. For... seeing what needed to be done.” His words were quieter now, sincere.

The gratitude in his eyes made her heart swell. “You’re welcome,” she said, still a little breathless from their exchange.

He looked toward the camp below, then back to her. “When this is over, when Cameron is home and Elspeth is settled at Bronmuir...” He hesitated, clearly uneasy in territory he couldn’t fight his way through. “There are things I would speak with you about. Important things.”

Kate’s pulse quickened. “What kind of things?”

He held her gaze, steady, warm with an emotion she dared not name. “The future. Possibilities. If you’re willing to hear them.”

“I’d like that,” she said softly, meaning it despite the complications she knew loomed ahead. Tomorrow would bring the confrontation with the MacDonalds, a day fraught with danger and uncertainty. Beyond that waited choices she hadn’t fully admitted she’d need to make. About the brooch, her origins, her place in this time.

And about the man beside her.

### Chapter Seventeen

Kate shivered as she tightened the wool cloak around her shoulders, watching Connor confer with Ewan near the edge of camp as a light rain fell and the wind picked up. Their heads were bent close together, voices too low to carry, but the tension in his stance told her everything she needed to know. Today was the day.

The exchange, the fake brooch for Cameron, seemed straightforward enough, but apparently nothing involving the MacDonalds was ever simple. Connor had made that abundantly clear.

“You should eat something,” Fergus said, appearing at her side with a bowl of steaming porridge. “The laird says we’ll be leaving within the hour.”

Kate accepted the bowl with a grateful nod, though her stomach twisted at the thought of food. Who would have ever thought she’d be excited to eat what she thought of as oatmeal. Where were banana slices, honey, and a few chopped pecans? “Thanks.”

“Dinna fash,” the older man said kindly. “The laird knows what he’s about. We’ll have Cameron home by nightfall.”

She hoped Fergus was right. The thought of Connor’s brother suffering at MacDonald hands made her sick to her stomach after the stories she’d heard the men telling when they thought she wasn’t listening.

Across the camp, he looked up, his gaze finding hers with unerring precision.

Something passed between them, a wordless communication that made her breath catch. Then he was striding toward her, purpose in every line of his body.

“We leave in half an hour,” he said without preamble. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” She nodded, setting aside her barely touched porridge.

His expression softened slightly. “You don’t have to come. You could wait here with Fergus?—”

“No,” she interrupted firmly. “I’m coming. Maybe I can help.”

How, she wasn’t entirely sure. She wasn’t a warrior or a healer, but something told her she needed to be there, that her presence might somehow make a difference, and to make sure the guidebook didn’t come true.

Connor studied her face for a long moment, then nodded. “Very well. But you’ll stay back during the exchange. No matter what happens, you remain with Ewan. Understood?”

This time, she didn’t argue. “Understood.”

“Good.” He hesitated, as if there was more he wanted to say, but instead turned away. “Half an hour,” he repeated, already moving toward the horses.

Kate watched him go, admiring the quiet confidence in his bearing despite the weight she knew he carried. The lives of his men, his brother’s safety, the future of his clan all rested on his shoulders.

How different he was from the men she knew in her time. There was nothing performative about Connor’s strength, nothing calculated about his courage. He

simply was who he was, without apology or pretense.

And she was falling for him, hard and fast and against all reason.

The realization should have terrified her. Instead, it settled deep inside her where it felt right.

Oh my. She was in love with Connor MacLeod.

A man born more than three hundred years before her time, a man whose world was vastly different from hers, a man she would eventually have to leave behind because she had to go back. She didn't belong here. Maybe she'd already messed up history, and the ripples were spreading through time. Her parents and sister must be frantic.

What if the MacDonald assassin she'd pushed over the battlements was an ancestor of her ex, Angus? Would he or someone in his family cease to exist? Or maybe Bronmuir Keep was now intact in her time?

The thoughts sent a pang through her so sharp it was almost physical. But there was no time to dwell on thoughts of ripples through time. Not now. Not with Cameron's life hanging in the balance.

\* \* \*

The weight of the fake brooch in Connor's sporran was a constant reminder of what was at stake. The craftsman had done his work well. None but the most discerning eye could tell it from the original Bronmuir Brooch. He prayed it would be enough to fool the whoreson Dougal MacDonald.

He cast a glance over his shoulder, checking on Kate who rode just behind him with Ewan. She sat straighter in the saddle today, her movements more confident after



days on horseback. The sight of her, determined despite her obvious apprehension, stirred something protective in his chest.

She shouldn't be here. He should have insisted she remain at Bronmuir, safe behind the stone walls. But even as the thought formed, he knew it was futile. Kate was not a woman easily dissuaded once her mind was set. It was one of the qualities he most admired about her, and one that most frustrated him.

"We're nearing the meeting place," Ewan murmured, drawing his horse alongside Connor's. "Just beyond that rise."

He nodded, tension coiling in his gut. "Keep the men spread out. I want eyes in every direction."

"Aye, and what of the lass?" Ewan asked quietly, with a meaningful glance toward Kate.

"She stays with you," Connor replied firmly. "No matter what happens."

Ewan's expression was grim. "You think Dougal will betray us."

It wasn't a question. He had known Dougal MacDonald since boyhood, had crossed swords with him more times than he could count. The man was as treacherous as he was cunning.

"I think Dougal rarely does what's expected," Connor said carefully. "Be ready for anything."

As they crested the hill, the meeting place came into view. A small clearing surrounded by ancient pines, their shadows long in the morning light. A group of riders waited at the far edge, their plaids marking them as MacDonalds.

Connor held up his hand, signaling his men to halt. “Stay alert,” he commanded, then turned to Kate. “Remember what I said. Stay with Ewan, no matter what.”

She nodded, her face pale. “Be careful,” she said softly.

He held her gaze for a heartbeat longer than necessary, then turned his horse toward the clearing, with two of his men flanking him. The rest of his men remained on the ridge, bows at the ready.

As they approached, Connor could make out Dougal at the center of the MacDonald party, his broad frame unmistakable even at a distance. There was no sign of Cameron.

“MacLeod,” Dougal called as they drew near. “I was beginning to think you’d lost your way.”

“MacDonald,” Connor replied coolly. “Where is my brother?”

Dougal’s smile was all teeth, no warmth. “Safe enough. For now.” He gestured to the men behind him. “Bring him.”

Two men disappeared into the trees, returning moments later supporting a third figure between them. Connor’s heart clenched at the sight of his brother. Cameron’s once-powerful frame was gaunt, his face bruised, his movements slow and pained as the men half-dragged him forward.

“What have you done to him?” Connor demanded, fury rising in his throat.

“Nothing he didn’t earn,” Dougal replied dismissively.

“He’s alive, isn’t he? More than can be said for the two men he killed trying to

escape.”

Connor forced himself to breathe steadily, to think past the rage clouding his vision. Cameron was alive. That was what mattered. Everything else could be dealt with once they were safely away. A time would come when Dougal MacDonald no longer breathed.

“You have what you came for,” Dougal continued, nodding toward Cameron. “Now, where is my payment?”

Connor reached into his sporran and withdrew the brooch, holding it up so the morning light caught the gemstones. “The Bronmuir Brooch, as agreed.”

Dougal’s eyes narrowed with naked greed. “Bring it here.”

“Release my brother first,” Connor countered.

A tense silence fell over the clearing. Connor could feel Murtagh shifting slightly beside him, ready for trouble. Behind them, he knew Kate was watching, probably holding her breath.

Finally, Dougal nodded to his men. “Let him go.”

The MacDonalds released Cameron, who stumbled forward a few steps before steadying himself. His eyes, though dulled with pain, found Connor’s with fierce recognition.

“Go to Ewan,” Connor instructed quietly.

His brother nodded, making his way slowly across the clearing. Connor waited until his brother had reached Ewan’s side before urging his horse forward, the brooch held

out before him.

Dougal reached for it eagerly, but Connor pulled back at the last moment. “Our business is concluded,” he said firmly. “I expect no further trouble from the MacDonalds.”

Dougal’s smile was cold. “For now,” he agreed, taking the brooch and examining it closely. “Though I can’t promise what the future might hold, especially with your sister carrying the bastard of the MacKenzie who killed one of my men.”

Connor’s jaw tightened at the deliberate provocation. “My sister and her child are under my protection. Remember that.”

“A fact I’m sure the MacKenzies will find interesting,” Dougal replied smoothly. “Given their new allegiance to William of Orange.”

The implication was clear. Dougal knew of Elspeth’s situation, knew of the political complications it presented for the MacLeods. It was a threat, thinly veiled but unmistakable.

“We’re done here,” Connor said flatly, turning his horse. “Ewan, let’s go.”

As they made their way back to the ridge where the rest of their men waited, Connor couldn’t shake the feeling that things had gone too smoothly. Dougal had given up Cameron with minimal resistance, barely examined the brooch. It wasn’t like him to miss an opportunity to press for further advantage.

“Something’s wrong,” he murmured to Ewan as they rejoined their party.

Ewan nodded grimly. “He’s planning something.”

“Let’s not wait to find out what,” Connor decided. “We make for Elspeth’s cottage, then home to Bronmuir. Fast as we can.”

Kate had moved to Cameron’s side, her face a mask of concern as she took in his condition. “He needs a healer,” she said quietly as Connor approached.

“Aye,” Connor agreed, noting the unnatural pallor of his brother’s skin, the way he held himself, as if every movement caused pain. “Elspeth has some skill with herbs. She can see to him until we reach Bronmuir.”

Cameron managed a weak smile. “I’m not dead yet, little brother. No need to look so grim.”

Despite everything, a smile broke out across his face. Trust his brother to jest even now. “Save your strength,” he advised. “We’ve a hard ride ahead.”

As they set off, he couldn’t shake his unease. Dougal had capitulated too easily, had barely glanced at the brooch. Something wasn’t right.

He just prayed they’d be far away before he discovered what it was.

\* \* \*

Kate kept close to Cameron as they rode, watching with growing concern as he listed in the saddle, his face gray with exhaustion, sweat dripping down his face. The man was clearly in no condition for a hard journey, but they had little choice. Connor’s urgency was infectious, his certainty that Dougal had some trick planned, spurred them all to greater speed.

“How much farther back to Elspeth’s?” she asked Ewan, who rode on Cameron’s other side, ready to catch him should he fall.

“Not far now,” Ewan replied, constantly scanning the surrounding hills. “Another hour, perhaps less.”

Cameron gave a soft grunt that might have been a laugh. “I never thought I’d be so eager to see our headstrong sister again.”

“She’s had a tough time,” Kate told him. “Grown up, I think.”

“Hardship will do that,” Cameron agreed, wincing as his horse jolted over the uneven ground. “Though I’d have preferred she learn her lessons some other way.”

They had just entered a narrow pass between two hills when Connor suddenly raised his hand, signaling a halt. The company froze, alert and wary.

“What is it?” Kate whispered to Ewan.

He shook his head slightly, one hand moving to the hilt of his sword. “Not sure. He senses something.”

Connor was perfectly still atop his mount, listening intently. Then, with a fluid motion that spoke of years of training, he drew his sword.

“Ambush!” he shouted, just as arrows began to rain down from the hills on either side.

Chaos erupted. Men shouted, horses reared, and the clash of steel on steel filled the air as MacDonald warriors poured from the rocks above. She watched in horror as one of Connor’s men fell, an arrow protruding from his chest.

“Get to the cottage!” Connor bellowed, cutting down a MacDonald who had leapt onto his horse. “Ewan, take Kate and Cameron! Go!”

Ewan didn't hesitate. He grabbed the reins of Kate's horse with one hand and Cameron's with the other, spurring his own mount forward. "Hold tight!" he shouted.

Kate clung to her saddle as they galloped through the pass, arrows whistling past them. She caught a last glimpse of Connor, sword flashing in the sunlight as he fought off two attackers at once, before a bend in the path took him from her view.

They rode hard, the sounds of battle fading behind them. Cameron was barely conscious now, slumped over his horse's neck, held in place only by Ewan's grip on his arm.

"Almost there," Ewan called encouragingly. "Just ahead!"

Through the trees, Kate could make out the small stone cottage, smoke rising from its chimney. Elspeth must have seen them coming, for she appeared in the doorway, her expression changing from welcome to alarm as she took in their state.

"What's happened?" she cried as they drew up before the cottage. "Where's Connor?"

"Ambush," Ewan explained tersely, dismounting in one fluid motion. "MacDonalds. The laird ordered us ahead while he and the others held them off."

Elsbeth's face paled. "Cameron," she breathed, seeing her eldest brother's condition for the first time. "Quickly, bring him inside."

Between them, Ewan and Kate managed to get Cameron off his horse and into the cottage. They laid him gently on Elspeth's narrow bed, where he groaned, his eyes fluttering open.

"Elsbeth," he murmured, a faint smile touching his lips. "Still as bonnie as ever, even

with a babe in your belly.”

“And you’re still a silver-tongued devil,” she retorted, though her hands were gentle as she examined his wounds. “Even half-dead.”

Kate hovered nearby, unsure how to help. “What can I do?”

Elspeth glanced up, her expression grim. “Heat water. There’s a pot by the fire, and clean cloth in that chest. We need to clean his wounds.”

As Kate hurried to obey, Ewan moved to the door. “I’m going back,” he announced. “The laird needs me.”

“Be careful,” Kate said, pausing in her task. “Please.”

He nodded once, then was gone, the sound of hoofbeats fading rapidly as he rode back toward the battle.

Elspeth worked quickly as she cut away Cameron’s tattered linen shirt, revealing a patchwork of bruises and half-healed cuts across his torso. But it was the wound across his side that drew a sharp intake of breath from both women. A deep gash, the edges inflamed and seeping.

“This is bad,” Elspeth murmured, pressing a clean cloth to the wound. “The blade was dirty.”

Cameron’s eyes were clearer now, watching his sister with a mixture of pride and resignation. “Always the clever one,” he said softly. “Even as a wee lass.”

“Save your strength,” Elspeth admonished, though her voice caught. “You’ll need it to heal.”



Kate brought the heated water and rags, watching as his sister cleaned the wound with steady hands. “Will he be alright?” she asked quietly.

Elspeth’s hesitation was answer enough. “We’ll do what we can,” she said finally.

Outside, the sounds of conflict grew closer. Shouts and the clash of steel, the thunder of hooves. Kate moved to the window, peering out anxiously.

“Connor,” she breathed, spotting him among the melee. He fought like a man possessed, his sword a blur of motion as he cut down one MacDonald after another. Even from a distance, she could see blood on his face, but he moved with the fluid grace of a warrior, seemingly untouched by the surrounding chaos.

Relief flooded her, followed immediately by fear as she counted the combatants. The MacDonalds outnumbered Connor’s men at least two to one.

“They need help,” she said, turning back to Elspeth.

The other woman nodded grimly. “In the corner, behind that sack of grain. You’ll find a bow and quiver.”

Kate blinked in surprise. “You have weapons?”

“A woman alone can’t be too careful,” Elspeth replied. “Can you shoot?”

Kate thought of the archery lessons she’d taken in college, a brief phase inspired by The Hunger Games . Not exactly the same as ancient combat, but the principles couldn’t be that different, right? Other than the whole shooting at a man instead of a target.

“Yes,” she said with more confidence than she felt, hands shaking. “I can shoot.” But

at a real person? She wasn't so sure.

Elsbeth nodded toward the window. "Then help my brother. I'll tend to Cameron."

Kate retrieved the bow, smaller and lighter than she'd expected, and the quiver of arrows. Her heart pounded as she positioned herself at the window, nocking an arrow with shaking hands.

The battle had moved closer to the cottage now, spilling into the small clearing before it. She could see Connor clearly, fighting back-to-back with one of his men, surrounded by MacDonalds.

She drew the bow, sighted along the arrow, and released.

The arrow flew wide, missing its target by several feet. Kate cursed under her breath, nocking another arrow. This time, she took a deep breath, steadying herself before drawing back the string.

The arrow found its mark in the shoulder of a MacDonald warrior who had been about to strike at Connor from behind. The man howled in pain, dropping his sword, and Connor whirled around to dispatch him with a single stroke.

For a heartbeat, Connor's eyes met hers through the window. Surprise flickered across his face, followed by something that might have been pride, before he turned back to the fight.

Emboldened, Kate continued to provide what cover she could from the window, though her aim was far from perfect. She managed to wound two more MacDonalds, distracting them long enough for Connor's men to gain the advantage.

The tide of battle seemed to be turning. The MacDonalds, realizing they were losing,

began to fall back. Several broke away entirely, fleeing into the surrounding woods.

“They’re retreating,” Kate called over her shoulder to Elspeth.

“Thank the saints,” Elspeth murmured, not looking up from her work on Cameron.  
“Though they’ll be back, and in greater numbers next time.”

The thought sent a chill through Kate. They couldn’t stay here, not with Cameron injured and Elspeth pregnant. They needed to reach Bronmuir, where stone walls and clansmen could protect them.

Outside, Connor was giving orders, his men moving quickly to secure the area and tend to the wounded. Kate set down the bow and hurried to the door, relief making her knees go weak as she watched Connor stride toward the cottage, bloodied but whole.

“Connor!” she called, unable to keep the joy from her voice.

He looked up, his grim expression softening as their eyes met.

“Ye are damn good with an arrow, Kate.” In three long strides, he was before her, hands coming up to cradle her face with surprising gentleness.

“You’re not hurt?” he demanded, his gaze searching her face.

“No, I’m fine,” she assured him. “But Cameron?”

His expression darkened. “How bad?”

“It’s not good,” she admitted. “Elspeth is doing what she can, but...”

He nodded once, releasing her to stride into the cottage. Kate followed, watching as he knelt beside the bed where his brother lay.

“Cameron,” Connor said softly, taking his brother’s hand.

Cameron’s eyes fluttered open, recognition dawning slowly. “Little brother,” he murmured. “Did we win?”

“Aye, for now,” Connor replied. “But we need to move. The MacDonalds will be back, and in greater numbers.”

Cameron attempted a smile that was more grimace than a grin. “Then you’d best get me on a horse. I’m not dying in some cottage in the middle of nowhere.”

Elsbeth made a small sound of distress. “He shouldn’t be moved. The wound?—”

“Will kill me whether I’m here or at Bronmuir,” Cameron finished for her. “At least at home, I might die in my own bed.”

The blunt assessment silenced them all. Tears pricked at her eyes, but Kate blinked them away. This wasn’t the time for weakness.

“We’ll place him in the cart,” Connor decided. “With blankets to cushion the ride. It will be easier on him than on horseback.”

His sister nodded, already gathering her supplies. “I’ll need to pack my things. It won’t take long.”

“Make haste,” Connor urged. “We leave as soon as possible.”

As the siblings conferred, Kate slipped outside to where Ewan was organizing the

remaining men. Three had fallen in the ambush, their bodies now laid out respectfully beneath their plaids. The sight made her stomach clench with grief and anger.

“How many MacDonalds escaped?” she asked Ewan.

