



# Annabelle Meets The Highlander (Scottish Highlander I Never Knew #4)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** When Annabelle Fox takes an extraordinary deal to escape her old life, she doesn't expect to wake up in 17th-century Scotland—or find herself investigating a murder that could spark a deadly clan war...

As a young police detective, Annabelle thought she'd seen it all, but when a mysterious Fae transports her to Clan Donald's rugged Fort on Islay, she's plunged into a world of feuding clans and magical intrigue. Grappling with her new reality, Annabelle finds an unexpected ally in Jamie MacDonald, the Laird's bright and earnest younger brother. His humor and warmth begin to thaw her guarded heart, but their growing connection is threatened when tragedy strikes.

The murder of a Campbell envoy on Donald lands sparks accusations that threaten to destroy the Sept. Determined to prove the clan's innocence, Jamie and Annabelle team up to track the real culprits. Their investigation leads them to a dangerous outlaw faction—and forces Annabelle to confront her fears of betrayal as her love for Jamie deepens.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

## CHAPTER 1

Annabelle stared at her phone, her jaw ticking. There was a tension in her shoulders that only he could cause her. She glanced around the San Francisco Police Department's detective pool, wondering how she'd gotten here. She was a decorated police detective and yet, she had found herself stuck in a dead-end engagement to a bastard of a man who did nothing but manipulate and abuse her.

Where are you? You were supposed to be home an hour ago!

She read the text again, wishing she could just escape him. Wishing she could get away and leave him. She loved her job, but at this point, she would even leave it to get away from him. She'd tried leaving Edward before, but he always found her and manipulated her back into his clutches. Logically, she knew she should end things, get a restraining order, and block him on all social media. The problem was she knew the reality of doing all of that. She saw it weekly in her line of work. Women who'd tried to escape, who did everything right, and still ended up dead because the men they were with weren't capable of acting like human beings.

She set the phone aside and didn't bother answering. She refocused on the cold case she was working on, taking notes on the case, looking for something that would give her a new direction to go on it.

As she sat at her desk, surrounded by stacks of case files, Devon Blake, another detective approached with a lighthearted smile. "You're burning the midnight oil again, Annabelle?" he quipped, his tone playful.

Annabelle glanced up, offering a tired yet warm smile in return. “I don’t know about midnight oil, but yeah, trying to find a lead on this cold case. I don’t want to go home while I’m in the middle of it, you know?”

Devon chuckled, nodding in understanding. “I get it. It’s like a puzzle and you’ve got a piece you are determined to make fit.” He nodded. “Good luck, I hope you find it.”

“Me too,” Annabelle said before she returned to her work.

Annabelle continued to work, ignoring every chime of her phone that she knew was another message from Edward. She knew he was getting angrier the faster the chimes happened. Eventually he’d come looking for her. She definitely didn’t want that. Didn’t want her colleagues hearing him berate her in front of them because she wasn’t home to fix him dinner. Her job was the only thing that kept her sane and she didn’t want him ruining that.

He’d ruined everything else in her life. He’d driven her friends away when they’d first started dating, claiming they took up too much of her time and she never had time for him. So she’d stopped seeing them and eventually they dropped away from her life. She had no family, so he hadn’t needed to isolate her from them. The only thing left was her job, and he’d been trying for years now to get her to quit that.

Edward wanted to know where she was twenty-four-seven. He wanted to know who she was talking to, what she was saying, and if she was doing something he wouldn’t approve of, which was pretty much everything. He didn’t like her wearing clothes that were too tight, not that she did that, but he always claimed her blouses were showing too much, or her pants showed off her curves too much.

She was a half-Latina woman, the curves were natural, but he constantly tried to tell her she needed to diet and slim down. He didn’t want her eating anything but salad and vegetables, and that just wasn’t what she liked. He was always picking at her,

manipulating her, whining at her about his needs and how she wasn't meeting them. It was exhausting.

Five more texts came through in quick succession and she knew if she didn't get out of there, he'd show up. Without reading the texts, she shoved the phone in her purse, stacked up her files and locked them in her desk, then headed out to her car.

Minutes later, Annabelle left the precinct and drove to the grocery store. The looming aisles of canned goods and various essentials greeted her with their fluorescent glow, as the bustle of other shoppers hurriedly attempted to get last minute things for their own dinners.

As she loaded her cart with provisions for the evening meal, she couldn't shake the gnawing frustration that had been building within her for far too long. She wanted out. She wanted to escape and move far, far away where he couldn't find her and bring her back. It was an impossible thought though. She had nowhere to go and no way to get there. Edward controlled everything, including her bank account which she had naively added him to when they first moved in together.

Finally, with her grocery bags packed and her mind still mired in contemplation, Annabelle returned to her car. She was tired and frustrated with her life. She didn't want to go home to Edward, but she didn't seem to have a choice. If she didn't return, he'd come looking for her. He was probably already on his way, tracking her via her phone.

Putting the key in the ignition, Annabelle tried to turn the car on, but all it did was click. Frowning, she looked at the panel. All the lights were on, the gas tank was more than half-full, but it wouldn't start. She twisted the key again, but nothing happened.

Uttering a string of annoyed words, Annabelle fumbled for her phone. She had no

choice but to call Edward for help, a decision that filled her with trepidation.

“Where the fuck are you, Annabelle? I swear to fuck you can’t do shit right! I am starving to death, and you aren’t here!”

Annabelle pulled the phone from her ear and waited for his shouts to end before she said, “I had to stop at the store, and now my car won’t start.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You stupid bitch, you didn’t put gas in it, did you. Just like you to forget doing something so basic! And now I’m going to go hungry because you are so useless you can’t even do something so easy as put gas in your car!” he ranted.

“There is gas in it, Edward. It just won’t start.”

“You probably did something else that was stupid then. I can’t believe you’re making me get out of the house. Do you know how hard my day was? Do you even care? No. All you care about is yourself! But whatever. Fucking bitch, can’t do anything. Just stay there. So fucking useless!” he muttered as he ended the call.

Frustration gripped her as she tossed the phone in the passenger seat. She sat behind the wheel, pondering her predicament. She’d give anything to get away from here, but it seemed even her car had other plans for her. Angry tears spilled down her cheeks as she sat there wishing for the impossible.

A loud tap on her window startled her and she rolled it down. She quickly wiped her cheeks. “Yes?” she questioned.

Before her stood a man in a security guard uniform. He was dark skinned and had a large scar on his bearded face. “Havin’ car trouble, lass?” he asked, his accent was a rich Scottish brogue.

He seemed so out of place in San Francisco, but she nodded. "Yes, the blasted thing won't start."

"Seems more than the car is giving you fits, lass, judging by the tears. Seems you might be in need of some help, and perhaps not just with your car?"

Annabelle snorted. "Got all that from me sitting here crying?" She grabbed a tissue and wiped her nose and cheeks. "Maybe you should be the detective."

He smiled and bent down to look at her through the car window. "I can offer you a way out, a chance to escape this world for another, if you're interested."

Annabelle chuckled, thinking it was all a joke. "Oh really?" She raised an eyebrow. "And how would you do that?"

The man's unique eyes glimmered mysteriously and Annabelle would have sworn they changed colors. "I can take you to another time, to a place entirely different from here, where you can start anew. But," he added with a note of gravity, "there's a catch, you cannae ever return here."

Annabelle's laughter faded as she considered his words. She stared into his eyes, searching for any hint of deceit, but saw only sincerity. "You can't be serious?"

The security guard nodded solemnly. "Aye, lass. I can do what I say, shall I give you proof?"

Annabelle's mind raced with disbelief and intrigue. Could this mysterious man truly offer her an escape from her suffocating life? Was he the miracle she was looking for? "Alright, show me," she said, her voice trembling with excitement and fear. "Who are you? A performance artist or something?"

He stepped back and gave her a slight bow. "You may call me Dub Sith." With that he instantly vanished before her eyes. A heart-beat later, he reappeared. "Do you believe me now?" He grinned mischievously.

As she gaped in astonishment at the surreal display, her thoughts raced. Could this really be her way out? An escape from the monotonous, frustrating life she had come to despise? The answer seemed to shimmer before her, as if fate itself were extending a hand, offering her an opportunity she'd never dared to dream of.

Then, a glimmer of dread pierced the excitement. Edward's car rumbled into the parking lot, breaking the enchantment of the moment. "Oh no, that's Edward."

Panic welled up within her as she realized the magnitude of the choice before her.

"Tis now or never, lass," Dub Sith replied. He opened her door and held out his hand.

Annabelle had a moment of inner reflection as her future flashed before her with Edward and how it made her feel sick. Then she thought about this strange adventure Dub Sith was offering and what it could bring. As Edward's headlights beamed in her direction, she knew she had to make a hasty and probably reckless decision. With hurried determination, Annabelle took Dub Sith's offered hand, her heart pounding in her chest. Time seemed to hang in the balance, as she made the decision that would forever alter the course of her life.

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### CHAPTER 2

From the moment Annabelle took Dub Sith's hand, the world had gone black and the next thing she knew she was no longer on her feet. Instead she was lying prone in some tall grass with the sun shining brightly over her. Had the man she'd recklessly trusted drugged her somehow? –She sat up and realized she was nestled in a field of vibrant green grass, greener than she'd ever seen in person. Funnily it reminded her of the pictures she'd seen of Ireland and Scotland...

It dawned on her that Dub Sith had a Scottish brogue. Was it possible he'd deposited her in Scotland? She recalled he'd said he'd bring her to another time and place... Was the place Scotland? she wondered... As she sat there pondering exactly where she was, she heard some bleating growing closer and suddenly several inquisitive sheep ambled closer to her, casting curious glances her way.

Then, from further away Annabelle heard barking and a couple of seconds later and long-haired Collie bound toward her. Its coat was a mix of black, brown, and tan to almost white and reminded her of a dog she'd seen as a kid about a shaggy dog. It circled around her, its tail wagging and its tongue hanging out as it moved into a playful stance in front of her, going low in the front with its hind end in the air, its tail still wagging. Annabelle couldn't help but laugh at the cheerful welcome. "Oh, hello there," she said. "Who are you?"

"Effie! Bring the wee girls back ta the herd," a voice called out.

Annabelle glanced at the dog and smiled. "Is that your name? Are you Effie? Am I keeping you from doing your job?"



Effie barked playfully and nuzzled her.

Annabelle laughed as she stroked the dog's long fur. She noticed it was pretty thick, but seemed to be well-groomed. "You're a real sweetheart, aren't you," she said.

"Aye, she is."

Annabelle looked up to see a man with a walking stick, dressed in a tunic style shirt and tan pants with boots. He had a plaid cloak around his shoulders and a blue cap on his head. "Oh, hello." Annabelle stood and dusted off her pants. "Um, can you tell me where and when I am?" she asked.

The man stared at her and shook his head. "You're one o' them, then. Damn Faerie. I'll take you ta those that help you."

Annabelle blinked. Faerie? Did he mean Dub Sith? The man she'd met in the grocery store parking lot was one of the Fae? "Sorry, but who are you?"

"Balloch MacDonald. Come with me, lass," he replied, and started walking. "Effie, this way!" he called to the dog.

Annabelle followed him through the field of lush grass. "Where are we going?" she asked, but Balloch simply grunted and kept moving. "Talkative, aren't you?" she said under her breath as she followed along. She watched Effie circle the sheep and push them along beside them.

Eventually they reached an area with some building that looked like stone and thatch roofed cottages, and various people in kilts and serviceable dresses were working. Watching them, she noticed there was nothing modern about what they were doing. There were no cars, no electricity... nothing but horses, and livestock, and old fashioned tools. Either she was in some obscure village, or Dub Sith really had

brought her into the past.

Thinking this was where Balloch was going to stop, she paused, but he continued on, heading for the large hill. That was when she noticed it. At the top of the hill stood a massive stone wall with wood towers and an iron and wooden gate. Coming out from behind the wall was a large building that looked like it might be a castle of some sort.

She and Balloch were still on the dirt road that looked like it wound its way up the hill to the gates. That had to be where he was taking her. She looked around at the hill which had the same tall grasses and heather as the field she'd arrived in. Taking a deep breath she noticed how clean the air seemed as compared to San Francisco. There was no car exhaust, not industrial smells... it was just pure fresh air.

Eventually, she and Balloch arrived at the imposing gates, which stood tall and sturdy, guarding the entrance to the courtyard of the castle.

"Balloch, what brings you to the fort on such a sunny day?" a voice called from the above tower. "Tis nae time to sheer the sheep again, tis it?"

"Nae, found this lass in the field, thought she belonged to you."

Annabelle looked up at the man in the tower who turned his gaze to her. "Hello. I'm Annabelle Fox, I'm not sure why Balloch brought me here, he just told me to follow him."

"Ah, I see. You be another o' them. Come in. We'll fetch someone to welcome you," the man in the tower called down.

A moment later the gates opened, and Balloch said, "There you are, lass, you'll do fine now, donnae be gettin' into any more trouble." With that, Balloch turned and called Effie to follow.

“Come through, lass,” a man in a blue and green plaid kilt said from the other side of the gate. “I am Shaw MacDonald. Welcome to Fort Donald.”

“Thank you,” Annabelle replied, her eyes wide as she took in the beauty of the place.

Suddenly, the massive doors of the castle opened and another man in a kilt strode down the steps. He was tall and broad with a head full of thick red curls that seemed to have a life of their own. As he got closer, she noticed he had the most beautiful blue-gray eyes she’d ever seen. As he reached her, the curious look on his face brightened and he broke into a grin that made his eyes crinkle and he chuckled.

“Welcome ta Fort Donald, I’m Jamie MacDonald. I’m going ta bet you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment?”

“Um... yes...” Annabelle stumbled through her greeting feeling like she’d just been hit with a two-by-four. She continued, “I’m Detective... I mean... I’m Annabelle Fox,” she corrected herself. Annabelle, captivated not only by his appearance but also by his friendly demeanor, accepted his offered hand. “I’ve figured out that I’ve been brought to Scotland, but the question is when am I?”

Jamie’s grin widened. “Follow me, lass,” Jamie said, “I’ll take you ta talk to my brother, Cam. He’s the chief of our clan. That tis Clan Donald and this as I said, tis Fort Donald.”

“Alright,” she agreed.

Jamie turned and started toward the steps he’d come down a few moments before. Annabelle looked around and took in the bustling courtyard. There was an area that looked like stables with horses, another that held a few other animals, a man working with iron she figured was a blacksmith, and then there were the men who were all dressed as Jamie and Shaw were. They all wore matching kilts of blue and green

plaid, white tunics with what looked like a heavy scarf of the same plaid that crossed their chests and tucked into the belts with their swords. She'd seen pictures of Scottish men and knew it was traditional wear, but didn't know what that cross shoulder plaid piece was called. All she knew was every one of them looked straight out of that TV show, *Outlander*, but without the jacket. She wondered if they weren't wearing them because it was fairly warm out at the moment, or if that was just something the costume designers had added for the show.

"This way, lass," Jamie said at the door as he held it open for her to step through.

Annabelle stepped into the interior of the castle and her breath was stolen. The floor was stone, as were the walls, but on the walls were numerous tapestries that were so vibrant in color it was a bit shocking. She'd seen tapestries before, but they were all weathered and old. These looked almost new. There was still light coming in through the windows, but she could see mounted torches on the wall which she assumed would be lit when it got darker. She did notice there were some already lit on the walls further up the staircase. "This place is incredible. I can't believe I'm actually here," she murmured.

"You donnae seem to be in shock being here," Jamie said, giving her a smile that stole her breath away.

Annabelle shook her head and smiled back. "I'm not. Not exactly. I'm half-afraid I'm dreaming, but I'm not shocked."

"Odd thing you are, lass." He laughed heartily. "The others were all in denial."

"Others?" Annabelle repeated. "What others?"

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### CHAPTER 3

“A ye, lass,” Jamie replied, grinning as he stood with her in the huge stone hallway. “You’re the fourth lass to be brought here to us Donalds.”

“What do you mean?” Annabelle asked cautiously. Dub Sith hadn’t told her about others, and hadn’t said she couldn’t talk about being brought through time to whatever time period this was, so she was hesitant to say anything for fear of being burnt at the stake as a witch or something.

“It’s all right, lass. We know you are nae from here, but my guess would be some place far in the future? Your accent and clothing match those of my sister-in-law and the others.” Jamie winked.

“You know I traveled through time?” Annabelle gasped at how easily he believed her. “Wait, there are other women who sound like me and dress like me?”

“Aye,” Jamie laughed again, “though nae longer do they dress as you are. T’would make them stand out a bit too much.”

“Well, yeah, that would make sense. I probably should get a change of clothes too. Can’t imagine anyone seeing me would think I belonged here.” Annabelle frowned.

“You’re a funny one.” Jamie grinned. “Not even one question about how you got here?”

Annabelle shook her head. “No, why? I know how I got here, but I still don’t know

what century I'm in and you nor any of the others have answered that question for me." She gave him a pointed look.

His lips twitched and his eyes sparkled with humor. "Well, lass, I imagine we were each tryin' to break it to you gently, because of the others you see, but you're in the seventeenth century."

"Seventeenth?" Annabelle sucked in a breath. "Beginning, middle or end?" She searched her brain trying to recall what she knew of the time period.

"Latter part," Jamie replied. "Does that worry you?"

"No, just trying to figure out what I recall of the time period, what went on in the world at this time. God, my country isn't anything but east coast colonies right now. I don't think the Spanish have even traveled up the coast of California yet. The Ohlone people must be living there right now." Amazement and wonder filled Annabelle. Part of her wished she could go there and warn them of the what was to come, but she knew that would be impossible, plus the massacres wouldn't happen for more than another hundred and seventy-five years or so.

"Lass, I havenae idea what it is you're talking about," Jamie replied, giving her a curious look.

"Oh, right. Sorry. Not sure that I can explain, or if I'm supposed to. He didn't give me an rules except I can't go back."

"He?"

"Dub Sith. He's the one who brought me here." She smiled. "I'm going to assume you already know that considering you said there were others, including your sister-in-law, who came here like I did. So from that I'm going to assume at least one of

them assimilated into your culture?"

Jamie's voice took on a playful tone. "Aye, each one of them has ended up marrying into the clan, lured by the charm of our fair land and the, uh, bountiful company." He winked, making it clear that he included himself among the hopeful suitors. "It seems the men here have a soft spot for damsels in distress, especially those with a mysterious allure."

His flirtations and teasing made her heart tingle, but Annabelle had just been given her freedom from Edward and she wasn't sure she was ready to jump into a new relationship right away. No matter how adorable Jamie was, she was going to enjoy the freedom she had here, unless, she thought, they'd married because they had to? Suddenly she was afraid she'd landed in a much more misogynistic time than the one she'd left.

"Did they do that on their own or were they compelled to marry?" she questioned.

"I donnae know what you are askin', lass. Why would they be compelled to marry?"

She gave him a curious look. She decided to reframe her question. "Did they marry because they fell in love with whoever they married?"

"Oh, aye. Arse over teakettle, if you ask me," Jamie replied, chuckling again, his expression brightening.

As they continued down the hall, Annabelle's thoughts drifted back to Edward. Despite his nagging and possessiveness, she couldn't deny that she had loved him in the beginning. It was only after she'd moved in, and things began to escalate, that she'd realized her mistake and by then it was too late. It was a complex web of emotions she was untangling, but with Jamie's sunny personality and sincerity, it was hard to remain guarded around him. She had taken a leap of faith into the unknown,

and it was as if the Highland winds were whispering secrets of adventure and romance in her ear.

Jamie led Annabelle through the hallway and up the stairs to the next level. He kept up the banter as they walked. “I think you’re going to like it here as much as the others have come to love it. Jen says being here is much less stressful than being where she came from.” He grinned.

“Really? What does she do now that she’s married and living here?” Annabelle asked, curious to know what the women of her time had found to do here. Had they just become wives and that was it?

“Well, Jen spends most days teaching our men something called martial arts. I’m getting pretty good at it.” His grin was infectious. “Do you know it?”

Annabelle’s jaw dropped. “I know of it, but I don’t know how to do it.” She laughed at the incredulous thought of these Highland warriors learning to fight using some form of martial arts.

“She took down a bunch of bandits when she first arrived. Cam was impressed,” Jamie said with a laugh.

“That’s crazy. What about the others?”

“Well, Mae, she was the second one to come here, she’s a healer of sorts, if anyone is feeling blue, they go talk to Mae and she helps them. She calls it therapy,” Jamie replied. “And Catherine spends most days in the library or traveling around Islay with Eamon on missions. She’s pretty smart and likes to record things.”

“So they don’t just stay home and play housewife?”



"I want ta say nae, but I am nae sure I take your meanin', lass." He smiled as he paused outside a door. "This is my brother's meeting chambers, lass. He's the chief of the clan,, Cam MacDonald."

"This is all very unusual for me. I feel like I'm about to meet the governor or something." Annabelle looked at the door with a bit of trepidation.

Jamie's eyes sparkled with reassurance. "Donnae let him scare you, lass. He's tough outside but soft inside." He knocked and then pushed the heavy doors open. "Cam?"

The room was spacious, adorned with more intricate tapestries that Annabelle noticed depicted the history of the MacDonald Clan. There was a large oak table sitting in the center of the room, surrounded by sturdy chairs, and a massive hearth crackled with a welcoming fire on one side. There was sunlight coming through the four windows in the huge room and a couple of lanterns that were lit as well on the table.

As Annabelle stepped further into the room, her eyes fell upon the man seated at the head of the table. Cam MacDonald, Chief of Fort Donald, was an imposing figure. Tall, dashing, and powerfully built, he possessed an air of quiet intensity. His thick, wavy auburn hair was the same shade as Jamie's but longer as it framed his rugged yet handsome face. His bright blue eyes turned to her with a penetrating gaze that seemed to see straight through her.

Annabelle found herself momentarily captivated by the sight of this enigmatic leader and she could see how Jen was probably immediately taken with him when she met him. Especially when he smiled at her. It wasn't as heart-stopping as Jamie's smile, but it was a close second.

Cam rose from his chair, his presence commanding the room. "Welcome to Fort Donald," he said in a deep, resonant voice. "I am Cam MacDonald."

“Thank you, I’m Detective Annabelle Fox, but I guess being here I’m not really anymore.” Annabelle said, uncertain.

Cam smiled. “Do you know how you arrived here?”

“Do you mean here at the castle in your room, or do you mean do I know how I traveled back in time more than three hundred years?” Annabelle grinned. “I can answer both.”

Cam seemed taken aback at her flippancy. “You seem comfortable with the fact you’ve traveled back in time.”

“I knew before I came that I would be going somewhere. He didn’t tell me where or when, only that once I went, I couldn’t go back.”

“He?”

Annabelle stared into his face and arched a brow. “Dub Sith. Which, from what Balloch said, is one of the Faeries?”

“Aye, that he is. How is it you know so much already, lass?” Cam frowned.

“I’m not sure what you mean. He asked me if I wanted to come, and I said yes.” Annabelle kept her reasons for making such a huge decision in a matter of seconds to herself. These guys didn’t need to know about Edward and how suffocated she had felt by him.

“Interesting. Let me send for my wife, she’s going to want to meet you and I’m sure you would be more comfortable with another woman from your time, which I assume from your attire is around the same period as Jen is from.” Cam strode over to the door, called out to someone, and then spoke softly to them. He turned back and said,

“She’ll be here shortly.”

“You mentioned a place earlier,” Jamie said.

Annabelle nodded. “California.”

“Is that in America?”

Again Annabelle nodded and her lips twitched. “It is. West coast. Where is Jen from?”

“All over, her family was in the military, but she came here from a place called Memphis, Tennessee. Do you know it?” Cam answered.

“I do. California is pretty far away from it though.”

As she said that, the door swung open once more, and Jen burst in with an infectious energy that instantly filled the room. With a wide, welcoming grin, she wrapped Annabelle in a warm and boisterous hug, as if they had been friends for a lifetime. Jen's physical presence was striking—she possessed both a rare beauty and undeniable strength.

Annabelle couldn't help but be awestruck by Jennifer's qualities. She stood at a medium height, exuding an athletic and toned physique. Her dark brown hair was elegantly pulled back into a braided bun, and her hazel eyes sparkled with warmth and vivacity.

“Er, hi?” Annabelle said to the exuberant woman. “I’m Annabelle Fox.”

Jen laughed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to tackle you, I’m just excited we’ve got another sister here. I’m Jennifer MacDonald, call me Jen, everyone does. Welcome to Fort

Donald. You must be so bewildered, right? But I can assure you, this is a great place and you're safe here."

"Thanks, and I'm okay actually. It's a lot to take in, but I think I'm going to like it too."

With a reassuring pat on Annabelle's shoulder, Jen replied, "I'm glad. So how did you get here?"

"I still can't quite believe how it happened myself," she admitted. "I was stranded in a grocery store parking lot, my car refusing to start, when this security guard appeared out of nowhere. He had this scar on his face, and he spoke with the thickest Scottish brogue I've ever heard and said his name was Dub Sith."

"He told you his name?" Jen's eyes widened.

"He did, and he offered me something unbelievable—a chance to escape, to go back in time to a place entirely different. At first, I thought he was just joking around, you know just being silly, but then he disappeared and came back, and I knew he could do what he said."

Cam leaned forward, his expression thoughtful. "I still cannae believe he asked you if you wanted to come."

Jen looked thoughtful and then said, "Well, if you recall, he did show up at Catherine and Eamon's wedding and she told him he should try asking first. Maybe he listened to her?"

Cam nodded but seemed surprised. "Perhaps so, surprising, but it does make this a bit easier."

Annabelle looked between them. “Wait, did he not ask you?” she said, turning to Jen.

“Well, technically, no. He came to my father’s funeral, and I thought he was offering me a professional fight. I didn’t know I was coming here and couldn’t go back. I’m glad he warned you first.”