“Three, maybe four,” he replied grimly. “Enough to bring back reinforcements.”

“Then we need to hurry,” she said, though she worried about Cameron’s ability to withstand the journey ahead.

Ewan nodded, already turning to direct the men in preparing the cart for Cameron and the dead. Kate watched them work, admiring their efficiency despite their own wounds and exhaustion.

These were good men, loyal to their laird and clan. She thought of the three who had fallen, wondering about the families they left behind, the lives cut short because of a feud that seemed to have no end.

“It’s not your fault,” Connor’s voice came from behind her.

She turned to find him watching her, his expression somber. “I know,” she said. “It’s just... so senseless.”

“Aye,” he agreed quietly. “Though sense has little to do with clan feuds. They’re born of pride and vengeance, fed by memory and blood, lasting for generations.”

“There has to be a better way,” she insisted.

His smile was tinged with sadness. “Perhaps. But not today.” He glanced toward the cottage where his siblings waited. “Today, we get them home. Tomorrow... We’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

Within the hour, they were ready to depart. Elspeth's few possessions were loaded into the small cart, alongside the dead, and Cameron, who lay on a bed of blankets and straw. He drifted in and out of consciousness, his face ashen against the dark plaid that covered him.

"Stay with him," Connor instructed Elspeth as they prepared to ride out. "Watch for any change."

She nodded. "I will."

As their small, battered company set off toward Bronmuir, Kate found herself riding beside the wagon, keeping a constant vigil over Cameron. Despite Elspeth's herbal remedies and careful bandaging, his condition was deteriorating. His breathing grew more labored with each passing mile, his skin hot to the touch despite the cool air.

"Hold on," Kate murmured, though she wasn't sure if he could hear her. "We're going home. Just hold on."

The journey seemed endless, each mile stretching before them like a lifetime. They traveled as quickly as they dared, Connor setting a pace that balanced urgency against Cameron's fragile state.

Twice they stopped to rest the horses and check on Cameron. Each time, Elspeth redressed his wounds, her face growing more drawn as she noted his worsening condition.

"He's weakening," she whispered to Kate during their second stop. "The wounds are putrid."

Her heart sank. "Is there nothing more we can do?"

Elsbeth shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. “Pray,” she said simply. “Pray he lives long enough to see Bronmuir again.”

As they continued their journey, the landscape gradually changed, becoming more familiar. She recognized landmarks from their outward journey. A tumbling stream and a rocky outcrop that resembled a sleeping giant.

“We’re close,” Ewan announced, as the sun began its descent. “Another hour, perhaps less.”

The news seemed to breathe new life into their weary company. Even the horses sensed the proximity of home, their pace quickening despite their fatigue.

Kate leaned over the edge of the cart to speak to Cameron, who had been silent for the past hour. “We’re almost home,” she told him. “Bronmuir is just ahead.”

To her surprise, his eyes opened, clearer than they had been since they’d found him. “I knew he’d come,” he said softly. “Told those MacDonald bastards my brother would never abandon me.”

“Never,” she agreed, her throat tight with emotion. “Connor would move heaven and earth for you.”

Cameron’s smile was ghostly. “And for you, I think. Though he’s too stubborn to admit it yet.”

Before Kate could respond to this startling observation, Cameron’s eyes drifted closed again, his breathing shallow but steady.

As the sun touched the horizon, casting long shadows across the hills, the silhouette of Bronmuir Keep appeared in the distance, its stone towers rising proudly against the

evening sky.

“Home,” Elspeth breathed, her voice thick with emotion. “I never thought to see it again.”



### Chapter Eighteen

If someone had asked her what death smelled like, which they hadn't, Kate would have said that it had to be like the wrapper from a package of chicken left out in the sun, but much worse. It wasn't just the metallic tang of blood or the sour notes of infection, but something deeper. It was the smell of hope draining away, of prayers going unanswered. Over the past three days, Kate had become intimately familiar with the scent she knew she would never forget.

Cameron lay on the bed, his once-powerful frame now diminished, sinking into the mattress as though already half-departed. The MacDonald clan had returned him broken. Ribs shattered, festering wounds across his back and side, and one arm twisted at an angle that made even Moira's weathered face go ashen.

"More hot water," the healer commanded, not looking up from where she pressed poultices against the wound on Cameron's side.

While she didn't have many, okay, not any, 17th century useful skills, Kate could at least fetch and carry, so she didn't feel entirely useless. She moved quickly, lifting the heavy kettle from the hearth and pouring steaming water into the waiting bowl. After working with the healer, she'd found herself anticipating Moira's needs, preparing herbs when asked, changing linens, and whatever else Moira needed. The work kept her hands busy while her thoughts kept circling around the realities of being trapped in the past. No modern medicine or doctors, for one thing.

Connor stood at the foot of the bed or sat beside his brother. His face was granite, betraying nothing, but during her time with him, she'd learned to read the subtle tells.

The white-knuckled grip on the bedpost, the muscle jumping in his jaw, the shadows deepening beneath his eyes with each passing hour.

“I need to change the dressing again,” Moira murmured, nodding toward Cameron’s side.

Connor turned his brother on his uninjured side. The Highlander groaned, eyes fluttering open. For a moment, they were clouded with confusion, then focused on Connor.

“Brother,” he whispered, voice like gravel.

“Aye, I’m here.” He took Cameron’s hand in his.

“The MacDonalds...” Cameron began, but a coughing fit seized him, flecks of blood appearing on his lips.

“Save your strength,” he said, voice steady despite the tremor in his hands as he wiped the blood away. “We’ll speak when you’re stronger.”

Throat tight, she stepped back, giving the brother’s privacy while helping Moira prepare more poultices. Through the window, she could see clan members in the courtyard below, their faces turned upward toward the room as if they could see through the stone. Several crossed themselves before going about their duties.

“He’s no’ going to last the night,” Moira whispered, so low that only Kate could hear. “The infection’s too deep, and there’s bleeding inside that I canna stop.”

Frustration ran through her. If only they were in her time, where modern medicine and surgeons could save Connor’s brother.

“Does Connor know?”

Moirá’s eyes, red-rimmed from exhaustion, met hers. “Aye. He kens fine. He just willna accept it yet.”

A soft sound drew their attention back to the bed. Cameron had reached up, fingers weakly clutching Connor’s plaid.

“Listen well, brother,” Cameron said, each word clearly costing him. “I’ve no time for gentle words.”

Connor nodded, leaning closer.

“You must lead them now. Not just until I heal, but always.” Cameron’s breathing grew more labored.

“I know being laird was never your wish. But I will be gone soon. Brodie is missing, and the clan looks to you now. They need your strength.”

“Dinna speak so,” Connor said, his voice roughening. “You will recover.”

Cameron’s laugh was a terrible sound, wet and broken. “Always the practical one. Face the truth. I’m for the earth, and soon.” His fingers tightened on Connor’s plaid. “But listen. This is important. Dinna make my mistakes.”

“What mistakes?” He asked, composure finally cracking.

“Living only for duty.” Cameron’s eyes drifted to Kate, who stood frozen by the herbs. “Find more than that. A good woman to love you and bear you many sons. Swear it to me.”

Connor followed his brother's gaze to Kate, then back to Cameron. Something passed between them.

"I swear it," Connor whispered.

Cameron nodded once, satisfied. Then his eyes glazed, focusing on something beyond the room. "Mother," he murmured, a smile ghosting across his lips. "I see you and father waiting with my two little brothers. I'm coming home..."

His hand fell from Connor's plaid.

The silence that followed was absolute. He remained kneeling, one hand still clasping Cameron's cooling fingers. Then he rose, reaching out and gently closing his eldest brother's eyes.

"I will tell the clan," he said to Moira, voice distant. "Prepare him for burial."

Not meeting her gaze, he strode from the room. The door closed behind him with a soft click that somehow felt more final than a slam.

Kate moved to follow, but Moira caught her arm.

"Let him be, lass. Some grief must be faced alone first."

Before she could respond, a commotion erupted from the corridor. Shouts and running feet. The door burst open, and Ewan stood there, face ashen.

"It's Elspeth," he gasped. "One moment she was standing in the hall, the next she was on the floor. There's blood, too much blood." Ewan stood back to let them pass. "I carried her to her chamber."

Moira cursed, already gathering supplies. “The bairn,” she said grimly. “She’s losing the bairn.”

Kate’s eyes darted to Cameron’s still form. “But?—”

“The dead will wait,” Moira said firmly. “The living need us now.”

They hurried down the corridor to Elspeth’s chamber. The scene inside was chaos. Elspeth crying, her skirts soaked crimson, two serving women fluttering uselessly nearby, clearly out of their depth.

“Out!” Moira commanded, and the women scattered. “Kate, clean linens. And hot water, as much as you can fetch.”

Grateful for the clear instructions, she ran for the kitchens. When she returned along with two of the kitchen girls, carrying steaming buckets of water and armfuls of linen, Moira had already removed Elspeth’s blood-soaked dress.

“Hold her shoulders,” Moira directed. “This will hurt her, but it must be done.”

Kate positioned herself at the head of the bed, gently but firmly gripping Elspeth’s shoulders. The young woman’s face was ghost-white, her eyes rolling.

“Cameron,” Elspeth moaned. “Is Cameron truly?—”

“Hush now,” Kate soothed, pushing damp hair from Elspeth’s forehead. “Save your strength.”

Elspeth’s eyes focused suddenly, with startling clarity. “My brother is gone. I feel it.” A sob wracked her body. “And now my babe as well.”

Kate had no words of comfort that wouldn't be lying, so she simply held Elspeth's hand as Moira did what she could.

Hours blurred together. Kate moved between tasks, holding Elspeth when the pain grew unbearable, preparing the herbs Moira called for, changing linens that soaked through too quickly. Outside, the sky darkened, then gradually lightened again as dawn approached.

Finally, Moira sat back. "It's done," she said wearily. "The bairn is lost, but she will live."

Kate looked down at the young woman, now mercifully unconscious. "Are you certain?"

"Aye. She's strong, like all MacLeod women." Moira cleaned her hands in a basin of water. "Though she'll need watching. The fever may yet take her."

"I'll stay with her." Kate nodded, arranging a light blanket over Elspeth's still form.

"Nay." Moira's tone brooked no argument. "You've been on your feet for near three days. You'll rest, or you'll be the next one abed." Her expression softened slightly. "Besides, someone should find Connor. He doesna ken about his sister yet."

The weight of everything crashed down on her. Cameron's death, Elspeth's loss. She swayed on her feet.

"Go wash," Moira said more gently. "Then find him. He shouldna find out from one of the men, not this news."

Kate nodded numbly and made her way to her chamber. The water in her basin was cold, but she didn't care, scrubbing at the dried blood until her skin was raw. She

changed quickly into a clean gown, then paused, uncertain where to begin looking for him.

Something tugged at her memory, something he had mentioned once about where he went to think. The cliffs. Of course.

The keep was eerily quiet as she made her way through it. Word of Cameron's death had spread, and the usual bustle was replaced by hushed voices and downcast eyes. Outside, a light drizzle fell, the sky the color of slate. Kate pulled her cloak tighter and headed toward the path that led to the cliffs.

She found him exactly where she'd expected, standing at the edge of the precipice, face turned toward the churning gray waters below. The wind whipped his hair and plaid around him, but he stood motionless, as if carved from the same stone as the cliff itself.

She approached slowly, making no effort to quiet her footsteps on the rocky ground. Connor didn't turn, didn't acknowledge her presence in any way, but she knew he was aware of her.

Suddenly unsure, she stopped a few paces behind him. What could she possibly say that would matter?

In the end, she said nothing. Instead, she moved to stand beside him, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched as she took his cold hand in hers, and gazed out at the same turbulent sea. The rain fell harder now, plastering her hair to her face, but she remained still.

Minutes passed, or perhaps hours. Time seemed meaningless here, at the edge of the world.

“He knew,” Connor finally said, his voice barely audible over the crash of waves. “He knew he was dying from the moment they returned him to us.”

Not trusting herself to speak, Kate nodded.

“I should have saved him sooner. I should have—” His voice broke.

“You did everything you could,” she said softly. “The MacDonalds did too much damage.”

Connor’s jaw tightened. “I’ll make them pay in blood for what they’ve done.”

“Not yet,” Kate replied with quiet certainty. “They’ll be expecting vengeance. They’ll be prepared.”

He turned to her then, his eyes red-rimmed but hard as flint. “Ye suggest I do nothing while my brother’s body grows cold?”

“I suggest you make them believe you’ve accepted defeat,” she said. “Let them relax their guard, grow confident. And then—” she met his gaze steadily, “—when they least expect it, strike with all the fury of the MacLeods.”

Something shifted in his expression. Surprise, followed by a gleam of cold calculation that replaced the raw grief.

“Elspeth lost the baby,” she said gently. “Moirra believes she’ll recover, but it was close.”

Connor closed his eyes briefly. “Too much death,” he whispered. “Too much loss.”

“I dinna ken how to do this,” he admitted, voice low. “How to be chieftain, how to



tell the clan their future died with Cameron, how to wait when every drop of my blood calls out for vengeance.”

“You’ll do it because you must,” she said. “Because that’s what a true chieftain does. He thinks beyond the moment, beyond his own desires. He plans and plots. And then he strikes.”

Connor nodded slowly, the fierce Highland warrior emerging through his grief. “Aye. We will wait. And then we will show them why the MacLeods have survived for centuries.”

Kate’s heart squeezed painfully in her chest. She’d never seen him like this, uncertain, adrift. Always before, he’d been the rock, the immovable center around which the clan revolved.

“You don’t have to know everything right now,” she said. “You just have to get through today. Tomorrow will come regardless.”

Connor looked down at their joined hands, then back at her face. Rain streamed down his cheeks, indistinguishable from tears.

“Why are you here?” he asked, the question layered with meaning.

“Because you shouldn’t be alone,” she answered simply. Then, after a pause. “And neither should I.”

Something broke in him then. Perhaps it was the last barrier of his composure crumbling. He pulled her against him suddenly, his arms wrapping around her with desperate strength. She found herself leaning in, her arms circling his waist, her face pressed against his chest. She could hear his heartbeat, strong and steady despite everything.

They stood like that, clinging to each other as the rain soaked them both, the sea roaring below. Kate felt the tremors that ran through his body, felt the moment when grief finally overwhelmed him and silent sobs shook his powerful frame.

She held him tighter, one hand reaching up to stroke his hair. "I'm here," she whispered against his chest. "I'm right here."

In that moment, with the taste of salt on her lips, from tears or sea spray or rain, she couldn't tell, Kate realized something that terrified and exhilarated her. She didn't want to let go. Not of this man, not of this place, not of this life she'd stumbled into even with all of the death and hardship.

The thought should have sent her running. Instead, she pressed herself closer, breathing in the scent of him. Wool and peat smoke and something uniquely him.

I'll never let go, she thought, the words rising unbidden in her mind. She didn't say them aloud, couldn't, not yet, but she felt them resonate through her body like a vow.

They remained there as the rain gradually eased, neither willing to be the first to break the embrace. When Connor finally pulled back slightly, his eyes were red but clear, his face composed once more.

"Thank ye," he said simply.

She nodded, suddenly shy. The intensity of what had passed between them left her feeling exposed, vulnerable in a way she hadn't allowed herself to be in years, perhaps ever.

Connor reached up, brushing a strand of wet hair from her face with unexpected gentleness. His fingers lingered against her cheek.

“We should return,” he said, though he made no move to leave. “The clan will need me.”

“Yes,” Kate agreed, equally reluctant.

Connor took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders. The man who turned toward the keep was different from the one who had stood at the cliff’s edge, still grieving, still wounded, but somehow steadier. As if sharing the burden had made it bearable.

They walked back in silence, side by side, not touching but close enough that Kate could feel the warmth radiating from him. At the edge of the courtyard, he paused.

“Kate,” he said, voice low. “What you did for Elspeth, for Cameron... for me. I willna forget it.”

Before she could respond, he was striding away, back straight, head high, every inch the laird his clan needed him to be.

Kate watched him go, her heart full of things she couldn’t name. The rain had stopped completely now, and weak sunlight broke through the clouds, casting long shadows across the keep.

She thought of Cameron’s final words to his brother, of the understanding that had passed between them. And of Elspeth, who had risked everything for love and lost so much. Finally, she thought of Connor’s arms around her, and how, for the first time in her life, being held hadn’t felt like being trapped.

### Chapter Nineteen

The rain began as they were returning from the eastern edge of MacLeod lands, a gentle patter that quickly transformed into an angry torrent. The wind howled across the land, and Kate clutched her cloak tighter as the first drops found their way beneath her collar.

“We need to find shelter,” Connor shouted over the gale. “The path ahead floods in storms like this.”

Kate nodded, her teeth already chattering. They’d spent the afternoon gathering herbs for Elspeth, who was still bedridden after losing her baby. Moira had sent them specifically for lady’s mantle, which only bloomed for a brief time each year. The plant was said to help women recover from childbirth and miscarriage. While she might not know much about medicine, at least during the month she’d been here, Kate had learned to identify several herbs and could recite their uses.

“This way,” Connor called, turning his horse off the main path. “There’s a place not far from here.”

The rain lashed at her face as they rode, making it nearly impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. She trusted his knowledge of his own land, but as the minutes stretched on and the storm intensified, fear began to creep in. Her clothes were soaked through, and she couldn’t feel her face.

Finally, Connor pulled his horse to a stop near what looked like a solid rock face. He dismounted quickly and came to help her down, his strong hands steadying her as her

feet touched the ground, not letting go until she was steady.

“This way,” he said, leading both horses toward what appeared to be nothing but more stone.

Only when they were almost upon it did she notice the narrow opening, barely visible unless you knew exactly where to look. Connor ducked inside, pulling the horses after him, and Kate followed, relief washing over her as the howling wind was suddenly muffled.

The cave was larger than it appeared from the outside, extending back into the hillside. It was dark and damp, but blessedly dry compared to the deluge they’d escaped.

“The shepherds have used this place for generations,” Connor explained, his voice echoing slightly. “And sometimes those who need to disappear for a while.”

“Outlaws?” Kate asked, wringing water from her hair.

He smiled, the dim light from the cave entrance catching the curve of his lips. “Among others. My brothers and I found it as lads. We’d hide here when we wanted to escape our father’s wrath.”

He moved deeper into the cave, and Kate heard the sound of rummaging. A moment later, a spark flared, and Connor had a small fire going, illuminating their shelter with a warm, flickering light.

“There’s always dry wood here,” he explained. “An unspoken agreement among those who know of this place.”

She moved closer to the fire, spreading her skirts to dry. The herbs they’d collected

were safely tucked in her satchel, protected from the sudden summer shower, but the rest of her clothing had caught the brunt of the downpour. The cave smelled of earth and smoke, with hints of heather and rain wafting in from the entrance where water dripped steadily, forming small puddles on the stone floor.

“You’re chilled,” Connor observed, his voice low and resonant in the quiet space.

The flickering firelight cast shadows across his chiseled features, highlighting the scar above his right eyebrow and the determined set of his jaw. His sun-kissed brown hair hung in wet strands around his face, droplets of water trailing down his neck.

“I’ll be fine once my clothes dry,” she replied, though she couldn’t suppress a small shiver as a gust of wind swept into the cave.

He settled beside her, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body. His linen shirt clung to his muscled chest, and Kate found herself struggling not to stare.

“The fire will help,” he said, reaching forward to add another piece of wood to the flames. The movement brought him closer, and Kate caught the earthy scent of him, heather and smoke and something she couldn’t place, that she found oddly comforting.

He tended to the horses, removing their saddles and rubbing them down with handfuls of dry grass he found deeper in the cave. When he returned to the fire, he sat down next to Kate, the flames casting his face in alternating light and shadow.

“This storm will last all night,” he said, glancing past the horses, toward the cave entrance where rain still fell in sheets. “We’ll need to wait until morning.”

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the rain and the occasional crack of

thunder. The fire popped and hissed, sending sparks dancing upward. Kate found herself growing drowsy with the warmth, her head gradually coming to rest against Connor's shoulder.

"I should have read the signs more carefully," he said suddenly, breaking the silence. "The clouds were gathering in the west, but I thought we'd make it back before the worst hit."

"You can't control the weather," Kate felt a smile ghost across her face.

He sighed, his breath stirring her hair. "I seem to be making too many mistakes lately."

There was something in his voice that she'd never heard before. She lifted her head to look at him, finding his blue eyes troubled in the firelight.

"What do you mean?"

He was quiet for so long she thought he might not answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and rough with emotion.

"I should have saved Cameron. I should have known the MacDonald offer was a trap. I should have..."

"Connor," Kate interrupted gently, "you can't blame yourself for Cameron's death. You did everything you could."

"Did I?" His jaw tightened. "I'm laird. The clan looks to me for protection, for guidance. And I feel like I'm failing them at every turn."

Her heart ached at the raw pain in his voice. This was a side of him she'd never seen.

The doubt beneath the confident exterior, the fear behind the strength.

“You’re not failing,” she said firmly. “You’re carrying an impossible burden, and you’re doing it with more courage than anyone I’ve ever known.”

He looked at her then, really looked at her, as if seeing something new in her face. “How is it you always seem to know exactly what to say?”

She smiled sadly. “I’m good at reading people. It’s what I did... before.” She stopped abruptly, realizing she’d nearly slipped.

“Before?” Connor prompted, his eyes curious.

“Before I came here,” she amended quickly. “It was important in my... village... to understand what people needed.”

It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either. In her job at Love Lasting, reading people’s relationships had been her specialty. Understanding what made couples work, or more often, what made them fail, had been her bread and butter.

He seemed to accept her explanation, but something in his expression told her he sensed there was more she wasn’t saying. He didn’t press, though, and relief spread through her, followed by guilt. But people here in this time were superstitious. She didn’t want to be branded a witch. Things were hard enough.

The fire crackled between them, casting dancing shadows on the cave walls.

“When I was a lad,” Connor said after a while, “my father told me that a chieftain must be like stone. Unyielding, unmovable. I’ve tried to be that. But sometimes...”

“Sometimes stone cracks,” Kate finished for him. “Being strong doesn’t mean never



feeling doubt or pain. It means continuing on despite them.”

His eyes met hers, and something passed between them, an understanding, a connection that went beyond words. Her breath caught in her throat.

Without thinking, she reached out and touched his face, her fingers tracing the scar above his right eyebrow. It was the first time she had initiated contact between them, and she felt him go still beneath her touch.

“What happened here?” she asked softly.

“Training accident when I was fourteen,” he replied, his voice equally quiet. “Brodie’s blade caught me when I wasn’t paying attention.”

Kate’s fingers lingered on the scar, then slowly traced down the side of his face to his jaw. His skin was warm beneath her touch, rough with stubble.

He caught her hand in his, eyes never leaving her face. “Kate,” he said, her name sounding like a prayer on his lips, a gentle caress that made her heart flutter in her chest.

The moment stretched between them, taut with possibility. Kate knew she should pull away, should maintain the distance that had kept her safe all these weeks. But something in his eyes, a vulnerability, a need that mirrored her own, made her lean forward instead. The warmth of his calloused palm against hers sent tingles up her arm, and she found herself moving closer, drawn by an invisible thread that had been weaving between them since the day they met.

Their lips met softly at first, a gentle question that hung in the air between them. His mouth was warm, tender, hesitant, as if he feared she might vanish if he pressed too hard. Then his hand came up to cradle the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her

hair, and the kiss deepened, becoming an answer neither of them had known they were seeking.

Kate melted into him, all thoughts of time, distance, and secrets momentarily forgotten. His arms encircled her, strong and sure, pulling her closer until she could feel the steady beating of his heart against her own. The scent of him, pine and leather and something uniquely him, enveloped her, and for the first time since arriving in this century, she felt truly safe, truly home. Cherished.

The world around them faded away, the damp walls of the cave, the distant rumble of thunder, the cold stone beneath them, until there was only him, only this moment, only the sweet, intoxicating sensation of his lips moving against hers. A soft sigh escaped her, and she felt him smile against her mouth, a smile she returned without hesitation.

When they finally broke apart, both breathless, Kate found herself trembling, not from the rain, but from the intensity of what had just happened. His forehead rested against hers, breath warm on her face, his eyes searching hers with wonder and a tenderness that made her heart ache.

“I’ve wanted to do that since I found you in the heather among the stones,” he whispered, his brogue thicker with emotion.

Kate reached up to touch his face again, tracing the scar above his eyebrow with gentle fingers. “I think I’ve been waiting for you my whole life,” she admitted softly, the truth of it surprising her even as she spoke the words.

For a perfect, suspended moment, they existed in a world of their own making, a place where time and circumstance couldn’t touch them. Then reality came crashing back, and with it, the weight of her secret. The truth that stretched between them like an uncrossable chasm. But for now, in the shelter of his arms, Kate allowed herself to

believe that some bridges could be built, even across centuries.

“Connor,” she began, her voice unsteady, “there’s something about me that I need to tell you. Something I’ve been keeping to myself.”

He watched her, waiting, his eyes still dark with desire but now tinged with concern.

Kate took a deep breath. “I’m not... I’m not who you think I am.” The words stuck in her throat. How could she possibly explain? I’m from the future. I was born three hundred years from now. Everything you know about me is built on a lie.

The magnitude of it overwhelmed her, and she faltered.

“Lass,” Connor said gently, misinterpreting her hesitation, “you don’t have to explain yourself to me. Whatever brought you here, whatever you’re running from, it doesn’t matter. What matters is who you are now.”

His kindness only made her feel worse. If only it were that simple. If only she was just running from a bad relationship or a troubled past. But her truth was so much more impossible.

“You don’t understand,” she whispered.

“Then help me understand,” he replied, his fingers intertwining with hers. “But know this, nothing you could tell me would change what I feel for you.”

The certainty in his voice made her heart ache. How could he be so sure when he didn’t know the truth? If she told him everything, would he still look at her with that warmth in his eyes, or would he recoil in fear and disbelief? Call her witch ?

“I’m afraid,” she admitted finally.

Connor's expression softened. "Of what, mo chridhe?"

The Gaelic endearment, my heart, nearly undid her. "Of losing this. Of losing you."

He lifted their joined hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "You won't lose me. I'm right here."

She wanted desperately to believe him, but fear held her back. Instead of words, she leaned into him again, finding his lips with hers. This time, their kiss was tinged with a bittersweet ache, a promise and a plea rolled into one.

When they separated, Connor kept her close, his forehead resting against hers. "The storm won't last forever," he murmured. "But this, what's between us, I believe it could."

She closed her eyes, letting his words wash over her. How had she come to care so deeply for this man in such a short time? And how could she bear the thought of leaving him if, when, she found a way home?

As if reading her troubled thoughts, Connor began to speak, his voice low and soothing in the dim cave.

"There's an old legend in our clan," he said, "about the Bronmuir Brooch. It's said to have been gifted to the first MacLeod by the old gods themselves, at a time when the world was changing."

Kate's heart skipped a beat at the mention of the brooch. She'd seen it only twice. The first time was in her own time, the second when Connor had brought it out to duplicate it. It sounded silly, but she swore it called to her.

"What kind of legend?" she asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

Connor shifted, settling her more comfortably against him. “They say it holds power over time itself, that it was forged at the meeting place between worlds, where the veil is thin.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the weather ran down Kate’s spine.

“The old stories tell of a woman. Some say she was the Cailleach herself, who appears during great storms, at the edges of time.” Connor’s voice had taken on the cadence of a storyteller, rich and rhythmic. “She guides lost souls to where they truly belong.”

Kate could barely breathe. “Do you... do you believe these stories?”

Connor was silent for a moment, considering. “I believe in what I’ve seen,” he said finally. “And I’ve seen enough in my life to know that there are forces at work beyond our understanding.”

He looked down at her, his eyes searching her face. “And you...? You are not like other women, Kate. I’ve known it from the first moment I saw you.”

The air between them seemed to vibrate with unspoken truths. Kate felt as if she stood on the edge of a precipice, one step forward and everything would change.

But she chickened out. “I’m just... me,” she said weakly.

Connor’s smile was gentle. “Aye, you are. And that’s more than enough.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, then shifted to add more wood to the fire. “We should rest. The storm will pass by morning.”

Kate nodded, suddenly exhausted by the emotional weight of their conversation. He

pulled his plaid over them as they lay near the fire, his arm a protective weight across her waist.

Despite her turbulent thoughts, she found herself drifting toward sleep, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against her back, the sounds of the horses, and the now-distant rumble of thunder.

Her last conscious thought was of the brooch and its supposed power over time. If the legends were true, could it be her way home? And if it was... did she still want to go?

\* \* \*

Dawn broke clear and bright, the storm having spent its fury during the night. Sunlight filtered through the cave entrance, painting patterns on the stone walls.

Kate woke first, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. Then she felt Connor's arm around her waist, his body warm against her back, and memory flooded back. The storm, the cave. That kiss.

She lay still, listening to his steady breathing, reluctant to disturb this moment of peace. Outside, birds were singing, celebrating the return of clear skies. The world felt washed clean, as if the storm had swept away more than just the dust.

Connor stirred behind her, his arm tightening briefly around her waist. "Morning, lass," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

Kate turned to face him, finding his blue eyes already open and watching her. "Good morning."

There was a moment of uncertainty between them, a question of whether what had happened in the darkness would survive in the light of day. Then Connor reached out,

brushing a strand of hair from her face with gentle fingers, and Kate knew that something fundamental had shifted between them.

“We should return,” he said softly.

“Yes,” Kate agreed, though part of her wished they could stay in this secluded place a little longer, away from the complications of the outside world.

Connor stretched, glancing toward the entrance where pale golden light spilled onto the flagstones. Kate yawned, rubbing her arms as she gathered her satchel.

The thought hit her as she tried to shake the heaviness from her mind. “It’s the 4th of July. Or, as I like to say, spilling the tea since 1776.” She clapped a hand over her mouth.

Connor cocked his head, a puzzled smile flickering across his lips. “Since when?”

Kate froze, heart thudding. She’d let her tongue run away with her again. “Just... something I used to say at home. About, you know, the storm. Or perfect days you’ll always remember,” she added quickly, hoping he wouldn’t press. Still, she couldn’t help feeling a pang at missing one of her favorite holidays. America was a long way from her revolution. In her own time, her friends would be barbecuing, watching fireworks painting the sky, swimming in someone’s pool, and she was here, centuries away, hiding in a cave with a Highland warrior.

Connor moved closer. “Is it an important day where you come from?”

She forced another smile, blinking fast. “Yes. Back home, it’s the day we think about... freedom.” She coughed, waving a hand. “And maybe spill a little tea for old times’ sake.”

He searched her face a moment longer, then nodded with quiet acceptance. “Well, perhaps one day, you’ll tell me that story.”

Kate just squeezed his hand in return, her bittersweet smile lingering.

They rose and prepared to leave in comfortable silence, each stealing glances at the other when they thought they wouldn’t be caught. The horses were well-rested and eager to be moving, and soon they were making their way back toward Bronmuir Keep.

As they rode side by side, Connor reached across the space between them and took Kate’s hand, squeezing it gently. No words were needed. The gesture said everything.



### Chapter Twenty

How things changed in a week. The keep was quiet, heavy with grief as Kate walked through the corridors, feeling the weight of sidelong glances following her path. Where once she'd begun to find acceptance, now she found closed doors and hushed conversations that stopped when she approached.

"Nae good can come of a lass arrived wi' the storm and a dead man at her back," an old woman muttered as Kate passed, not bothering to lower her voice. The words sliced through her like a blade, but she kept her head high and her face impassive.

Cameron had been buried, laid to rest beside his father in the small cemetery behind the chapel. The clan had gathered, somber and silent, as Connor spoke the words of farewell. Kate had stood apart, knowing her place was not among the family. Even then, she'd felt the distance growing between herself and Connor.

Now, as she made her way to the kitchen, she wondered if that distance would ever close again. After their passionate kiss in the cave, she'd thought they were moving toward something serious. A relationship. But since Cameron's funeral, Connor had withdrawn completely. She'd tried to ask him if something was wrong, but he'd merely shaken his head, muttering that all was well even as he avoided her eyes. He no longer sought her out during the day, no longer asked her opinion on clan matters.

Had she been too forward? Had their kiss in the cave crossed some invisible boundary? Or was it something else entirely? Rumors had a way of spreading through the keep like wildfire, and she'd caught whispers suggesting her arrival had brought ill fortune to the clan. First the MacDonald assassin's death at her hands, then

Cameron's passing so soon after his return, and Elspeth losing the baby. Some even muttered that she was a witch or a banshee, bringing death in her wake.

Kate swallowed hard against the knot in her throat. She'd finally begun to feel like she belonged here, but now she felt more alone than ever.

Moira was in the stillroom, grinding herbs with a mortar and pestle, her eyes distant. She hesitated in the doorway, then stepped inside.

"Can I help with anything?" she asked softly.

Moira looked up, her expression unreadable. "Nay, lass. I've no need of help just now."

"I could prepare some broth for Elspeth," Kate suggested, trying again. "I heard she's still refusing to come out of her chamber."

"Elspeth needs peace," Moira said sharply, then sighed. "And no more ghosts. The poor lass has enough haunting her."

Kate flinched at the word "ghosts." Was that how they saw her now, a harbinger of death and misfortune? Thank the stars she hadn't told Connor the truth, that she was a time traveler. Then everyone would be calling her a witch.

"How is Connor?" she asked, changing the subject.

The healer's hands stilled. "He doesna eat. Doesna sleep. He carries the weight of his brother's death like a millstone." She looked directly at Kate for the first time. "He carries many burdens now."

The unspoken accusation hung in the air between them. She nodded, understanding

she'd been dismissed, and backed out of the kitchen. Her throat felt tight, and she swallowed hard against the threat of tears.

The day dragged on, each hour heavier than the last. Kate tried to make herself useful, mending torn clothing, helping Nessa with the linens, but everywhere she went, she felt unwelcome. By evening, she retreated to her small chamber, but the walls seemed to close in around her.

It seemed everywhere she went, Kenna's eyes followed, sharp as flint. More than once Kate heard her voice in the corridors, low and urgent, whispering to the laundress or to Moira, always with glances that darted away when Kate appeared. At first, she brushed it off as more of the uneasy gossip that seemed to collect about her like mist at dawn. But it grew harder to ignore when she saw two of the younger girls crossing themselves as she passed, and one even spat on the floor behind her.

That evening, desperate for an escape, Kate retreated to her chamber. She paused with her hand on the door, hearing the sound of someone inside, then the unmistakable crackle of flames. She pushed the door open to find Kenna crouched before the hearth. The girl straightened, eyes wild in the firelight, as a cascade of unfamiliar fabric slipped through her fingers. Her sweatshirt, jeans, and bra, her last links to home. They smoldered on the coals, curling up in bits of black.

"What are you doing?" Kate cried, rushing forward. She reached out to grab them, but it was too late, the delicate material was destroyed.

Kenna glared at her, chin raised defiantly. "Ridding the keep of your cursed things," she spat. "Witch's rags. No decent soul wears cloth spun of shadows."

Kate stared at the burning remnants of her life, words failing her. "Those are mine! They're not dangerous?—"

Kenna cut her off with a hard, hollow laugh. “No, but you are.”

Without another word, the girl brushed past Kate and out into the corridor, the door banging shut behind her. She stared into the fire until the burn of smoke forced her back from the hearth. Only then did she let herself sink onto the bed, wrapping her arms tightly around her knees and burying her face in the coarse wool blanket. Tears threatened, but she held them back. She didn’t know what she’d done to earn Kenna’s hatred, but she felt it, raw and unyielding, trailing her everywhere she went.

Unable to bear the solitude any longer, she slipped out into the night. The moon was hidden behind clouds, the courtyard in shadow. A light rain had begun to fall, and Kate welcomed the cool drops on her heated skin.

She found herself drawn to the stables, where a single lantern still burned. Peering inside, she saw Connor standing beside his horse, one hand resting on the animal’s neck, his gaze fixed on something she couldn’t see.

“Connor?” she called softly.

He turned, and the emptiness in his eyes made her heart ache. This was not the man who had held her through the night after she’d killed the assassin. This was not the man who had kissed her in the cave with such tenderness. This was a hollow shell, full of grief, and distant.

“You should be inside,” he said, his voice flat.

“I couldn’t sleep.” She stepped closer, searching his face for any sign of the connection they’d once shared. “I thought maybe we could talk.”

“About what?”

“About Cameron. About what happened.” She hesitated. “About us.”

Connor’s jaw tightened. “There’s naught to say about Cameron that hasn’t been said. He’s gone.”

“I know you blame yourself?—”

“I said there’s naught to say,” he cut her off, his voice hard. “Not now. Not to you.”

She recoiled as if he’d struck her. “I’m only trying to help.”

“Help?” He gave a bitter laugh. “Aye, you’ve helped enough, have you not? My brother is dead. My sister nearly followed him. The clan looks to me for answers I dinna have.”

“None of that is your fault or mine,” Kate retorted. “You couldn’t have known what would happen.”

“Couldn’t I?” He turned away, shoulders rigid. “I am laird. Everything that happens to this clan is my responsibility.”

She reached out, her fingers hesitating just above his arm. “Let me be here for you,” she whispered.

He flinched away before her fingers could make contact. “I canna talk right now, Kate. Not to you.”

The rejection stung worse than any physical blow. She withdrew her hand, curling her fingers into her palm. “I understand,” she said, though she didn’t. Not really.

So she left him there, alone with his grief and his guilt, and stepped back into the rain.

It was falling harder now, soaking through her dress and plastering her hair to her skull. She didn't care. The physical discomfort was nothing compared to the ache in her chest.

Kate wandered aimlessly, eventually finding herself at the kitchen door. The main hearth would still be warm, she thought. A place to dry off and gather herself before returning to her chamber and trying to sleep.