“Oh wow. That would suck, coming here without warning. I bet you were so confused.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Jen nodded. “So were Mae and Catherine. I’m just amazed at how relaxed you are about all this.” She giggled. “We so weren’t, but don’t worry, none of us would trade what happened for anything. We all love it here.” She turned her gaze on Cam, and they shared a small, intimate smile.

“Jamie said the three of you each married someone in the clan?”

“We did.” Jen looked over at Jamie and there was something in that look that had Annabelle wondering what they were keeping from her, but she didn’t expand on it because Jamie cleared his throat and looked embarrassed for a moment.

“Jen, why don’t you take Annabelle on a tour while I have Sally prep a room for her?” Jamie said.

“Sure, but I’m really curious... what made you say yes?” Jen said, giving her a curious look.

Annabelle, her gaze cast down slightly. She didn’t really want to share why she’d come here. Why she’d felt the need to travel three hundred plus years into the past to get away from Edward. It felt too personal even though she was quickly coming to feel more connected to these people than she had been connected to anyone in her life.

“Jennifer.”

Annabelle glanced up through her lashes to see Cam giving her a subtle shake of his head. Jen glanced at him and then some look of understanding passed between them, and she turned back to Annabelle.

“So, how about we see about that tour?”

“That would be great. Thanks,” Annabelle said with a genuine smile. She was grateful that Jen didn’t push.

“We’ll just do the basics for now and get you a more extensive tour over the next few days.”

“Um, I hate to ask, but what about clothes?”

Jen laughed. “I’ll take you to see Bridie. She’s the best seamstress and makes most of the clothes for the clan. She’ll get you fitted right up. In fact we can start there.” Jen led her from the room and to another on the first level of the castle.

As they walked, Jen explained that Bridie and her daughters sewed dresses for the women while her husband took care of seeing that the men of the clan had what they needed. Nearly all the men wore kilts in the warmer months, but they did wear a style of wool pants in the winter months when they needed to be out in the weather.

Once they finished with Bridie, who had gifted her a nightdress as well as a gown to wear later, Jen showed her the kitchens, the dining hall and to the healer’s room, just in case she felt ill at any point. As they were heading back up the stairs, a woman in a brown gown with a white apron appeared.

“Oh, Sally, meet Annabelle,” Jen said.

“Aye, hello.” Sally smiled. “I’ve jest been preparing a room for you. I put her in the same you and the others used when you arrived. Seems to be good luck,” Sally said with a wink.

Jen’s smile widened. “Perfect. Thanks Sally.”

“My pleasure, Lady Jen. Let me know if’n you need aught else.”

“We will, thanks.” Jen led her up the stairs and down a corridor filled with torch light. She stopped in front of a wooden door and put her hand on the handle. She grinned and looked at Annabelle. “Welcome to your new home.” She swung open the door and let Annabelle in. “I know it’s kind of small, but trust me, it’s cozy and will warm up nicely in the winter.”

Annabelle’s gaze swept over the room. There was a single bed with a hay mattress and numerous bed linens, a nightstand with a lantern, a small table and chairs under a window, a stand that held a washbasin with a bowl and water and a large pot at the bottom, as well as a cabinet that she recalled was called a wardrobe. There was also a large fireplace with a crackling fire and the accoutrements that went along with keeping it stoked. She’d never had a fireplace, so she wasn’t exactly sure what she’d need to do for it, but figured it probably wasn’t that hard.

“It’s lovely,” she said.

“I always enjoyed it.” She smiled. “So do you have questions? Or need to know how anything here works?”

“You didn’t show me a bathroom, so I’m going to guess there aren’t any and if I recall my history, that is a chamber pot?” Annabelle pointed at the larger pot below the bowl and pitcher.

“Yeah, one of the few things I miss from our time. The good news is that the castle staff will take care of cleaning it out each day for you. If you need it cleaned sooner, there is a place for that, but we’ll go into that at a different time. If you want a bath, Sally and the staff women can bring up a tub and fill it for you.”

“That’s got to be a pain in the ass, but I’m good right now. I’m just really hungry.”

“Oh right. I forgot how starved I was when I first got here too. Tired too. You’re gonna sleep hard, but let me get you some food and then you can rest.”

“That would be great. Should I go down to the dining hall?”

“Naw, I’ll go get you something and bring it up here for you, that way you can eat at your leisure and get some rest.”

As Jen left the room, the golden rays of the sun starting to descend in the sky painted the room with a warm, amber glow, casting long shadows that danced across the stone walls. The day had passed so quickly, but then Annabelle had no idea what time it had been when she’d woken.

She walked around the room, looked in the cabinet, which was empty except for a few wooden hangers. Annabelle used them to hang up the dress and nightgown Bridie had given her. Once that was done, she sat down and tested the bed. It was fairly comfortable, and she knew she was going to like it here.

A few moments later, Jen reappeared, bearing a tray laden with two hearty meals that sent savory aromas wafting through the room. On the tray, a bottle of whisky glistened invitingly. The meal comprised a rich stew, brimming with tender chunks of meat and hearty vegetables, accompanied by a generous slice of freshly baked bread. The whisky, a fiery and robust spirit, promised warmth and fortitude.



After eating together, Jennifer bid Annabelle goodnight and departed the room, leaving Annabelle to her own thoughts, she sat down and thought back over their conversation. Annabelle had wondered who all knew about them being from the future and what they were allowed to say to the people here. Jen had told her as long as they were a MacDonald or a member of the Donald Clan, then she could talk about it. Anyone else was to be told they came from a small town in England called Sheffield, which was on the southern coast. It seemed it wasn't often that they were questioned about it, as the only actual visitors they had were mainly from Clan Campbell who owned the land.

Annabelle still wasn't sure, but it seemed there was some animosity between the two clans from what Jen alluded to, but she also told her they'd get into that later when she wasn't so tired. By the time they'd finished eating, Annabelle had been yawning.

With the glass of whisky in hand, Annabelle settled into the cozy bed, the nightgown's soft fabric embracing her skin. The room was awash in the soft, flickering light of a single candle lantern placed on the night table, casting dancing shadows across the stone wall behind it. The occasional crackle from the hearth added to the room's soothing ambiance.

As she lay there, the weight of the decision she made to come here pressed into her thoughts. She still couldn't believe she was actually here. It seemed like it was dream and she feared if she fell asleep, she'd wake up back home in her bed, Edward snoring next to her. She took another gulp of the whisky, hoping it would help her dismiss the thoughts of him and soon between it, the glow from the candle in the lantern and the fire, she drifted off to sleep, despite her worries.

### CHAPTER 4

The following morning, as the sun's gentle rays filtered into the room, Annabelle stirred in her unfamiliar surroundings. For a brief, hazy moment, she half-expected to find herself back in her modern apartment in San Francisco next to Edward, with its convenient appliances and the mundane routines of her time. Yet, reality pressed upon her as soon as she opened her eyes and noticed the castle's stone walls. A wave of relief passed over her and she smiled.

Her relief soon dissipated as she got up and realized she couldn't take a shower. Her gaze traveled over to the wash bowl and pitcher. She thought about maybe having that bath that Jen had mentioned, but how she was supposed to get hold of anyone to help her was mind boggling. She couldn't just pick up a phone and call someone, so what was she supposed to do?

She wasn't comfortable leaving her room in the nightgown and she didn't want to put the dress on without bathing. She also didn't want to put on the clothes she arrived in, so she sat there on the bed debating what to do. Her gaze traveled back over to the wash bowl and pitcher. Was there even water in it? She hadn't looked last night.

As her feet touched the stone floor, she realized it was slightly chilly, even with the fire having burned through the night. It was basically embers now, but the room was still somewhat warm, so the floor being chilled startled her. Quickly she padded over to the stand with the bowl and pitcher.

It took her a moment to realize the side of it lifted on a hinge and locked into place, making it a small table. She moved the heavy pitcher of water from the bowl and saw

a chip of soap, which she moved to the table, then poured some of the water into the bowl. The water was also chilly, she noticed, and she wasn't looking forward to using it. On the opposite side from the small table was a rod that held two small towels. Picking one up, she dipped it into the bowl and then wrapped it around the soap.

Realizing she'd need to take off the nightgown to get clean, she set the soap and rag down, stripped down to her underwear and then grabbed it up again. It took her a little while to feel like she was clean enough before she used the other towel to dry herself and then turned to the wardrobe.

Taking the dress from the cabinet, she laid it on the bed. Suddenly she was overwhelmed by how to get into it. Not only that, but she'd also just come to the realization that she didn't have any undergarments that were appropriate for this time period either. Was she supposed to put her bra back on? What was the etiquette here? She wasn't sure but she didn't think she was supposed to wear her bra.

She started to undo the ties on the dress so she could put it on and realized it was several pieces, not all one dress. In fact it was five pieces all together. There was an underdress that was all white linen, which she thought went on first, so she put that on. It fell to midcalf. Next, she tried stepping into the skirt, but all it did was bunch up, so she stepped back out and laid it on the bed, found the center of it and pulled it over her head. Settling it around her waist, she tied it in place.

Next, she picked up the stiff top which reminded her of a corset, but it did bend, so she wasn't sure it actually was a corset. That took her several minutes to get on and by the time she had it the way she thought it was supposed to go, where it pushed her boobs up and sat firm against her frame, she was nearly out of breath, and she missed zippers. She had two more pieces to go. One was an over skirt that was split in the front and lighter in weight than the first skirt. It didn't take long to get on. And last was a sort of jacket that fastened in the front under her breasts over the corset thing.

The one thing she didn't have were socks or shoes, somehow Bridie and Jen had forgotten about those. With a sigh, she slid her feet into the black tennis shoes she'd been wearing when she arrived, but without socks.

As she stood there wondering what to do about her hair, Annabelle couldn't help but question her decision to venture into this new life. Had she made a mistake? The absence of technology, or even the smallest conveniences she'd taken for granted which had been so integral to her previous existence, was like a gaping void in this world. Her yearning for the comforts of the modern age gnawed at her, challenging her resolve to adapt.

The stark contrast in culture was another weight on her conscience. The customs and practices of this 17th-century Scottish realm felt like intricate riddles she struggled to unravel. The clash of her contemporary sensibilities against the backdrop of history left her feeling like a fish out of water and she wondered if she'd ever be able to adapt.

Just as she was about to descend into a depressed state, there was a knock at the door. Taking a deep breath she opened it to see Jen on the other side, smiling.

"Well look at you! You managed it all on your own, that's awesome. I had to have Sally help me forever it seemed like." Jen shook her head in amazement.

"Did I do it right?" Annabelle didn't like how much her anxiety showed.

Jen walked around her and checked the dress. "You did perfect. I'm impressed. Are you comfortable?"

"Well," she lifted the skirts to show her feet and bare legs, "I don't have any socks and I'm pretty sure my shoes are going to get some looks."

“Crap, I knew I forgot something,” Jen said, frowning. “Hang on, I’ll get Sally to get what you need.” She turned back to the door and called out to someone passing by.

There were some shouts down the hall and then Sally appeared in the doorway. “Lady Jen, Lady Annabelle, what can I do for you?”

“I forgot to get undergarments for Annabelle and she’s going to need footwear as well, can you get her some?”

“Size six,” Annabelle added.

“So a four,” Jen told Sally, then looked back at Annabelle, “they do it different here.” She smiled.

“I’ll be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail,” Sally said then scurried off.

Annabelle sat down and pulled off her tennis shoes. “How do you get used to this?”

“I know it can be a bit much at first, but you’ll get it. I promise. It gets easier as time passes, and the dresses really are comfortable. And if you ever want to wear pants occasionally, you can, especially if you want to come out and learn some martial arts with me.” Jen sat down next to her and patted her leg.

“I’ll think about it.”

Sally arrived and handed her garters, wool stockings, and a pair of boots as well as something that looked like bloomers. Annabelle looked at Jen who burst out laughing. “I know it’s not what you’re used to. Bridie can make you some short ones, that’s what I had her do for me, but the bloomers are nice in the winter.”

Lifting her skirts, Jen helped Annabelle put on the garters and stockings and then slid

her feet into the boots which fit rather nicely. Once that was done, Jen brushed and braided her hair for her, letting the long braid hang over her shoulder, and then they walked down to the dining hall for breakfast.

Jen showed her how everything was set up buffet style and told her she could have whatever she wanted and eat as much or as little as she wanted. She also recommended that she add honey to the porridge which looked a lot like oatmeal.

As soon as Annabelle had eaten a few bites of everything, Jen asked, "So what do you think of your first traditional Scottish breakfast?"

Annabelle, still adjusting to this new world, cautiously speared a piece of bacon with her fork. "It's...different. I mean, bacon is bacon, but this bread, it's so hearty and dense. I've never had anything quite like it."

Jennifer nodded in agreement, her tone warm and welcoming. "Yeah, that's our Scottish bannocks. It'll fill you up for the day's work, that's for sure. And these eggs? Fresh from our game hens. Nothing beats these eggs."

Annabelle took a bite of the eggs, her taste buds pleasantly surprised. "You're right. They're delicious, different from the chicken eggs I'm used to. And this porridge is great too, the honey makes it so sweet."

Jen smiled. "Told you it was good." Annabelle sipped her tea, appreciating its warmth. "And the tea, it's perfect. Although I must admit, I was expecting coffee."

Jen grinned, teasingly. "You're a coffee girl hmm? Well we can probably get some in trade the next time Eamon and Catherine go traveling, but really, it's not popular here yet. Tea seems to rule the day."

Annabelle couldn't help but smile. Despite the challenges of this new world, there

was something comforting about sharing a meal and laughter with Jen. "I have a feeling I'm going to learn to love it. And everything else that comes with this place, but I'm sure it will take time to get used to it all."

Jen's eyes softened with understanding. "You will, Annabelle, I promise. It's a different world, but it's got its own kind of magic. And you'll find your place here, just like I did."

"Thanks, Jen. I'm glad to have you here. Not sure what I would have done if I was on my own."

"You'd have been fine, I bet." Jen smiled. "You know, it's a pretty day, how about we go get some fresh air?"

"Okay," Annabelle replied and stood up from the table.

The sun bathed the Scottish morning in a gentle golden light as Jennifer led Annabelle outside. Birds chirped in the few nearby trees that stood inside the walls of the fort courtyard, and a soft breeze blew rustling their leaves. The air was crisp, invigorating, and filled with the promise of a new day.

As they settled at one of the wooden tables in the courtyard near the training area, Annabelle noticed Jamie, a striking figure with his thick auburn hair and captivating blue-gray eyes, came out of an exterior building, see her and stroll over to them. Her heart quickened its pace as he approached and took a seat beside her. He exuded an undeniable charm and rugged handsomeness, his features chiseled like a work of art. Jamie's broad shoulders and strong physique hinted at a life of physical labor and outdoor adventure. Annabelle found herself momentarily captivated by his roguish good looks, the playfulness in his eyes, and his warm smile. She cleared her throat, trying to focus on the conversation at hand, but Jamie's presence was undeniably distracting.

“How are you this morn, lass?” Jamie asked, smiling at her.

“That’s a loaded question,” she replied, smiling back. “Overwhelmed to put it mildly.”

“I understand, lass. Dub Sith bringing you here would have to be,” he acknowledged.

“Why does he do it?” Annabelle asked. “I mean why here? Does he take women to other times and places too?” She looked between Jen and Jamie to see who would answer her.

“Go ahead, Jamie, I know you enjoy telling the tale,” Jen replied, a smile lighting her face.

“Aye so tis a tale that goes back nearly a hundred years.” Jamie smiled, getting into his tale. “There was a battle, as there often is in these parts. Clans waring against one another. This one was between the Macleans and the Donalds. As for Dub Sith, he is a mischievous Fae, and he rewards or gets revenge at his will. You must know who was involved to understand what took place.”

“Makes sense.” Annabelle was enthralled already.

Jamie continued, “You see the Macleans wanted our land, claimed it belonged to them. My ancestor offered him half, but that wouldnae do.”

“So the Donalds were already on the land, the Macleans came in and claimed ownership and instead of taking the offered compromise, the Macleans decided on war?”

“Aye.” Jamie nodded. “An’ that is when Dub Sith made his appearance. He offered his services to the Maclean, but Sir Lachlan Mor Maclean who was the leader of the



Macleans at the time, was disgusted and refused Dub Sith's offer."

"Did he not know who Dub Sith was?" Annabelle asked.

"Is said the Maclean do nae believe in the Fae, which only served to infuriate the wee elf man. He immediately went to my ancestor James MacDonald and offered to side with him, with the understanding that he be the one to kill Sir Lachlan Mor Maclean."

"Did he?"

"Aye, and elf bolt straight to the temple. After that the Maclean clan fled, though we lost many Donalds in the battle."

"So Dub Sith brought luck to the Donalds," Annabelle said, but that didn't tell her what she really wanted to know. "So how did that translate to him bringing women here?"

"Aye, he did bring luck to the Donalds, in a way, but we paid a large toll for fighting the Macleans. You see King James VI was a friend to the Macleans and even though we won, we still lost our land because the king gave it to the Campbells. After that, the Donalds struggled as nearly all were against us. It t'was nae jest us Donald men who paid the toll. Many of our women were stolen from us and murdered, thrown off the cliffs into the sea. That is when Dub Sith returned and vowed to bless us."

"The Campbells?" Annabelle looked over at Jen. "You mentioned them at dinner last night."

"Aye. The Campbells still own the land. They were the ones who murdered the Donald women. Not the current Laird, but his predecessor," Jen replied.

"That's horrible, why did they do that?" Annabelle replied.

“The Donalds disagreed with the past and current monarchy. The Campbells, though, have the favor of and support the king and decided to try and rid the world of all Donalds,” Jamie explained somberly, but then he smiled. “It seems we Donalds are pretty resilient though and with Dub Sith’s help, we’re thriving.”

“So he brings women here from the future to be your wives? Is that what you’re saying?” Annabelle couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that she was part of some mystical marriage arrangement beyond her control. With a hint of skepticism, she voiced her concerns, her voice carrying a subtle hint of apprehension. "That's a bit creepy," she admitted, "I don't like that I've been brought here for some kind of arranged marriage."

Jen's laughter was warm and reassuring, her eyes filled with understanding. "Oh, well crap, you've got it all wrong," she replied. "The three of us, Mae, Catherine and I have all made our own choices. Nobody is going to force you into a marriage you don't want, I promise. Hell, nobody will force you to do anything you don't want to do. But no matter what, you're family. You're part of the Donald Clan now and you have a home here always for as long as you want, no strings attached.”."

Annabelle's fears faded. She couldn't deny the genuine kindness and warmth she had encountered since her arrival. It was clear that this clan valued family and friends over any mystical matchmaking.

She offered Jennifer a grateful smile, her worries gradually dissipating like morning mist. "Thanks, Jen," Annabelle said, her voice filled with sincerity. "I appreciate your reassurance. This place... it's so different from back home."

Jen nodded and patted Annabelle’s hand. “It really is, but I think you’re going to love it here as much as the rest of us do. And I’m not just saying that because we each met someone that we ended up marrying.” She laughed. “The people here are some of the best people I’ve ever met. Everyone works together and takes care of each other. We

rely on each other, help each other... it's really amazing."

As the conversation continued, Annabelle couldn't help but feel like she had actually found her place in the world. She had never really fit in back home, but here, with these people who were so connected, so friendly and accepting, she thought maybe, just maybe she could really be herself.

"We Donalds each feel blessed by Du Sith to have you here." Jamie gave her a sincere look. "Each of these women he's brought us has brought a bit o' their own magic to our lives. They've become part of our clan, and we're grateful to have them. Tis as though they were meant to make us better, stronger as a clan."

Annabelle loved hearing that. That was what she wanted. To make a difference. To help people be stronger and better and more connected. The idea that maybe Dub Sith had seen that about her was comforting. So not only had he gotten her out of the abusive situation she'd been in, but he'd also brought her somewhere that she could make a real difference and be a benefit to a community.

"Maybe my being here is fated," Annabelle said, feeling thoughtful.

"Aye," Jamie exclaimed, his Scottish accent dancing through the words, "tis like something out o' a fairy tale, isnae it? Fate bringing us together from different times and places."

The way he was looking at her, his eyes filled with wonder and something she was afraid of naming, had Annabelle's heart skipping a beat. She wasn't ready for what she thought he might be thinking about. She needed to get him to slow down. "I suppose if you're not the one who's been displaced from their world and time, it might seem that way, even if I did chose it, it's still a huge change," she replied. And then a notion struck her and she said with hint of feistiness, "Do you think you would you find it romantic if you woke up one day in San Francisco in the 21st century, away

from everything you know and love?"

Jamie's expression faltered for a moment as he considered Annabelle's question. "Ach, I suppose I had nae thought of it in such a way, lass," he admitted with a sheepish grin. "I reckon I'd be a wee bit fashed, to say the least. If'n you need help findin' your place here, I will give you my help. I want you to be happy here, lass."

Annabelle couldn't help but smile at his honesty. "Being here is a lot to take in, and there is so much for me to learn how to do that I never had to do before," she conceded. "I appreciate your offer to help me adjust to this new life, Jamie, I do. It's just going to take some time for me to acclimate."

Jamie nodded earnestly, his blue-gray eyes locking onto hers. "You have my word, Annabelle," he replied, his tone gentle and reassuring. "I'll do whatever I can to make this transition easier for you. You'll see, the Highlands have a way of working their magic on even the most stubborn of souls."

"I hope you're right considering I can never go back," Annabelle replied feeling suddenly homesick. There were going to be a lot of things she missed, but nothing she couldn't live without, she didn't think. Still, the idea that she'd never drive a car again, she'd never listen to the radio or watch TV or take an actual shower was almost devastating. It was just a lot to take in and all things she'd never considered when she'd made that snap decision to take Dub Sith up on his offer.

"I'm right sorry, lass," Jamie murmured, picking up on her mood. "I'll leave you to your thoughts." He got up and started to walk away.

Annabelle suddenly felt maybe he'd taken what she'd said as a rejection and stood up to go after him. "Jamie!" she called.

He turned back to her, a curious look on his face. "What is it, lass?"

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you, I’m just feeling sorry for myself.”

Jamie took her hands in his. “Tis all right, lass. You’ve a right to how you’re feelin’. If’n I were taken away from here and thrown into a new world, I imagine I’d be feelin’ somewhat the same, so I understand. I promise, I will help you find your place here.”

“Thank you, I really do appreciate that.”

“For now, I have to go see to my duties. Go spend time with Jen, she will help you too, and so will the others. We’re all here for you.” Jamie gave her a gentle smile as he squeezed her hand in his.

Warmth filled her heart. “You have no idea how much that means to me,” she replied.

“I’ll see you later this eve, lass. Have a good day.” He winked and let go of her hand before turning to head off to do his job.

Turning her attention to Jen, who had patiently waited during the exchange, Annabelle found herself eager to explore more of this ancient fortress and its intriguing inhabitants. “So, how about a more extensive tour?” she said, smiling at Jen.

“We can do that, but first, I was thinking you should meet Mae and Catherine.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” Annabelle nodded. “Do you know where they are? I mean this place is huge. Are they together?”

Jen laughed. “It is huge, but I know they were planning to meet up in the library.”

“You’ve got a library?” Annabelle said with surprise.

“We do, but don’t expect to find a lot of entertaining reads. I mean we have some Shakespeare and if you like poetry, Catherine has a few books she got as gifts from Sir Kellan before he returned home.”

“Sir Kellan?”

Jen paused. “So you need to know that the Campbells send spies to watch us, collect taxes and such. Sir Kellan Campbell was the Laird’s eyes and ears for a while. Let’s just say he and Catherine became friends of sorts.”

“I’m not a huge reader, but I do recall liking some of Shakespeare’s writing.” Annabelle smiled as they made their way up the stone staircase.

Jen pushed open the doors and Annabelle took in the bookshelves along the walls and the large table in the center of the room where two women sat. “Hey girls, come meet Annabelle.”

The two women looked over at them and both grinned and jumped from their chairs, coming over to them. “Hi Annabelle, I’m Mae, this is Catherine, welcome to Fort Donald,” the woman with sparkling green eyes and a mischievous smile said. Her hair was a light auburn and had an almost golden hue to it as the sun hit it.

“Hi, um, thanks.” Annabelle smiled.

The other woman had auburn hair too, but it was a darker shade, and her skin was a little more pale than Mae’s. She smiled shyly and said, “Welcome Annabelle, I bet you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed being here. I know I was waking up here with no warning.”

“Get this, Dub Sith asked her first!” Jen said, looking at Annabelle with amazement and wonder.

“He listened to me,” Catherine replied, surprise on her face. “I’m so glad he did.”

“So what made you come,” Mae asked, sounding curious as the four of them sat down around the table.

“Er, well, it sounded like an adventure,” Annabelle said, not wanting to share her real reasons for coming. Not yet. Maybe once she got to know these women better, she’d be more comfortable doing that, but for now, she kept it vague. Still as she spoke to them, she couldn’t help but think she was finally going to have a group of women she could count as friends who would have her back no matter what.

### CHAPTER 5

As the days passed within the ancient walls of the fortress, Annabelle found herself settling into her new life, slowly but surely. She spent her time with newfound friends—Jennifer, Mae, and Catherine—whose presence brought her both comfort and camaraderie in this strange world. It was funny that she had to travel more than three hundred years into the past to find a group of women that were quickly becoming the kind of friends she'd longed for all her life.

One sunny afternoon, as they gathered in the library, the women exchanged stories about the modern conveniences they missed from their own times. Laughter and nostalgia filled the room as they reminisced about various TV shows and music that they loved.

It turned out they'd all been fans of Carrie Underwood, Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran and could sing several of their songs. Catherine had taken notes, writing the lyrics out for several so they'd have them for when they started to forget what they sounded like. They made a pact to destroy them eventually so that nobody would think those artists stole their own work. They were all conscious of the fact that they could screw up the future if they let too much of what they knew get out.