Over the past week, she'd been dreaming of home. Hot showers, pizza, cars, grocery delivery, and, of course, her parents and sister. Did they think she was dead? How awful it would be to lose someone and not know what had happened to them. Not to have closure. Did they bury an empty casket?

The kitchen was dim, lit only by the dying embers in the hearth. At first, Kate thought it was empty. Then she noticed a figure huddled on a stool near the fire, a cup clutched in trembling hands.

Kenna. The maid had always been cold toward Kate, avoiding her whenever possible, spreading rumors that had gotten to Connor. Now she looked up with red-rimmed eyes, her face tear-streaked and blotchy.

"Come to gloat, have ye?" Kenna's words slurred, and Kate noticed the bottle on the floor beside her.

"I just came in to get warm," she said cautiously.

Kenna laughed, a harsh, broken sound. "Warm? There's no warmth here. Not anymore, witch."

Kate should have left. Every instinct told her to turn around and walk away. Instead, she moved closer, drawn by something in Kenna's voice, a raw pain that echoed her

own.

“Are you all right?” She asked, knowing it was a foolish question even as the words left her mouth.

“All right?” Kenna took a long swallow from her cup. “You think you’re the only one haunted by death?”

She stilled. “What do you mean?”

“I saw you that night. On the battlements.” Kenna’s eyes were unfocused, voice low. “I saw what you did.”

“The assassin,” Kate whispered. “You saw me push him.”

Kenna nodded slowly. “Aye. I saw you murder him.”

Something in Kenna’s tone made Kate’s skin prickle. “He was going to kill one of Connor’s men. He had already killed someone else.”

“His name was Malcom,” Kenna said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “He wasn’t always an assassin. Once, he was just a man. A man who promised to take me away from here.”

Understanding dawned cold and terrible. “You knew him.”

“Knew him?” Kenna let out that broken laugh again. “I loved him. And he loved me. Or so he said.”

Kate felt sick. “You were helping him. Giving him information.”

“Nothing important,” Kenna said quickly. “Just... small things. When the guards

changed. Which passages were least used. He said no one would be hurt. He just needed to get inside, to take something valuable. Enough to start a new life. For us.”

“But he killed someone,” Kate said, her voice hardening. “He was going to kill others.”

“And now he’s dead.” Kenna’s eyes filled with fresh tears. “And so am I, nearly.”

She rose unsteadily, swaying on her feet. “Do you know what it’s like? To be trapped between two worlds? Not to belong anywhere?”

The words hit too close to home. She did know, all too well.

“Kenna, I?—”

“They watch me,” Kenna continued, her voice rising. “All of them. They know something’s not right. They don’t trust me, that’s why I told them ye were to blame. A witch. I’m useless now. Useless to the clan. Useless to the MacDonalds.”

“The MacDonalds?” Kate’s blood ran cold. “You’ve been passing information to them?”

“What else could I do?” Kenna cried. “Malcolm was gone. I needed protection. I needed a way out.”

She lurched toward the door, bottle in hand. Kate followed, alarmed by the wild look in the woman’s eyes.

“Kenna, wait. We can talk about this. We can figure something out.”

But Kenna was already stumbling into the rain, her pace quickening as she headed



toward the outer wall. Her heart pounded as she realized where Kenna was going.

The battlements.

“Kenna, stop!” Kate called, breaking into a run.

The rain was coming down in sheets now, driven by a rising wind that tore at their clothing and hair. By the time she reached the stone steps leading up to the battlements, Kenna was already halfway up, clinging to the wall for support.

“Leave me be!” Kenna shouted over her shoulder.

“Please,” Kate begged, taking the steps two at a time. “Whatever you’re thinking, this isn’t the answer.”

“Isn’t it?” Kenna reached the top and staggered to the edge. “What answer is there for me now? I betrayed my clan. I betrayed Malcolm. I’ve nothing left.”

She approached slowly, hands outstretched. “That’s not true. You can make amends. You can start over.” Where were the damn guards?

“Like you?” Kenna’s laugh was lost in a gust of wind. “The sassenach? The woman who belongs nowhere? You’re as lost as I am.”

“I’m trying to find my place,” Kate said, inching closer. “And you can too. Come away from the edge. Please.”

For a moment, it seemed the girl might listen. She turned slightly, her eyes meeting Kate’s through the curtain of rain.

“He would’ve left me too, you know,” she said softly. “Like they always do.”

Before she could react, Kenna stepped on top of the wall and then backward into the empty air.

“NO!” Kate threw herself forward, fingers grasping at air as Kenna disappeared over the edge.

The scream that tore from her throat was primal, a sound of pure anguish that rose above the howling wind. She collapsed at the edge of the battlements, staring down into the darkness where Kenna had fallen.

Time lost all meaning. She didn’t know how long she knelt there, rain and tears mingling on her face. Eventually, she became aware of voices, of torches moving in the darkness below. They had found Kenna’s body.

Kate couldn’t face them, couldn’t bear to see the accusation in their eyes. She fled, feet carrying her blindly through the keep until she found herself in the small chapel.

The stone floor was cold and hard as she sank down before the altar. Her clothes were sodden, her body shivering, but she barely noticed. All she could see was Kenna’s face in that final moment. All she could hear was her voice. You’re as lost as I am.

“I didn’t want anyone else to die,” Kate whispered to the empty chapel. “I never wanted anyone to die.”

But they had. The assassin. Cameron. And now Kenna. Deaths that seemed to follow in her wake like shadows.

Hours later, that was where Nessa found her, curled into herself on the chapel floor, soaked to the skin and trembling.

“Och, lass,” the housekeeper murmured, kneeling beside her. “What have ye done to

yourself?”

Kate couldn't answer. The words were frozen in her throat, trapped behind the knot of grief and guilt that threatened to choke her.

Nessa helped her to her feet, supporting her as they made their way back to Kate's chamber. She helped her change into dry clothes, wrapped her in blankets, and built up the fire without asking any questions about the fabric remnants.

Before she left, Nessa paused at the door. “They found Kenna,” she said quietly. “The poor, misguided lass.”

She stared into the flames. “It was my fault,” she whispered.

“Nay.” Nessa's voice was firm. “A guard heard her confess. He ran to fetch Himself, but was too late and that's why there was no one on the battlements. The lass made her choice. As we all must do.”

### Chapter Twenty-One

Enough was enough. Kate couldn't sleep.

The stone walls of the chamber seemed to press inward, the darkness thicker than usual. She'd been staring at the ceiling for hours, listening to the wind moan through the cracks in the keep. It sounded like Kenna's last cry before she'd thrown herself from the battlements.

That sound haunted her dreams. When she did manage to drift off, she saw Kenna's face. Accusing, broken, eyes hollow with grief. Then the MacDonald assassin, Malcolm, his expression of shock as he plummeted to the rocks below. Both deaths stained her hands.

Kate pushed herself upright, abandoning any pretense of sleep. The fire had died down to embers, casting the room in ghostly shadows. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to ward off a chill that came from within rather than without.

A flicker of light caught her eye. Through the narrow window, she spotted a lantern bobbing across the courtyard. Connor's broad-shouldered silhouette was unmistakable, even in the darkness. He moved with purpose, his stride long and determined.

Where was he going at this hour?

Without thinking, she slipped from bed. The stone floor bit at her bare feet as she pulled on her shoes and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. She'd barely spoken

to Connor since Cameron's death and then Kenna's suicide. The distance between them had grown into a chasm she didn't know how to cross, and he didn't seem to care to bridge the distance.

Everyone was asleep, even the young guard posted in the corridor. If Connor found out, there would be hell to pay, but the guard's dereliction of duty was her advantage. She crept down the spiral staircase, careful to step over the servants asleep in the great hall near the hearth. Like a ghost or a mirage, she slipped past them, following the faint glow of Connor's lantern through a side door left ajar, one she'd never noticed before.

The passage was narrow and damp, smelling of earth and time. Kate trailed behind, keeping enough distance that Connor wouldn't sense her presence. The walls pressed close on either side, occasionally brushing her shoulders. After what felt like an eternity of careful steps, the passage widened into a small, circular chamber.

Connor knelt before an ornately carved wooden chest, his back to her. Kate pressed herself against the wall, barely daring to breathe. She watched as he produced a key from around his neck and unlocked the chest with reverent care.

The lantern light caught something that gleamed within, a flash of silver, gold, and sapphire that made Kate's heart stutter. The brooch.

Connor lifted it carefully, turning it in his hands. Even from her hiding place, Kate could see the tension in his shoulders, the weight of responsibility evident in every line of his body. He murmured something too low for her to hear, a prayer, perhaps, or a promise to his dead father and brother.

After a long moment, he returned the brooch to its resting place, closed the chest, and locked it. Kate shrank back into an alcove as he rose and made his way back through the passage, his footsteps fading into silence.

She waited until she was certain he was gone before approaching the chest. Her fingers trembled as she touched the polished wood, tracing the intricate carvings of Celtic knots and thistles.

“I can’t stay here,” she whispered to the empty chamber.

The words hung in the air, a truth she’d been avoiding for days. Connor had withdrawn completely after Cameron’s death, throwing himself into his duties as acting chieftain. The clan looked at her differently now, too. Whispers followed her. The strange woman who brought death and tragedy in her wake.

She didn’t belong here. She never had.

The chest was locked, but Kate had dated a locksmith for a few weeks and learned a thing or two. She removed a hairpin and worked it carefully into the keyhole. After several tense minutes, she felt the satisfying click of the mechanism giving way.

The brooch lay nestled on a bed of faded velvet, its silver, gold, and sapphires catching the faint light that filtered through a tiny window. Her breath caught in her throat. It was even more beautiful than she remembered, an intricate Celtic design surrounding three perfect gemstones.

“This is my only way home,” she told herself, fingers hovering over it. “I don’t belong here.”

Images flashed before her eyes. Connor teaching her to ride, his large hands steady on the reins. The little girl she’d saved from drowning, who now followed her around the keep like a shadow. Moira teaching her which herbs could heal and which could harm. Nessa laughing as she told Kate old stories. The nights by the fire, listening to tales of ancient Scotland.

For a moment, her resolve wavered as she thought about asking him if she could borrow it. But then she saw Kenna's face again, heard the accusations in the whispers that followed her through the halls, and knew he'd never let her near it for fear she'd curse it with her bad luck.

Ye bring naught but ill fortune, outlander.

The laird's heart has turned to stone since ye came, Sassenach.

Two deaths follow in yer wake.

Kate's fingers closed around the brooch. The metal was warm to the touch, as if it had been lying in sunlight rather than a dark chest. She tied the ends of her shawl around it, heart pounding so loudly she was certain it would wake the entire keep.

Back in her chamber, Kate quietly dressed, choosing the practical clothes she'd been given, hoping it wouldn't matter that her modern clothes had been burned.

Once more she crept down the stairs and across the hall. After making sure everyone in the kitchen was asleep, she opened her satchel and placed a small loaf of bread, a waterskin, and a knife Ewan had given her.

There was no telling what would happen when she tried to use the brooch. Would she return to exactly the same moment she'd left? Or would time have passed the same as it had here? She hoped she'd return to the same moment to spare her parents any worry.

Would she even make it back at all?

Kate pushed the thought away. She couldn't stay. Not when her presence brought nothing but pain. There was nothing here for her.

The keep was silent as she made her way out and into the herb garden. The night air was crisp, heavy with the scent of heather and salt from the sea. The moon hung low and full, painting the landscape in silver.

At the edge of the garden, she paused. She turned to look back at Bronmuir Keep, its ancient stones solid against the night sky. Torches flickered along the battlements where guards kept watch. Somewhere within those walls, Connor slept, or more likely lay awake, burdened by grief and duty.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, though there was no one to hear. “I never meant to hurt anyone.”

The path to the cemetery was etched in her memory. Kate picked her way carefully over the uneven ground, grateful for the moonlight that illuminated her way. The wind tore her hair from the bun, whipping it around her face. Her fingers kept straying to the shawl, reassuring herself that the brooch was still secure.

The cemetery appeared before her, its ancient stones standing like sentinels against the night sky. Kate’s steps slowed as she approached the place where she had first arrived in this time. The old woman was nowhere to be seen, but Kate could feel a presence in the air, a watchfulness that prickled along her skin.

She stood before the oldest stone in front of the chapel though the spiral was nowhere to be found. With trembling fingers, she removed the brooch from the shawl. The sapphires caught the moonlight, seeming to glow with an inner fire.

“Please,” Kate whispered, pinning the brooch to her chest above her heart. “Send me home.”

The wind rose around her, tugging at her clothes and hair. In the distance, she thought she heard footsteps, but she didn’t turn to look. Her entire being was focused on the



brooch, on the desperate wish to return to a time where she understood the rules, where her presence didn't bring death and heartbreak.

"I don't belong here," she said, her voice breaking on the words. "Please... I want to go home."

The brooch remained cool, showing no sign of the magic that had brought her here. Her throat tightened with panic. What if it didn't work? What if she was trapped here forever, an outsider bringing misfortune to those she had come to care for? Would she end up like Elspeth? Living alone in a tiny cottage with no friends or someone to love?

The footsteps grew closer. Kate closed her eyes, pressing the brooch harder against her heart.

"Please," she whispered one last time. "Send me home."

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Kate perched on the edge of a weathered gravestone, clutching the brooch so tightly that the intricate Celtic knots left indentations on her palm. The brooch was as cold as the midnight chill that had settled over the ancient cemetery. Mist clung to the ground like ghostly fingers, weaving between the tilted markers and caressing the moss-covered stones of the ruined chapel.

“Where are you?” Kate whispered, her voice ragged from unshed tears. “Please... I want to go home.”

But was Atlanta truly home anymore? The thought of returning to her empty apartment, to her color-coded planners and predictable life, felt hollow now. Yet staying meant facing the accusation in Moira’s eyes whenever she passed. It meant enduring Connor’s cold distance. His grief-hardened face turned away from her as though she were invisible. It meant living with death on her conscience.

A tear slipped down her cheek, followed by another. “I don’t belong here,” she murmured to the silent graves. “I never did.”

The wind picked up suddenly, whipping a strand of chestnut hair across her face. A crow cawed from atop a nearby headstone, its black eyes glittering. Her breath caught as the mist began to swirl and thicken until it took the shape of a woman.

“Ye belong where yer heart leads, child of two tides,” came a voice like ancient stones grinding together.

The old woman stood before her, more substantial than Kate remembered. Her wild silver hair floated around her face as though underwater, and her dark eyes reflected starlight that wasn't visible in the sky. She wore a cloak of midnight blue, adorned with what looked like pinpricks of light, a map of the constellations woven into the fabric.

"You're real," she rose to her feet. "I was beginning to think I'd imagined you."

The old woman's mouth curved into something between a smile and a grimace.

"I am as real as the ground beneath yer feet and as fleeting as the breath that leaves yer lips."

She gestured toward the brooch in Kate's hand. "Ye think that trinket will return ye to yer time?"

"Won't it? That's how I got here." Kate studied the woman's weathered face, her heart pounding. "Are you... are you the Cailleach?"

"Aye, that I am," the old woman answered, her voice like stones shifting in a riverbed. "What ye seek doesna lie in the place behind or ahead, but in the heart ye run from."

The Cailleach moved closer, her steps making no sound on the damp earth. "Time isna a river, daughter of turning stones. It is a pebble in a pond, and every footstep ye've ever made still ripples 'round it."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't understand. I just want to go home. I don't belong here. I've caused nothing but pain by being here."

"Ye havena finished what ye began." The old woman's gaze was penetrating,

seeming to look through Kate rather than at her.

“The threads of yer fate are woven with his. Cut one, and both unravel.”

“With whose?” She asked desperately. “Connor’s? Is that why I’m here? For him?”

The Cailleach raised a gnarled hand, her fingers splayed toward the star-strewn sky.

“Ye stand at the crossing hour, child. Neither here nor there. Neither then nor now.” Her form began to shimmer, becoming translucent at the edges. “Choose wisely, for some doors, once closed, canna be opened again.”

“Wait!” Kate reached out, but her fingers passed through the Cailleach’s arm like smoke. “Please, I need more than riddles!”

The wind rose to a howl, drowning her words. The old woman’s form dispersed into mist, leaving behind only the echo of her final words. The heart kens what the mind canna fathom.

Kate stood alone once more, the brooch heavy in her palm. “Great,” she muttered, wiping tears from her cheeks with her free hand. “Another cryptic non-answer from the supernatural guidance counselor.”

The distant thunder of hoofbeats shattered the cemetery’s silence. Kate’s heart leapt to her throat as she turned toward the sound. A horse and rider materialized from the darkness, moving fast along the muddy path. Even before the rider’s face became visible in the moonlight, she knew who it was.

Connor.

He reined his mount to a halt at the cemetery’s edge, dismounting in one fluid motion

that spoke of a lifetime in the saddle. His boots hit the ground with a dull thud, and he strode into the graveyard with purpose in every step. His dark hair was unbound, wild in the wind. There was violence etched across his face.

In the moonlight, his face was a study in devastation. The scar above his right eyebrow stood out starkly against the skin, gone pale with fury and something deeper. Betrayal. His blue eyes, usually warm when they looked at her, had turned to ice.

“Bloody hell, lass,” he growled, his voice low and dangerous.

“Ye actually did it. Ye stole it, after all ye were given? After I—” He cut himself off, his jaw clenching so tight she could see the muscle jump beneath his skin.

Kate couldn’t speak. The words lodged in her throat, choking her with their weight. She had no defense to offer, no explanation that wouldn’t sound like madness or betrayal.

“Give it here.” Connor extended his hand, palm up. When she didn’t immediately move, he took a step closer. “The brooch, Katherine. Now.”

The use of her full name made her flinch. She looked down at the precious artifact in her hand, its surface catching the moonlight. Slowly, she extended her arm, offering it to him. “I only meant to borrow it.”

He snorted, his fingers brushing hers as he took it, the brief contact sending a jolt through her system. He examined the brooch, then looked back at her, his expression unreadable.

“Did ye ever mean a word?” he asked, his voice rough with emotion. “Or were we all mere pieces on your chessboard?”

“It wasn’t like that.” Her composure cracked.

“Then what was it like?” His voice rose, echoing among the graves. “Enlighten me, for I canna fathom why ye would flee in the night like a thief. Why ye would take the one thing that matters most to my clan?”

“I didn’t know how to stay,” she whispered, tears flowing freely now. “But I didn’t know how to go, either. I thought the brooch could help... after the story you told me.”

“Old tales. Nothing more.” Connor stared at her for a long moment, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath.

“If ye truly wish to leave, go.” His voice was so quiet she strained to hear him.

“But doona lie again. Especially not to me.”

Before she could respond, he turned and walked away, his broad shoulders rigid with hurt. Kate watched him go, feeling bereft without the brooch she’d come to see as her lifeline.

“Connor,” she called after him, her voice breaking on his name.

He paused but didn’t turn. “Aye?”