As they reminisced, Annabelle couldn't help but feel a twinge of homesickness as she thought about her career as a detective, and she told the girls about what she'd done in the past. Each of them had shared what they'd done too, and it was nice to see that they each were still doing what they enjoyed. Jen teaching martial arts, even though she couldn't exactly compete anymore, Mae using her degree in psychology to help with anyone's problems here, and Catherine was writing a history of the Donald clan,



and about Islay as she often went out with Eamon as he and his men traveled around the isle in their guard duties. Annabelle just wished she could use her skills in some way too.

Later, as she was sitting in the castle's courtyard, Annabelle was joined by Jamie. “Good afternoon, Jamie. Are you off duty now?”

“I am. Do you mind me joining you?” he asked.

“Not at all. I’m glad for the company. I’m afraid I’ve been feeling a bit melancholy. Missing my job,” she said ruefully.

“What kind of work did you do? I know Mae was getting ready to be a healer and she has found a way to do that here, and Jen, well I told you she teaches martial arts to us. Not sure what Catherine did as a job, she said she was a scholar, but I didn’t know that was a job.”

Annabelle smiled. “Actually, I worked as a police detective for the San Francisco police department. I used to investigate crime and arrest criminals and help make our city safer.”

“Oh, aye? So you were like a guardsman?” Jamie asked, sounding curious.

“In a way, I guess I was. Though I don’t think it was quite the same. I mean I didn’t stand guard on a wall or ride out on a horse or anything like that.” She smiled.

“So what did you do, lass? What kind of things did you investigate?”

Annabelle described her role as a police detective and she couldn't help but notice the genuine interest in Jamie's eyes. He asked about her cases, her colleagues, and smart questions about modern law enforcement and how it compared to what they did here.

She loved that he had a thirst for knowledge about it and could relate to a lot of it, making comparisons as she spoke.

Their conversation continued late into the afternoon as Annabelle told him how much she enjoyed looking into older cases and finding the one thing that was missed that would give them a new lead and help them close the case. “It was exciting to be able to finally capture the person responsible and get closure for the victims. I felt like I was making a real difference for people.”

Jamie leaned closer, his eyes fixed on Annabelle's with an intensity that made her heart race. “You did admirable work, Annabelle. I could listen to you tell me stories of your time as a detective all day.”

Annabelle couldn't help but blush under his gaze. “Well, it had its moments,” she replied with a hint of modesty, “but I must say, your work as a guard here is just as commendable, Jamie, if not more important.”

“Would like to see what we do here?” he asked, standing up and offering her a hand.

Annabelle took his offered hand and stood as well. “I'd like that very much.”

“As I told you afore, the Campbells have been treacherous, but they are nae the only ones. The Donalds have many enemies because we believe Scotland should stand proudly on its own. There are those who want what power can be granted to them and seek to take from us to gain that power, so we stay vigilant.” He led her up the stairs to the top of the wall. “As you can see, we have several guard here, archers who are our first line of defense.”

“How far can they reach?” she asked, curious as she eyed the archers keeping an eye over the land.

“An arrow shot by our guards can fly all the way to the loch.” Jamie pointed toward the distant lake.

“How big is that lake? I can’t see the other side of it.”

“That is Loch Ballygrant. Do you see the road?”

Annabelle narrowed her eyes and raised a hand as shade. “Do you mean that dirt path?”

Jamie chuckled. “Aye, tis nae a small walking path, lass, merely looks that way from here. Tis a road that will take you north to the town of Ballygrant. Once you reach Ballygrant, if you travel east, it will take you to Caol Ila, on the coast of the Sound of Islay. If’n you go west for a couple of hours, you’ll reach the town of Bridgend and beyond it, Loch Indaal, which leads out to the Sea of Hebrides.”

Annabelle shook her head in amazement as she giggled. “You know, in my time, we could probably reach it in a few minutes or less. That’s going to take me some time to get used to. Travel will literally take hours or days for me now.”

They walked down the wall toward the towers and climbed the steps. He brought her to the top point and let her stand next to Shaw. “Good afternoon, lass, I see you’re getting the full tour of Fort Donald from Jamie,” he said.

“I am. This is an impressive view. You can see for miles it seems.”

“Aye, any trouble headed our way, and you can be assure we will see it coming,” Shaw replied with a nod.

“Let’s head down to the training area,” Jamie said, touching her elbow and send an electric wave through her.

“You should take her out on a horse, show her all of our land.”

“Aye, I will.” Jamie gave Shaw a nod. “Best nae do it today though, as it tis getting late.”

Annabelle was thrilled that he was thinking about spending more time with her in the future. Jamie’s sunny personality was such a delight in comparison to Edward’s demanding and brooding personality. She felt as though she could be herself around Jamie, that she could do or say anything, and it wouldn’t bother him in the least. Not like it would Edward.

She followed him down the stairs and over to the training grounds where they watched several of the guards in mock battle with wooden swords so they wouldn’t accidentally wound each other. As they moved further about the training ground she paused to watch another group grappling, and doing what she could only assume was martial arts. It almost looked like the kind of sparring they did in a UFC match.

“Is that what Jen has been teaching you all?” she asked.

“Aye, some. We also use boxing and wrestling. Anything that will give us an advantage over our foes,” Jamie explained.

Annabelle watched in fascination and then glanced at Jamie. “You don’t do all that, do you?” she waved toward the men pummeling each other.

Chuckling, Jamie said, “Aye, lass. All the guards do, even Cam.”

“Is it safe?” she murmured, worry creasing her brow.

“For us? Aye, but for our foes, nae.” A wide grin split his face, and his eyes sparked with an almost feralness and Annabelle could see that these men would be a force to

be reckoned with. She was glad they were on her side.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Annabelle's peaceful slumber took an abrupt turn, and she woke with a start. Her heart raced, and she sat up in bed, her wavy black hair cascading around her shoulders. Beads of perspiration clung to her forehead as she tried to shake off the remnants of the nightmare that had gripped her.

In the nightmare, Edward had been berating her, shouting at her, grabbing her, and forcing her back into the house, shoving her around like a ragdoll. It wasn't so much a nightmare as a memory of the first time he'd done that to her. She had made plans to go out with a couple of girlfriends, and he'd shown up at her place, seen how she was dressed and lost it.

He'd demanded she go inside, and at first it was just to change, or so he said, but once they were in the house, he'd gripped her arm and dragged her to the bedroom, screaming at her, calling her some horrible things and then forced her to be with him. Saying if she wanted to dress in that way, then he'd treat her like the slut she was dressed as.

Afterwards, he'd apologized and said he'd been drinking, and he didn't mean any of it. She'd forgiven him. That was the biggest mistake she'd ever made in her life. She'd been young and stupid, but she knew that should have been the end of them. Looking back, she wished she could change how she'd reacted. Instead of running away, escaping him, she'd turned inward. Attempted to be everything he wanted. Not make him mad, ever. It worked for a little while. Long enough for him to convince her that he wasn't that guy and that she should move in with him.

As she sat here, contemplating a life that was now hundreds of years away, Annabelle couldn't help thinking that no matter how far he was from her, she would never

escape him because he lived on in her head. He'd turned her into this mess, and she didn't know how to get her innocence back. She used to think that most people were inherently good, but with how he'd picked at her and shaken her confidence, she now didn't trust so easily as she had before Edward.

With a sigh, Annabelle lay back down, attempting to banish Edward's lingering presence from her thoughts. She wrapped herself in the covers, staring at the wooden beams of her bedchamber ceiling. In the quiet of the night, she couldn't help but wonder what Edward believed had become of her and part of her hoped that he would be blamed for her vanishing.

\* \* \*

Annabelle woke again to a knock at her door. The embers of the fire from the previous night were nothing but a small orangish glow and the sun was streaming brightly through the window. "Just a moment," she called, rising from the bed.

She reached for the robe that Bridie had sent to her along with several other dresses the evening before. It was nice to have a wardrobe made completely for her. She'd sent a note telling her there were a couple more coming before her wardrobe would be complete. After that, she'd repair or adjust anything as needed.

Opening the door, she was surprised to see Jamie standing there, a grin on his face as he waited patiently for her to greet him. "Oh, hi?" she said.

"Good morning, lass. I was hopin' you might wish to accompany me on a ride this morn."

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid I don't know how to ride a horse."

"You can ride with me then, if'n you still want to go with me?"

“I would, yes. I don’t know that I have anything to ride in, can I do that in one of the dresses?”

“Aye, any of them will do you fine, lass. I’ll meet you at the stables then, and donnae worry about breaking your fast, I’ll bring something for us.” He winked at her.

Thirty minutes later, down at the stables, Annabelle met up with Jamie who led her to his horse. It was a sweetheart, solid brown with a black mane and tail. Annabelle stroked his neck and said, “What’s his name?”

“Sgail, which means shadow in English,” Jamie replied as he mounted and then reached down for her arm to lift her onto the horse’s back.

Annabelle held onto his waist, her heart quickening at the proximity as he nudged the horse to move. Together, they rode out of the fort, the imposing stone walls gradually receding as they ventured down the huge hill toward the small village, but once there, they turned toward Loch Ballygrant.

The loch was a sight to behold, a tranquil expanse of sparkling waters nestled amidst rolling green hills. The surrounding landscape was dotted with vibrant wildflowers and inhabited by an array of wildlife. The air was crisp, carrying with it the invigorating scent of the Scottish wilderness, a smell she was coming to really love.

They rode along the shores of Loch Ballygrant for a while and then Jamie assisted Annabelle in dismounting from the horse. As their eyes met, Annabelle felt an undeniable spark of chemistry between them, a silent acknowledgment of the connection that seemed to be growing stronger with each passing moment.

“Let us find a spot to have our small picnic, aye?” Jamie suggested.

As they strolled together along the tranquil shores of Loch Ballygrant, Jamie bent

down and began picking wild flowers and making a bouquet. With a genuine smile, he offered it to Annabelle, his romantic nature shining through in this simple gesture.

Annabelle couldn't help but notice the romantic undercurrent of their outing. It felt remarkably like a first date, and the realization tugged at her heartstrings, stirring emotions she had long suppressed. "Thank you, Jamie, no one has ever given me flowers before. These are beautiful." She lifted the bouquet and sniffed them.

"That's a shame, lass, I cannae believe no man of worth courted you in your world. Are they blind?" he inquired, giving her a curious look.

"I did date someone in my time, but..." she sighed. "It's a long story and not a very good one." Thoughts of Edward ran through her mind.

Jamie reached out and ran a finger over her forehead, where she knew it had creased. "Lass, if'n you wish to share, I have a good listenin' ear." His hand cupped her cheek. "Let me get the blanket and food and you can think about it."

He stepped back from her and then jogged over to Sgail, opened the saddle bag, and removed the blanket and a tied up bundle then returned and spread it on the ground. He set the bundle in the center then took her hand and brought her over to it.

"Come sit, Mira fixed us some Bannock and I snitched some meats and cheese as well." He smiled.

Annabelle loved how easy he was around her and she felt herself compelled to tell him. "I met Edward after I got out of the police academy. He was a business man, successful and established and I was amazed that he'd even noticed me. We started dating and things were good at first."

"Jen explained to me before that means you courted, but it's different than the way



we court here.” Jamie nodded.

“Yes, I’m sure it’s pretty different. Edward would get jealous if I made plans with friends, saying he barely got to see me, so I stopped making so many plans with my friends. I’d go to work and spend nearly every bit of my time off with Edward. About three months into us dating, he asked me to move into his place. At first, I didn’t. I liked having my own place. And then we had our first fight.” Annabelle licked her lips and recalled the nightmare.

Jamie grabbed her hand and held it, using his thumb to caress the back. “You donnae have to tell me, if’n you donnae want to.”

“No, it’s okay. I had planned to go to a friend’s birthday party. I hadn’t seen them in a while, and I wanted to catch up. Edward came to my place, started screaming at me, demanding things, he didn’t like how I was dressed, he called me horrible things. And then...” Tears welled in Annabelle’s eyes. She took a moment to compose herself. “I didn’t go out. He made me stay in and be with him.”

Jamie’s hand tightened around hers for a moment. “Did he hurt you?” his voice, normally sweet and gentle, had an edge of harshness to it that startled her, and she looked up, meeting his gaze.

She met his gaze and nodded, but couldn’t bring herself to answer him verbally. She looked away, toward the loch and then said, “He apologized, said it would never happen again and I was young and stupid and believed him. I moved from my place into his and he slowly began isolating me from everyone even more. All I had was my job and he was trying to get me to quit doing it, but I wouldn’t.”

“Right bastard,” Jamie muttered, but it almost sounded like a growl.

Annabelle flicked her gaze back to his face, wondering what he was thinking. His

grip was still a little tight on her hand, but it wasn't hurting her, more like he was holding on to her, protecting her from the phantom memory of Edward.

"If I could, lass, I'd find him and beat him until he respected you properly. No real man would treat a lass in such a way."

His words fixed a hole in her heart she hadn't know was there. That he was ready to defend her after just a few days of knowing her warmed her and touched her heart. "Thank you, Jamie."

He lifted his other hand and cupped her cheek. "If you were mine, lass, I'd treat you like a rare rose, cherishing your every petal."

The look in his eyes, coupled with his words melted the wall of protection Annabelle had erected around her heart. It was so sincerely said, and she could see that he meant what he said. Part of her wanted to lean forward and kiss him, but figured that would be way too forward in this age. Instead she smiled at him and said, "You're making me blush."

He chuckled and then turned to the food. "Eat up, lass, Mira will nae like it if'n we let the wee fishes eat her offerings."

Their conversation momentarily lapsed into a thoughtful silence as they ate, the echoes of Jamie's heartfelt words lingering in the crisp Scottish air.

"We do have ones such as that Edward in our time, though not among us, now."

Annabelle frowned. "Where did they go?"

Jamie ate another piece of cheese and then said, "Before my brother became the chief, we were without one and there was a vote. It was between Cam and our cousin

Malcolm. Malcolm is one like the man you courted. Controlling, aggressive, angry. When the vote didnae go his way, he became volatile and left us. He's been causing us trouble ever since. We still donnae know where he might be."

"What do you mean by trouble?" Annabelle asked, her brow furrowed.

"Thieving, killing livestock, we suspect he's behind some of our people being killed as well."

"And you've no idea where he is?"

"Nae, we have patrols out looking for sign of him daily, but we suspect he's with a group of bandits and other marauders."

Annabelle couldn't suppress her detective instincts. "Where was the last confirmed sighting of this Malcolm?" she asked.

"Been more 'an a month, lass, since we heard he might have been with a group in Kellis."

"And you said you've got men out patrolling? Are they actively hunting this man, or just keeping an eye on a specific area?"

"Aye, Eamon and his men go out on patrol and cover specific areas. When we hear rumors of where he might be, Eamon and his men ride out to check it out, but either the townspeople are providing him with shelter and siding with him, or he hasnae been there. We are nae positive of which."

"Is he an imminent threat? Is there something specific he's after?" Annabelle asked.

"We are aware that he is a threat to us, Aine has forewarned us that he will cause us

chaos in the near future,” Jamie replied.

“Who is Aine?”

“She’s a wise woman. She’s like Dub Sith, or close enough,” Jamie replied.

“And she can see the future?” Annabelle questioned.

“Aye, in a way. She doesnae see it exact, you understand, more impressions of what possibilities are in the future for us.”

Annabelle nodded. “I see.” She wasn’t sure she believed that anyone, even a Fae could see into the future, but then what did she know? Dub Sith had literally come to the future and brought her back here, so maybe they could? It was hard to wrap her head around that.

Jamie smiled and reached for her hand. “Lass, you have a keen mind, and I am quite drawn to you.”

Annabelle blushed as she felt the bond she’d been forming with Jamie deepen. She just wasn’t sure she could trust it. She’d trusted Edward and look where that had gotten her.

### CHAPTER 6

As Annabelle entered the dining hall, the rich aroma of the evening's feast wafted through the air. It was a tempting invitation to sit down and eat her fill of the roasted meats, which were tender and succulent, the bowls of steaming potatoes, fresh vegetables, and savory pies. The women who worked in the kitchen were very skilled in their jobs and could rival any professional chef of her time.

Music filled the air, the lively strains of fiddles and flutes setting a joyful backdrop to the festivities. Feet tapped and hands clapped in time with the melodies, as couples danced, lost in the enchantment of the evening. Stories and laughter filled the room all around her and kept Annabelle well entertained.

She listened intently as the guards talked about their day, but also shared stories from the past.. Annabelle found great pleasure in hearing about everything going on both in the past and present, her inquisitive nature soaking up the everyday conversations like a sponge.

A great many of her internal questions about this time and place were answered by listening to everyone around her. She was relieved that she wouldn't have to bother Jennifer or Jamie with some of the questions that had floated through her head. She'd had questions about how things worked, where things were stored, what they would do if they were invaded and a million other things, but as she listened, she got answers to pretty much all of it.

It was as she sat listening to the guards at her table discussing the Campbells that she discovered they were expecting one to come visit soon. But she wasn't sure why, so

she leaned in to hear better as Shaw and another guard discussed it.

“Another Arsworm, I’d lay bet,” Shaw replied. “We pay our taxes fine, trust a Campbell to send another spy to see what we’re up to.”

“Aye, probably lookin’ for somethin’ to report to the king and have a reason to slaughter us in our beds.”

Annabelle sat back in her seat and gasped. “Wait, they won’t really do that will they?”

Several of the guards shared a knowing look.

“Aye, lass, tis what the Campbells do. They take our women, and try to murder us, but you’ve nothin’ to fear. We Donalds are a hearty lot, and we’ll protect you,” Shaw replied.

“When is this spy you’re talking about coming here?” Annabelle asked, feeling a bit queasy about it.

“His envoy should arrive in the next few weeks from what Eamon reported. Currently they’re in Glenegedale, and they donnae travel quickly,” another guard she learned was named Artair said.

“How long will they be here?” Annabelle was worried, but she tried to keep it from showing.

Shaw shrugged. “Sir Kellen was here more ‘an six months, before that the Laird’s brother was here for nigh on a year. Jest depends.”

“You’ll need ta be careful, lass. Whoever the Laird sends, will nae be a good man, of

that we can be sure,” Artair said. “Donnae share anythin’ about the Fae nor how you arrived here,” he added.

“I’ll be sure to hold my tongue then,” Annabelle replied. “If you’ll excuse me?” Annabelle stood. She intended to locate Jamie, who sat alongside his brother, Cam. She wanted to get his insight into this spy the Campbells were sending. Not that he’d probably have any different information, but she trusted him to tell her exactly what she would need to know.

As she approached, Jamie’s eyes lit up at seeing her. “Lass, well met, are you enjoying the eve?”

Annabelle nodded. "Can I have a word with you?" she asked, her tone earnest and full of curiosity.

Jamie, ever the obliging and cheerful soul, responded with another warm smile. “A course, lass," he replied, effortlessly picking up two empty glasses and a pitcher of ale. With the glasses in hand, he gestured for Annabelle to follow him, leading her to a quieter corner of the expansive hall. There, they settled on a worn wooden bench, and Jamie poured a generous serving of ale into Annabelle's cup.

“Now, what tis it that brought you to my table, lass? Nae that I am nae thankful to have your company.” He grinned.

Annabelle gave him a shy smile. “I overheard a conversation between Shaw, Artair and some other guards. They were talking about some envoy that was coming here with a spy?”

“Oh. Aye. I’ve told you about the Campbells and how they came to be the landowners here in Islay.”

Annabelle nodded. “Yes, I know you mentioned that they have the ear of the king and are on his side politically. But why are they sending a spy?”

Jamie smirked. “There is nae trust between us and the current monarchy, nor between us and the Campbells. Tis better than it twas in years past, but we donnae rub along together well. We donnae trust who the Laird sends. They’ve nae been the best men. Sir Kellen was nae so bad, however he tended to focus too much attention upon our women. Especially Mae and Catherine, who are our newest arrivals. Before him, the Laird’s brother, who was an addle-potted nitwit, had his focus on Jen. Nearly came to blows between him and Cam.”

Annabelle frowned. “Okay, but if they are more focused on us women, then maybe they aren’t really spies?”

“Donnae doubt that they are reporting straight to Colin what it tis we are doing here. Probably frustrating the Laird to no end that we’ve had new women arriving and marrying into the clan. Campbells would rather we Donalds died off and not thrived. Hence them sending these spies to find out what we are up to.”

“Hmmm.” Annabelle thought about it and then asked, “So who is the man they are sending? Do you know?”

“Oh, aye, tis Brandon Campbell, a cousin to the Laird. Brandon's loyalty to Campbell Clan is well-known and he is in fervent agreement with the Laird about us Donalds and the direction Islay should be governed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Colin has the ear of the king, he governs over a good portion of Islay, and makes sure all the taxes are collected. But that isnae all he wants. Colin wants to rule over all of Islay and probably Scotland. He’s ambitious and greedy. All the Campbells



are.”

“So are they raiding other clans and taking them over?”

“It tis what they do. If they cannae do so with the king’s blessing, then they will find other ways of gaining a foothold into a clan. They often did it to us by marrying our women. And then we started to do the same to them, which led to tensions increasing between us.” He went on to describe the Campbells' stranglehold on the isle, where they asserted control over virtually every aspect of life. "They expect the remaining Donalds to bow and swear fealty to them, relinquishing our clan identity, but we refuse," Jamie elaborated. "And as we resist we are burdened with heavy taxes and tributes. The laird openly loathes us and searches for any excuse to force us from this land."

As Jamie's tale unfolded, Annabelle couldn't help but be drawn into the intricate web of politics, power, and pride that defined this world. She listened with rapt attention. It dawned on her that her presence here was no longer a simple twist of fate; it was an opportunity to understand, perhaps even influence the course of history. She wondered if that was why Dub Sith brought her here. Because there was something she could do to help get the Donalds out from under the thumb of the Campbells or perhaps end the feud between the two clans. Only time would tell.

The strains of lively fiddle music filled the air and Jamie smiled, his eyes dancing with delight. “Let’s leave this talk of the Campbells for later and enjoy the eve, lass. Come and dance with me.” He stood and held out a hand to her. “Donnae worry about the steps, I’ll show you.”

Annabelle didn’t even hesitate. She put her hand and his and they joined the other couples in the reel the fiddlers were playing. She laughed as she attempted to do the steps and got turned around. Jamie joined in her laughter and helped her to get them down. It was one of the best experiences she’d ever had in her life, and she knew

there would be many more to come in the future.

As the evening waned, and the torches and fires cast long shadows across the stone walls, Jamie offered to walk Annabelle to her chamber. She agreed, her heart fluttering with a mixture of excitement and anticipation for the time they'd spend together in the dimly lit corridors.

As they approached the door to her chamber, Jamie held her hands as he said, "Good night lass, I bid you sleep well an' have pleasant dreams."

Annabelle felt her heart flutter at the look in his eyes. She half thought he might kiss her, but he took a respectful step back and let go of her hands. "Good night, Jamie. Thank you for dancing with me. I had fun."

"My pleasure, lass," he murmured.

With a final, lingering look, Jamie retreated into the shadows, leaving Annabelle standing at her chamber door, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotions. Jamie was slowly taking hold of her heart, and she wasn't sure what to do about that. She'd thought she needed time to work on herself after being with Edward, but at the moment, all she wanted was to spend more time with Jamie.

The chamber was warm and comfortable as Annabelle stepped inside. The staff had already been in and stoked the fire and lit the candle in the bedside lantern for her. It's flickering light danced on the stone walls, casting a soft and soothing glow that played tricks with the shadows. She went through the familiar rituals of getting ready for bed, her fingers deftly unfastening her dress, the fabric whispering as it slid to the floor. Her mind, still buzzing from the evening's festivities, was a kaleidoscope of sensations and emotions.

As she got ready for bed, she couldn't help but recall the twinkle in Jamie's eyes as

they danced, the way his laughter had mingled with hers in the crowded hall. The memory was something she'd treasure always, she thought as she hung up her dress in the wardrobe.

The mattress beneath her welcomed her weight, and Annabelle settled in, the softness of the sheets a gentle embrace. Her thoughts, like a river winding through the landscape of her mind, meandered to Jamie. She thought of his charm, his sunny disposition, and the way he had made her feel so alive in this strange and wondrous place.

As the night deepened, sleep began to claim her, drawing her toward its elusive embrace. But in the midst of slumber, a ghostly specter from her past intruded—a nightmare that seemed to echo with the commanding voice of Edward. Her body jolted awake, drenched in a cold sweat, her breath ragged as she fought to shake off the haunting remnants of the dream.

The chamber remained still but glowed with the embers of the dying fire. Annabelle lay there, her heart gradually slowing its frantic rhythm, as she stared at the dark shadows on the walls. She knew that the specter of Edward still haunted her, even in this distant and magical place, but she was determined to put him behind her and out of her thoughts. Eventually sleep claimed her once again.

## Page 7

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### CHAPTER 7

As the days turned into weeks, Annabelle and Jamie's connection deepened. They had taken to spending more and more time together whenever he was available. They were often seen eating meals together, walking in the courtyard, or out riding. Jamie taught her how to shoot a bow and arrow, teasing her that she was getting so good that Cam might have to put her on the wall to help protect them.

"I don't think Cam is going to want me up here shooting arrows at anyone," Annabelle laughed.

"Donnae doubt yourself, lass, you can do anythin' you set your mind to." He grinned and tapped her nose.

Annabelle rolled her eyes. "Don't you have work to do?" she asked with a grin.

Jamie looked up at the sun and then back to her. "Aye, that I do. What say you to riding later?" he asked.

"I'd love that." She nodded as she replaced the bow and quiver in the guard station. "After your shift?"

"Aye, mid-afternoon." He cupped her cheek and gazed into her eyes for a moment.

Annabelle held her breath, hoping he'd kiss her, but he didn't. She licked her lips and noticed his eyes on her mouth.

Still he didn't. Instead, he dropped his hand and smiled. "See you in a while," he murmured before sauntering off.

There was something to be said for courting in this day and age versus the quick to jump into bed nature of what she'd left behind. Every touch, every glance between them was building up the anticipation for what she knew would happen between them. It had to happen. She'd make it happen if he didn't take that step soon. The thought of seducing Jamie made her lips twitch. She paused that thought though. She wasn't sure what the consequences of doing something like that here in this time period might be. She probably needed a conversation with the other women to find out. With that in mind, she set off to look for Mae.

Annabelle's heart soared as she and Jamie raced their horses over the moors. She glanced at him riding next to her, slightly ahead, laughing like a maniac. She couldn't contain her own joy at the feeling of the almost flying. The untamed beauty of Islay matched the untamed feeling of her heart. She felt free and full of joy in a way she'd never felt before. Jamie brought this out in her. He was so full of life that she couldn't help but want to enjoy every second of it with him.

Leaning forward, Annabelle urged her horse to go faster. They were headed for a bank of trees. The first one to reach them was the winner. She pulled ahead of Jamie about a ten yards from the trees and as she reached them and reined in the horse, she called, "I win!" with a laugh. "That you do, lass," Jamie said, riding up to her, a brilliant smile on his lips. "Let's give the horses a chance to cool down at the stream." He turned his horse toward the small flow of nearby water.

Amidst the untamed beauty of the landscape, Annabelle felt the connection between them deepen. As they strolled along the stream, they shared secrets and dreams with each other. Annabelle learned of Jamie's dreams to be an asset to the clan, to marry and have a family, and spend his life making them proud to be a Donald. The entire time, his gaze was on her, full of hope and admiration. She wondered if he was telling

her that, so she'd know what he wanted out of their relationship or if she was just putting her own feelings into what he was saying. She hoped it was the former, not the latter.

“What about you lass? Do you miss being in your San Francisco? Do you miss being a detective?” he asked. “It was probably more exciting than living here where we have nothing familiar to you.” He sighed.

Annabelle reached for his hand. “San Francisco feels so distant. An entirely different world. I miss some things from being there, but Jamie, this place isn't boring. It's beautiful and magical. I love it here. I do miss solving cases, but I am not bored here by any means.” She smiled.

“I'm glad of that, lass. Tell me some more about San Francisco. What things do you miss?”

Annabelle thought about it and then told him of the sunsets over the Golden Gate Bridge, the hikes she used to take in Yosemite Park, the various cuisines that were available to her being in the city. She missed baseball games, and loud music, and TV. But then went on to tell him that none of that was important enough to make her want to go back to it.

What she didn't say was that he was becoming much more important to her happiness than any of those things possibly could be to her. She could live without all of that, as long as she had Jamie in her life. He was like the sunshine, and as necessary as breathing. Even if they never took this relationship deeper, she didn't want there to ever be a time when she couldn't be with him, even if it was only as a friend. Jamie brought a joy to her life that she'd never felt before and didn't want to ever be without him.

\* \* \*

Three days later, the courtyard was bathed in the soft hues of twilight as Annabelle stood, her gaze fixed upon the imposing walls of the fort. Her heart skipped a beat as she spotted Jamie, walking with an air of authority along the walls. His silhouette against the fading light, managing the guards, and issuing orders, made her admire him even more.

She liked to watch him working and generally tried to find a spot nearby to observe him while she read one of the books Catherine had lent her. Jamie had caught her watching him several times, but he always smiled and waved to her when he noticed. She was glad he didn't think she was stalking him and instead found it cute. He had said he enjoyed knowing she was there, waiting for him to get off duty to join her for meals or for a walk or ride. She was thankful that he saw it that way.

As she stood there, enjoying being his presence, she realized that the fortress seemed different when Jamie wasn't around, like a song missing its melody. Those days it was all Annabelle could do to distract herself from worrying about him while he was gone. She knew Malcolm was out there, causing havoc to the people who trusted the Donald Clan to take care of them. So every time Jamie went out with a group of guards, she would spend the entire time he was gone praying for his safety and a quick return.

Today, her steps echoed through the corridors as she made her way to his usual post, her heart pounding in anticipation. She knew Jamie was on duty this morning, so she assumed he'd be on the wall somewhere. When she found him, she approached the wall with a warm smile, her eyes reflecting her affection as she carried a tray of food.

"Good morning, Jamie," she greeted him, her voice soft and melodic as she called up to him.

Jamie turned and looked down at her, his eyes alight with a mixture of surprise and delight. "Annabelle," he said, his voice tinged with warmth. "What brings you out

here so early this morn?"

"I wondered if you could join me for a quick breakfast before you got busy?" she said, shading her eyes as she looked up at him.

His grin widened. "I'd like that, lass. I'll join you at the table by the guard station." He began walking toward the stairs that would bring him down to the courtyard.

Annabelle moved to the table he'd indicated and started moving things off the tray to the tabletop and sat down. She looked up as he joined her and smiled. "You're at it early today."

Jamie sank down across from her and nodded. "Aye. I was giving instructions to my men. We're the next to go out on patrol and they'll need to brief those who take over the wall from them."

"You're going to searching for Malcolm?" Annabelle said, suddenly sad. She didn't like when he was gone from the fort. She would worry the entire time he was gone.

"Afraid I must, lass." He nodded and gripped her hand across the table.

Annabelle pushed herself up and leaned across the table, then pressed her lips to his, kissing him softly. "For luck," she whispered before sitting back down, her cheeks warm and flushed.

"Thank you, Annabelle," he replied softly, his voice filled with warmth as he squeezed her hand and gazed into her eyes.

They ate and then Jamie's men began to gather near the stables and with a resigned sigh he stood, pulling her to her feet as well. He raised a hand to her cheek and cupped it as he gazed into her eyes.



“I’m going to miss you,” Annabelle murmured, pressing her cheek deeper into his palm.

He kissed her cheek next to the corner of her lips and replied, “I feel the same, lass.” He cleared his throat and stepped back.

With that parting gesture, Jamie joined his men, and they left the fort. Annabelle watched him go, her heart filled with worry and hope for a quick return.

\* \* \*

Two days later Annabelle felt a sense of unease lingering in the air. Jamie hadn’t returned as expected, and a surprising void filled her heart. She was really worried about him. She worried that something had happened to him. That he and his men had found Malcolm, and he was laying injured somewhere in the Highland wilderness. Or worse.

Seeking solace and a confidante, Annabelle made her way to Jen's bedchamber. She knocked on the door and waited for Jen to answer. She knew she was in there because she hadn’t seen her down in the dining hall yet.

A moment later, Jen opened the door and smiled. “Hey Annabelle, what’s up?” she asked, welcoming her in.

“I’m worried about Jamie,” she blurted.

Jen grinned. “I thought that might be the way things were going. You two have been spending a lot of time together. I’ve barely seen you.”

“I know, I’m sorry, it’s just I really like him a lot and I’m worried. He’s not back yet.”

“Okay, so what are you worried about? You don’t think he’s cheating on you or anything, right? I mean, the men here, they don’t really do that sort of thing. If they’re courting you, which Jamie is doing with you, they don’t spend time with any other ladies.” Jen paused. “Okay, well the good men don’t, and Jamie is a good man, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

Funnily enough that hadn’t been where her head was, but it was still good to know, and it lightened her heart a bit knowing that about him. “Thanks. That wasn’t what has me concerned. I’m worried that something’s happened.”

Jen frowned. “When was he due back?” she questioned.

“Sometime last night. I expected to see him this morning, but when I went to look for him, Shaw said that they hadn’t returned.”

“Okay, well don’t get too worried yet. They might have had to go take care of something with one of the villages or towns. It happens and there’s no need to panic yet. If he’s not back by tomorrow morning, Cam will send someone out after them.”

She nodded. “Thanks, Jen. I just know from being a cop that things can go wrong when you’re out looking for those causing trouble, you know?”

“I get it, but this is typical here. Things tend to take a little longer than planned, especially when it involves travel. So don’t worry too much.” Jen gave her a commiserative smile. “If I find out anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate that.” Annabelle stood and walked with Jen to the door. “I’ll see you later then.”

After lunch, Annabelle was in her bedchamber, her thoughts consumed by Jamie, when a knock on her door stirred her from her reverie. She hurriedly smoothed down

her dress and called out, "Come in."

"It's me. I thought you might like to know that Jamie returned from patrol a few minutes ago." Jen grinned.

Annabelle's heart leapt at the news, and she couldn't contain her delight. Her steps were quick, and her heart raced as she left her chamber followed by Jen who was laughing at her exuberance. She grinned over her shoulder at Jen and called, "Thanks for telling me!" before practically running down the stone stairs.

It didn't take long for her to spot him, and without hesitation, she rushed into his arms. In that moment, the world around them disappeared, and it was just the two of them, locked in an embrace.

Jamie lifted her off her feet and twirled her around, their laughter filling the air. As he gently set her down, he claimed her lips in a passionate kiss. The world outside the two of them faded and Annabelle felt her love for him blaze in her heart.

Breaking the kiss, Jamie held Annabelle close, as he whispered, "I've missed you more than words can express, Annabelle."

"I missed you too," she replied, her voice soft and filled with sincerity.

He cupped her cheek and stared into her eyes. "I care for you very much, lass," he murmured, and she could see the depth of his feelings for her in his eyes.

Annabelle's heart swelled. "I care for you a great deal too, Jamie."

"Jamie, lad, there you are," Cam said, striding toward them. "I need you, Eamon and Shaw with me."

“What has happened?” Jamie asked, suddenly concerned as he let Annabelle go and looked toward his brother.

“The Campbell envoy has nae arrived, and I fear something has happened that will reflect badly upon the Donald Clan. We need to speak and plan.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm*

### CHAPTER 8

Annabelle waited outside the Chief's meeting rooms, wishing she could go in and listen to what was going on. Of course, she wasn't invited, so instead she paced outside of the room. They'd been within for nearly an hour and with each passing moment her nerves frayed more.

Eventually the door opened, and the men stepped out. "We'll gather our men and set out now," Eamon said.

"Mine are weary from our last patrol, I'll gather four others from the guard to go with me," Jamie added.

"And I'll brief those who will stay behind, we'll gather the people from the village and bring them into the fort for protection," Shaw said as they swiftly moved toward the door to the courtyard.

Annabelle trailed behind them, trying to keep up. She hurried to Jamie's side. "What's been decided?"

"We're going back out to look for the envoy, lass. As soon as we find them, we'll return."

Annabelle pursed her lips. "I want to go."

"Lass, no, you cannae, tis too dangerous."

Annabelle grabbed his arms and stopped him. "I am a police officer, Jamie. I know how dangerous it is. I am not afraid."

He gave her a tender look. "Aye, I know that, lass. Tis a different world here, though. You're not trained with a sword and have no way to protect yourself."

Annabelle knew he was right. He'd taught her to shoot the bow, but that wouldn't do her any good on horseback, not when she might have to fight up close. She half wished she'd had her gun on her when Dub Sith had brought her back in time, but it had been left behind in her purse on the passenger seat of her car.

She sighed. "All right, then allow me to ride with you all and if a fight breaks out, I will ride back to the fort." She desperately needed to go. She needed to be sure he was safe but also because she was feeling called to do this.

Jamie sighed. "Very well, lass. You are very stubborn." He smiled. "Let me gather the men, go see to your horse. And you will listen to my directions. One hint of trouble and you race back here."

"Absolutely." Annabelle nodded. She hurried to the stables and got her horse saddled and then mounted and waited in the courtyard.

"Leave no area unsearched," Jamie urged his men, his eyes scanning the terrain ahead.

They had ridden toward the Glenn Road that would take them toward Mulindry, which was the last known location of the envoy. Eamon and his men had gone the opposite direction, toward Ballygrant, thinking maybe the envoy had backtracked and gone through Bridgend instead of Mulindry. Annabelle kept her eyes peeled, searching for anything that looked off. She rode in the middle of the group, protected from anyone coming at them from any side. She was sure that Jamie had set them up

that way on purpose.

“Jamie! Up ahead!” one of the guards called out.

That was when Annabelle noticed it. A carriage lay on its side, its once-sturdy wooden frame splintered and shattered. The horses were nowhere to be seen, leaving only vacant reins swaying in the wind. The imprint of chaos and violence hung heavy in the air.

Jamie’s eyes swept the nearby woods, Annabelle was sure he was looking for any sign of danger or disturbance, same as she was. He looked to her and said, “Annabelle, stay there, Artair, stay with her.”

“Aye,” Artair said with a nod from next to me.

Jamie dismounted and his boots crunched on the forest floor as he approached the scene. A moment later he backed up again, looking pale as a ghost. He glanced at Artair and said, “Get her out of here, take her back to the fort.” His tone was commanding and sent a shiver of fear down Annabelle’s spine.

“Wait, what is it?” Annabelle asked.

“Annabelle, you need to go. Get to safety. Now.”

“But—”

“They’re dead, Annabelle, they’re all dead. Now go!”

Instead of doing as he asked immediately, Annabelle rode forward to see what he saw. She’d seen death before. She’d caused death before, that was nothing new to her, but this scene... it was awful. She counted six bodies, all male, three beheaded,

others bleeding out around the wreckage of the carriage.

“Annabelle, now!” Jamie demanded, his voice harsh. “Artair, inform the Chief what has happened.”

“Aye, Jamie.”

Finally Annabelle nodded and turned her horse back, joining Artair as they rode back to the fort.

She could hear Jamie issuing orders to the rest of the men as she and Artair rode back to the fort. Annabelle felt horrible for him having to deal with that aftermath. She wished he’d have allowed her to stay and help figure out what happened to them. At this point she wasn’t sure if that was a battle or if it was a horrible, terrible carriage accident.

“Donnae worry, lass, I will get you back to safety,” Artair said as they rode.

“I’m not worried about us, Artair, I’m thinking about the scene. I don’t know a lot about carriages, but shouldn’t there have been some horses?”

“Aye, likely the bandits took them.”

“So it wasn’t an accident, they were ambushed?” Annabelle said, finally figuring out why they were all so somber over the Campbells deaths when they didn’t like the Campbells at all.

“Aye, and more ‘an likely, the Laird will be blamin’ us Donalds for their deaths.”

Annabelle sucked in a breath. That was the worst possible outcome. She needed to help. She wanted to turn back and investigate. She nearly did, but didn’t want to piss



Jamie off. Frustration filled her as they completed the ride back to the fort. She heard the men on the wall calling down to the courtyard about their return and as soon as she and Artair rode through the gate, they were met by Shaw and Cam.

“Artair, what news do you bring?” Cam asked.

Shaw reached up and helped Annabelle dismount. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“Tis not good news, Chief. We found the wreckage of the carriage, and all the men were slain.”

Cam paled and ran a hand through his thick red hair. "Did you see Maeve's body among the others?"

“There wasn’t a woman’s body that I saw. I counted six dead men,” Annabelle answered. “Was there supposed to be a woman traveling with them?”

“Aye,” Cam said, his expression darkening. “Maeve Campbell, Brandon’s sister. We had a letter last week that she wished to visit with him and would like her own bedchamber.”

“So not only do we have the dead, we have a missing woman,” Annabelle replied.

“Aye.” Artair nodded.

“Where are Jamie and the others?” Cam asked.

“Looking for signs of where the bandits have gone,” Artair answered.

“Good. Ride out to Eamon, Artair, tell him the envoy’s been found and to return here.”

“Aye, sir.” Artair remounted and rode back out.

It took several hours for Jamie and his men to return. They looked weary and filled with sadness. Annabelle ran to him, and he wrapped his arms around her, just holding her for a few minutes.

"Are you alright, Jamie?" she asked.

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Aye.”

“I’ve seen sites like that before Jamie. I know how devastating they can be, especially when the victims are known to you. I know the Campbells and the Donalds weren’t friendly, but seeing them like that had to screw with your head.”

Jamie turned to her, his gaze heavy with the weight of the tragedy they had witnessed. "Aye," he admitted, "the dead men might well be from the Campbells Clan, but they didnae deserve such a gruesome end." His voice trembled with a mix of sorrow and anger. "And the Campbell woman," he added, "she doesnae deserve what the bandits—or whoever they are—will do to her while she's captive."

Annabelle held him tighter. “No woman ever does. Men can be brutal to women.”

“Aye. And Laird Colin will likely blame us Donalds for this murder, unless we can find the true culprits and prove our innocence."

“I will do whatever I can to help, Jamie. You know I will,” Annabelle offered.

“Thank you, lass.” Jamie kissed her temple.

### CHAPTER 9

As Annabelle and Jamie stood together in the courtyard, Cam called out, “Clan meeting in the dining hall.” Cam looked up to the tower. “Shaw, is everyone from the village here?”

“Aye, Chief, all are accounted for,” Shaw replied.

“Keep the men on the wall, everyone else in the hall in fifteen minutes,” Cam demanded as he joined Annabelle and Jamie.

“You think this is wise?” Jamie murmured to him.

“Aye, we’re all Donalds and all our lives will be forfeit if the Laird decides we are responsible for his cousins deaths,” Cam replied as he strode toward the castle. “I’m going to speak with my wife. I’ll see you within.”

“Aye,” Jamie agreed, looking worried.

“What does he mean all our lives will be forfeit? Does he think the Laird will murder all of us in retaliation?” Annabelle was taken aback.

“Unfortunately, lass, that is exactly what he means.” Jamie gripped her hand as they walked into the building and down the hall toward the dining hall where nearly everyone was migrating. “I have to sit next to Cam, Jen, and Eamon. We are the head of the family and must stand together. Will you be all right here?” He’d led her to one of the tables closest to the head table on the raised dais.

“I’ll be fine. But what’s about to happen?” Annabelle asked, curious.

“Cam will announce what’s occurred and then open the floor up for discussion.”

“Okay, that doesn’t sound too bad,” Annabelle said, but she was nervous for some reason she couldn’t put her finger on. Her thoughts drifted to what she knew about feuds between various families that she’d read about and knew how this could quickly turn ugly if they didn’t find out what happened to that envoy.

“Tis not bad to have a discussion, lass, but it could lead to trouble, so please, help keep things calm if you can.”

“Of course, Jamie. I can do that.” Annabelle pushed up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

He left her side and stepped up on the dais with Cam who was now seated at the center of the table facing the room. Jen sat on his left and Jamie on his right. To the right of Jen was Eamon and then Niall. To the right of Jamie sat Shaw and Artair.

Cam stood and raised his hand for quiet and the room that normally was so full of noise, and laughter, and joy, grew painfully quiet. There were so many people in the room that Annabelle was amazed they all fit. Turning to look, she could see the staff gathered at the back, standing close to the hall doors.

“First, thank you all for being here, and thank you to those who remain vigilant at the wall to keep us all safe,” Cam said, his voice strong and full of authority. “I have somber news to share that affects everyone within these walls. The envoy Laird Colin had sent was ambushed on it’s way to us here at Fort Donald. Everyone in the party was killed, except Lady Maeve, who is now missing. Presumed captured by the bandits who struck the envoy.”

A murmur went through the gathering and Annabelle could hear the panic rising in several of the voices. She glanced toward the closest ones and began to keep a closer eye upon them. She didn't know who they were, but she was ready to step in and calm them down if need be.

“As we are all Donalds and we all know that the Campbells hold great animosity toward us, it is to be expected that they will blame these deaths upon us. Which is why I would like some suggestions on how we handle this situation. I am opening the floor for any who wish to speak. Please step forward and say your peace.”

“We need to be cautious,” a voice in the crowd called out, “we don't know that the Campbells will blame us. They were on the high road, anyone could have ambushed them!”

Annabelle couldn't see who it was that spoke, but there were several murmurs of agreement with the speaker.

“I say we fight like our ancestors!” another voice called out.

Annabelle thought it looked like the man who made the weapons for the fort, so it made sense in her head that he would be for fighting.

“We need to stand firm against the Campbells, bring the fight to them instead of waiting for them to come to us!” he continued.

Mira glanced at him and said, “Hush your mouth, Andrew. We cannae be rushin' headlong into danger. We've bairns to consider, not to mention the ladies.”

“We should fight and take our lands back from the Campbells,” another voice shouted.

“Aye!” a chorus shouted out from the back of the room.

“Look, it seems to me that we need to find out who’s behind these killings first. The Laird isn’t going to find out anything for a while yet, so we have time,” Mae said, moving forward and turning to look at everyone.

Jennifer took her lead. “An investigation needs to be conducted. There is a missing woman. If we can recover her, she can assure the Campbells that the Donald Clan aren’t to blame, and we can avoid conflict with the Campbell clan.”

It was clear to Annabelle that these Highland men and women were very proud of their heritage and would do anything to protect their home and way of life. She admired that, but also thought fighting wasn’t always the answer. Especially in this case.

Cam stood again and raised his hands. “Quiet, quiet,” he called out. As the room died down, he added, “I’ve heard all of you and I think the cooler heads of reason are the direction in which we need ta go. That doesnae mean that we donnae prepare for battle should it come to that. As Donalds we are all prepared to fight for what we believe. There is nae doubt each of us are willing to sacrifice for this clan, but we donnae need to needlessly die.”

Jamie stood up next to Cam, drawing everyone’s eyes, including Annabelle’s. “I will put together a group to search for Maeve. Any who wish to join, speak now,” he said his chin raised defiantly.

“Aye, Jamie, that is a good plan,” Cam agreed.

Annabelle stood up again and said, “I wish to be included. As you know, I’ve got experience in investigation work. I will be an asset.”

“Lass,” Cam said, a warning in his tone.

“I am aware that this is normally not work women do, but—” Annabelle began to argue as Jen put a hand on Cam’s arm.

“Tis not that, lass,” Cam started to assure her.

“Tis that you are nae trained, Annabelle. You’ve no way to defend yourself should we run into the same trouble as the Campbell envoy,” Jamie finished for him.

Annabelle frowned. “Are you telling me no?” She narrowed her eyes at him, ready to go to war to get her way.

“Nae, lass. Jest that you need ta have a way to defend yourself. I do think you could be of help to us in this,” Jamie assured her.

“I can teach her to use a dirk before you all head out. It’s not difficult and she’s trained with more deadly weapons from our time,” Jen said, looking at Cam.

Cam and Jen seemed to hold a conversation with just their eyes for a couple of minutes and then he turned back toward those gathered and said, “Very well. Annabelle, you may join the patrol going out to investigate. My wife will make sure you have what you need.”

“Thank you, sir,” Annabelle replied.

Cam gave her a nod. “Any others volunteer to join the group going out?”

Several of the men stepped forward including Artair and Eamon who were on the dais. Shaw wanted to go, but Cam indicated he needed him here, taking charge of the fort’s defenses with Niall.

“With that settled, Mira, please serve the evening meal. Jamie what time do you wish to head out?” Cam asked, looking at him.

“First light,” Jamie replied. “That will give Jen time to practice with Annabelle after dinner.”

Annabelle was glad of his forethought. She would need a little bit of training since she’d never used a dirk or any kind of knife or sword before.

“I’d like everyone to stay at the fort this eve and until we resolve this. Rooms will be available to everyone,” Cam announced.

“I’ve livestock to see to, Chief,” one of the villagers called out and there was murmur of agreement from others.

“I’ll send some guards down to bring the livestock up the hill and into the courtyard where they will be protected as well,” Cam assured them.

Mira and her staff had rushed from the room right after Cam asked her to serve the dinner and were now returning carrying platters of steaming foods. Annabelle’s mouth watered at the scent of the food that was placed on her table. She took her place again and was about to fix her plate when Jamie joined her.

“Are you sure you are up to this, lass? There will be a lot of riding involved,” he said.

“I know, but this is what I do and I’m good at it, Jamie.”

“I just want you to be safe, lass.” He smiled. “Let us eat and then Jen has said she will meet with you to show you how best to defend yourself.”

Annabelle felt a thrill of excitement wash over her. This was the first time since she’d



been here where she felt she could truly fit in. She could make a difference and help save the clan from their enemies. All she had to do was find whoever murdered those men and rescue Maeve. How hard could it be?

\* \* \*

An hour later she was standing in Jen's receiving room, a dirk in her hand stabbing a wooden dummy with it over and over again. She was sweating and getting tangled in her skirts. "This skirt sucks," she muttered. "I'd give anything to have a pair of jeans, or pants to do this in."

Jen laughed. "I thought you might say that." She headed for a door. "Give me a second. Keep practicing."

Annabelle wondered what she was doing, but continued attacking the dummy as Jen had shown her. It wasn't hard. She'd always been coordinated and had done some hand-to-hand combat in the police academy, learned some boxing and wrestling moves as well. This was a sort of extension on that. Jen had said it all came down to muscle memory and the more she practiced the better at it she'd get.

"I think you've got it. At least well enough for this. I don't think you're going to have to do much fighting, but it's best to be prepared. Just remember these bandits are like serial killers. They have no remorse, and are extremely ruthless. You aren't going to be able to talk them down. This most likely will be kill or be killed," Jen said as she returned, her hands full of cloth.

"What's that?" Annabelle asked as she wiped her brow.

"These are a couple pairs of pantaloons that I had Bridie make me for when I'm teaching martial arts. They're wide legged, comfortable and modest. The tops are quilted and have extra chest padding, long enough to cover your ass and they're fitted

at the waist. Try them on, I think they will work.”

Annabelle took the offering and rushed into Jen’s room to change out of the dress into the new attire. She rejoined Jen a few minutes later with a grin. “These are awesome. It’s almost like a karate uniform, right?”

“Sort of, I mean it does resemble one in a way, but the material is thicker and stronger than the cotton we had for karate. The quilted part has some chainmail woven into it between the layers so that you are protected. That’s why it’s a bit heavy.”