“I need to tell you something. Something I should have told you a long time ago, that I’ve been trying to tell you for weeks.”

Slowly, he faced her, his expression guarded but attentive. At that moment, Kate knew there was no going back. It was time for the truth, all of it, the consequences be damned.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

It was now or never.

Kate's heart hammered against her ribs as Connor stared at her, his blue eyes hard and cold in the moonlight.

"I'm not from here," she began, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Aye, that much is clear," Connor said, his tone clipped. "From the moment ye arrived with yer strange manner of speech and odd ways and yet I chose to accept you into my home, despite knowing ye were not telling me the truth about yourself."

Kate shook her head, chestnut hair spilling over her shoulders. "No, I mean I'm not from now ." She drew a deep breath, steeling herself. "I'm from the future. The twenty-first century."

Connor's expression didn't change, but she caught the slight narrowing of his eyes, the minute tightening of his jaw beneath the shadow of stubble.

"Do ye take me for a fool, then?" His voice was dangerously soft.

"I know how it sounds," Kate pressed on, desperation making her words tumble out faster. "I was born in 1996. I work, or rather I worked, for a dating app called Love Lasting, in Atlanta. I came to Scotland on vacation after my boyfriend Angus?—"

"Enough!" His shout echoed among the ancient stones, startling a roosting crow into

flight. “I’ll not stand here and listen to such madness. If ye wished to leave, ye needed only say so, not spin tales fit for a bairn.”

She stepped closer, the damp grass soaking through the hem of her dress. “I can prove it. Ask me anything about the future, anything at all.”

“Ye think to trick me with parlor games?” He raked a hand through his dark hair, his frustration evident in every taut line of his body. “Ye’ve stolen the most sacred relic of my clan, and now ye mock me with?—”

“In my time,” Kate interrupted, “men have walked on the moon. We have machines that fly through the air carrying hundreds of people across oceans in hours. I can talk to someone on the other side of the world instantly through a device that fits in my pocket.”

Connor’s laugh was brittle. “Ye’ve an active imagination, I’ll grant ye that.”

“The American colonies will revolt against British rule and become an independent nation in 1776. Scotland and England will eventually unite under one crown. There will be wars that span the globe, weapons that can destroy entire cities in seconds.” Kate’s voice cracked. “And Clan MacDonald and Clan MacLeod will survive it all. Your bloodline continues for centuries, though your home is a ruin.”

Something flickered in his expression, uncertainty, perhaps. But it was quickly masked by anger.

“And how would ye ken such things?” he demanded. “Are ye a witch, then? Is that why ye sought the brooch, for some dark purpose?”

“No!” Kate felt tears burning behind her eyes. This was what she’d been afraid of, labeling her a witch.



“I’m just a woman who fell through time. I don’t know how or why, but I ended up here, in 1689. The old woman at the cemetery, the Cailleach, she did something. The brooch was part of it.”

Connor’s gaze dropped to the artifact in his hand. In the moonlight, the intricate knotwork seemed to shift and move, as though alive.

“The Cailleach,” he repeated, his voice suddenly hollow. “Ye’ve seen her?”

Hope fluttered in her chest. “Yes. First in my time, then here. She speaks in riddles, but she’s real. She was here tonight, just before you arrived.”

Connor was silent for a long moment, his breathing ragged. When he spoke again, his voice was low, controlled.

“If what ye say is true, and I’m no’ saying it is, why did ye no’ tell me before?”

Kate wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold. “Would you have believed me? Or would you have thrown me in a cell? Accused me of witchcraft? Burned me at the stake?”

“I would never harm ye,” he growled, and the raw hurt in his voice made her wince.

“I was afraid,” she admitted. “And then... then I started to care for you. For everyone. I didn’t want to lose what I’d found here.”

“Until tonight.” His words fell between them like stones. “What changed?”

Unable to bear the intensity of his gaze, Kate looked away. “After Cameron died, you pulled away. You barely looked at me or talked to me. Then Kenna...” Her voice broke. “Her death is on my hands, as is the assassin who was her lover. I don’t belong

here. I've brought nothing but pain to your clan. Everyone thinks I'm cursed."

"So ye thought to flee? To abandon us, abandon me, without so much as a farewell?"

"I thought it would be easier," she whispered. "For everyone."

Connor stepped closer, close enough that she could see the pulse beating in his throat, smell the heather, salt, and smoke that clung to his skin.

"Tell me something else," he demanded. "Something from this future of yours that no one could possibly ken."

Kate thought for a moment, then met his eyes. "In my time, they've mapped the human body down to its smallest parts. They know what makes us who we are, tiny building blocks called DNA. It's unique to each person, passed down through generations." She took a shaky breath. "And they can look at someone's DNA and tell exactly where their ancestors came from."

Connor's expression was unreadable, but she saw his throat move as he swallowed.

"In my time," she continued, "Skye is still beautiful. Tourists come from all over the world to see the Fairy Pools. The MacLeod clan still exists. And while Bronmuir Keep is now in ruins, Dunvegan Castle still stands."

Something shifted in Connor's eyes, a flicker of belief quickly extinguished by doubt.

"If what ye say is true," he said slowly, "then ye've lied to me from the moment we met."

"Not about everything," Kate whispered. "Not about how I feel."

Connor's laugh was bitter. "And how am I to ken which words were true and which were false? Ye've stolen from me, Katherine, not just the brooch, but my trust."

"I'm sorry," she said, the words wholly inadequate for the pain she'd caused. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Yet here we stand." He gestured to the space between them, moonlight casting his face in harsh relief. The scar above his eyebrow stood out starkly against his skin, a reminder of battles fought and won. But this, this was a wound she'd inflicted that no sword could match.

Connor's expression softened for just a moment, and she caught a glimpse of the man who had held her through nightmares, who had shown her the secret waterfall and cave, who had looked at her as though she were the answer to a prayer he'd never dared speak aloud.

"If ye truly wish to leave this time, to return to your world of flying machines and talking devices, then go." His voice was rough with emotion. "But the brooch stays with the clan. With me."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. "And if I want to stay?"

Connor studied her for a long moment, his face a battlefield of warring emotions.

"I dinna ken if I can trust ye again," he said finally. "Ye've broken something between us, something I'm no' sure can be mended."

He turned away, broad shoulders rigid with hurt, and began walking toward his horse. Kate watched him go, rooted to the spot, her heart shattering with each step he took.

At the edge of the cemetery, Connor paused, looking back at her over his shoulder. In

the silver moonlight, his eyes gleamed with unshed tears.

“You should take shelter for the night,” he said quietly. “There’s a storm coming.”

Then he mounted his horse and rode away, taking with him both the brooch and the pieces of Kate’s broken heart.

She stood alone among the ancient graves, the mist curling around her ankles like ghostly fingers. Above her, the stars wheeled in their eternal dance, indifferent to the pain of mortals below. A cold wind swept through the cemetery, carrying with it the promise of more rain.

Kate sank to her knees on the damp earth. For the first time since arriving in this century, she felt truly lost, adrift between worlds, belonging to neither.

“What do I do now?” she whispered to the silent stones.

No answer came but the soft sigh of the wind through the ruins of the chapel and the distant rumble of thunder over the sea.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Kate woke with a start, her back stiff from sleeping against the stone wall of the chapel. The storm had passed, leaving behind that peculiar stillness that follows nature's fury. Morning light filtered through a hole in the roof, casting dappled patterns on the floor where she'd spent the night.

She hadn't meant to fall asleep. After Connor had taken the brooch and ridden away, leaving her alone at the cemetery, she'd sought shelter in the chapel as the sky unleashed its fury. The rain had seemed fitting, a mirror to her own storm of emotions. She'd huddled in the corner, her clothes damp, and wept until exhaustion claimed her.

Now, in the clear light of dawn, the full weight of what had happened settled on her shoulders. She had told Connor everything, that she was from the future. How she'd arrived, why she'd taken the brooch. The look of betrayal on his face had cut deeper than any breakup she'd ever been through.

"I've made a terrible mess of things," she whispered to the empty chapel. Her voice echoed softly against the stone walls that had witnessed years of prayers and confessions.

With a sigh, she pushed herself to her feet, wincing as her muscles protested. Her hair had dried in wild tangles, and her clothes were wrinkled and dirt-stained. She looked as much a disaster as she felt, but there was nothing to be done about it. She needed to return to the keep, to face whatever consequences awaited her and figure out what to do. Where would she live? It wasn't like she could stay at Bronmuir. How would

she make a living? Survive?

The walk back seemed both endless and too brief. With each step, she rehearsed what she might say to Connor, though she doubted he would listen. The clan would know by now about the brooch, perhaps even about her origins. How could she possibly face them all?

As Bronmuir Keep came into view, silhouetted against the morning sky, Kate's steps faltered. The massive stone structure that had begun to feel like home now looked imposing, unwelcoming. She forced herself forward, head high despite the knot of dread in her stomach.

The guards at the gate stiffened as she approached. Their hands moved to their weapons, though they didn't draw them.

"I need to speak with Connor," Kate said, her voice steadier than she felt.

The younger guard's expression darkened. "Ye've done enough harm, lass."

The older one, Alec, she remembered, gave her a hard look. "The laird is ill. Took sick after being out in the storm half the night."

Kate's blood ran cold. "Ill? How bad?"

Neither man answered, but the grim set of their mouths told her enough. After a moment, Alec stepped aside to let her pass, though his reluctance was palpable.

The courtyard was busy with morning activities, but a hush fell as she walked through to the hall. Eyes followed her, some curious, others openly hostile. Word had spread quickly. She kept her gaze forward, refusing to show how deeply their judgment cut.

Inside the great hall, she found Ewan pacing before the hearth. His normally cheerful face was drawn with worry, the dark circles beneath his eyes suggesting he hadn't slept.

"Where is he?" Kate asked without preamble.

Ewan's head snapped up. For a moment, anger flashed in his eyes, quickly replaced by exhaustion. "His chamber. Moira's with him."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad enough." Ewan ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "Fever took hold in the night. He stayed out in the storm all night."

The accusation in his voice was unmistakable. Kate flinched but didn't look away. "I need to see him."

"Aye, well, Moira might have other ideas about that." Despite his words, he didn't try to stop her as she headed for the stairs.

Outside Connor's chamber, Kate paused to gather her courage. From within came the low murmur of voices, Moira's commanding tone and another woman's softer response. Kate knocked softly, then pushed the door open without waiting for permission.

The room was dim, with heavy curtains drawn against the morning light. A fire burned in the hearth, making the chamber uncomfortably warm. The air smelled of herbs and sickness. Pungent, medicinal, with an underlying note of sweat.

Connor lay on the bed, his face flushed with fever, breathing labored. Moira stood at his bedside, wringing out a cloth in a basin of water, while Aileen from the kitchens

stirred something in a pot by the fire.

Moirra looked up, her expression hardening, as she saw Kate. “Ye shouldnae be here.”

“I want to help,” she said, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind her.

“Help?” Moirra’s voice was sharp as a blade. “Like ye helped poor Kenna to her death? Or perhaps ye mean to help by stealing what isna yours?”

The words hit Kate like physical blows, but she forced herself to stand her ground. “I made terrible mistakes. I know that. But right now, Connor needs all the help he can get.”

“And what would ye know of healing, lass? Do they teach that in your time, along with thievery and deceit?”

So Connor had told her, or perhaps he’d spoken in his fever. Either way, Moirra knew the truth, and she clearly didn’t believe it.

“No,” Kate admitted. “I don’t know much about healing. But I can learn as I have working with you. I will do whatever needs doing.”

Moirra studied her for a long moment, her weathered face unreadable. Finally, she sighed. “Aileen, take that broth to the kitchen. It needs to simmer longer.”

The young woman hurried to obey, giving Kate a wide berth as she passed.

When the door closed behind her, Moirra spoke again, her voice low. “The laird told me a wild tale before the fever took hold. About ye being from another time. Is it true?”



Kate nodded. "It is. Though I understand why you'd doubt it."

"I've seen strange things in my years, lass. The old ways still have power in these hills." Moira wrung out the cloth again, placing it on Connor's forehead. "But that doesna excuse what ye've done."

"No, it doesn't," Kate agreed quietly. "Nothing excuses that. But please, let me help care for him. I can't undo what I've done, but I can do this."

Moira's gaze was piercing. "Why? Why do ye care what happens to him now? Ye were trying to leave, were ye not?"

"I thought—" Kate swallowed hard. "I thought he didn't want me anymore. After Cameron's death, he pulled away. And then with Kenna... I felt responsible. I thought everyone would be better off if I just disappeared."

"So ye stole the brooch."

"I borrowed it. It brought me here, so I thought it would send me home." Kate moved closer to the bed, drawn by Connor's labored breathing. "I was wrong. About everything."

Moira didn't respond immediately. She adjusted the blankets around Connor with practiced hands, her movements efficient. "He needs the fever to break. If it doesna soon..."

The healer didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to.

Kate took a deep breath. "Tell me what to do. Whatever it is, I'll do it."

For the next several hours, she followed Moira's instructions and tried to coax sips of

broth between Connor's parched lips. The tasks kept her mind focused, preventing her from drowning in guilt and worry.

As the day wore on, she began to notice inefficiencies in their care routine. The herbs were stored haphazardly, making it difficult to find what was needed quickly. The water in the basin grew warm too fast, reducing its effectiveness in cooling Connor's fever. The schedule for administering different remedies was kept only in Moira's head, leading to confusion when Aileen returned to help.

"Moira," Kate said during a rare quiet moment, "I have an idea that might help us work more efficiently."

The older woman raised an eyebrow, her expression skeptical. "Oh?"

"If we organize the herbs by purpose, fever reducers together, pain remedies together, and so on, we could find what we need faster. And if we kept a written record of when each remedy is given, we wouldn't have to rely on your memory."

"And ye think ye know better than me how to tend the sick? I've been healing longer than ye've been alive, lass."

"I don't know how to heal," Kate clarified. "But I do know about organization and efficiency. It's what I did, what I do... where I'm from, and I was very good at it."

Moira snorted. "What nonsense."

"Please, just consider it. The more efficiently we work, the more energy we can devote to Connor's care."

Perhaps it was the mention of Connor that softened Moira's resistance. "Show me what ye mean, then."

She didn't waste the opportunity. She quickly sorted the herbs into logical groupings, labeling each with a small piece of parchment. She created a simple chart showing the time each remedy should be administered, using a system of marks to track when each dose was given. Then she arranged for fresh water to be brought regularly and set up a rotation of rags to ensure Connor always had a cool compress.

By nightfall, even Moira had to admit the new system was working well. "Ye've a practical mind," she conceded grudgingly. "Though ye've little sense when it comes to matters of the heart."

Kate accepted the criticism without argument. She deserved far worse.

As the night deepened, the healer finally agreed to rest, leaving her alone with him. In the flickering firelight, his face looked younger, more vulnerable. The stern lines of command were smoothed away by unconsciousness, leaving only the man beneath.

At some point, the knowledge settled deep within her. She belonged here. With him. Kate gently replaced the cloth on his forehead.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, knowing he couldn't hear her. "I never meant to hurt you. I was scared and stupid and I didn't trust what was right in front of me."

She took his large, calloused hand between her own. His skin burned with fever, but his fingers curled slightly around hers, an unconscious response that made her heart leap.

"I don't know if you'll ever forgive me," she continued softly. "I don't know if I deserve forgiveness. But I'm not going anywhere. Not again. Even if you send me away when you wake up, I'll still be here, somewhere, waiting. Because this is where I belong. With you. In this time. In this place."

Connor's breathing seemed to ease slightly, though perhaps it was only wishful thinking on her part. Kate leaned forward, pressing her forehead gently against their joined hands.

"Just get better," she murmured. "Please."

Outside, the wind picked up again, whistling around the stone walls of the keep. Within, the fire crackled steadily, casting long shadows across the chamber. Kate settled in for the long night ahead, determined to prove, to him, to the clan, to herself, that she was exactly where she was meant to be.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

For a moment, Kate was disoriented as she jolted awake, neck stiff from sleeping at an awkward angle in the hard wooden chair. The dim light of early dawn cast unfamiliar shadows across the chamber. Then her eyes fell on Connor as her breath hitched.

Over the past three days, she'd barely left his side as the fever raged through him. Now, in the gray light filtering through the narrow window, the sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs outside, she could see that his face was no longer flushed with heat. His breathing had steadied sometime in the night, the terrible rasping replaced by the deep, even rhythm of healing sleep.

She leaned forward, pressing the back of her hand gently against his forehead. Cool. Finally cool. Relief washed through her, so powerful she nearly wept.

"If ye're quite finished pawing at me, I'd like some whisky."

The gruff voice startled her so badly she nearly toppled from her chair. Connor's eyes were open, clear for the first time in days, though shadowed with exhaustion.

"You're awake," she breathed, then scowled at him. "No whisky." She scrambled to pour water from the pitcher beside the bed.

He made that particularly Scottish sound in the back of his throat. "Aye, though I'm beginning to wish I wasn't." He winced as he tried to sit up. "My head feels like it's been trampled by horses."

Kate slipped an arm behind his shoulders, helping him rise enough to drink. She was acutely aware of the heat of his skin through the thin linen shirt, and the solid weight of him against her arm. He drank deeply, then sank back against the pillows with a sigh.

“Ye’re bossier than Moira,” he muttered, but there was no real heat in the words.

“Someone had to make sure you didn’t die,” Kate replied, setting the cup aside. Her hands trembled slightly. Now that the immediate crisis was past, the awkwardness between them rushed back. The last time he’d been conscious, he’d looked at her with such betrayal in his eyes that it had shattered her heart.

Connor’s gaze traveled over her face, taking in the dark circles under her eyes, the tangled mess of her hair and state of her dress. Something flickered in his expression, but before she could identify it, he turned his face away.

“How long?” he asked.

“Three days,” she answered. “The fever broke sometime during the night.”

He nodded slightly, still not looking at her. “And the clan?”

Before she could answer, the door swung open. Moira bustled in, immediately noting Connor’s improved condition.

“About time ye rejoined the living,” she said briskly, moving to his bedside. She pressed her weathered hand to his forehead, then nodded in satisfaction. “Fever’s gone. Ye’ve a sturdy constitution, lad, I’ll give ye that.”

“Has aught happened while I slept?” Connor asked, his voice stronger now.

Moira's expression grew grave. "Aye. Word came yesterday. The MacDonalds ride."

Connor tensed, immediately trying to push himself up. "How many? How far?"

"Lie still, ye great fool," Moira snapped, pushing him back down. "Ye'll do no one any good if ye fall on yer face. Ewan has matters well in hand for now."

"I need to speak with him," Connor insisted. His face had gone pale with the effort of sitting up, but determination blazed in his blue eyes. "And the council. Now."

The healer muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like a curse. "Aye, I'll send for them. But ye'll stay in that bed while ye speak to them, or I'll tie ye to it myself."

She turned to Kate. "Make sure he doesna do anything stupid. If he tries to leave this chamber, knock him on his hard head with the pitcher. I'll fetch Ewan."