“It’s lighter than Kevlar, will it stop a sword?”

“It will only stop a slash or cut, but not a stab. The force of a stab will get through it, so try to avoid becoming a pin cushion, okay?” Jen replied.

“Got it. No becoming a pin cushion. Where do I put the dirk?” Annabelle asked.

“I’ve got a sheath for it that can be attached to the belt of the top so you can wear it on your hip and pull it easily.” Jen handed her the sheath and helped her put it on. “See?”

Annabelle slid the dirk into the sheath and then pulled it and maneuvered it in her hand as Jen had shown her. She nodded. “If it had bullets it would be better, but I think I could get used to this.” She smiled.

“Yeah, the best we can do is try to get you a flint lock pistol out of France, but they are hard to come by from what Cam has told me. They’ve only been around for a few decades now and aren’t real prevalent here.”

“Maybe eventually, I can look into that, but for now, this should do.” Annabelle

smiled. “Somehow I don’t think the guns of this time would even come close to matching what I left behind.” She laughed.

“Definitely not, which is why we rely more on swords, bows and hand-to-hand combat.” Jen grinned. “You should probably go get some sleep. Dawn is going to come way too early.”

“You aren’t kidding. I’m going to pack my bag before I go to sleep, so I am ready to go first thing.”

“I’ll meet you at your room and head down with you in the morning.”

“See you then,” Annabelle said as she headed out the door with her bundle of clothes and the new weapon sheathed on her hip.

### CHAPTER 10

Annabelle was up and ready to go when there was a knock on the door. She opened it to see both Jen and Sally waiting there in the corridor for her. “Hey, how did you sleep?” Jen asked.

“Well, for the most part,” Annabelle replied, not sharing the fact that she’d had a nightmare about Edward again. It had been a while since she’d experienced one and she hoped it would be a long time before she had another.

“I brought you some nibbles from the kitchen for your journey,” Sally said, holding up a bundle.

“Thank you, Sally, that’s so thoughtful.” Annabelle took the package from her.

“The men are downstairs eating before heading out, you probably want to get something to eat as well,” Jen said. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let me grab my bag.” Annabelle turned toward the bed and picked up the small bag she’d stuffed her clothes into.

“I brought you a cloak as well, I think you might need it. It gets a bit chilly,” Jen said, fastening it around Annabelle’s shoulders.

“Thanks, you and Sally have thought of everything.”

They headed for the dining hall and ate together before following the others out to the

stable. Annabelle greeted Jamie with a kiss and then went to see to her horse. She was saddled and ready to go within minutes.

“Have a safe trip,” Jen said.

“Godspeed,” Mae said to the group with a wave as she stood next to Niall and Catherine.

“Be safe,” Catherine called, her eyes on Eamon.

Their group of six rode out of the gates which quickly shut behind them. Jamie led them over the uneven terrain of the Scottish landscape. The chilly wind whipped through Annabelle's hair as she clung to her reins, the thrill of adventure coursing through her veins. They were heading back to the scene.

As they reached the area, Annabelle studied the site. The carriage was one of opulence, not a simple mode of transportation, but one that spoke of wealth. The wheels were busted on it, and it had been tipped on its side, the front of it twisted and broken. The door hung off its hinges, as though someone of great strength had ripped it open.

Climbing down from her horse, Annabelle walked over to it, looking for clues. She bent over and picked up the leather straps that were on the ground near the front and studied the ends. “They’ve been cut.”

“Aye,” Jamie said from next to her.

She headed for the door to look inside, but Jamie grabbed her arm. “What’s wrong?” she asked, her hand immediately going to her dirk.

“It’s nae a pretty sight, lass,” he warned.

Annabelle closed her eyes for a moment and steeled her backbone for what she was going to see. She gave him a nod and moved forward, stepped on the edge of the carriage to boost herself toward the door and peered inside. There were two men, one well-dressed, his throat slashed, blood dried and gummy on his neck. The other had a couple of arrows piercing it's chest and face.

She looked back at Jamie. "So at least two assailants, one with a sword and one with a bow."

"We think there's more than that, lass. We've two dead that we believe were part of the marauder group. I didn't tell Cam, but they're dressed in Donald tartan."

"Are they our men?" Annabelle questioned.

"Nae, I've nae seen them a'fore." Jamie shook his head.

"Then likely, they're wearing the plaid to throw suspicion on the Donalds."

Jamie agreed.

Annabelle looked back into the cab of the carriage. Inside she noticed a piece of cloth. It was fine silk, and she reached for it. "Jamie, I think this came from Maeve's dress."

"Aye lass, you could have the right of it." He took the fabric from her. "So we should look for signs of where she might have been taken." He turned to Eamon and the others. "We tried to look for signs yesterday, but the sun was dim in the cover of the trees as it went down, maybe we will have better luck today. Look for any other signs of Maeve," he directed.

The men set off toward the trees, spreading out, looking for anything that would give

them a direction.

Annabelle moved from the carriage to the bodies on the ground. There was one dressed in Campbell tartan, at least Annabelle assumed it was the Campbell tartan, an arrow piercing his chest. From the position of the body in relation to the carriage, she said, "This was the driver."

Jamie was her shadow, following her steps as she studied the scene. "Aye, I agree."

Next Annabelle moved on to a man dressed less like a Highlander and more like an Englishman, or what she imagined was probably the attire of a wealthy English gentleman of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. "Brandon Campbell?" she said, pointing to the body which had numerous sword wounds, including one to the neck.

"I believe so, aye."

There was a sword in the man's hand, which was covered in dried blood. He had engaged in battle with these bandits but though he'd probably killed or maimed some of them, it hadn't been enough to stop them from taking his sister.

Annabelle looked from the carriage to where Brandon lay. "He wasn't in the carriage when that ambush occurred. If he had been, he'd have died in there like the others. So he was riding on his own."

Jamie looked at her, his eyes told her he was impressed with her deductions. "That tis likely," he agreed.

"I wish I had a lab where I could send some of this for analysis," Annabelle muttered as she studied the scene. "Okay, so Brandon fought these two, maybe another?" She pointed at the two bandits dead about a foot away. She picked up one of the dead men's swords and carried it over to Brandon's body. She looked at the splashes of

blood on the weapon and matched them up the slashes on the body. “See these wounds? These came from this man.” She turned back to one of the bandits dressed in Donald tartan.

“You can tell that?” Jamie asked in surprise.

Annabelle nodded. “See the placement of the blood? It’s consistent with these slash marks.” She turned to the other bandit and picked up his sword. It was clean. “This one didn’t manage to get a hit in, and he’s been stabbed through the back, so I’d say Brandon took him down first, then this guy joined the fight, got the slashes in and then there had to be a third one at least.”

“Why?”

“Because someone made those stabs to Brandon’s chest and neck.”

Annabelle moved from the two bandits to the others, the three beheaded men and noticed there were also arrows in their bodies as well. She looked up at Jamie and said, “I’m going to guess there were at least ten to twelve bandits, from how this scene looks. I can’t really see footprints, because the horses were clearly agitated prior to being taken, and they messed with the prints, leaving behind their own. But if you look at each individual death, it had to all be going on nearly at once.”

“I think you’re right, lass,” Jamie said grimly. “And they wanted the Campbells to believe we were the ones bringing death to them.”

Annabelle nodded as the others returned.

“We tracked the horse toward the stream, but once there, the signs disappeared,” Artair said.



“We should gather the dead and bury them before scavengers show up,” Jamie suggested.

“Aye,” Eamon replied. “We’ll clear an area for the graves.”

\* \* \*

It took several hours to get the bodies all buried and then set up a small camp nearby. They were going to spend the evening under the stars and return to the fort in the morning. Annabelle had packed for a few days and was surprised they weren’t going to go looking for the men who’d taken Maeve. She knew that every minute counted, but she didn’t know the terrain here and wouldn’t even begin to know how to track them.

The men took turns keeping watch throughout the night and in the morning, they returned to the fort to report to Cam. Annabelle stood at Jamie’s side as he told him what they’d found. This time including the fact the two of the bandits were dressed in Donald tartan.

Cam’s jaw tensed. “And you didnae recognize them? Could they be ones who left with Malcolm?”

Jamie shook his head. “They weren’t family, Cam. I know our family. These weren’t ours.”

He sighed. “I’m going to have to send word to the Laird.”

Annabelle frowned, her brow wrinkled at that suggestion. “Why inform him? Is he expecting to hear from them?”

“Aye. They should have been here for a little more ‘an a week now. He would have

sent word back to the Laird with his impressions of us.” Cam’s jaw ticked.

“We’ll go back out and continue the search for Maeve in the morning. Give Annabelle a chance to rest in her own bed for the night. Sleeping on the ground had to be difficult for her.” Jamie said, giving her a tender look.

“It was fine, we shouldn’t waste any time, Jamie. Who knows what they are doing to poor Maeve.” She had seen some horrid behavior from men toward women in her job and she hated to think that after watching her brother and friends slaughtered, she was tortured or worse as well.

“You’re a brave one, lass, but I think it would be best to go out again at first light.”

With a sigh, Annabelle accepted that, but she didn’t agree. She wanted to get out there and find her.

### CHAPTER 11

Annabelle, Jamie and the others met up in the courtyard at first light. She was anxious to get going and impatient as they headed out at a slow pace. She wished once again that she knew this land as well as they did. She wanted to move faster. She wanted to track these killers down and save Maeve before it was too late. She pressed the sides of her horse and urged him to go faster.

“Annabelle!” Jamie called, his voice sharp.

She reined in, and turned in her seat. “What!” she said, her voice filled with frustration.

“You donnae know where you’re going, lass, you need to let me lead.” Jamie’s brow was furrowed as he watched her. “If you cannae do that, then I will have Artair return you to the fort.”

Annabelle wanted to scream at him, but held her tongue. “Fine,” she bit out as she turned her horse and moved in behind him and Eamon.

Jamie gave her another look, but she couldn’t read it as he and Eamon picked up their pace. Two hours later, they came across an area on the moors that looked like an abandoned campsite. The ashes of a long-extinguished fire lay cold and lifeless, bearing witness to days of neglect. The absence of any signs of recent human activity raised the stakes of their mission, amplifying the sense of urgency that hung in the air.

Annabelle was frustrated as she meticulously combed the area for any trace of a clue. She needed to find something, anything that would tell them where the bandits had gone, but nothing stood out to her. She stood near the burnt out pit where a fire had once roared and stared at the ground as Jamie approached.

"Annabelle," Jamie's voice carried a gentle tone, the faintest hint of remorse in his Scottish brogue. "I'm sorry that I spoke harshly to you before. I didnae mean to upset you."

Annabelle, her face etched with both weariness and understanding, nodded. She turned to him, her eyes meeting his with a flicker of vulnerability. "It's not your fault," she admitted with a sigh. "I suppose I am just being triggered by what's happened to Maeve. I think it's just reminding me of how my old boyfriend, Edward, treated me."

"That is understandable, lass. I just care too much about you to let you ride off willy nilly. I donnae want you to get lost as well and the moors can be dangerous if'n you donnae know where you are going."

"I know. Thank you." Annabelle smiled.

"Come, let us continue the search."

\* \* \*

Under the vast Highland sky, the search party rode forth across the moors. The landscape stretched out before them, a patchwork quilt of emerald fields and rolling hills, kissed by the golden rays of the sun. The air was crisp and filled with the earthy scents of heather and brine, a scent Annabelle really enjoyed.

Another hour passed before the searchers stumbled upon the remnants of another old

camp; a mere ghost of a temporary refuge abandoned by the elusive bandits. Annabelle figured this camp was prior to taking Maeve, as there was nothing left behind that told of her being with them and it felt as though it had been abandoned long before they'd taken her.

Jamie, his eyes scanning the surroundings with a seasoned vigilance, spoke in hushed tones. "These bandits, they're clever," he noted, his voice carrying the weight of their elusiveness. "They donnae stay in one place for long, it seems. That must be why we've not come across them in our patrols." He rubbed his chin as he spoke.

"Tis getting late, Jamie. Should we camp here for the night?" Eamon suggested.

"Aye, tis a good idea, Eamon." Jamie nodded.

As twilight cast its enchanting hues over the Highland landscape, tents were pitched, and a flickering campfire was kindled, its dancing flames pushing back the encroaching darkness. The scent of cooking meat wafted through the crisp evening air as they gathered around the fire, seeking warmth and solace in its comforting embrace.

Amidst the crackling of the firewood and the low murmurs of conversation, a sudden commotion broke the tranquility. Shouts of alarm and surprise rang out among the guards as a lone messenger on horseback came thundering into their camp. The sudden arrival sent ripples of tension through the gathering as they all jumped to their feet and pulled their swords.

Annabelle did the same, standing up and pulling her dirk, ready to battle to the death if she needed to. Jamie swiftly stepped in front of her, guarding her with his own body. "Who comes here?" he called out to the new arrival.

"Tis Seamus," the messenger called out, breathless and disheveled from his haste as

he rode forward, dismounted and presented Jamie with a sealed letter. "I brought a letter from the Chief."

Jamie broke the seal and read the letter. He gave a frustrated sigh and crumpled the letter in his hand.

"What is it?" Annabelle asked.

"A group of Campbell guardsmen have set up camp at the bottom of the hill from the fort. They've demanded we find these bandits within a fortnight's time, or the Campbells will bring forth an army and raze the fort."

The gravity of the situation hung heavy in the air, casting a shadow over their camp. Fort Donald, their sanctuary Annabelle now called home, now stood under a dark and looming threat. The very survival of the Donald Clan rested upon their shoulders, and the urgency of their mission took on an even greater significance.

Their mission to find Maeve Campbell and uncover the truth had taken on a new urgency. As the weight of Cam's dire message settled upon the camp, the atmosphere grew increasingly somber. Disgruntled murmurs permeated the air, and a heavy cloud of worry hung over the guards. Each one wore a furrowed brow, and an expression marked by concern, their thoughts drifting to their families left behind within the protective walls of the fort.

Annabelle put her hand on Jamie's arm. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Find her, tis all we can do, lass." Jamie headed for the tents and was gone for a couple of minutes and then returned. He handed Seamus a letter. "Take this back to the fort. Give it to the Chief."

"Aye," Seamus replied as he remounted his horse.

Annabelle watched him go, a shadow moving through the darkness until he blended in with the landscape and she could see no more.

\* \* \*

The night was draped in a heavy silence, broken only by the soft snores of the weary search party, save for the vigilant guards on their nocturnal watch. Annabelle lay in her own tent on her bedroll, her thoughts a tumultuous whirlwind of concern for the fort and the expectations that rested squarely upon her shoulders.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, Annabelle rose from her bedroll. She had seen Jamie's face when that letter was delivered. He was more upset than he'd let on and she wanted to comfort him. She couldn't sleep knowing he was probably sitting in his tent fretting over all of this.

"Are you awake, Jamie?" she whispered as she knelt at the entrance to his tent.

"Aye, lass, I am. Tis everything all right?"

Annabelle crawled in and sat down next to him. "Actually, that's what I wanted to ask you. I know you're worried about the clan, about your home. I thought maybe I could..." she let her voice trail off, unsure of what she could do, or rather what he'd allow her to do.

"Aye, that I am, lass. I cannae let the clan down. Tis not in me."

"It's a lot of pressure to put on yourself. Let me share the burden," she said, moving closer to him. "We can do this if we work together."

A smile quirked his lips. "Aye lass, I like the thought of you sharing my burdens as long as you allow me to share yours as well," he said.

Annabelle met his gaze and licked her lips. She drew in a shallow breath that caught in her throat as he leaned forward. His lips captured hers in a tender kiss and his hands moved to her waist. The world outside their tent faded away, leaving only the two of them.

Annabelle's heart quickened as she drew closer to Jamie, her fingers tracing the contours of his face with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation. In the soft, flickering glow of the lantern, his eyes held a depth that sent shivers down her spine. It was a gaze that promised both solace and passion, a silent invitation to unburden themselves.

Their lips met once more, this time with a hunger that mirrored the dance of the lantern's glow. Jamie's kisses were a revelation, each one sparking a blaze of desire within her. Annabelle felt herself surrendering to the exquisite torment of his mouth on hers, their breaths mingling in a wordless exchange.

Their hands moved with purpose, fingers tracing patterns on each other's skin as they ventured into uncharted territory. The rustling of fabric underscored the crescendo of their desires, layers of cloth and pretense slipping away.

Jamie's touch, both gentle and fervent, explored her body. Annabelle gave into him.

Jamie pulled off his tunic and belt and disrobed until he lay naked before her. Annabelle gasped at the beauty of his body. Beneath his tunic and kilt he had a six pack of abs and all hard muscles that made her mouth water.

"May I, lass?" he said reaching for her top.

Annabelle nodded, yes. Jamie made quick work of the top and pants she wore until Annabelle was naked. Jamie cupped her breast, and the warmth of his hand was instantly comforting. He kissed her passionately, first her mouth, then her neck, until



his mouth was clasped on her nipple. Annabelle arched her back.

"I want you, Jamie," she moaned.

"And I you, lass," he whispered.

Jamie maneuvered between her thighs and placed the tip of himself inside of her. Annabelle wrapped her legs around his back and drew him to her. He entered her and both reacted with a moan of ecstasy. As though they both had been waiting to be satiated from such hunger.

Jamie moved his hips slowly, romantically making love to her. Whispers of romantic words slipped from his lips. Annabelle had never been with a man like this. Edward was always a taker and expected her to do all the work. He was nothing like Jamie. It was unusual to have a man lock eyes with her as he made love to her, trying to connect with her.

Annabelle reached a height and stifled a loud moan, remembering that they weren't alone in the camp. She pushed her mouth into Jamie's shoulder, biting to keep from screaming. Jamie responded with his own release as his body tremored on top of hers.

Annabelle nestled her head against Jamie's broad chest, finding solace in the steady rhythm of his breath. His strong arms wrapped protectively around her, drawing her closer in a tender embrace. In his arms, she felt secure, cherished, and loved.

### CHAPTER 12

The first light of dawn crept over the rugged Scottish landscape, casting a golden hue upon the campsite. Birds began to stir in the distant trees, their melodic songs a gentle backdrop to the scene unfolding before them.

Jamie, Annabelle, and the men of the search party moved with practiced efficiency as they packed up the camp. Tents were disassembled, their canvas folds neatly tied and secured to the horses' saddles. Bedrolls were rolled up and strapped in place, while cooking utensils were stowed away in leather pouches.

Amidst the flurry of activity, Jamie's attentiveness to Annabelle was unmistakable. He would steal glances at her, his gaze lingering on her with an affectionate intensity. He reached out to help her with her saddlebag, his touch tender and reassuring. Although Jamie's actions were filled with a genuine romantic tenderness, Annabelle struggled to fully accept it. Scarred by her past with Edward, she found it challenging to believe she'd moved on so quickly from him and didn't know if she could trust what she was feeling.

With their campsite dismantled, the group prepared to mount their horses and continue their search. Jamie, issued orders with a confident tone. He directed them toward a nearby village, situated strategically along the road the Campbells would likely take to reach Fort Donald. The notion that the bandits might have stopped there, especially if they had a woman in their midst, lingered in Annabelle's mind.

As they rode out of the camp, Annabelle found herself caught in a whirlwind of emotions. Her heart, once encased in the protective armor of past pain, was slowly

thawing in the warmth of Jamie's affection. Yet, the scars of her past relationship with Edward still haunted her, making it challenging to fully embrace the romance that had seemed to have bloomed between her and Jamie.

As they rode, Jamie rode up next to her and murmured, "Lass, are you well?"

Annabelle hesitated for a moment, her thoughts caught in the tangled web of her emotions. She had enjoyed their night together, the deep connection they had forged under the stars. But now, with the clear light of day, doubts had begun to creep into her mind. She knew it was irrational, but the memory of her controlling ex-boyfriend, Edward, loomed like a shadow over her heart. She nodded, not wanting to share her thoughts with so many others around them.

Jamie leaned close, his voice carrying the warmth as he said, "I very much enjoyed last eve with you, lass."

Annabelle noticed the affection in his gaze, and she smiled. "I enjoyed it too," she whispered back. She might not trust that this would last, or that he wouldn't change now that she'd slept with him, but she couldn't lie. It had been one of the best nights of her life.

That thought led to a wave of guilt descending on her heart. She'd never felt that with Edward, and it seemed as though she'd moved on pretty quickly from him after coming here. It wasn't as though she owed him anything; their relationship had been toxic, a prison from which she had finally escaped after wanting to do so for so long. Still, the fear lingered that, in allowing herself to embrace this budding romance with Jamie, she might inadvertently summon him and the specter of control and manipulation once more.

The words to express those fears eluded her. How could she tell Jamie that, in spite of her newfound happiness, the scars of her past were still etched deep within her? She

worried that voicing such concerns might make her sound irrational or overly cautious. And so, she rode in silence, the weight of her thoughts casting a shadow over the blossoming love that lay between them.

Riding side by side on horseback, Jamie became her enthusiastic guide to the wonders of the island. His knowledge of Islay was impressive, and he pointed out various scenic marvels with a lighthearted and flirtatious banter that warmed Annabelle's spirit.

"Look there, lass," Jamie exclaimed with a mischievous glint in his eye, gesturing to a cascading waterfall that sparkled like a diamond in the sunlight. "You see that waterfall? The locals say that its waters have the power to heal a broken heart."

Annabelle couldn't help but chuckle at the whimsical notion. "Well, in that case, perhaps I should take a dip and ensure my heart is well on the mend and ready for something with a handsome Highlander like you."

Jamie grinned, his blue eyes sparkling as he played along with her playful tone. "Ah, but I donnae know if I could bear to see a swan as fair as you transformed into a siren. It may be more than my humble heart could take."

Their banter continued as they rode through rolling hills covered in vibrant heather, and Jamie regaled Annabelle with tales of the ancient standing stones that dotted the landscape. Each stone, he explained, had a story or legend attached, and the island itself seemed to whisper secrets of bygone eras.

As they paused by the shores of a serene loch, Jamie told her what was called Loch Skerrols, he leaned closer to Annabelle, his voice softening. "You know, lass, these lands are a rare treasure, and I'm grateful to be able to share them with you. But tis nae just the beauty of Islay that warms my heart."

Annabelle met his gaze, her eyes dancing with a mixture of curiosity and affection. "Oh, and what is it, then, that warms your heart, Jamie?"

He reached out, his fingers lightly grazing her cheek, his touch gentle as he replied, "Tis the company of a lass as smart, fierce, and beautiful as you, Annabelle."

Their horses stood side by side, as if mirroring their closeness. In that moment, amid the breathtaking Scottish scenery, Annabelle felt their connection deepen, and the promise of love filled her fragile heart.

\* \* \*

As the sun began its descent in the sky, casting a warm, golden hue over the rugged Scottish landscape, Annabelle couldn't help but let her thoughts drift. Jamie's words had triggered a cascade of introspection within her, making her aware of her tendency to analyze every gesture, every word he uttered. Her past with Edward had clearly left scars that she needed to rid herself of so that something could truly blossom between them.

Jamie had remained steadfast and true since their evening together, his actions reflecting a kindness and sincerity that slowly chipped away at the walls she had built around her heart. He was unlike anyone she had known before, a man of honor and integrity. He was everything that Edward had claimed to be, but had lied about.

As they rode together over the next few days through the wild, untamed beauty of Islay, Annabelle began to notice the small things about Jamie that made him so endearing. The way he would sometimes glance at her with a crooked smile, as if sharing a secret only they knew. His genuine interest in her thoughts and feelings, always listening when she spoke. And the kindness in his eyes when he thought she wasn't looking, a kindness that seemed to go beyond mere attraction.

“You seem more at ease now, Annabelle. I'm glad to see you smiling.”

She met his gaze, and her heart suddenly became lighter. “It's your company, Jamie. You make me feel safe, and for the first time in a long while, I can breathe without fear.”

He reached out and gently took her hand, his touch warm and reassuring. “You are safe with me, lass, always. And we'll clear our clan's name, together.”

Annabelle felt a sense of peace she hadn't known in years. In the midst of the Scottish wilderness, she found herself drawn to Jamie, not just as a protector, but as a kindred spirit, a man whose sincerity and strength were gradually melting away her reservations. With each passing moment, their connection deepened and the walls around Annabelle's heart had begun to fall.

As the day's journey came to an end, the group stumbled upon a hidden gem—a serene clearing aside a rolling hill, offering a breathtaking panoramic view of the surrounding countryside, but also shelter from the wind. A collective sigh of appreciation escaped their lips as they gazed upon the natural splendor that lay before them.

With efficiency born of experience, they set about establishing their camp for the night. Tents were expertly pitched, their sturdy canvas walls offering shelter from the unpredictable Highland weather. A ring of stones was set into place to contain their campfire, a source of warmth against the chill of the evening.

Jamie and Annabelle worked in tandem, preparing a hearty meal over the open fire. A large pot bubbled with a rich stew, brimming with tender chunks of fish caught in the stream nearby, vegetables, and fragrant herbs—a dish that promised warmth and sustenance after a long day's travel.

Beside the simmering pot, a cast-iron griddle sizzled with thick slices of bannock. Its golden crust gave way to a soft, warm center, perfect for soaking up the savory flavors of the stew. The tantalizing aroma of cooking food drew the others closer, and soon, laughter and camaraderie filled the night air.

“Lass, have you heard the tale of Alistair MacLeod?” Artair asked from across the campfire.

Annabelle shook her head. “No, I don’t think I have. Who was he? Is he related to the Donald Clan?”

“Nae Lass, he was part of the MacLeod Clan and lived long ago. He was a humble crofter, a man of great strength and kindness, known throughout the glens for his generosity and compassion. His croft was nestled at the foot of the cliffs, its jagged peaks edges by the sea.”