With that, she swept from the room, leaving an uncomfortable silence in her wake. Kate busied herself straightening the bedcovers, avoiding his gaze.

"Ye stayed," he said finally. It wasn't a question.

Kate's hands stilled. "Yes."

"Why?"

She looked up then, meeting his eyes directly. "Because I couldn't leave. Not with you ill. Not with..." She swallowed hard. "Not with things unfinished between us."

Connor's expression gave nothing away. "And the brooch?"

“I don’t know where it is,” she admitted. “You took it from me at the cemetery.”

He nodded slowly. “Aye. ’Tis safe.”

Before she could respond, the door opened again as Ewan entered, followed by several older men Kate recognized as Connor’s council of advisors. Their expressions ranged from concerned to openly hostile when they saw her.

“Out with ye, lass,” one of the older men said gruffly. “This is clan business.”

“She stays,” Connor said, his voice quiet but carrying the unmistakable weight of command.

Surprise flickered across the faces of the council members, but none dared contradict him. Kate retreated to a corner of the room, making herself as unobtrusive as possible.

Ewan approached the bed, relief evident in his face as he saw Connor’s improved condition. “Good to see ye with yer wits about ye again, cousin.”

“Tell me what we face,” Connor said without preamble.

Ewan’s expression sobered. “MacDonald scouts were spotted two days ago, near the southern ridge. Last night, our own men reported a larger force gathering in the valley beyond. They fly MacDonald colors, and they’re armed for battle.”

“How many?”

“At least forty warriors, maybe more.”

A murmur ran through the gathered men. Kate felt a chill run down her spine. Forty



armed men against a clan already weakened by Cameron's death and earlier skirmishes.

"Our own numbers?" Connor asked, though from his grim expression, he already knew the answer.

"Thirty men fit for battle," Ewan replied. "Another ten who could fight if pressed, though they're either too young, too old, or nursing injuries."

"Hardly ideal odds," Connor said dryly.

"Aye, and morale is low," one of the older men added. "Cameron's death weighs heavy, and there are those who whisper of ill fortune dogging our steps." His eyes flicked briefly toward Kate.

Connor's jaw tightened. "Superstitious nonsense. The MacDonalds would have come, regardless. They've been looking for an excuse since my father's death." He pushed himself upright, grimacing slightly at the effort. "What supplies do we have?"

The discussion turned to practical matters. Food stores, weapons, defensive positions. Kate listened carefully, mentally cataloging the disorganized approach to their preparations. The clan had weapons scattered across three different storage areas. Food supplies hadn't been properly inventoried. The healers' stores were depleted after illness.

Kate bit her tongue, watching as the council members argued about priorities. She noticed Connor's jaw tightening with each passing minute, his patience clearly wearing thin as the men talked in circles.

When the meeting finally concluded, the council members filed out one by one, leaving only Connor and Ewan behind. Kate hesitated by the door, then turned back.

“May I speak freely?” she asked, her voice stronger than she felt.

Connor’s gaze settled on her as he sighed. “What troubles ye, lass?”

“Everything is scattered,” she said, stepping forward. “Weapons in three places, food supplies uncounted, no clear system for who guards which areas or when. In a siege, efficiency matters. If we organize now, we’ll be better prepared when they arrive.”

Ewan crossed his arms. “And what would ye know of siege warfare, lass?”

“Nothing,” Kate admitted. “But I know about organization and efficiency. It’s what I did in my... before.” She glanced at Connor, uncertain how much he’d shared about her origins.

“Give me the day to put systems in place. I can help coordinate supplies, set up rotations, make sure everything is where it needs to be when it’s needed.”

Connor and Ewan exchanged a long look.

“Tell the council,” Connor finally said to Ewan. “The lass will oversee the preparations. She works with you and Nessa. Whatever she needs, see to it.”

Ewan raised a brow, but nodded. “Aye. Though they willna like it.”

“I dinna care what they like,” Connor said, his voice hardening. “Because of the damned MacDonalds, Cameron is dead. Let them come. I will cut down every single one who crosses our threshold. I will have my vengeance. For my father, for my brother, and for my clansmen.”

“For Cameron,” Ewan agreed solemnly.

“For Cameron,” Connor echoed, his eyes dark with promise.

As Ewan left to deliver Connor’s orders, Kate remained, uncertain.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Connor’s expression was unreadable. “Don’t make me regret it.”

\* \* \*

The keep buzzed like a disturbed beehive. Kate moved through the organized chaos, clipboard in hand—a rough approximation she’d fashioned from a small wooden board and parchment. She’d spent the morning taking inventory of weapons, assigning each type to a specific storage area, and creating a simple tracking system using colored fabric strips to mark what was where.

“The spears go there,” she directed a group of young boys, pointing to the rack she had set up near the eastern wall. “Make sure they’re sorted by length, longest at the back.”

The boys hurried to comply, though not without curious glances at her makeshift clipboard and the strange marks she kept making on it.

In the courtyard, men were reinforcing the gates and preparing defensive positions. Kate suggested moving large barrels filled with water to strategic points around the keep, both for drinking and for dousing any fires the attackers might set. The idea had been met with initial skepticism, but Ewan had backed her, and now the barrels stood ready.

She paused in the shadow of the great hall, watching the activity around her. Despite the grim circumstances, there was something oddly satisfying about seeing her

organizational systems take shape. Here, at least, she could be useful. Could begin to make amends.

“Ye’ve a knack for this.”

She turned to find Nessa, the keep’s housekeeper, standing behind her. The older woman’s expression was still guarded, but there was a hint of grudging respect in her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, surprised by the almost-compliment. Nessa had been one of the most openly disapproving of her presence since the whole brooch debacle.

“Don’t get above yerself,” Nessa sniffed. “I still think ye’re trouble. But ye’ve a practical mind, I’ll give ye that.”

“I’m trying to help,” she said simply.

“Aye, well.” Nessa gestured toward the kitchens. “The grain stores need counting. If ye’re so clever with yer lists and marks, perhaps ye can make sense of them.”

Kate recognized the olive branch for what it was. “I’d be happy to.”

In the kitchen storerooms, she found chaos. Sacks of grain and dried goods were piled haphazardly, with no clear system for tracking what was used or what remained. With Nessa’s reluctant assistance, she established a simple inventory system, using small chalk marks to indicate quantities and creating a rotation to ensure the oldest supplies were used first.

“Saints, she’s daft,” Nessa muttered, watching Kate arrange the storage area. “But the lass gets things done.”

By midday, she had moved on to the makeshift infirmary Moira was setting up in a corner of the great hall. The healer was sorting through her depleted supplies, muttering darkly about the shortage of certain herbs.

“What do ye want?” Moira asked bluntly, as Kate approached.

“To help,” Kate replied, holding up her clipboard. “I’ve been organizing supplies throughout the keep. I thought I could do the same here.”

Moira eyed her suspiciously. “And what do ye know of healing herbs and poultices other than what I’ve taught ye?”

“Nothing,” Kate admitted. “But I can help you track what you have and what you need.”

After a moment’s consideration, Moira nodded grudgingly. “Very well. Come, then. If ye’re to be useful, ye’ll need to know the difference between feverfew and foxglove, lest ye kill someone by mistake.”

For the next hour, Moira showed her how to identify and prepare various medicinal herbs. Despite her gruff manner, the healer was a patient teacher, correcting Kate’s mistakes without the biting criticism she’d expected.

“Ye’ve quick hands,” Moira observed as Kate successfully ground a mixture of dried herbs into a fine powder. “Grind that any finer and ’twill blow away in the wind.”

Kate set the mortar aside carefully. “Moira,” she said hesitantly, “can I ask you something?”

The older woman blinked. “Ye can ask. Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

“Do you really think I’m a witch?”

Moirra was silent for a long moment, her weathered hands continuing to sort through bundles of dried herbs. “I’ve seen strange things in my years,” she said finally.

“The old ways still have power in these hills. But a witch?” She shook her head slowly. “Nay, not a witch. Something else entirely, I think.”

“Then why do you still look at me like I might sprout horns at any moment?”

A hint of a smile touched Moira’s lips. “Because ye might yet, lass. Because ye might yet.”

She set a hand on Kate’s arm, the gesture startling in its gentleness. “Ye could have left. Why stay?”

Kate thought about it, surprised by the simplicity of her answer. “Because people need help. And because I can help.”

Moirra grunted, a sound that might have been approval. “Well, then. Let’s get back to work. There’s much to do before the MacDonalds come knocking at our gates.”

\* \* \*

As evening approached, Kate found herself drawn to the battlements. The setting sun cast long shadows across the landscape, turning the rolling hills to gold and crimson. In the distance, the sea glittered, deceptively peaceful. Hard to believe that somewhere beyond that beautiful horizon, men were preparing for war.

She leaned against the cold stone, letting the wind tug at her hair. What was she doing here? Playing at being a historical staging and logistics manager while actual lives

hung in the balance? She'd spent her career organizing dating profiles and marketing campaigns, not siege defenses.

"Are ye a witch, then?"

The small voice startled her. She turned to find a young boy, no more than six, watching her with wide eyes. His mop of red hair stood up in all directions, and his freckled face was smudged with dirt.

Kate knelt at his level. "No, I'm not a witch. Just a woman trying to help."

The boy looked unconvinced. "Mam says ye came from the skies like a fairy. That ye stole the laird's treasure and tried to flee."

Kate winced at the blunt assessment. "I made a mistake," she said carefully. "I was scared and confused. Have you ever done something you regretted when you were frightened?"

The boy considered this, then nodded solemnly. "I wet the bed once when there was thunder. Da said only babes wet the bed."

Kate bit back a smile. "Well, there you go. Everyone makes mistakes when they're scared."

"I suppose," he agreed dubiously. "Are ye going to help us fight the MacDonalds?"

"I'm going to help in any way I can," she promised.

Apparently satisfied, the boy scampered off, leaving her alone with her thoughts once more. She turned back to the view, watching as the last rays of sunlight slipped below the horizon. In the gathering darkness, she could almost imagine she saw movement

on the distant hills, shadows that might be men preparing to attack.

“Ye shouldn’t be up here alone.”

Connor’s voice made her start. She turned to find him standing a few feet away, his tall frame silhouetted against the torchlight from the courtyard below. He looked better than he had that morning, though still pale, with dark circles under his eyes.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed,” she countered.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips as he took a swig of whisky from a flask. “Stubborn wench.”

“You need to rest.”

“I needed to see for myself how the preparations go.” He moved to stand beside her at the wall, his gaze scanning the darkening landscape. “Ewan tells me ye’ve been most... efficient.”

“I’m trying to help,” she said simply.

Connor nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Aye, so ye are.”

They stood in silence for a moment, the wind whistling around them. So much remained unsaid between them, about the brooch, about her confession, about the future neither of them could predict.

“Will they attack tomorrow?” Kate asked finally.

“Likely. They’ll want to strike while they believe us weakened.” His jaw tightened.

“They’re not wrong.”



“We’ll be ready,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

Connor glanced at her, a question in his eyes. “We?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said firmly. “Whether you believe that or not.”

He studied her face in the fading light. “Be careful on the morrow,” he said finally. “When the fighting starts, stay with Moira in the great hall. The MacDonalds will target the walls first, but if they breach the gates...”

“I’m not planning on dying,” Kate said, meeting his gaze steadily.

A slight smile crossed his face. “Nay, as I’ve not seen it written on one of your wee lists.”

The unexpected touch of humor caught her off guard, and she found herself smiling back. For a brief moment, the tension between them eased, replaced by something warmer, something that felt like the beginning of understanding.

The moment shattered as a horn blast cut through the night air. Connor stiffened, his hand automatically moving to the sword at his side.

“My laird!” a voice called from the watchtower. “Riders on the southern rise!”

In the distance, Kate could just make out dark shapes moving against the night sky. A chill ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the evening air.

“Saints preserve us,” someone whispered from the walls.

Connor’s expression hardened into the mask of a warrior, all traces of the sick man gone. “It begins,” he said quietly. “Go to the hall, Kate. Now.”

As she hurried down the stone steps, the keep coming alive with urgent activity around her, she felt a strange sense of clarity. Whatever happened, whatever came after, she had made her choice.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

The urgent wail of horns blaring through the predawn darkness woke Kate. The riders from late last night had kept their distance, obviously waiting until early this morning to attack.

For one disoriented moment, she thought she was back in Atlanta, with a car alarm going off outside her apartment window. Then the rough wool blanket scratched against her skin, and the smoky scent of peat fire filled her nostrils.

Not Atlanta.

Bronmuir Keep.

1689.

The thundering of boots in the corridor outside her chamber door jolted her fully awake. She threw back the covers and scrambled to her feet, yanking on her dress, a simple linen shift with a bodice that she'd finally learned to lace properly. The corset was much more comfortable than the old underwire bras she used to wear. Her fingers trembled as she worked the laces, her heart pounding in rhythm with the shouts echoing from the courtyard below.

“To arms! The MacDonalds are upon us!”

Kate flung open her door just as Moira rushed past, her gray-streaked braid swinging behind her.

“Stay inside, lass,” the healer commanded over her shoulder. “This is no place for ye.”

She ignored Moira, following the stream of people down the narrow stone staircase. The great hall was in chaos, with women gathering children, old men strapping on swords they hadn’t wielded in decades, warriors rushing to the battlements. The acrid smell of fear mingled with smoke and the metallic tang of freshly sharpened steel.

Through the open main door, Kate could see the courtyard filling with MacLeod warriors. Connor stood at the center, broad shoulders squared beneath his plaid, sun-kissed brown hair pulled back from his face. Even from a distance, she could see the intensity in his blue eyes as he barked orders, his voice carrying across the yard.

“Ewan, take ten men to the east wall. Dougal, secure the gatehouse. The rest of ye with me at the main gate.”

Kate pushed her way through the crowd, ignoring the disapproving glances from the women herding children toward the back of the hall. Outside, the air was thick with mist, making her feel like she was walking through a nightmare.

Connor caught sight of her and frowned, striding toward her with purpose. “Get back inside. Now.”

“I can help,” she insisted, lifting her chin. “I’m not going to cower in a corner.”

“This isna a debate,” he growled, his accent thickening with stress. “These men willna hesitate to cut ye down and worse.”

A cry from the battlements interrupted them. “They’re at the gate! And there’s movement on the cliffs!”

Connor's head snapped up. "The cliffs? Bloody hell, they're trying to flank us." He grabbed Kate's shoulders, fingers digging into her flesh. "Inside."

The raw emotion in his eyes nearly made her obey. Nearly. But as he turned away, shouting orders to split his forces, she made her decision. She wouldn't hide. Not this time.

Instead, she ran to where Moira was readying the makeshift infirmary in the corner of the great hall. "What can I do?" she asked.

The older woman's sharp eyes assessed her. "Ye can fetch clean water and tear these into bandages." She thrust a stack of linen at Kate.

She took the fabric, grateful for a task to occupy her mind. As she tore the linen into strips, Nessa bustled around the kitchens, barking orders at the other women and gathering herbs for poultices. The sounds of battle echoed from beyond the keep's walls. Shouts, the clash of metal, and occasionally, the terrible cry of a wounded man.

Hours passed in a blur of bandages, water, and blood. Just as Kate was returning from the well with another bucket of water, something caught her eye through the open kitchen door. Movement in the mist. A flash of tartan that didn't belong to the MacLeods.

"They're coming through the back!" She shouted.

But her warning came too late. The door burst open, and three MacDonald warriors charged through, their dirks flashing in the gray morning light. The women near the door screamed, scattering with children in their arms.

Kate looked around frantically, searching for a weapon. Her eyes landed on a heavy cast-iron pan sitting near the hearth. She lunged for it, her fingers closing around the

handle just as one of the MacDonalds spotted her.

He grinned, revealing stained teeth beneath his red beard. “Well, well. What have we here?”

Kate backed away, hefting the pan. It was solid, the weight reassuring in her palm. The warrior advanced, his dirk held low.

“I wouldna do that if I were ye, lass,” he sneered.

Behind him, the other two MacDonalds were engaged with the MacLeod men who had rushed in from the courtyard. The clash of steel on steel filled the air, punctuated by grunts and curses.

Kate’s attacker lunged, and she swung the pan with all her might. It connected with his forearm with a sickening crack. He howled, his dirk clattering to the stone floor. Kate didn’t hesitate. She brought the pan down on his head, and he crumpled at her feet.

Her hands shook as she stared at his still form. Had she killed him? The thought made her stomach lurch, but there was no time to dwell on it. More shouts came from the kitchen passage. The MacDonalds had found their way in.

Kate dropped the pan and grabbed the fallen warrior’s dirk. The blade was heavier than she expected, the handle worn smooth from use. She had no idea how to use it, other than stick them with the pointy end, but it was better than nothing.

She ran toward the kitchen passage, heart hammering against her ribs. The narrow corridor was dim, lit only by a single torch in an iron bracket. She pressed herself against the wall, listening to the sounds of fighting ahead.

Connor's voice rose above the din. "Hold them back! Don't let them reach the hall!"

She inched forward until she could see. Connor and two other MacLeods were fighting five MacDonald warriors. He moved with deadly grace, his broadsword a blur of steel as he parried and thrust. But even as she watched, one of the MacLeod men fell, blood spurting from his throat.

Connor faltered, still not fully healed from the fever. A MacDonald warrior seized the opportunity, driving his blade into Connor's side. Connor grunted in pain, staggering back against the wall. The MacDonald raised his sword for a killing blow.

Kate didn't think. She burst from her hiding place with a scream that surprised even her and hurled herself at the MacDonald. The dirk in her hand plunged into his back, between his shoulder blades. The warrior roared in pain, twisting around to face her. His blade caught her across the forearm, slicing through her sleeve and into her flesh.

Pain blazed up her arm, but she refused to let go of the dirk. She wrenched it free and stumbled backward, nearly falling over an overturned chair. The MacDonald advanced on her, blood soaking his plaid, his face contorted with rage.

"Ye'll pay for that, ye wee bitch," he snarled.

Connor appeared behind him, his face pale with pain, but his eyes burning with fury. His broadsword swung in a vicious arc, catching the MacDonald across the back of the neck. The man's head nearly separated from his body as he collapsed.

Kate stared, bile rising in her throat. Connor's gaze locked with hers, and for a moment, they stood frozen, both breathing hard. Blood streaked his face and soaked his side where the blade had caught him.

"Ye shouldna be here," he rasped, but there was something different in his tone. Not

anger, but a kind of respect.

Before she could respond, more MacDonalds poured through the rear door. Connor pushed her behind him, raising his broadsword despite the wound in his side. Kate grabbed a heavy bottle of spirits from a shelf and stood at his back, her injured arm throbbing.

“If we die,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt, “we die together.”

She felt rather than saw him nod. “Together, then.”

They fought as one, Connor with his broadsword, Kate with her makeshift weapons. The bottle, a wooden stool, whatever came to hand. When a MacDonald slipped past Connor’s guard, Kate smashed the bottle over his head. When Kate was cornered, Connor cut down her attacker with a single stroke.

Time blurred. Her world narrowed to survival. Thrust, parry, dodge. Her arm burned, blood soaking her sleeve and dripping onto the stone floor. Connor’s movements grew slower, his face gray with pain and blood loss. But still they fought.

The clash of steel and shouts of men filled the air until a commanding voice cut through the chaos.

“Enough!”

The fighters parted like a tide to reveal Dougal MacDonald, his imposing figure silhouetted in the doorway. A triumphant smile played on his lips as he stepped forward, eyes locked on Connor.

“Your brother Cameron begged for mercy at my hands,” Dougal taunted, voice dripping with malice. “As will you.”



Connor's jaw tightened, his knuckles white around the hilt of his broadsword. "You're a liar as well as a coward, Dougal. My brother would never beg. Least of all to the likes of you."

Dougal laughed, touching the ornate brooch pinned to his plaid. "I cannot lose, for I wear the Bronmuir Brooch. Your clan's power is mine now."

"Is that what you believe?" Connor's voice was dangerously soft. "Then you know nothing of our history."

Kate watched as Connor straightened despite his wounds, his voice carrying throughout the room as he spoke.

"The legend of the brooch is known to every true MacLeod. Forged in the fires of Bronmuir by our ancestors, blessed by the old gods themselves. It grants victory in battle and protection from harm." His eyes narrowed. "But only to those of MacLeod blood."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Dougal's face.

"That silver and gold was taken from the prow of a Norse longship," Connor continued, his voice gaining strength. "The metal that survived a hundred storms was gifted to the first MacLeod of Bronmuir by a Norse princess who saw his true heart."

Connor took a step forward, and Kate noticed how the clansmen around them had fallen silent, hanging on his every word.

"Those stones that catch the light like the depths of the sea? They are the tears of a selkie who gave up her ocean home for the love of my ancestor. When she returned to the waves, she left those tears as a promise of protection."

Dougal's hand fell away from the brooch as Connor spoke, the magnificent piece gleaming in the firelight. Silver and gold intricately woven around three large blue stones that seemed to glow with an inner light.

"For seven generations, that brooch has protected our people from disaster. No MacLeod laird wearing it has ever fallen in battle. No winter has brought starvation to our clan while it remained in our possession." Connor's eyes locked with Dougal's. "The selkie's magic flows in our blood. To you, it is merely metal and stone."

"What you wear," Connor continued with a wicked grin, "is nothing but a trinket. A decoy. The real Bronmuir Brooch is safely hidden away, as it has been for generations."

Dougal's expression twisted with rage. "You lie!"

"Test your luck then," Connor challenged, raising his broadsword once more.

With a roar of fury, Dougal charged forward. Connor met him with a fierce battle cry of his own, summoning strength from some hidden reserve. His blade flashed in the dim light, and with one powerful stroke, he cut down his enemy.

And then, suddenly, it was over. MacLeod reinforcements flooded the corridor, driving the remaining MacDonalds back. The invaders retreated, leaving their dead and wounded behind.

Kate sagged against the wall, her legs trembling beneath her. Connor leaned heavily on his broadsword, his breathing labored. Their eyes met across the blood-spattered larder.

"Ye saved my life," he said softly.

Kate attempted a smile, though it felt more like a grimace. “Consider us even.”

\* \* \*

Night fell on Bronmuir Keep, bringing with it a heavy silence. The MacDonalds had been driven back, but at great cost. Five MacLeod warriors dead, a dozen more wounded. The injured laid out on pallets before the hearth in the great hall.

Kate sat alone on a bench near the fire, staring at her bandaged arm. Moira had cleaned and dressed the wound, declaring it “a wee scratch.” The healer had given her a draught for the pain, but she’d only pretended to drink it. She wanted to keep her head clear.

The events of the day replayed over and over. The clash of steel, the coppery smell of blood, the weight of the dirk in her hand. She had killed. That made four. The assassin. Kenna. And the two MacDonald men. The knowledge sat like a stone in her chest.

“Kate.”

She looked up to find Connor standing before her. His side was heavily bandaged, his arm in a sling. His face was drawn with exhaustion, but his blue eyes were clear and focused solely on her.

“How are ye feeling?” he asked, lowering himself carefully onto the bench beside her.

“Like I’ve been hit by a bus,” she admitted, then caught herself. “I mean... I’m sore, but I’ll live. How about you?”

“I’ve had worse.” The hint of a smile touched his lips. “Though no’ many.”

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the flames dance in the hearth.

“Connor? Why didn’t you wear the brooch in battle?”

A long sigh escaped. “’Tis said it can only be used three times and has been used twice already.”

Around them, the clan moved quietly, tending to the wounded, comforting the grieving, rebuilding what had been broken.

“Ye shouldna have been in that fight,” Connor said at last. “But I’m grateful ye were.”

Kate turned to look at him, surprised by the admission. “I couldn’t hide while everyone else fought.”

“Aye, I’m beginning to understand that about ye.” He shifted, wincing slightly as the movement pulled at his wound. “Ye’re no’ like any woman I’ve ever known.”

“Is that a good thing?” she asked, half-joking.

“It is.” His expression grew serious. “I didna believe ye, ye ken. About where, when , ye came from.”

Kate’s breath caught in her throat. “And now?”

Connor reached into the sporran at his waist and withdrew something that glinted in the firelight.

“I had Ewan fetch it.” The Bronmuir Brooch. Its surface was polished to a warm glow, the intricate Celtic knotwork catching the light.

“I believe ye now,” he said softly. “Every strange word, every moment ye speak of a world I canna understand. I see it now. I see you.”

He placed the brooch in her open palm. The metal was warm from his body, the weight of it familiar and strange all at once.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Giving ye a choice.” Connor’s gaze never left her face. “The old witch at the cemetery brought ye here for a reason. Perhaps that reason was today. Perhaps ye were meant to save my life, and now ye’re free to return to your time.”

Kate stared at the brooch in her hand, her throat tight with emotion. “And if I don’t want to go back?”

“Then ye stay. With the clan. With me.” His voice roughened. “We will face every storm together.”

She looked up at him, seeing the vulnerability behind his warrior’s facade. This proud Highland chieftain was offering her his heart, his future, his world.

“I need time to think,” she admitted.

Connor nodded, though she could see the disappointment he tried to hide. “Take all the time ye need. The choice is yours.”

He rose stiffly, favoring his injured side. “Rest now. The dawn will bring enough work for all of us.”

Kate watched him walk away, the brooch clutched tightly in her hand. The metal seemed to pulse with warmth, as if alive with its own magic.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

The morning after the attack, Kate stood at the edge of the cliff behind Bronmuir Keep, the brooch clutched in her palm. The metal was warm against her skin despite the cool sea breeze that whipped her hair around her face. That was the gift he had given her. The freedom to choose.

Below, the waves crashed against the jagged rocks, sending up plumes of white spray that caught the early sunlight like scattered diamonds.

The cut on her arm throbbed beneath its bandage, a physical reminder of all she had endured, all she had done. She had killed four people. The memory of the dirk sliding into flesh made her stomach clench. Yet she had saved Connor's life in doing so, and couldn't bring herself to regret the choice.

"I thought I might find ye here."

She turned to see him approaching, his movements stiff from his own injuries. The morning light caught in his brown hair, turning the edges to gold. His blue eyes were solemn as they met her own hazel eyes, though she caught a flicker of something else there. Hope, perhaps, or fear.

"I needed to think," she said, turning back to the sea.

He came to stand beside her, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body, but not touching. "And have ye reached a decision?"

She opened her hand, revealing the brooch. Its intricate knotwork caught the light, the surface gleaming. “I don’t know if this will even work,” she admitted. “I don’t know if I can go back.”

“Ye dinna have to try,” Connor said softly. “Ye could stay. With me.”

She looked up at him, studying the strong line of his jaw, the way his mouth curved when he was trying not to show emotion. “So if I stay...”

Something flickered in his eyes, a spark that ignited and spread, warming his gaze. “Then ye would make me the happiest man in all of Scotland.”

Kate closed her fingers around the brooch again, feeling its weight, its history. “I’m afraid,” she whispered.

“Of what, my fierce lass?”

“Of everything. Of loving you. Losing you. Never seeing my family again.” She swallowed hard. “The guilt I carry for the men I killed. And for Kenna and her lover.”

Connor’s hand came up to cup her cheek, his calloused palm rough against her skin. “Ye saved my life, Kate. Ye’ve nothing to feel guilty for.”

“I killed two men in the battle,” she said, voice breaking. “And Kenna... if I hadn’t pushed her lover from the battlements?—”

“Ye did what ye had to do,” Connor interrupted firmly. “Kenna took her own life. Her MacDonald lover made his own choice. Their fates were not of your making.”

Kate leaned into his touch, drawing strength from his certainty. “I still see their faces

when I close my eyes.”

“Aye, and ye always will,” Connor said gently. “That’s the burden of survival. But ye dinna have to bear it alone.”

He took her hands in his, his voice dropping to a solemn murmur. “My father taught us an ancient prayer before our first battle. The old priests would say it over warriors who had taken lives in defense of their clan.”

His thumbs traced circles on her palms as he recited. “May the shield of Saint Michael be between ye and the enemy. May your hand be guided by justice, your heart by mercy. The blood on your blade is the price of our freedom, and the Almighty understands the warrior’s burden. Go forth absolved, for ye fought not with hatred, but with love for those ye protect.”

The wind gusted around them, carrying the scent of heather and salt. Below, the sea continued its eternal dance with the shore, waves retreating, only to surge forward again with renewed force. Like time itself, she thought. Always moving, always changing, yet somehow constant.

And in that moment she realized something that made her bones tremble, not that she must choose between two lives, but that one might now be impossible to leave behind.

“I may have left my time behind,” she said, the words rising from some deep place within her, “but I’ve found where I truly belong.”

Connor’s eyes widened slightly, hope blooming across his features. “Are ye saying?—”

“I’m staying,” Kate said, holding out the brooch to him, and as the words left her lips,



she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. “If you’ll have me.”

He took the brooch, pocketing it. His smile was like the sun breaking through storm clouds. Without warning, he swept her into his arms, lifting her off her feet in a fierce embrace. Startled by the sudden movement, Kate laughed, then winced as pain shot through her injured arm.

“Careful,” she gasped. “I’m still a bit battered.”

“Forgive me,” Connor said, setting her gently back on her feet, though he kept his arms around her. “I forgot myself.”

Kate leaned into him, resting her head against his chest. She could hear his heart beating, strong and steady. “I never thought I’d find someone who made me feel like this,” she murmured.

“Like what, lass?”

“Like I’m home.”

His arms tightened around her. “Then let us build a future together.”

\* \* \*

The courtyard garden was small but lush, a hidden oasis of green tucked away from the harsh Highland winds. As the sun began to set, painting the sky in shades of gold and pink, she wandered among the herbs and flowers, trailing her fingers over the rough leaves of sage and the delicate petals of wild roses enjoying the last days of summer. There was already a chill in the early August morning air and soon it would be cold.

The events of the day had left her emotionally drained, but strangely peaceful. She had made her decision, and with it had come a sense of rightness that she couldn't explain. She belonged here, in this time, with these people. With him.

The thought of him brought a smile to her lips. After their conversation on the cliffs, he had been called away to deal with the aftermath of the attack. Organizing repairs, comforting the bereaved, planning for the clan's defenses. But he had promised to find her at sunset, his eyes holding a promise that made her heart skip.

The sound of footsteps on the gravel path made her turn. Connor strode toward her, his tall figure silhouetted against the fading light. He had changed from his bloodstained plaid into fresh clothing, though his movements still betrayed his injury.

"Ye look beautiful," he said, his voice low and warm.

She glanced down at her simple dress, patched in places and stained with dirt and blood that wouldn't quite wash out. "I'm a mess," she laughed.

"Nay," Connor said, stepping closer. "Ye're perfect."

There was something in his tone that made her breath catch. He reached for her hand, his fingers entwining with hers. "Walk with me?"

Kate nodded, allowing him to lead her deeper into the garden, where the stone wall provided shelter from the wind. The air was heavy with the scent of herbs and salt from the nearby sea. As they reached a small bench nestled beneath a small gnarled tree, Connor stopped.

"I have something for ye," he said, reaching into his sporran.

Kate's heart raced as he withdrew a small object and held it out to her. In the fading

light, she could see it was a ring. A delicate band of silver and gold, inset with a large emerald that caught the last rays of the sun.

“It was my mother’s,” he said, voice rough with emotion. “My father gave it to her when they wed. I’ve kept it safe all these years, waiting for...” He trailed off, his blue eyes searching hers.

“For what?” Kate whispered, though she knew the answer.

“For the woman who would make my heart whole again,” he said simply.

Kate felt tears prick at her eyes. “Connor?—”

“I love ye, Kate,” he said, the words tumbling out as if he couldn’t hold them back any longer. “I didna think it possible to feel this way again after all I’ve lost. But ye’ve brought light back into my life when I thought there was only darkness.”

He took her hand, his calloused fingers gentle against her skin. “I ken it’s soon, and I ken ye’ve much to adjust to in this time. But I canna imagine a future without ye by my side.” He paused, drawing a deep breath.

“Will ye marry me, Kate? Will ye be my wife, my partner, my heart?”

Kate stared at the ring, at the man holding it, and felt the last of her defenses crumble like ancient stone walls finally yielding to time. She had spent so long running from vulnerability, from the possibility of loss. But here, now, with Connor looking at her as if she were the sun and stars combined, his blue eyes shimmering with a devotion that stole her breath, she couldn’t run anymore.

“I’m terrified,” she admitted, her voice barely audible above the rustling of leaves and the thundering of her own heart. Her hands trembled as she clasped them

together.

“I’m scared of loving you this much. Of losing you. Of failing you. I’ve never let anyone get this close before.”

His expression softened, the scar above his eyebrow crinkling slightly. The fading sunlight caught in his wild, sun-kissed brown hair, as the scent of wool and leather tickled her nose.

“Aye, love is a fearsome thing,” he said, his deep voice washing over her like warm honey. “But I’d rather face that fear with ye than live without ye. The thought of waking each day without yer smile would be a darkness I couldna bear.”

She reached up to touch his face, her fingertips tracing the line of his jaw, rough with stubble, the curve of his lips, warm and inviting. The contact sent electricity through her veins, a sensation both foreign and familiar.

“Yes,” she whispered, tears gathering in her eyes, reflecting the golden light of sunset. “I’ll marry you.”

Connor’s smile was radiant, transforming his usually stoic features into something so beautiful it made her chest ache. His hands, calloused from years of wielding a sword yet impossibly gentle with her, slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly, as if it had been made for her. Perhaps, Kate thought as she admired the way the metal caught the light, this had been her destiny all along.

He leaned down, his lips meeting hers in a kiss that began as gentle as a whisper but quickly blazed into something fierce and consuming. Kate melted into him, her arms winding around his neck, fingers tangling in his hair, her body pressing against his as if she could somehow merge their souls together. She tasted the sweetness on his tongue, breathed in the scent of pine and leather and something uniquely Connor that

had become as essential to her as air.

The world around them disappeared. The ancient stones, the whispering wind, the distant call of birds returning to their nests, all of it faded away until there was nothing but the two of them, suspended in a moment that felt eternal and ephemeral all at once. Heat bloomed between them, a living thing that wrapped around them like invisible flames.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Connor rested his forehead against hers. His hands cradled her face as if she were made of the most precious glass, his thumbs gently wiping away tears she hadn't realized she'd shed.

"Ye have my heart, Kate," he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. "From this day until my last. I will cherish ye, protect ye with my body, and love ye with everything I am."

"And you have mine," she replied, meaning it more than she had ever meant anything in her life. The words seemed inadequate for the tide of feeling washing through her, but she saw in his eyes that he understood.

"I never believed in fate until I found you. Until you found me."

They stood in the hush of the garden, wrapped in each other, until Kate suddenly gasped and pulled back slightly.

Connor caught her waist. "What is it, lass? Are ye unwell?"

She shook her head, stunned. "No, it's nothing like that. It's, it's just something I forgot." She looked up at him, her voice wavering. "Before I came here, I read about Bronmuir Keep in a history guidebook, right before I left for Scotland."

He frowned slightly. “And what did it say?”

Kate swallowed hard. “It said the ruins of Bronmuir Keep stood as a testament to one of the most tragic tales on Skye. That in 1689, the laird of the clan was betrayed... and murdered... by his bride. A MacDonald. That it was part of a plot to end the MacLeod line.”

Connor blinked. “Bloody hell,” he muttered.

“They said the laird’s ghost, your ghost, still walks the ruins, looking for justice. For the love that was denied him.”

There was a beat of silence, a small wind curling through the garden as though marking the gravity of the moment.

Then Connor laughed, a deep chuckle that rumbled from his chest. “Me? Marry a MacDonald? The lass would gut me in my sleep just to claim the larder and the cattle.”

Kate didn’t smile. Not at first. Her heart pounded, and strange understanding flushed through her like fire in her blood. “Connor...” she whispered, her fingers tightening around his.

He sobered at once. “What is it?”

“Don’t you see?” she said. “You never did marry that girl. Because I came here. Because of me. History changed.”

A slow smile curved his lips, one that curled around her heart like a ribbon. “Aye, I believe ye did change fate, Kate. At great cost. But saints, I canna regret a single heartbeat of it.”

She laid her hand over his heart, then brushed her lips over the scar above his brow.

“If fate gave me the chance,” she said, voice low and sure, “I’d choose you again.”

“And I you,” he said, voice rough. “In every time, in every life.”

They stood together in the gathering dusk, the world around them fading into shadow, the garden a silent witness to their vow. A cool breeze swept across the keep, carrying the scent of heather and salt from the sea, but Kate felt only warmth. This was where she belonged. This was home. Not a place, but a person. This man, with his strength and his gentleness, his honor and his passion, had become her anchor in a world where everything else was uncertain.

\* \* \*

The moon rose full and bright, casting long shadows across the garden where Kate walked alone. She couldn’t sleep, her head too full of the day’s events, her heart too full of emotion. The ring on her finger caught the moonlight, the emerald glowing like a tiny star.

She had left Connor sleeping, his face peaceful in repose, his breathing deep and even. She had needed a moment to herself, to process everything that had happened, everything she had chosen.

The garden was different at night, mysterious, almost otherworldly. The herbs released their scents more strongly in the cool air, creating a heady perfume that mingled with the salt of the sea. Somewhere in the distance, an gull called, the sound echoing across the silent landscape.

Kate made her way to the small bench where Connor had proposed, settling herself on the weathered wood. Above her, the stars were impossibly bright, more numerous

than she had ever seen in the light-polluted skies of Atlanta. She tried to imagine never seeing electric lights again, never driving a car, never using a smartphone. The thought was both terrifying and strangely liberating.

“You have chosen well.”

The voice, soft and ancient as the hills themselves, made Kate jump to her feet. Standing at the edge of the garden was a figure she had seen only twice before, the old woman from the cemetery. The Cailleach.