As Artair spoke, Annabelle was transported to a different time and place.

"One fateful day, as the Highland mist hung heavy in the air, Alistair ventured deep into the forest to gather firewood. It was there that he stumbled upon a wounded creature—a magnificent stag with antlers that gleamed like silver in the dappled sunlight and wings to match."

“Was it real? This creature?” Annabelle asked.

"Aye, lass. With great care, Alistair tended to the stag's wounds, and in return, the creature bestowed upon him a gift—a single, gleaming feather from its mighty wings. This feather, tis said, possessed the power to heal wounds and bring good fortune."

Annabelle gave him a skeptical look. “If that’s true, why didn’t the stag heal itself?”

Jamie chuckled. "Listen to the tale, lass."

"Tis a good question, that, lass. The stag's magic didnae work upon itself." Artair smiled, a twinkle in his eye as he continued, "Word of Alistair's gift spread throughout the glens, and soon, travelers from near and far sought his croft for the miraculous feather's touch. Alistair's croft prospered, and he became a revered figure in the Highlands, known as the 'Healer of the Stag.'"

"So he actually healed others with the feather?" she questioned.

"Aye, he did. But Alistair never forgot the lesson he had learned from the stag—the importance of compassion and kindness. He shared his gift freely, using the feather to heal not only the body but also the souls of those in need."

"That is a lovely story. What happened to him and the feather?" she asked.

"Alistair lived a long and prosperous life. Upon his death, the feather disappeared, it's magic and the pact between Alistair and the stag fulfilled. Tis the way the Fae work, lass." He smiled.

Annabelle sighed at the simple answer. If only everything in life worked that way.

Later that night, Annabelle found warmth in Jamie's arms, and although they didn't make love that night, it was a night of romantic and protective embrace unlike anything that she had ever known. They laid nestled under a warm plaid blanket that he had thoughtfully draped over both of them. The gentle rise and fall of his chest as he slept was a comforting lullaby that allowed her to drift in her thoughts.

In the quietude of the night, memories of Edward resurfaced. She recalled the countless nights when she had laid beside him, on her own side of the bed, not touching him and feeling alone. Edward had disliked her being close to him. Had



often pushed her away after sex, and then rolling over and falling to sleep, his libido satisfied.

In stark contrast, Jamie was a man of genuine warmth and care. His very presence was like a protective shield that kept the chill of the Highland night at bay. Annabelle couldn't help but marvel at the way he tucked the blanket around her, ensuring that she was cocooned in comfort. His actions spoke volumes of the love and tenderness that flowed from his heart.

She reflected on the differences between the two men, like night and day. Jamie, with his endearing gestures and affectionate nature, had opened her heart to a love she had never known. Edward, on the other hand, had been a master of manipulation, his love a fleeting illusion that had crumbled beneath the weight of his selfish desires.

Annabelle knew in that moment, without a doubt, that she had made the right choice in embracing the Highland life and the attentions of a man like Jamie MacDonald.

As the golden fingers of dawn gently caressed the Scottish countryside, the camp stirred to life. The morning air was crisp and invigorating, carrying with it the earthy scent of the Highland heather. In the soft light of a new day, the routine of the camp began with a grace that only the rhythm of the Highlands could provide.

In the heart of the camp, the breakfast preparations were underway. Succulent sausages picked up in the nearest village a day ago sizzled in a well-seasoned skillet, their aroma mingling with the scent of freshly warmed bread. The rich, savory fragrance of their morning meal wafted through the camp, a hearty promise of sustenance for the journey ahead.

Once breakfast had been savored and the horses watered, the group packed up the camp and headed out on the trail again. They rode for hours, toward one of the farther reaches of Clan Campbell's territory.

The journey through the enchanting Scottish countryside eventually brought Jamie, Annabelle, and their party to another small village. The sunset bathed the cobblestone streets in a warm, golden glow, casting long shadows that stretched out like welcoming arms. The village, nestled amidst rolling hills and lush greenery, appeared frozen in time, a place where the traditions were lovingly preserved.

As they entered the heart of the village, the buildings revealed their age, their timeworn stone facades exuding a timeless charm. Moss clung to the thatched roofs, giving the structures an earthy, rustic feel. Smoke spiraled lazily from the chimneys, carrying the comforting aroma of hearth fires and hearty meals. The streets bustled with villagers going about their daily tasks, their faces filled with the warmth of community and familiarity.

Their journey's end was marked by the Timber House Inn, a welcoming refuge that stood proudly amidst the village's picturesque setting. Its exterior, adorned with hanging baskets of vibrant wildflowers, was a testament to the care and pride of the innkeeper. Wooden beams, darkened by years of exposure to the elements, crisscrossed the whitewashed walls, creating an inviting and cozy atmosphere.

As the horses were tended to, Annabelle couldn't help but admire the seamless blend of nature and human craftsmanship that defined this village, a place where the past and present coexisted in perfect harmony.

### CHAPTER 13

The village Annabelle now stood in seemed to have been plucked from the pages of a historical novel. The very air carried the fragrance of history, a blend of woodsmoke, damp earth, and the sweet scent of heather that blanketed the nearby hills. Annabelle felt as if she had stepped into a living, breathing tapestry, where each stone and cobblestone street had a tale even more ancient than Fort Donald to tell.

As Annabelle continued to gaze upon this living relic of the past, her heart swelled with a profound sense of belonging. She knew that her journey through time had brought her to a place where she could uncover not only the secrets of the past but also the untold chapters of her own destiny. Turning her gaze, she met Jamie's compassionate gaze.

His eyes held a mixture of curiosity and concern as he inquired, "Is something amiss, lass?"

"No, Jamie, nothing's wrong. It's just... everything is overwhelming. I never imagined I'd find myself in a place like this. It's magical."

Jamie's lips curved into a smile as he gently squeezed her hand. "Aye, I understand. 'Tis a lot to take in. You're safe here, and you've got me by your side. I'll nae let anything harm you."

With a soft sigh, she leaned into Jamie's embrace, allowing herself to find to enjoy his strong arms. "Thank you," she murmured, grateful to have him by her side.

The two of them followed the rest of their party into the inn and Jamie led Annabelle toward a man behind a counter. “Good evening,” Jamie said. “I am hoping you have rooms available.”

“Aye we’ve a few.” The man nodded. “I’m Sean Robertson, proprietor. Let me get my wife, she’ll see to the rooms. Do you need a meal?”

“Aye that would do us well.”

“Thank you, before you go, can you tell me if Brandon Campbell and his party stayed here?” Jamie asked.

“Aye that they did, he and his men as well as a young lass. Very high handed and demanding, they were. Drove business away from the tavern while they were here too,” Mr. Robertson replied.

“Was there anyone who paid them any mind?” Annabelle asked. “Anyone strangely interested in them?”

Mr. Robertson frowned and shook his head. “Nae, kept to themselves, ‘cept for orderin’ me and the missus about. We were all glad to see the backsides of them.”

As they spoke with the innkeeper, the room buzzed with the hushed conversations of other patrons, the clinking of tankards, and the lilting melodies of a bard strumming a lute in the corner. As Jamie thanked the innkeeper, the hearty aroma of stew and freshly baked bread wafted through the air and Annabelle’s stomach rumbled.

“Please tell me there is plenty of that delicious smelling stew for us,” she said looking at Mr. Robertson.

“Aye, lass, that there is. Find yourselves a table and we’ll get you fed while my

missus sees to your rooms.”

“Thank you, Mr. Robertson,” Annabelle said with a smile.

Jamie and Annabelle found themselves seated at a worn yet sturdy wooden table in the heart of the inn. A fresh pitcher of water sat before them, glistening in the warm glow of candlelight.

As the others joined them, a young and pretty girl with rosy cheeks and a cascade of chestnut hair, made her way to their table. Her apron bore evidence of a long evening's work, yet her smile remained warm and inviting. As she approached, Jamie greeted her with a disarming grin. For a brief moment, Annabelle couldn't help but feel a twinge of doubt at his feelings for her and her mind clouded with fleeting uncertainties.

With a charming lilt in his voice, Jamie inquired, "And what might your name be, lass?"

The young woman replied, "I'm Beitris, sir."

“Beitris, we’d all like a bowl of that delicious stew, some bread and ale, if you wouldnae mind?” Jamie gave her one of his charming smiles. He seemed almost flirtatious toward her.

“A course, sir.” Beitris nodded and scurried off.

Annabelle couldn't help but wonder if maybe Jamie's heart wasn't as fully engaged with her as she'd previously thought. She hated to think of herself as a jealous woman, but she was fighting the green-eyed monster something fierce at the moment. She tried to bite back the jealousy but couldn't help but ask him, “Why did you ask her name?”

Jamie looked at her and smiled. It was one that reached his eyes and damn near melted her heart. “I asked because tis the polite thing to do and because we want her to trust us. She may have seen or heard somethin’ when the Campbells were here that could lead us to who might have murdered them.”

Annabelle listened to his explanation, chastising herself inwardly for momentarily letting her romantic insecurities cloud her professional judgment. She nodded in understanding, realizing that, as a detective herself, she should have recognized the wisdom in Jamie's approach. “Good point,” she agreed.

Beitris returned, deftly balancing a laden tray. The aroma of the stew filled the air as she placed the dishes before them. The stew was a rich medley of tender meat, vegetables, and fragrant herbs, while the bread bore a crusty exterior and a soft, warm center. Beitris had also brought a selection of cheeses ranged from sharp cheddar to creamy brie, offering a delightful variety of flavors, and frothy tankards of ale.

“Thank you kindly, Beitris,” Jamie said, giving the girl a smile.

Annabelle decided to step in then. There was no need for him to be the one to do all the talking. “Beitris,” Annabelle injected, smiling at her, “I was wondering if you could help us.”

She turned to Annabelle; her eyes wide. “If’n I can, I will, what do you need, miss?”

“We’re inquiring about a group of people who stayed here not too long ago, from the Campbell Clan.”

Her face soured. “Oh, them.” She nodded. “What about them?”

Annabelle nearly laughed, but quickly sobered considering they were dead. “I understand they weren’t very pleasant to anyone here, but my question isn’t about

them directly. I wondered if you noticed anyone paying them special attention?"

"Oh aye, there were some of your clan here as well. They kept an eye upon them, made sure they didn't get out of hand."

Annabelle and Jamie shared a glance and then looked around the table.

"Our clan?" Artair asked.

"Aye, Clan Donald? At least they wore the same tartan as you." She paused and looked thoughtful for a moment. "Come to think of it, I donnae think I've ever seen them around here before, and they spoke funny, kind of like you," she said, looking at Annabelle.

Annabelle froze and immediately thought maybe Edward had been brought back in time, but that was ridiculous. Why would Dub Sith bring him here when he knew she was trying to get away from him? Still she gave Jamie a startled look.

"Lass, do you mean they were English?" Jamie asked.

"Aye, they sounded more English than you, miss, are you not English?" the girl asked, a frown on her lips.

Annabelle's expression cleared. "Oh, yes, I am. Um, but I come from a very small obscure town, and we apparently have our own um accent that is different from a good part of England."

"Like the Welsh then." She nodded.

A couple of the men at the table snickered and Annabelle frowned at them.

“Yes, something like that,” Annabelle agreed. She cleared her throat then asked, “So these men, they were English but dressed in Donald tartan?”

“Nae all of ‘em, jest a few. The others were Scotsmen.”

“How many of them were there?” Eamon asked.

Beitris frowned. “Cannae say exactly. They come at different times, have a tankard or two and go off on their merry way. More’n a handful o’ them, I would guess.”

“Have you seen them around here lately?” Artair asked.

“Aye, jest yesterday two o’ them came in.” Beitris nodded.

Annabelle grew excited hearing that. They were close to catching them if they were here yesterday. She glanced at Jamie, her hand going to his knee and squeezing it in her excitement. He gave her a subtle nod.

“Has anythin’ else odd been goin’ on in your town?” Jamie asked. “Since the Campbell’s visit I mean.”

“Oh aye, tis the strangest thing. Food from our storages have gone a miss. Nae jest here at the inn, but with others too. An’ our kitchen was ransacked as well.”

“Has anyone been injured?” Jamie asked, concern lacing his words.

“Nae, have nae heard of anyone sufferin’ any injuries.” She shook her head.

“That tis good to hear,” Jamie said with a smile, then pulled out a coin and handed it to her. “I appreciate you speakin’ with us, Beitris.”



“A course, can I get you anythin’ else?” she asked as she looked around the table.

“Nae, we’re fine, lass. Thank you again,” he replied.

Beitris bobbed a curtsey and headed back toward the kitchens as Annabelle watched her go. She turned back to Jamie said, “You are awfully charming to people.”

Jamie chuckled, his eyes warm as he looked at her. "Aye, lass, sometimes a friendly face and a wee bit o' charm can open doors that might otherwise stay shut."

Annabelle couldn’t fault his logic, but she didn’t like that his being charming with Beitris made her feel jealous and irrational. And it was irrational. She decided to let it go as she leaned in closer, her voice low. "It seems these bandits are using this village as a sort of base, don’t you think? They keep returning here, probably to steal food and supplies for their group. If we can figure out why they're targeting this place, we might get closer to finding Maeve and clearing your clan's name."

Jamie nodded in agreement, his eyes focused and determined. "Aye, you could be right, lass. We’ll start here in the village and see what we can discover.”

“Tis a good plan, Jamie,” Eamon agreed.

“We’ll start at first light,” Artair added.

Annabelle yawned. She was tired but wished they could go out and hunt them down right now. She understood why they were going to wait, but she really wished they didn’t have to.

### CHAPTER 14

After a hearty meal, she and Jamie ascended the creaky wooden stairs behind Mrs. Robertson, followed by the others. "I've put you and your missus in this room," she said, opening the door for them.

Jamie and Annabelle shared a look, but didn't dissuade her from the idea that they were married. Instead they entered their quarters. The room had a cozy charm to it, with a large, well-made bed adorned in plaid covers taking center stage. A sturdy wooden table stood by the window, upon which a flickering candle illuminated the room. The window itself offered a picturesque view of the quaint village below, its thatched cottages and narrow cobblestone streets bathed in the soft glow of twilight.

"Thank you, Mrs. Robertson, this is a very nice room," Annabelle said graciously.

She nodded, a smile on her lips. "Sleep well." She pulled the door shut and moved on down the hall with the others.

As they settled into the room, Annabelle's gaze was drawn to the inviting bed. Her thoughts wandered for a moment as she contemplated the newfound comfort of the inn's accommodations compared to the tent they had shared during their journey.

Curious, Jamie noticed the faint blush on Annabelle's cheeks and inquired with a playful smirk, "Why, lass, what's got you all flushed?" he teased. "'Twas it Mrs. Robertson callin' you my missus?"

Annabelle's lips curved into a half-smile. "I almost feel bad about misleading her. We

didn't even try to explain."

Jamie winked at her. "Tis nothin' to be ashamed of, lass. She saw the affection between us, and assumed. If'n you want your own room, I can bunk with one o' the others."

Annabelle quickly shook her head and moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Don't you dare."

Jamie chuckled and said, "I was hopin' you wouldnae take me up on that offer." He set about putting his bag down and pulled out a few things, laying them on the desk. He took a seat and picked up his quill, dipping it into a well of ink and turned his attention to Annabelle. "I'm penning a letter to Cam. I'm going to request he send more mento us here in this village. I truly believe we are on the cusp of finding these bandits."

"That's a good idea," Annabelle agreed. "Who are you going to send it with?"

"I'll use one of the innkeeper's messengers. I donnae want to send away one of my men, as I may need them here."

Jamie finished writing the note, sealed it and then told her he'd be back in a moment. Annabelle used that time to make use of the wash basin, cleaning her face and hands and getting comfortable. Jamie returned, pulled off his tunic and began to wash as well. Annabelle couldn't take her eyes off of him. He was sculpted perfection, and she was amazed that he was interested in her.

"Lass, keep watching me like that and we willnae get any sleep this night."

Annabelle giggled. "As intriguing as that sounds, I don't think we'll be getting any sleep anyway."

Jamie frowned and looked at her. "What do you mean, lass?"

"I have a plan, well, more of an idea," she said. "Beitris said that things were being stolen and their kitchen was ransacked. She didn't say when it happened, but I would have to assume it's been at night, once everyone has gone to sleep. I think we should start watching for the thieves at night and follow them back to their camp once we find them."

Jamie considered her words carefully. His deep blue eyes met hers. "That is a sound idea, lass." Pulling his shirt back on, he rose from his seat, the muscles of his powerful frame rippling beneath the fabric. "I'll go inform the others."

Annabelle couldn't help the moment of regret that they wouldn't be making use of the large comfortable bed she was sitting on, but duty came first. They needed to catch these murderers and clear the Donald Clan's name.

Jamie returned and as he entered the room, pulled his tunic over his head and grinned at her. Annabelle gave him a questioning look. "I thought we were going to go watch for the bandits?"

"Hugh and Aedan are taking first watch." Jamie wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Thought we might make use of this nice bed the innkeeper has provided us with."

Annabelle laughed. "I like the way you think," she answered, reaching for him.

\* \* \*

The next morning greeted them with a soft, golden light that filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow across the room. It was a new day, and Jamie and Annabelle reveled in it after a night and morning of shared passion.

After their fiery connection, they shared a hearty breakfast of freshly baked scones, still warm from the oven, a generous platter of sliced ham, and bowls of hot porridge with honey.

“What are we doing today?” Annabelle asked.

“We’ll need to trade off with the others to keep watch. I checked in with Eamon this morning, so far there’s been no sign of the bandits. So with that in mind I thought perhaps we could explore the village? Visit the shops and maybe ride in the surrounding countryside?”

Annabelle grinned. “So basically a stakeout and undercover work. I like it.”

“I thought you might, best wear a dress instead of those pants and quilted top. You’ll want to blend in more.”

Annabelle laughed. “What, my nightdress won’t work?” She lifted the skirt of the linen nightgown she was wearing currently.

“Lass, I fear I shall have to poke out every man’s eyeballs if’n they saw you in such attire.” Jamie chuckled.

Annabelle laughed too. She liked this playful side of Jamie. It was so refreshing after being with someone like Edward for so long. She hurried to change into the single dress she’d brought along so they could get started on their day.

### CHAPTER 15

That night found them perched in strategic positions, Annabelle back in her dark pants and top, vigilant, and silent as they watched for any sign of the elusive thieves. The darkness was their ally, cloaking them in shadows as they lay in wait. The night was alive with the sounds of the wilderness — the distant howl of a wolf, the hoot of an owl, and the rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze.

Jamie had visited with the village guards earlier in the day and explained the situation to them. Luckily, it seemed the villagers were allies to the Donald Clan and though they were not vocal about it, disagreed with the Campbells and the monarchy. The guards had been on the lookout for the thieves as well, as there had been numerous complaints made over the last few weeks, but hadn't had any luck. Now though, with Jamie and the others of the clan's help, they agreed to step up their efforts to protect the village and catch them.

Between them, they created a network of surveillance that covered every nook and cranny of the village, ensuring that no movement would escape their vigilant eyes. Now they just had to wait for the bandits to make their move.

Several days passed with no activity from the bandits, which had Annabelle frustrated. She decided to ask Jamie if he could train her more with the weapons of the day since she was missing her firearm. She was used to being armed and though she had the dirk, she feared it might not be enough.

“What would you like to learn, lass?”

Annabelle thought about it a moment and then said, "I'd like to be more proficient with the bow so that I can use it while on horseback, and while I like the dirk as a backup weapon, I thought maybe a short sword might be better?"

"Aye, I can teach you to shoot while mounted, lass, tis tricky riding and shooting, but once you master it, you'll be quite the threat." Jamie smiled.

"And the short sword?"

He nodded. "If I can find a training weapon with the guards here, I think we can manage that too."

"A training weapon?" Annabelle wasn't sure what he meant by that. Wasn't one sword the same as another?

"Aye, we use wood to train so you donnae hurt yourself."

"Oh, that makes sense." She wouldn't want to accidentally stab him or herself while practicing.

As the two worked together training, Annabelle realized that not only did it deepen their romantic relationship but it also solidified their commitment to their mission and their friendship. They shared knowing glances and exchanged silent cues, as their connection transcended words. They not only worked well together, but they understood one another on a deeper level.

A few days into the training, there still hadn't been any sightings of the bandits. She and Jamie had taken the late afternoon and evening off from practicing and patrolling and were seated in the tavern, enjoying the camaraderie of the villagers who were telling tales and singing. Jamie had partaken of numerous tankards of ale and was more jovial than normal. It was then that Annabelle realized he was one of those

happy drunk people. The kind who only got more boisterous and fun-loving the more they drank.

It took everything in her to keep the tears of laughter from flowing down her cheeks as Jamie tried to balance a tankard on his nose, much to the enjoyment of everyone around them. Eventually, she had to support him as they made their way up the stairs to their room for the night. It was an evening she would never forget because of how much fun they'd had.

\* \* \*

The next day dawned in the village with a soft, misty light filtering through the curtains in the tavern. The air carried the tantalizing scent of a hearty breakfast, promising warmth and comfort. Jamie and Annabelle sat at a table with plates laden with freshly baked bread and bowls of creamy, buttery porridge drizzled with honey.

Jamie was nursing a slight hangover as he said, "Lass, tell me I didnae make you uncomfortable last eve with my silly minded drunkenness." He gave her a remorseful look.

Annabelle grinned. "I thought you were quite fun and even though you were off your head, you remained ever the gentleman, Jamie, you've nothing to worry about."

He blew out a relieved breath. "Oh thank the good Lord for small mercies. I'd not want to drive you away. I donnae usually drink so much I lose my head."

"You were fine, Jamie. I had a good time with you. Not that I want you to drink to excess often, but you were having fun, we all were. It was one of the best evenings I've had in a long time."

"I'm glad to hear it, lass." Jamie smiled and reached for a chunk of bread as a young



man approached. “Kieran, what troubles you lad?” he asked.

The boy handed over a note with a seal that Annabelle recognized as Cam MacDonald’s. “Tis nae good news, Jamie.”

Jamie took the letter and opened it. He read it over and passed it to Annabelle as he said, “Did you see the Campbells camped around the hill to the fort?”

“Aye, they’ve taken over the small village at the base of the hill.”

Annabelle read the missive that Cam had sent. He’d written to tell them that no more men could be spared because the Campbells were ready to attack and that he prayed Jamie would find these bandits quickly and bring them to the Laird before it was too late. A shiver of fear raced down Annabelle’s spine at his words.

“How many are there, Kieran? Did you see?”

"Aye. There must be at least a hundred Campbell guards camped outside the Fort. They said you’ve been given a fortnight, and you’ve only got a few days left. It seems they hold Clan Donald responsible for the attack upon the ones who stayed here."

Jamie clenched his jaw. “Aye, that they do. We’ve four days left to track down these bandits or the Campbells will destroy Fort Donald and any who claim the Donald Clan as their own.”

“What can we do to help?” Kieran asked. “You know the villagers here will support you.”

“Aye, that I do. We need to find Maeve Campbell. She may be our only real hope to saving the clan. The bandits who murdered the Campbell envoy stole her away. That is why we’ve been searching for them.”

“Then we shall have every man, woman, and child help keep watch. We donnae need another war between the Donalds and the Campbells.” Kieran laid an assuring hand on Jamie’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Kieran, your help is greatly appreciated.”

\* \* \*

That night was draped in shadows, with only the moon casting its pale glow upon the village. Annabelle and Jamie, wrapped in their cloaks, stood watch near the stables. The world was shrouded in a deep, velvety darkness, alive with the symphony of nocturnal sounds – the whispering breeze through the trees, the distant hooting of an owl, and the soft rustle of leaves underfoot.

As they kept their vigil, Annabelle's gaze swept over the serene countryside. She felt the cool night air against her cheeks, a welcome respite from the day's heat. Her heart swelled with exhilaration, the thrill of adventure intermingled with the weight of their mission.

In the quietude of the night, Jamie turned to her with a mischievous glint in his eye. “You know, lass, these moonlit nights with you are quite enchanting.”

Annabelle chuckled softly, her eyes dancing in the dim light. "Enchanting, indeed. Especially when you're not day-drunk and falling about like a wee bairn," she teased, using a few of the Scottish words she'd learned recently.

Jamie grinned, a playful sparkle in his eyes. "Ah, how I do love hearing those Scottish words fallin' from your sweet lips, lass.”

They shared a light laugh, as Annabelle's fingers brushed against Jamie's hand and they both reached for the same spot on their watch post. A faint blush crept across her

cheeks, hidden in the night's obscurity. Annabelle suddenly wished that they were back in their cozy room enjoying the bed as they entangled their bodies and let their passions rise, but she knew they had a job to do and their love making was going to have to wait.

She sighed. “You are very addictive, you know that?” she murmured, her brow arched at him.

Jamie chuckled. “Lass, you’ve got that topsy-turvy. You’re the addictive one and I’m arse over tea kettle when it comes to you.

### CHAPTER 16

The flirtation between Annabelle and Jamie continued as they changed their post, moving to the higher ground of the roof top above the stables so they could stay out of sight. They kept their banter and voices soft so that anyone passing by would not know they were there. Annabelle liked how they huddled together, keeping watch over the small town. She knew there were others out there as well, standing guard from various points around the area. All were told to inform Jamie, Eamon or Artair, whoever happened to be the closest, if they noticed something peculiar.

So when a village guard climbed the boxes and joined them upon the roof, Annabelle wasn't surprised. The village guard moved up next to them and crouched low next to Jamie. "I've just seen four cloaked figures slip quietly into the town on foot on the north side. It looked suspicious as they are attempting to keep to the shadows, and I thought you should know."

Jamie nodded. "Thank you for the warning. Good eye, keep at it and we'll nab these bandits when they return to their camp."