In the moonlight, she seemed to shimmer, as if not quite solid. Her silver hair flowed around her like water, and her dark eyes held the wisdom of centuries. She wore a cloak of midnight blue, embroidered with symbols that seemed to move when she wasn't looking directly at them.

“You,” Kate breathed. “You brought me here.”

The Cailleach inclined her head slightly. “I merely opened the door. You walked through it of your own free will.”

“Why?” Kate asked, the question that had haunted her for months finally finding voice. “Why me? Why now?”

The old woman's lips curved in a smile that was both ancient and knowing. “Some souls are born out of their time, child. Yours was always meant for this place, this moment.”

“But my family, my friends?—”

“Will live their lives, as you will live yours,” the Cailleach said gently. “The threads of fate weave a complex tapestry. Your thread has found its proper place.”



Kate heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Connor approaching, his expression alert despite having been woken from sleep. He wore only his plaid, hastily wrapped around his waist, his chest bare in the moonlight. His eyes widened as he caught sight of the Cailleach.

“What—” He began, then stopped abruptly as the old woman stepped forward.

As she moved, the air around her seemed to shimmer and change. For a moment, she was no longer an old woman, but something else entirely. A being of light and power, ancient as the land itself. Her cloak billowed around her though there was no wind, and the symbols embroidered upon it glowed with an inner fire.

Connor dropped to his knees, his face a mask of awe and terror. “Saints preserve us,” he whispered, reaching blindly for Kate’s hand.

The Cailleach looked at him, her eyes now glowing like twin stars in the darkness. “You have doubted,” she said, her voice echoing strangely in the still night air. “You have questioned. But now you see.”

“Aye,” Connor breathed, his fingers tightening around Kate’s. “I believe. I believe all of it.”

The Cailleach nodded, seemingly satisfied.

“Will I ever go back?” Kate asked, though she already knew the answer in her heart.

“Your path lies here now,” the Cailleach said simply. “The future is not when you are, but who you’re with.”

With those words, she began to fade, her form becoming translucent, then transparent, until only a faint shimmer remained in the air where she had stood. A

breeze whispered through the garden, carrying the scent of heather and something older, wilder, the essence of the Highlands themselves.

For a long moment, neither Kate nor Connor moved, both too stunned by what they had witnessed. Then Connor rose slowly to his feet, his eyes never leaving the spot where the Cailleach had been.

“Was that—” He began, his voice hoarse.

“Yes,” Kate said softly. “That was her. The one who brought me here.”

Connor turned to her, his face pale in the moonlight. “I saw her change. She wasna human.”

“No,” Kate agreed. “I don’t think she is. Not entirely.”

His hand found hers again, his grip firm and reassuring. “I believed ye before, Kate. But now...” He shook his head, as if words were inadequate. “There are more things in heaven and earth than I ever dreamed possible.”

She smiled, recognizing the echo of Shakespeare. “The world is full of wonders,” she said. “Some we understand, some we don’t.”

He drew her close, his arms encircling her waist. “The greatest wonder is that ye’re here with me,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Whatever magic brought ye to me, I’ll be grateful for it all my days.”

They stood together in the moonlit garden, surrounded by the ancient magic of the Highlands, their hearts beating in time with each other. And Kate knew, with a certainty that went bone deep, that she was exactly where she was meant to be.

\* \* \*

The great hall of Bronmuir Keep buzzed with activity as the clan prepared for the evening meal. A fortnight had passed since the MacDonald attack, and life was slowly returning to normal. The dead had been honored and buried, the wounded were healing, and the damage to the keep was being repaired.

Kate moved among the tables, helping to set out trenchers and cups. Her ring caught the light from the hearth, sending small flashes of green across the wooden surfaces. Several of the women had noticed it and offered their congratulations, their initial wariness of the strange outlander giving way to genuine warmth. They had forgiven her because their laird had and because she had risked all during the battle to save them and their laird.

Moirra approached, her sharp eyes taking in Kate's flushed cheeks and bright eyes. "Ye look happy, lass," she observed, a smile softening her weathered features.

Before she could respond, the doors to the hall burst open, and a young man staggered in, his clothing stained with travel dust, his face haggard with exhaustion. "I seek the laird!" he called, voice cracking.

Connor emerged from a side chamber, his expression alert. "Aye, I'm here. What news?"

The messenger straightened, drawing a deep breath. "I've come from Edinburgh, my laird. I've seen him. I've seen your youngest brother, Brodie!"

A hush fell over the hall, all activity ceasing as everyone turned to stare at the messenger. Connor went very still, his face draining of color. "Ye're certain?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Aye, my laird,” Thomas said eagerly. “As certain as I stand before ye. He was at the harbor, working on one of the merchant ships. I called out to him, but the crowd separated us before I could reach him.”

Connor’s hand went to the hilt of his dirk, a gesture Kate had come to recognize as his way of grounding himself when emotional. “Was he well? Did he appear injured or ill-treated?”

“Nay, my laird. He looked hale enough, if a bit thin. And his hair was cropped short, but ’twas him, I swear it.”

A murmur ran through the gathered clan members. Surprise, hope, joy. Brodie, the youngest MacLeod brother, lost over six months ago, was alive.

Connor turned to Kate, his blue eyes bright with unshed tears. “My brother lives,” he said, his voice rough with emotion.

She crossed the hall to him, taking his hands in hers. “Then we’ll find him,” she said firmly. “We’ll bring him home.”

Connor nodded, squeezing her hands. “I’ve lost too many,” he said, his gaze holding hers. “I willna let another slip through my fingers.”

“Then let’s bring him home,” Kate repeated, her voice strong and sure.

Around them, the clan erupted in cheers and excited chatter. Plans were already being made. Who would go to Edinburgh, what supplies would be needed, how soon they could depart? The hall, which had been so recently filled with grief, now vibrated with hope and purpose.

Kate looked around at these people who had become her family, at the man who

would soon be her husband, and felt a deep sense of rightness settle in her soul.

She had left behind a world of convenience and technology, of fast food and smartphones, of dating apps and predictable heartbreak. But what she had found was so much more valuable. A place where she was needed, where she belonged, where she was loved, not for who she could pretend to be, but for who she truly was.

The future stretched before her, unknown but full of promise. There would be challenges, of course. Adjusting to life in the seventeenth century, learning the ways of the clan, becoming the wife of a Highland chieftain. But Kate was no longer afraid. With Connor by her side, with the strength she had discovered within herself, she was ready to face whatever came next.

As if reading her thoughts, Connor turned to her, his expression solemn but his eyes alight with love. “Together,” he said softly, a promise and a vow.

Kate nodded, her heart full to bursting. “Together.”

In the warmth of the great hall, surrounded by the people who had become her clan, Kate knew that she had finally found what she had been searching for all her life. Not just love, but belonging. Not just passion, but purpose.

She was home.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:52 pm*

The Isle of Skye, Scotland

Sometime in the future

Dr. Abigail Winston clutched the tablet against her chest, squinting as the late afternoon sun reflected off the crumbling stones of Bronmuir Keep. The wind whipped her dark hair across her face, carrying the scent of brine and heather from the cliffs below.

“Bloody tourists,” she muttered, pushing her way through a group taking selfies. Her sensible boots crunched over loose gravel as she ducked under the preservation society barriers, flashing her credentials at the lone security guard.

“The north tower is still off-limits, Dr. Winston,” he called after her. “Structural engineers haven’t cleared it yet.”

She raised a hand in acknowledgment without turning back. The discovery had been reported from the north tower, and after three years of researching the mysterious Lady Katherine of Clan MacLeod, Abigail wasn’t about to wait for bureaucratic clearance.

The stairwell was dark and smelled of damp stone and time. Abigail switched on her flashlight, illuminating centuries of wear on the steps beneath her feet. Each footfall echoed, as if the keep itself was breathing around her.

When the workman had called, voice trembling with excitement, about finding a sealed chamber during the restoration, she’d dismissed his breathless tales of

“untouched treasures.” Historical sites were always yielding forgotten storage rooms or priest holes. But his mention of a portrait bearing the name Katherine had sent her racing from Edinburgh to Skye without even packing a proper bag.

The newly exposed doorway gaped before her, its ancient oak reinforcements having protected whatever lay beyond for centuries. Abigail’s heart hammered against her ribs as she stepped through.

“Oh my,” she whispered.

Unlike the rest of the keep, exposed to weather and time, this chamber remained remarkably intact. The air felt different here, still and waiting, like a held breath. Dust motes danced in the beam of her flashlight as she swept it across the room.

The portrait dominated the far wall.

They stood together, a man and woman caught in a moment of quiet joy. The man, Laird Connor MacLeod, surely, stood tall and proud, his wild brown hair touching broad shoulders, a half-smile playing on his lips. One hand rested on a broadsword, the other curled possessively around the woman’s waist. Pinned at his shoulder was the infamous Bronmuir Brooch, its silver and gold setting and blue stones capturing the light as if it had been polished yesterday.

But it was the woman who drew her gaze and held it. Katherine MacLeod wore a gown of deep green, her chestnut hair tumbling in waves past her shoulders. Her eyes, a striking hazel flecked with gold, seemed to follow Abigail across the room.

“Impossible,” Abigail breathed, checking the date inscribed at the bottom of the frame. 1695.

The glass case beside the portrait held what appeared to be a journal, its leather

binding cracked but intact. Abigail carefully lifted the protective covering, her trained hands trembling slightly as she opened to a random page.

The handwriting was neat, precise, and utterly modern in its style.

April 18, 1691

Implemented the new inventory system today. Connor laughed at my color-coding, but when we accounted for every last grain in the storehouse in half the usual time, even he had to admit it was “no” a daft notion after all.” Next week, I’ll introduce basic accounting ledgers to track the wool production.

Abigail flipped forward, finding detailed sketches of what appeared to be primitive plumbing systems, medical records tracking fever outbreaks, and notes on crop rotation that wouldn’t become common practice for another century.

The final entry made her throat tighten.

December 31, 1699

Ten years in this century. Sometimes I still wake reaching for my phone or craving a hot shower that doesn’t require hauling twenty buckets up from the well. But then Connor’s arms tighten around me, or little Cameron crawls into our bed with his wild dreams and sticky fingers, and I remember why I stayed.

I may have left one time behind, but I have found where I truly belong. The future is not when you are, but who you’re with.

To whoever finds this someday. Time isn’t a straight line. It’s a circle, and love is the compass that guides us home.



Abigail closed the journal with reverent hands, her academic skepticism warring with the evidence before her. She'd spent her career chasing historical anomalies. People who seemed to know too much for their era, innovations that appeared decades before their time. But this...

This was the proof she'd always sought.

The sun was setting as she emerged from the keep, casting long shadows across the ancient cemetery that bordered the ruins. Her mind raced with implications, publications, research opportunities, all the ways she could share this discovery with the world.

She paused by a weathered stone cross, the same one featured in numerous local legends about wishes and fate. The same one mentioned repeatedly in Katherine's journal.

"I don't suppose you grant wishes for love like Katherine and Connor's?" she said aloud, feeling foolish even as the words left her lips. Three months since David had walked out, claiming her "obsession with the past" left no room for their future.

The wind picked up, carrying the scent of woodsmoke and something else, something green and ancient. Abigail shivered, wrapping her coat tighter.

"They were bonny together, were they no'?"

Abigail startled. An elderly woman sat on a nearby bench, her silver hair escaping a cap. How had she not noticed her before?

"I'm sorry?"

"The laird and his lady," the woman said, her accent thick as heather honey. "Love

like theirs doesn't fade, even when the stones do."

Abigail stepped closer, drawn by something in the woman's dark eyes. "Do you work with the historical society? I don't think we've met. I'm Dr. Winston."

The woman's smile deepened the lines around her eyes. "Aye, I ken fine who ye are, lass."

A cloud passed over the sun, and in that brief shadow, Abigail caught the glint of something at the woman's throat. A brooch, silver and gold with blue stones, identical to the one in the portrait.

"That brooch—" Abigail began, but the words died on her lips as a tour group passed between them. When they cleared, the bench was empty.

Where the woman had sat lay a single black feather, spiraling gently in the wind.

Abigail reached for it, but the breeze lifted it away before her fingers could close around it. The feather danced upward, catching the last golden light of day, then disappeared over the cemetery wall.

Some stories are written in ink, others in stone. But the rarest ones, the ones that reshape destiny, are written across time itself.

And sometimes, if you listen closely enough, you can hear them still.

Edinburgh

1689

Late Autumn

The cobblestones gleamed like wet river stones in the thin drizzle, reflecting the amber glow of newly lit street lanterns. Brodie MacLeod pulled his borrowed cloak tighter against the chill, the hood concealing his face as he wove through the crowded streets of Edinburgh.

At seventeen, he moved with the wary grace of someone much older. The boy who had left Skye almost a year ago, full of romantic notions and defiance, had been burned away like morning mist. What remained was leaner, harder, his blue eyes shadowed beneath a furrowed brow and dark hair that had been shorn close to his scalp.

The White Hart Inn loomed ahead, its weathered sign creaking in the wind. Brodie's hand instinctively checked the dirk hidden at his waist before he pushed through the door into the wall of noise and heat.

The common room reeked of wet wool, spilled ale, and unwashed bodies. Smoke hung in layers beneath the low beams. In the farthest corner, half-hidden in shadow, sat Anne McKinnon.

His chest tightened at the sight of her. The copper hair tucked beneath a plain cap, the proud tilt of her chin, the fingers that nervously traced the rim of her pewter cup. For

her, he had defied his brothers, abandoned his clan, and forsaken his name. For her, he would do it all again.

“Ye shouldna be here,” she whispered as he slid onto the bench opposite her. Her Gaelic was soft, meant only for his ears. “They’re watching the ports now.”

“Let them watch,” Brodie replied, reaching across to take her trembling hand. “The ship leaves at dawn. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be bound for the Colonies.”

Anne wouldn’t meet his eyes. Her fingers were ice cold despite the fire roaring in the hearth.

“What troubles ye, lass?” Brodie asked, ducking his head to catch her gaze. “Is it the journey? I swear to ye, I’ll work my hands to the bone in Virginia. We’ll have land of our own within five years.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “Brodie, I?—”

The door to the inn crashed open. Five men in the king’s colors filled the frame, rain dripping from their cloaks onto the threshold. The tavern fell silent.

“I’m sorry,” Anne whispered, finally looking up. The anguish in her eyes told him everything.

Cold understanding washed over him. “What have ye done?”

“My laird knows about us,” she said, her voice breaking. “He threatened to banish my family. I had no choice.”

The soldiers moved through the room with purpose, straight toward their table. Brodie’s hand flew to his dirk.

“Don’t,” Anne pleaded. “They promised ye wouldn’t be harmed if ye didn’t resist.”

Betrayal tasted like ash in his mouth. “And ye believed them? Christ, Anne, do ye ken what they do to Highland rebels?”

The captain of the guard reached their table, his face impassive beneath his rain-soaked hat. “Brodie MacLeod? You’re to come with us.”

Brodie stood slowly, his muscles coiled tight. Five against one. No chance of winning, but perhaps a chance of escape if he timed it right.

“They said they’d only hold ye until the troubles pass,” Anne said desperately. “A few months at most. Then ye can go home.”

Brodie laughed, a harsh sound with no humor. “Aye, and the English king loves the Scots like brothers.” His voice dropped lower. “I would have died for ye, Anne McKinnon. Remember that in the cold nights ahead.”

As they bound his wrists with rough rope, Brodie caught a glimpse of something passing between the captain and Anne. A small pouch that clinked with the unmistakable sound of coins.

“Thirty pieces of silver,” he spat. “At least Judas got a kiss with his betrayal.”

They dragged him out into the rain, past the curious eyes of Edinburgh’s citizens. None would interfere. None would remember the face of yet another Highland lad being hauled away to an uncertain fate.

Three weeks later, Brodie lay in the fetid darkness of a ship’s hold, the taste of blood and seawater sharp on his tongue. The vessel pitched and groaned around him, timbers creaking like tortured souls. The chains at his wrists had rubbed his skin raw, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the hollow ache in his chest.

“Where d’ye think they’re taking us?” whispered the man chained beside him, a blacksmith from Perth who’d been caught with Jacobite pamphlets.

“Does it matter?” Brodie replied, staring into the darkness. “Hell’s hell, no matter which shore it’s on.”

The ship lurched violently, sending several men sliding across the wet planks. Something had changed in the motion of the waves. They were no longer in calm waters.

“I heard the guards say Jamaica,” another voice offered. “Sugar plantations. Men don’t last two years there.”

A sudden commotion above deck pulled Brodie from his thoughts. Men shouted. Something heavy crashed. The unmistakable sound of steel on steel rang out.

“What’s happening?” the blacksmith hissed.

Before anyone could answer, the hatch flew open. Rain and sea spray poured in, along with the silhouette of a man.

“How many down there?” called a voice with a thick French accent.

“Twenty, maybe more,” answered someone above.

“Get them up. Quickly now. The Royal Navy won’t be far behind.”

As Brodie was hauled up into the storm-tossed night, he saw the British crew lined up against the gunwale, hands bound. A ship with unfamiliar colors flew alongside them, grappling hooks binding the vessels together.

“Pirates?” he asked the man, removing his chains.

The man grinned, teeth flashing white in his dark face. “Privateers, lad. Flying under French colors.” He nodded toward a tall figure giving orders near the helm. “Captain has no love for the English or their slave ships. You’ve a choice now. Join us or take your chances in the longboat.”

Brodie looked out at the heaving black sea, then back at the captain. The man stood like a warrior, unbowed by the tempest around him. Something about his stance reminded Brodie of Connor.

“What’s your name, boy?” the captain called, striding over.

“Brodie MacLeod of Skye,” he answered, straightening to his full height despite his weakened state.

A strange expression crossed the captain’s weathered face. “MacLeod, you say? I once knew a MacLeod who saved my life in a tavern brawl in Inverness.” He studied Brodie for a long moment. “Can you fight?”

“Aye. And I learn fast.”

The captain nodded once. “We’ll see. My ship’s no place for vengeance or self-pity. Leave those chains behind with your past.”

As dawn broke over a steel-gray horizon, Brodie stood at the rail of the privateer ship, watching the slave vessel shrink into the distance. The salt air stung his cracked lips, but he breathed it in deeply, tasting freedom and possibility.

Anne’s betrayal would always be a scar across his heart. But for the first time since that rainy night in Edinburgh, Brodie felt something other than despair stirring in his blood.

The wind changed, filling the sails with a sudden snap. The ship surged forward,

cutting through the waves toward whatever fate awaited beyond the horizon.

Behind him, unnoticed in the chaos of the night, a black feather drifted across the deck, spiraling upward into the lightening sky.

\* \* \*

Thank you so much for reading!

I hope you enjoyed A Scot for All Time. Next up is, The Scot Who Loved Me , where you'll meet an awkward geologist and a Jacobite spy. I hope you love it.