Annabelle's heart raced as she clung to the roof's edge, her senses heightened. The village guard, Annabelle, and Jamie each descended from the roof, their movements as silent as humanly possible. Each step was a calculated risk, every corner rounded with the utmost caution, as they inched closer to the cloaked figures that had slipped into the village. The guard showed them the direction and then returned to his post as Jamie and Annabelle trailed the bandits.

Jamie's eyes met Annabelle's in the muted glow of the night, and he placed a finger to

his lips. Peering out from behind a building, they observed the figures, their dark cloaks obscuring their identities. They were engaged in a surreptitious act, emptying apple barrels into the saddlebags they were carrying.

Silently, Jamie pointed back to the stables, mimicked getting the horses and Annabelle nodded. The thieves were on foot at the moment, but they could have left horses in the trees. If they were going to follow them, they'd need their own horses. Annabelle indicated that she would go retrieve their horses and meet up with Jamie out of sight of the bandits as they headed back to the forest. He hesitated only a moment, but then agreed that was best, so they didn't lose sight of them. He pointed to his ear and then made a long low hooting sound three times. It sounded exactly like the owls she'd heard in the evenings outside Fort Donald. Jamie had taken her to see them one evening and called them long-eared owls.

Annabelle mouthed, "Okay, I'll listen for that and bring the horses." With that, she headed back to the stables while Jamie kept watch over the bandits. She quickly got their horses out of the stables, cooing at them to keep them quiet. They'd prepared them earlier so if they'd need them, they wouldn't have to take the time to saddle them. Using the reins, she led them out to the street, then kept to the shadows with them as she led them to the edge of town. She stayed close to the last building, hiding herself and the horses in the shadows as she waited for Jamie's call.

It didn't take long for the hooting to start. She urged the horse to move toward the edge of the woods, and found Jamie. She handed him his reins and they both mounted. With the softest of hoofbeats, Jamie and Annabelle followed the path the bandits had taken, their eyes fixed on the darkened trail. They were acutely aware that they were treading the fine line between discovery and danger. The journey seemed interminable as they shadowed the thieves, maintaining a discreet distance behind them. At one point they had to quickly direct their horses off the path and into the trees as one of the bandits turned back toward them, presumably looking to make sure they weren't followed. Thankfully, they weren't seen and the thief returned to his

comrades. Annabelle and Jamie waited a couple of heartbeats before walking their horses back to the path.

Annabelle had tracked perpetrators before as a cop, but this was unlike anything she had ever done before. The challenge of keeping her horse silent added a layer of complexity that she'd never had to account for, yet it was invigorating, a thrill that surged through her veins.

Jamie turned his head slightly toward Annabelle, his voice barely a murmur. "Do you think these are the ones we've been seekin', lass?"

Annabelle shifted her gaze from the bandits to Jamie. Her voice matched his hushed tone. "It's hard to say, but they did seem to act suspiciously in the village, and their presence there is highly coincidental. I'd say they have to be the ones we're after. We can't afford to lose them now."

Jamie nodded in agreement, his rugged face illuminated by the pale moonlight. "Aye, let us hope they are leading us to their camp where we'll find Maeve, and not on a fool's errand."

Annabelle's eyes remained locked on the bandits who were half a mile ahead of them, her mind racing with thoughts of the impending confrontation. She knew that their fate, and that of the fort, rested on the outcome of this pursuit. With every passing second, the tension mounted, and the forest seemed to hold its breath in anticipation of what was coming. The air was thick with the heady scent of pine, moss, and damp earth, a stark contrast to the urban environment of San Francisco that Annabelle was accustomed to.

Annabelle's gaze shifted to Jamie. A feeling of safety washed over her, and she realized that there was no one else she would trust more to be her partner in this unfamiliar world. His loyalty and unwavering strength had become a constant in her

life, and as her heart quickened, she couldn't deny that she was falling deeply in love with him. She couldn't wait for all of this to be over so she could tell him, but first they had to catch these murderers and save Fort Donald from the Campbell's attack.

### CHAPTER 17

The night was shrouded darkness as Jamie and Annabelle rode side by side, trailing the group of thieves.

"Do you smell that?" Annabelle asked softly.

Jamie replied, "Aye, lass. Tis the scent of campfire smoke."

Jamie directed her toward the edge of the road, and they dismounted. He took the reins of both horses and tied them to a thin tree, so they wouldn't wander off. With their horses secured and the dense woods around them, they ventured forward on foot, their every movement cautious, deliberate. Annabelle's heart pounded in her chest, and she was thankful that she wasn't wearing a dress but one of the pants outfits Jen had given her. It made it much easier to navigate the wilderness without having to worry about snagging her skirt on branches.

As they drew closer to the campfire, they could make out faint murmurs and the soft crackling of burning wood. It was a surreal sight – a small clearing amidst the wild, the glow of the fire casting an eerie light upon a motley group of figures, huddled together around the light of the fire trying to stay warm. Jamie and Annabelle exchanged a wordless glance, their eyes reflecting a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

Annabelle's thoughts raced as she struggled to maintain her footing in the unfamiliar terrain. Her detective instincts told her that this was a crucial moment, a pivotal juncture in their quest to save Maeve and clear the Donald Clan's name. Every twig



underfoot, every leaf that rustled seemed to echo through the forest, a potential herald of their presence.

“Stay close, lass,” Jamie whispered.

Together, they crept toward the firelight, a beacon of revelation in the heart of the mysterious woods. They reached the edge of a clearing, and Jamie motioned for Annabelle to squat down. The two of them huddled low and peered through the trees. Before them lay an obvious campsite of tents and horses.

The camp was alive with activity. There were seven men in total, aside from the three thieves they were tracking. It was a formidable group, far too numerous for Jamie and Annabelle to take on alone. They needed help, but first they had to find out if this was the group they were after.

The thieves were certainly well-provisioned, that much was clear. Annabelle's heart pounded in her chest, and she felt a bead of sweat forming on her brow. Annabelle knew they needed a plan, and fast, if they were to find Maeve Campbell and uncover the truth behind the attacks that had thrown their clans into turmoil. As they crouched in the shadows, Annabelle's sharp eyes caught the movement of one of the bandits as he was moving away from the others toward a cart. She nudged Jamie gently on the shoulder, directing his attention to the bandit's actions. “What’s he doing?” she whispered.

They watched as the bandit lifted a heavy woolen blanket from the back of the cart, revealing a wooden cage with a metal lock. It was a cage typically used for livestock, and its presence in this camp was a curious and unsettling sight.

Their senses heightened, the night was pierced by a fierce, distinctly feminine, Scottish voice. Anger and defiance dripped from each word as the voice cried out, “Get away from me, you filthy MacDonald!”

There was no mistaking it – the voice had to belong to Maeve Campbell. Relief washed over Annabelle like a cool, soothing breeze on a scorching day. They had found her, their quest was nearly over. The cloud covered moonlight cast eerie shadows across the camp as they continued to observe. However as the clouds moved on and the moon shone brightly once more, Jamie sucked in a breath. Annabelle glanced at him and noticed the anger on his face.

“What is it?” she murmured.

“My cousin. Malcolm MacDonald.” The ire in Jamie's voice was unmistakable as he pointed out the man who was, without a doubt, the mastermind behind the entire ambush on the Campbell envoy.

### CHAPTER 18

Annabelle could clearly see that the inner divisions within the MacDonald clan had caused an avalanche of problems, and Malcolm was clearly the puppeteer, pulling the strings of chaos. It was apparent that he'd aimed to destabilize the power dynamics within the clan, with the ultimate goal of unseating Cam, the current leader of the Donalds and perhaps out of vengeance destroy the entire clan in his wrath over not being chosen as leader.

After a few more minutes of watching Malcolm interact with Maeve, taunting her and making her cry, Jamie silently motioned for Annabelle to crouch low and follow him as they retreated stealthily into the concealing embrace of the woods, away from the camp where Maeve was held captive.

They retraced their steps, each footfall measured and deliberate, avoiding even the faintest rustle of leaves. It was as if the very forest was complicit in their mission, shrouding them in its dark, protective embrace. Jamie led the way, his senses sharp and alert, attuned to every sound and movement in the night.

After what felt like an eternity of heart-pounding silence, they finally reached the haven of their horses.

Jamie's eyes locked onto Annabelle's. "There's too many of them, lass," he said, his voice laced with concern. "You must ride back to the village and alert my men. We need their strength if we're to put an end to this once and for all."

Annabelle, equally resolved, met his gaze with determination. "No, Jamie," she

countered. "You should be the one to go. I'm used to doing stakeouts and trailing killers. I'll stay here and keep watch, make sure the bandits don't slip away. I'm not sure I could get back to the village without getting lost. You know this land much better than I do. You can lead them here much quicker than I could."

Jamie hesitated, but eventually caved. He couldn't deny the logic of her words. "Aye, you make sense, lass," he conceded. "But I cannae leave you alone here near those bandits."

"I promise I'll be fine. I can handle myself," she said. "Now go. You are wasting time."

Jamie looked undecided for another moment before giving her a nod. "If Malcolm and his men move again before I return with my men, leave a trail for me to follow that will mark their path." He looked at her, his concern evident in his eyes.

Annabelle nodded. "I'll find something, now go. I promise I won't let them get away from me."

Jamie pulled her to him and kissed her with such passion that her knees went weak. Their whispered promises hung in the air, as Annabelle wished him a safe and fast journey.

Annabelle ventured silently through the woods, her movements deft and purposeful as she returned to the clearing's edge, her keen eyes fixed upon the distant camp. In the moon's silvery embrace, she became a silent sentinel, unwavering in her resolve to keep watch over their mission. Nestled amidst the velvety embrace of the woodland, Annabelle couldn't help but chuckle softly at the sheer peculiarity of her current stakeout. This was unlike any investigation she had ever embarked upon.

The minutes ticked by, each one bringing her closer to the crucial moment when they

would strike, determined to rescue Maeve from the clutches of Malcolm MacDonald and his men.

Amidst the nocturnal symphony of chirping crickets and rustling leaves, Annabelle couldn't help but feel an eerie sense of isolation. The unfamiliar sounds of the woods seemed to come alive, their nocturnal chorus a constant reminder of her solitude. Every rustle in the underbrush or distant hoot of an owl sent shivers down her spine, a reminder of the wild world that enveloped her.

With a quiet resolve, Annabelle spoke to herself in hushed tones, a soothing mantra to ward off the creeping unease that threatened to unravel her composure. "Keep it together," she murmured softly, her voice barely more than a breath on the wind. In the midst of the hauntingly beautiful wilderness, Annabelle's senses sharpened, and her ears caught every word Malcolm MacDonald uttered. The commanding tone he wielded over the bandits in his thrall was intense, his persuasive words telling a dangerous tale of ambition. He promised them riches and power, enticing their loyalty with the allure of a coup against Fort Donald, a scheme to unseat Cam MacDonald from his seat of authority.

He sounded like a mad man, one drunk with power and completely misguided. It seemed he was unaware that as he spoke the Campbell Clan was planning death and ruin to all those who claimed the Donald Clan as their own. He'd unseat Cam sure, but there would be nobody and no fort to rule over if Annabelle and Jamie didn't rescue Maeve and capture this delusional man.

As he went on pontificating like a James Bond villain, Annabelle couldn't help but be struck by a sense of déjà vu. His domineering presence, his schemes for control, they all seemed hauntingly familiar. In her heart, she knew the source of this disconcerting familiarity - it was reminiscent of Edward, who had been a master manipulator himself.

For a moment, she found herself pondering Edward's fate. Had he been blamed for her disappearance? Was he languishing in a jail cell unable to explain where she was? Or had he simply walked away and found some other poor woman to manipulate? Annabelle hoped that wasn't the case. Nobody deserved that kind of treatment. She wondered if there was a way to find out. Catherine had said that Dub Sith showed up occasionally, perhaps she could ask him what Edward's fate was after she disappeared. Then again, did she really care?

With every word Malcolm spoke, Annabelle's resolve deepened. She couldn't allow another tyrant to go unchecked. Her mission was clear: to ensure that Maeve Campbell would not suffer the same fate she once did at the hands of a controlling man.

### CHAPTER 19

Annabelle's keen ears captured the resounding command of Malcolm as he bellowed for the bandits to prepare for their departure. The urgency in his voice echoed through the night air, stirring her into action.

Quickly, she retreated to her horse, her movements purposeful. Mounting her horse, she positioned herself at the verge of the road, a silent sentinel in the moonlight. She thought quickly about how to leave a trail for Jamie, who hadn't returned yet. If she had some scissors, she could cut off pieces of the clothing she wore, but it was too thick. As soon as she had that thought, she realized while she couldn't use her outer clothing, she could use the linen chemise she wore. It would tear easily. Reaching under her top, she pulled the chemise free from the pants and ripped the material, tearing off a piece about one inch in length.

Carefully, she secured the material to a branch along the road, the pale forms luminous in the soft moonlight. Each strip of cloth would be a signal for Jamie to follow.

Soon, the bandits emerged from the depths of the forest, their movements accompanied by the rustling of leaves and the faint clattering of equipment. Annabelle maintained a prudent distance, her silhouette cloaked in the embrace of darkness.

The scent of damp earth and pine trees filled the air as she continued to follow the bandits. Her heart thrummed with tension and determination, the adrenaline surging through her veins like a fierce river. Annabelle continued her pursuit of the bandits as

she methodically fastened pieces of cloth to overhanging branches, each one a breadcrumb leading the way for Jamie and his reinforcements.

Then, in a heartbeat, the serenity she felt she'd achieved by keeping her distance shattered. A sudden, boisterous neigh pierced the night, ringing through the woods like a clarion call of treachery. Her heart seized, dread gripping her soul as her own horse responded to the bandit's horse's neigh. There was nothing she could do to stop it from happening, and nowhere she could go to hide from the men who now turned, their focus solely on her.

Her thoughts raced as she realized what was happening. The horse the bandit rode had to have recognized her horse's scent. And the only way that could happen would be if the two horse had at some point shared a stable. Which meant that the most likely candidate was Malcolm's horse, because it would have once shared a stable with her own at Fort Donald. The chilling implications hung in the air like a ghostly specter. Suddenly, the ominous pounding of hooves echoed through the forest. She spun her horse around, her senses heightened, as she urged her horse to gallop back the way they'd come, her heart racing in tandem with the thudding rhythm.

But fate conspired against her, and her desperate escape was cut short. Emerging from the shrouded darkness in front of her came another bandit on horseback. She realized he must have circled around through the trees to get ahead of her and cut her off. He was a looming specter of menace. In the pitch-black of the night, he used his sheathed sword to knock her off her horse, stealing the breath from her as she landed on the ground with a thud. Then he dismounted and moved toward her menacingly. Annabelle's instincts kicked in, and she quickly got to her feet. She would fight with every ounce of her strength. She couldn't let him win. She wouldn't.

Annabelle pulled the short sword Jamie had given her a few days before after one of their practice sessions. She still wasn't proficient at it, but she would give it everything she had. She lunged and struck the man in the arm, but that just served to



make him angry. He unsheathed his own weapon and then slammed it into hers, knocking it from her hand with massive force.

Annabelle gasped. The power behind that hit was more than she'd anticipated. She realized Jamie had been taking it easy on her in their practice sessions and if she survived this, she was going to have words with him about it. With the sword gone, she pulled the only other weapon she had, the dirk. She flipped it in her hand and went toward the man like Norman Bates in Psycho and slammed the dirk into his chest, causing him to stumble back in surprise.

Just as she was feeling triumphant, she was grabbed from behind and she lost her hold of the dirk as she was jerked backward. Two massive arms surrounded her holding her tightly as she struggled to break free, but she couldn't. She couldn't even use her teeth to bite the guy holding her as he lifted her off her feet and carried her toward the group.

Within seconds he forcibly shoved her into the wooden cage, with Maeve. Her breathing quickened, heart pounding like a trapped bird, as she came face to face with Maeve Campbell, the woman they had risked so much to find.

As she sat there trying to catch her breath, the man she now recognized as Malcolm began to question her, his words sharp and probing. "Who are you, and why are you trailing us?" he demanded.

Annabelle met his gaze with unwavering determination. "I don't have to tell you anything and I wasn't trailing you," Annabelle lied.

"You're riding a horse from Fort Donald, you're not alone. No Donald would let a wee lass like you take off with one o' their horses." He stared at her, his massive arms crossed over his chest.

“I don’t care what you think. I was just traveling back to the village. I went for a late night ride because I couldn’t sleep. I demand you let me go at once,” Annabelle said defiantly.

“Very well, I’ll believe you were out on your own, as there’s nae sign of any others about, but you’re obviously one o’ them outsiders brought here to marry a Donald, so who is it then? Who are you married to?”

Jamie’s image flashed in front of her eyes, but she refused to name him.

A murmur of disbelief rippled through the bandits, their superstitious minds jumping to conclusions. “I’ve heard tales of the Fae bringin’ women for the Donald Clan but never in all my years thought it to be true,” one of the bandits declared in a hushed and fearful tone.

Annabelle wondered if she could use that fear of the Fae against them, but she wasn’t sure how, so she remained quiet and defiantly stared at Malcolm.

"I asked you whose wife are you?" he inquired again; his tone laced with suspicion.

Annabelle held her head high and declared, "If I were married, I'd be wearing a ring, wouldn't I?" It was a bold response, one she hoped would deflect their scrutiny.

Yet, as she uttered those words, a pang of longing coursed through her. In that tense moment, she wished with all her heart that she could proudly claim Jamie MacDonald as her husband, as he had come to mean more to her than she could have ever imagined, and she hoped she lived long enough to tell him as much.

Malcolm, his lips curling into a sly smile, chose to jest in the face of danger. "Perhaps, lass," he mused, "you're meant for me." His words hung in the air, daring her to challenge him.

But Annabelle, unyielding in her defiance, shot back with fiery determination. "I'd sooner marry the devil himself than marry scum like you, Malcolm MacDonald, you're a disgrace to the Donald Clan," she retorted, her voice trembling with anger. She punctuated her defiance by spitting in his direction.

Malcolm wiped the spittle from his face and sneered at her. "You'll regret that, lass," he replied, his voice laced with anger. He spun on his heel and shouted. "Mount up. We've a journey ahead of us." He glanced at Annabelle, his eyes narrowed. "I don't know who you're meant for, lass, and I don't care, but you'll watch them bleed at the end of my sword as me and my men conquer Fort Donald and take the leadership from my cousin's cold dead hand."

One of the bandits, a burly figure with a scar across his cheek, dared to speak up. "Malcolm, you said this last time, and we ended up in the midst of chaos. Are you sure this is how you want to do this?"

Malcolm's eyes narrowed as he regarded the man who had dared to question him. "Aye, Douglas," he hissed, "I've a plan. We shall slip through the shadows, strike when they least expect it, and Fort Donald will fall like a house of cards."

Annabelle, who had been listening intently from her concealed position, couldn't help but marvel at the audacity of their ambition. There would be nothing left of Fort Donald if she didn't find a way to free herself and Maeve from these lunatics and hand her over to the Campbells, so they'd know that the actual Donald Clan wasn't behind the murders or Maeve's kidnapping.

To get free she was going to have to find a way to outwit Malcolm MacDonald. She also made note that these men he was commanding weren't completely loyal to Malcolm and seemed to be doubting his leadership. Maybe she could find a way to use that.

### CHAPTER 20

As the sun rose to mid-day, the bandits made a crucial decision to halt their journey. They set up a new camp, miles away from the previous one. Annabelle fretted that she hadn't been able to leave more of a trail for Jamie to follow.

During the journey, Maeve had slept while Annabelle kept watch, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jamie or his men following behind, but she'd seen nothing. She hadn't even gotten a chance to try and talk to Maeve since she'd been shoved in this cage with her. Annabelle knew she needed to though if she was going to find a way out of this for them both. She'd need Maeve's cooperation, she was sure.

Seeking to break the silence that enveloped them, Annabelle leaned closer to the young woman beside her. She placed her hand on Maeve's arm and whispered, "Hey, are you awake?"

She opened her eyes and blinked at Annabelle, giving her a nod.

Annabelle smiled. "I'm Annabelle. I've been looking for you for nearly two weeks now. Me and Jamie MacDonald and some of the others of the Donald Clan."

Maeve's eyes widened with distrust. "How do you know who I am? Why are the Donalds looking for me?"

Annabelle glanced toward the bandits to make sure they were all occupied and paying them no attention. "Your envoy to the Fort Donald was late. We went looking for you all and found the wreckage of the carriage. I'm sorry about your brother," she said

softly, laying a hand on Maeve's arm.

Maeve's lip trembled. "They killed them. How do I know you're not part of them?" she asked, turning her gaze toward the bandits.

Annabelle frowned. "They locked me in here with you, and you heard Malcolm question me, I'm not from... here."

She nodded. "He called you an outsider and that other said a Fae brought you, but the Fae donnae exist, so I donnae know what to think."

"I'm from a small town in the south of England," Annabelle replied, telling the lie that Jen and the others had come up with.

Maeve relaxed a little further. She turned her glance back to the bandits. "That's Gwilym. He's a disgusting pig. Malcolm put him in charge of guarding me to be sure I donnae escape." She rolled her eyes. "He'll be bringing us food, if you can even call it that. Tis little better than swill."

Annabelle's stomach grumbled at the thought of food. At this point she'd eat darn near anything she was so hungry. She watched Gwilym as he started toward them, two bundles of food in his hands. "Maeve, don't let on anything I told you. Jamie and his men will find us, we just need to be patient and stay vigilant as we look for a way to escape."

Maeve nodded but kept quiet.

With a cruel grin that seemed etched into his wrinkled visage, Gwilym approached the cage. He tossed down portions of roasted meats that had turned cold and unappetizing. Alongside them he dropped a meager chunk of bread, dry and crumbly, like a pale imitation of sustenance.

The food landed in a messy heap within the cage, barely an invitation to satisfy one's hunger. Annabelle watched as Gwilym's grubby hands flung the scraps with disdain, the fading sunlight highlighting the griminess of his fingernails.

In the cramped confines of the cage, Annabelle took the meager portions and gave some of them to Maeve. "You need to keep up your strength so we can find a way to escape, so eat."

Maeve, her wide eyes with exhaustion and gratitude, accepted the food with trembling hands. Her hunger proved stronger than her initial hesitation, and she began to greedily devour the offerings.

Annabelle couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for Maeve. Her frail frame, barely visible beneath the tattered garments, hinted at the hardships she had endured while being held by Malcolm and his men. As she watched Maeve eat, Annabelle silently ate her own portion and vowed that they would find a way out of this dire situation for both of them.

The sun set and the sky turned dark. The sky was filled with clouds that blocked the moonlight, leaving them shrouded in the dark. Maeve stirred from her fitful slumber next to Annabelle, her eyes heavy with exhaustion. Annabelle hadn't been able to sleep at all in the uncomfortable confines of the cage, so her being awake seemed to startle Maeve.

Maeve began to cry, her shoulders heaving as she wept. "Why is all of this happening to me?" she whispered, as if fearful that the mere act of speaking might invite more trouble upon them.

Annabelle gently reached out to comfort the young woman. "Maeve," she began softly, "this is all because of Malcolm. He's an asshole who wants to seize control of the Donald Clan. He's hired these men, these bandits, to create chaos between your

clan and the Donalds in the hopes of undermining his own cousin's power as Chief."

Maeve's eyes continued to well up with tears, reflecting her fear and anger. "But why? Why me? Why kill my brother? We have nothing to do with him and the Donalds," she implored, her voice barely above a whisper.

Annabelle's hand found Maeve's, offering what comfort she could. "You're a Campbell, that is all that matters to Malcolm. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't cause this to happen to you and your brother. He got to you by chance. You're not to blame," she explained. "In Malcolm's eyes, you are merely a pawn in his game. He's using you in hopes of rallying support against Cam MacDonald. It's not about you, Maeve. It's about power, greed, and betrayal."

"But tis not fair, what's going to happen to me?" she whispered, sniffing as she wiped her nose on her sleeve.

Annabelle leaned in closer to Maeve. "Maeve," she implored gently, "bear with me, just a little longer. We're bound to find a way out of this. I need you to be brave for just a little while longer, please. We'll be free soon, I promise you."

Maeve nodded fervently. In that moment, she looked more alive and spirited than she had since Annabelle had met her. "I hope you are right," she murmured.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on Maeve, her slender form leaning against Annabelle's shoulder as her eyelids drooped once again. The trials of their ordeal had obviously taken a toll on her, and in this vulnerable state, she surrendered to much-needed slumber.

As the night wore on, Annabelle remained vigilant, watching over Maeve as she slept, determined to keep her safe and comforted until dawn. Unfortunately, her body began to grow more weary, and she was having trouble staying awake.

With a heavy heart and heavier eyelids, Annabelle finally succumbed to the beckoning embrace of sleep. Her dreams, however, offered no respite from the turmoil that had marked their harrowing journey. Fitful and restless, her slumber was overtaken by haunting visions.

In the depths of her nightmare, the figure of Edward materialized before her, his face contorted by a malevolent mask of horror. To her dismay, he stood next to another man. One with a face she recognized all too well—Malcolm's. He stared at her; his cruel intentions visible on in his gaze.

In the dream, the two menacing figures, Edward and Malcolm, united in their wicked alliance, pursued her through a dimly lit Highland landscape. At her side was Jamie, the man she had come to admire, respect, and love. They both tried desperately to escape them, but no matter where they went, which way they turned. Edward and Malcolm were right on their tail. Annabelle's heart ached as the dream played out, the lines between her past and present blurred by the twisted tendrils of her subconscious.

Annabelle eventually stirred from her fitful slumber. She propped her head up and looked around. The camp still lay shrouded in the hushed embrace of the coming dawn. Her weary eyes scanned the surroundings, instinctively assessing the shadows and the stillness, ever watchful for any signs of movement.

Annabelle closed her eyes once again, hoping to get a little bit of actual restful sleep, but the cage was uncomfortable and cramped. Still her mind drifted. Visions of Jamie, resolute and fierce, swirled through her mind, intermingling with the anxious uncertainty of her situation. She hoped that he was trailing them, that he'd find her and free her from Malcolm's clutches. Her and Maeve.

She hadn't been able to complete her task of leaving him cloth ties to follow, but she prayed that somehow, he would know which direction to go to find them. She had to believe that he would. She just hoped it wouldn't be too late.



### CHAPTER 21

The morning broke in the Highlands with a brilliance that spoke of the raw, untamed beauty of the Scottish countryside. Golden sunlight spilled over the rugged terrain, painting the landscape in vivid hues of green and amber. Dew-kissed grass glistened like scattered emeralds, while the distant hills seemed to touch the very heavens. A chorus of birds welcomed the new day with a cacophony of cheerful melodies, and the air was crisp and invigorating, carrying with it the scent of earth and heather.

Annabelle stirred from her uneasy slumber, her senses gradually returning to her. As her gaze swept the dismal surroundings, her heart sank as she found Malcolm's face mere inches away, his malevolence etched in the lines of his visage.

Their eyes locked, and a chill seemed to settle over the cage. Malcolm's voice, dripping with menace, slithered through the bars like a venomous serpent. "We discovered and eradicated the trail of cloth strips you left, lass. Who are they for?" he demanded.

Her lifeline to Jamie and their imminent rescue was now wadded in Malcolm's hands and Annabelle felt a flash of fear. How was he going to find her now? And what was taking him so long to gather the men and come after her? It shouldn't have taken that long to get back to the village, find his men and come back for her. Had he abandoned her? she wondered, her heart filled with dread. Had he instead ridden back to the fort and left her to deal with Malcolm on her own?

Malcolm dumped the pile of cloths on her like rain. His eyes glinted with a malevolent triumph, as he showed her the seized cloth pieces that Annabelle had used

to mark her trail. He held one up between his fingers, scrutinizing them with a perverse interest. His voice dripped with a sinister amusement as he taunted Annabelle.

"Well, well, lass," he sneered, "Thought someone would come charging to your rescue, did you? Who is it? Who did you think would rescue you?"

Annabelle's jaw tightened, her eyes locked onto the stolen pieces of cloth. She refused to give Malcolm the satisfaction of seeing her fear. "Who says those were mine?" she said defiantly.

Malcolm's laughter echoed through the small valley they'd set up camp in, a chilling sound that sent shivers down Annabelle's spine. He crumpled the rest of the cloth strips in his hand, then flung them aside, scattering them like confetti on the dirt ground.

"Perhaps they're not," he conceded with a wicked grin. "But I'd bet my horse they were, lass, and unlucky for you, I've found them and removed them."

"Now, tell me, lass, who tis it that you have riding to your rescue." He pushed his face up to the bars, baring his teeth as he added, "Tell me or I'll beat it out of you."

Annabelle raised her chin and put her own face directly in front of his. "I'm not afraid of you. You're not going to break me or get me to tell you anything."

Malcolm's sinister laughter only intensified at her bravado. He swiftly stripped off his shirt, revealing the muscled, sinewy frame of a seasoned Highlander. The gleam of his sword belt followed, and he tossed it aside with a confident flourish.

Turning to the guard, Malcolm ordered, "Let her out, Gwilym. This wee lass thinks she take me."

The guard, Gwilym, reluctantly obeyed, approaching the cell with a heavy keyring jangling in his hand. Annabelle took a deep breath, readying herself for whatever Malcolm had in mind.

"No, Annabelle," Maeve said grabbing her arm.

"It's alright. Trust me," Annabelle whispered. She'd learned to fight in the police academy and Jen had shown her some moves as well, though she suddenly wished she'd had more time to practice them.

As the cell door creaked open, Annabelle emerged cautiously, her eyes locked onto Malcolm's challenging gaze. He dared her to come at him bare-handed, his lips curling into a sardonic smile. The tension in the camp was palpable, the other bandits forming a circle to watch the impending showdown.

Annabelle knew she couldn't back down now, and she couldn't run away. She stepped forward, fists clenched, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and determination. Malcolm had thrown down the gauntlet, and she was ready to accept the challenge, come what may. She just needed to draw it out for as long as she could and pray that Jamie would arrive. Annabelle, a glimmer of cunning in her eyes, seized the opportunity to further delay the bandits. As she squared off against the bare-chested Malcolm, she couldn't help but taunt him with a sly grin.

"Is this the best you've got, MacDonald? A lass from the wilds of southern England is going to make you look like a fool in front of your own men?" Her words were edged with mockery, intended to rile him up.

Malcolm's face reddened with anger and embarrassment. His pride wounded, he lunged at Annabelle, fists swinging. She skillfully dodged his blows, her movements graceful and agile, like a seasoned boxer. Each deft evasion was punctuated with a taunt or a jest that further infuriated her opponent.

Their faux battle became a dance of words and feints, a performance designed to keep the bandits enthralled and distracted. Annabelle's goal was clear: stall for time until Jamie could come to the rescue, or she could find a way to escape and then rescue Maeve. With every playful insult and exaggerated dodge, she inched closer to her objective.

The bandits watched in fascination as she and Malcolm circled each other. Annabelle's taunts and Malcolm's fuming responses created a spectacle that momentarily overshadowed the urgency of their situation. After Malcolm took another miscalculated swing, Annabelle seized the opportunity to lighten the mood and gain favor with the bandits. With a sly grin and a mischievous glint in her eye, she paused in her movement and addressed the gathered men.

"Hey, lads! What did one Highlander say to the other when he stole his goat?" she quipped, her voice carrying through the clearing.

The bandits, initially taken aback by her audacity, leaned in with curiosity, eager for a bit of humor to break the tension. Annabelle didn't disappoint them.

"He said, 'You goat to be kiddin' me!'"

Her punchline was met with a raucous burst of laughter from the bandits. Their boisterous guffaws filled the air, and for a moment, the grim reality of their situation was forgotten. Annabelle's joke had succeeded in lightening the situation and further delayed their departure from this camp.

While they roared with laughter, Annabelle maintained her vigilance with Malcolm, skillfully keeping him engaged in their battle and oblivious to her true intent. With each moment that passed, she grew more confident that Jamie and his men would arrive in time to turn the tide in their favor. She had to believe that he would.

As Annabelle and Malcolm circled each other in the clearing for the twelfth time, a tense hush fell over the bandits who had gathered to watch the spectacle between them. Their anticipation of her defeat was strong, and the air seemed charged with electricity as she prepared to actually lay hands on him. It was obvious to Annabelle that play time was over. She wasn't going to be able to duck and dodge her way out of this fight. She was going to have to start throwing punches as well.

Malcolm continued swinging at her, and Annabelle swiftly demonstrated her agility, ducking and weaving to avoid Malcolm's powerful punches. Her movements were graceful and fluid, a stark contrast to Malcolm's brute force. She danced around him, and started landing quick jabs and strikes whenever an opening presented itself to his ribs.

Her punches probably weren't as powerful as his, but she did notice him wince as they landed. She knew how to put her weight behind those punches, and she would do it, no matter how sore her hands were going to be by the time they finished.

The spectacle had drawn the attention of all the bandits, including Gwilym, the cage guard. Annabelle noticed out of the corner of her eye that his sinister demeanor had momentarily been forgotten, as Gwilym couldn't tear his gaze away from her battle with Malcolm. The bandits, too, were enthralled by the unexpected turn of events, and began laying odds in favor of Annabelle.

As she ducked and spun behind him, Annabelle kicked Malcolm on the back of the knee and he went down on one knee. But Annabelle didn't continue her blows, she gave him time to regain his feet.

Malcolm's frustration grew as Annabelle continued to evade his attacks. His punches met with nothing but air or were skillfully deflected by her expertly timed blocks. It was a testament to her training and determination, and the bandits watched in amazement as their leader struggled to land a decisive blow.

Annabelle's strategy was clear—to wear Malcolm down and capitalize on his exhaustion. She knew that in a prolonged battle, her agility and resilience would give her the upper hand. Gradually, Malcolm's wild swings began to lose their precision, and his breathing grew labored.

The bandits' cheers for Malcolm began to wane, replaced by a sense of awe for Annabelle's skill and resilience. The balance of power had shifted, and it was evident that she had defied their expectations, and might just emerge victorious.

Annabelle saw her opening to end this a few minutes later. With a final, well-timed strike to his throat, Annabelle delivered a stunning blow that sent Malcolm crashing to the ground. The bandits fell silent, stunned by the unexpected turn of events. Annabelle stood victorious, her chest heaving with exertion but her spirit unbroken.

Gwilym, was among the most astonished as he stood there with his mouth agape. Annabelle had turned Malcolm into a defeated man. Gwilym's gaze now held respect as he looked at her. Annabelle's victory had not only won her a temporary reprieve but also the begrudging admiration of the bandits.

As she stood there gathering her breath, she heard the unmistakable sound of hoofbeats, like a relentless storm, approached from multiple directions, their ominous rhythm heralding an impending onslaught.

The bandits, jolted from their stupor, reacted with frantic urgency. Shouts of "Ambush!" and "Ready your weapons!" erupted from their ranks as they scrambled for their weapons. Panic spread through the camp like wildfire, and chaos seized control.

Amidst the pandemonium, Malcolm, still recovering from his recent defeat, seized Annabelle in a desperate bid to regain some semblance of control. Annabelle, fiercely resisting, kicked, and fought with all her might, determined not to succumb to her

captor's grasp.

Gwilym, whose fascination with Annabelle's earlier fight had given way to awe and respect, came to Malcolm's aid leaving Annabelle feeling that her win was short lived. Together, the two of them managed to overpower Annabelle and ruthlessly tossed her back behind the bars of the wooden cage. Malcolm sneered at her, promising, "Donnae worry lass, our unfinished business will be concluded in due time."

Complete mayhem reigned over the camp. The bandits, disoriented and rattled by the unexpected turn of events, tried to rally their defenses as Jamie and his men, arrived to rescue Annabelle and Maeve and with any luck capture Malcolm and his men.

Annabelle, trapped once more in her cage, watched the turmoil with a mixture of frustration and anticipation. Her fight with Malcolm had delayed the bandits' movements, buying them the precious time they needed for Jamie to rescue them. She knew without a single doubt that Jamie and his men would turn all this in their favor, and they would put an end to Malcolm's treacherous plot.

Maeve's voice trembled as she asked, "What is happening? Who are those men? Are they more bandits? Have they come to kill us?"

Annabelle smiled and hugged her. "No, they aren't bandits at all. That's the rescue party."

Maeve's eyes widened in astonishment and hope flickered within them. She seemed stunned, scarcely able to believe her ears. "Rescued? We're being rescued? You were nae tellin' tall tales then?" she repeated, her voice quivering with disbelief and yearning.

Annabelle nodded, her smile still in place. "Yes, rescued. I told you Jamie would

come. That's him and his men fighting these bandits."

Though she spoke to Maeve, she couldn't take her eyes from the scene. The Donald men in their kilts with their swords raised were a breath stealing sight. Her heart was a flutter as she watched Jamie ride into battle against the bandits. That sight would live rent free in her head forever. She was sure of it.



### CHAPTER 22

As Jamie and his men charged forward, another group joined them, these dressed in a different tartan than the one the Donald men wore and Annabelle frowned, wondering who these others were. Next to her Maeve gasped.

“What is it?” Annabelle asked, thinking she’d missed something.

The noise level rose as swords clashed, and shields bore the brunt of mighty blows. Some of the men grappled in fierce wrestling matches as the ladies watched from their wooden prison.

“Tis the Campbells, some of the Laird’s best men,” Maeve replied, suddenly breathless.

“The Campbells? How did they get here?” Annabelle wondered out loud, but as she watched it seemed they had joined the Donalds in this fight and weren’t fighting against them, which she took as a good sign.

Annabelle, her heart pounding with determination, decided she needed to free herself and Maeve from their cage. Her gaze fell upon a decorative pin adorning Maeve's hair, a glinting treasure she was shocked the bandits had allowed Maeve to keep. She swiftly demanded, "Maeve give me your hairpin, I may be able to pick the lock with it."

Without hesitation, Maeve pulled the pin from her hair and handed it over. The pin was ornate in design and Annabelle hoped that by using it to pick the lock, it

wouldn't be ruined. Her fingers trembling with urgency, she set to work on the cage's lock. It was a tense moment, as the clashing of swords and the shouts of battle served as the backdrop to their desperate escape.

Annabelle fiddled with the lock, but it wouldn't click. The pin kept slipping. She looked up, wanting to make sure Malcolm and Gwilym were occupied but the only one she could see was Gwilym. Malcolm had disappeared. She swept her gaze over the camp, searching for him, but there was no sign of him.

In that moment, Annabelle noticed Jamie in the heart of the swirling maelstrom of battle, fought his way with unmatched ferocity. Two adversaries fell before his might as he pushed forward, working his way toward her and Maeve. Annabelle wanted to call out to him, but knew she shouldn't distract him. He'd get to them soon enough and in the meantime, she still had a lock to deal with.

As Jamie's broadsword cleaved through the air and met its mark, he finally reached the cart where Annabelle was held captive with Maeve. "Lass, are you all right? Have they hurt you? Either of you?"

"I'm fine, Jamie, we both are, and I am so happy to see you. How on earth did you find us? Malcolm found the cloth I tied to the trees, so there was no trail for you to follow." Annabelle reached for him through the bars of her cage.

"I'm so sorry, lass, I should have made sure you were better protected. I vowed to keep you safe and instead put you in harm's way." Jamie looked miserable.

"You did no such thing. I put myself in harm's way by joining you on this mission and I'd do it again. I am fine, albeit stuck in this cage with a lock I can't pick. I think Maeve's hair pin is too short or not thick enough for this lock." She sighed as she rattled the lock.

Jamie smiled. “Move back, lass, you and Maeve get as far back as you can an’ I’ll break the lock.”

They did as he asked, and he slammed his broadsword down on the lock. The metal fell to the ground, and he swung the door to the cage open, then helped them to the ground. Annabelle threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

The battle between the rest of the bandits, Jamie’s men and the Campbells continued, and Annabelle looked at him. “How did you find us and how did the Campbells get here too?”

Jamie smirked. “Malcolm isnae as clever as he thinks. We were already on the trail when he took those cloth ties of yours. We followed him when he returned and continued to follow him while I sent Eamon back to Fort Donald to speak with the Campbells. I told them we’d found Maeve and if they wouldnae let the Donalds come to her rescue, then they needed to do it themselves.”

Annabelle, in awe of Jamie's quick thinking and unyielding bravery, said, “That was brilliant. I mean I was worried when Malcolm brought those ties back, but I never doubted you’d find us and rescue us.” Annabelle pushed up on her toes and kissed him.

When Jamie released her a few seconds later, she nearly fell to the ground, a pile of mush at the feelings that were washing over her. The entire last two weeks came crashing in on her from the murder scene, to the search, to the time spent with Jamie falling in love, and then her kidnapping, it was a bit overwhelming. She needed a minute to get her bearings now that she had been rescued. “I think I need to sit down a minute.”

Jamie led her over to the front of the cart and lifted up to the seat. Annabelle smiled at him and then a movement a few paces behind him caught her eye.

A fierce adversary was charging at Jamie, his weapon raised high with deadly intent. "Jamie!" Annabelle cried as she pointed behind him.

With sinew and courage, Jamie spun and met the onslaught head-on, the clash of steel against steel ringing out like a thunderclap. The impact reverberated through his strong arms as he fought to hold his ground, the grit and determination etched upon his face was a sight to behold.

Annabelle's voice pierced the chaos, her cries filled with worry and fear as she watched Jamie's valiant struggle. She jumped down, looking for a way to help. A way to swing the battle in Jamie's favor. She found it in a thick tree branch that had been set in a pile near the fire pit. Picking it up, she swung it like a baseball bat at his foe's head causing him to stumble and fall to his knees. Jamie took that opportunity to run his blade through the man's chest and he fell to the ground, dead.

Breathing heavily, Jamie put his foot on the man's chest and pulled his sword free. He turned back to Annabelle and reached for her. "Are you all right, lass?"

Annabelle nodded and moved into his arms. "I think so, yeah, are you?"

"He didnae harm me," Jamie answered.

As the dust settled and the battlefield began to calm, Jamie and Annabelle surveyed the aftermath. The bandits, once a fearsome force, now lay wounded and vanquished, their reign of terror brought to a swift end. Those that still lived were bound with thick ropes and seated on the ground awaiting their fate.

Annabelle scanned the clearing for any sign of Malcolm MacDonald, but he wasn't among the dead or the captured. She sighed. "It looks like Malcolm got away while everyone was engaged in battle."

Jamie ran his gaze over the same path Annabelle had just taken. “You seem to be right, lass,” he said, clearly frustrated at that turn of events. “We might have won this battle, but he’ll still be bringing us war.”

Annabelle nodded, her eyes on Jamie. “We’ll find him, Jamie,” she replied with unwavering determination. “We’ll find him, and we’ll stop him. We’ve come this far, and we won’t stop until he’s paid for what he’s done.”

### CHAPTER 23

The aftermath of the battlefield painted a vivid scene of both victory and chaos. Broken swords and discarded weapons bore witness to the fierce clash of blades that had taken place moments before.

Annabelle embraced Jamie tightly, never wanting to leave his strong arms. His scent, a mixture of sweat and earth, was a comfort to her, a reminder that they had faced the turmoil together and emerged victorious. She wanted him close as she looked around, she didn't want Malcolm to come out of hiding and try to capture her again. As her gaze scanned over the scene she wondered, "Where did Maeve get to?"

Jamie looked around as well and then pointed across the camp. "She's jest there, lass, nae need to worry."

Annabelle followed his finger to see Maeve hurrying over to speak with the Campbell men. It seemed Maeve was having a frantic conversation and she began to gesture toward Annabelle and Jamie.

"Um, maybe we should go over there?" Annabelle suggested.

"Aye, that might be wise, lass," Jamie agreed as he escorted her toward Maeve and the Campbell men.

"I am telling you what happened. The Donald Clan wasnae behind the attack on me and my brother." She stomped her foot. "Aye, we were attacked by these men that you jest defeated, but they are nae members of Clan Donald."

“Several of them wear the Donald plaid,” one of the Campbells replied, his eyes narrowed.

Annabelle felt Jamie tense. She stepped forward. “You’re right, they are wearing the Donald plaid, but only because they were attempting to pin Maeve’s kidnapping and her brother’s murder and the murders of his envoy on Cam MacDonald.”

"Aye. I heard it with my own ears," Maeve asserted, her eyes filled with determination. "Malcolm MacDonald, he's the one behind all this. He's been long banished by the Donald clan, but he seeks to sow strife between our clans, all because he covets Cam MacDonald's seat as head of the family."

The Campbell men exchanged glances of astonishment, the weight of Maeve's revelation sinking in. Their faces bore expressions of disbelief as they processed the implications of her words. The tension that had lingered in the air moments ago began to dissipate, replaced by a growing sense of understanding.

One of the Campbell soldiers, a seasoned warrior with a grizzled beard, stepped forward, his voice carrying a note of sincerity. “You speak the truth, lass?”

Maeve nodded firmly, her gaze unwavering. "Aye, I do. Malcolm aims to exploit the feud between our clans for his own gain. He's a danger to us all."

The realization that their actions had been driven by false assumptions began to dawn upon the Campbell men. “We misjudged you, MacDonald, you have our thanks for rescuing our Maeve.”

Annabelle could only hope this would be a turning point for the clans. Perhaps now they would stop fighting each other and start working together. She could only hope since this would now be her home. She didn’t want it punctuated with a war between them.

“Tis what any decent Scotsman would do,” Jamie replied taking the offered hand and shaking it.

“I’ll have my men start tearing this camp down.” The Campbell guard turned from them and began ordering his men to get busy.

Jamie walked with Annabelle over to the village guards who had joined their fight. “I wish to expressed my gratitude for your help. I donnae know if we’d have won this battle without you. I will speak highly of each of you to the Chief.”

The village guards each nodded at Jamie. “We are loyal to Clan Donald...” and then with a surreptitious glance toward the Campbell guards, he added, “And to Laird Colin Campbell.”

Jamie smirked but said, “Aye, we are all grateful to Laird Colin Campbell for his men’s help as well.”

Annabelle knew that he’d never in a million years swear loyalty to the Campbell clan, but it seemed he was willing to offer thanks to them which was a start. She figured it would be a long road to get any of the Donalds to be on actual friendly terms with any of the Campbells.

Jamie made sure the wounded were attended to by both Campbell and Donald clansmen. Thankfully, most of the injuries sustained by their own men during the skirmish were minor, with a few cuts and bruises that bore testimony to the intensity of the clash.

Amidst the clearing, Gwilym and the remaining bandits, subdued and disarmed, were brought to the Campbell guardsmen who would be taking them to the Laird for questioning. .



Gwilym, a wiry and unkempt figure, swore vehemently as he was loaded into the cart for travel. He insisted, with a conviction that bordered on desperation, that their nefarious deeds were all orchestrated by Malcolm MacDonald. His aim, he explained, had been to create discord and turmoil between the MacDonalds and the Campbells, ultimately seeking to implicate Jamie's brother in the eyes of the Campbell clan.

Maeve apparently overheard his and said, "You see. It tis the truth as I told you," she affirmed. "I'll tell Laird Colin myself when we return."

"As you said, Maeve. I believe you and you'll have your chance to tell the Laird of what happened to you. Donnae worry," the Campbell guardsman replied.

Maeve turned from him to Annabelle and Jamie. "I want to thank you again for coming to my rescue. I donnae know what might have happened to me if you didnae risk your life for mine," she said, holding her arms open and moving toward Annabelle.

Annabelle hugged her back. "You're welcome, Maeve. I was doing my duty to protect and serve, and I would do it again to save you from men like that." She knew Maeve probably didn't understand exactly what she meant, but Annabelle knew. There was just one other thing she wanted to say to Maeve. "I do hope this means that you and I can be friends, even if I do end up marrying a Donald." She glanced at Jamie shyly and then looked back at Maeve.

Maeve laughed. "I'd like that, Annabelle, even if you do marry a Donald." She winked at her.

As everyone began to remount their horses, with everything at the camp cleaned up, one of the Campbell guardsmen approached Jamie. Annabelle watched him with caution, unsure of what was about to take place.

“I wanted to say thank you again for searching for my cousin Maeve. Twas not your duty to do so, but you did it anyway.” He held a hand out to Jamie.

"Nae, it tis my responsibility to keep the lines of civility between our clans and rescue those in peril no matter whose relation they are," Jamie responded with a smile as he shook the man's hand.

The man acknowledged his words with a nod and a smile before he departed. With goodbyes exchanged and the promise of new beginnings in the air, the two groups prepared to part ways. The Campbell guards along with Maeve set off toward the Laird's land, with the captured bandits being driven in the cart, while the village guards returned to their town.

Jamie, Annabelle, Eamon Artair and the rest of their small group turned their own horses back toward Fort Donald. The winding path they followed, worn smooth by countless hooves over the ages, stretched ahead like a ribbon of destiny, leading them through the rugged and untamed countryside.

As they rode, Annabelle found herself gazing at the man beside her, her heart warmed by the bond they had created between them. In the soft light, she couldn't help but admire Jamie's rugged features, his strong and capable hands gripping the reins of his horse with confidence. She couldn't wait to be back at the fort and in his arms.

### CHAPTER 24

The night had given way to the early morning hours as Jamie, Annabelle, and their small band of men were finally on the road toward Fort Donald. It seemed that all the Campbells had left and the people who normally occupied the small little village at the bottom of the hill had all returned along with their livestock. Someone must have gotten word to them that Maeve had been rescued and most of the bandits captured or killed.

As they entered the courtyard, Cam, Jen, Mae, Niall, and Catherine were waiting for them. Eamon immediately dismounted and took Catherine in his arms, declaring he missed her more than words could say.

“See to your wife, Eamon, I’ll take care o’ your horse,” Artair called with a chuckle.

Eamon lifted Catherine in his arms and carried her into the castle, much to everyone’s amusement.

“Welcome back, you don’t look like you suffered too much,” Jen said, looking at Annabelle. “Jamie sent word that you’d been taken hostage?”

“I was, but no, I’m not hurt. I did fight Malcolm though and I won, but then he escaped,” Annabelle shared.

“What was that lass? What do you mean you fought Malcolm and won?” Jamie asked, astonishment filling his voice.

“He escaped?” Cam said, clearly frustrated.

Annabelle looked at Jamie. “I’ll tell you later. But yes, he got away while Jamie and the others were battling Malcolm’s men.”

“I see. Let’s take this discussion inside. Come see me after you’ve seen to your horses.” Cam threaded his arm with Jen’s, and they returned inside.

“Glad you’re back safe, Annabelle, we’ll chat later, yeah?” Mae questioned.

“Absolutely.” Annabelle nodded.

She and Jamie led their horse into the stable and made sure someone got the brushed down, watered and fed, then headed inside. They found Cam and Jen in his office and joined them.

As they entered, Cam said, “Now start from the beginning.”

Jamie exchanged a meaningful look with Annabelle before beginning to recount the events of their journey, from the initial discovery of Maeve's abduction to the daring rescue in the woods. Cam listened intently, his expression shifting from puzzlement to gratitude as the tale unfolded. Annabelle added in what happened at the camp before Jamie arrived as well, and they all had a chuckle as she described the fight with Malcolm.

Jen sat next to Cam, listening as well. “That was some good thinking. Still can’t believe you fought Malcolm like that. Remind me to add you to my training schedule.”

“I’m sure the Campbells are glad to have Maeve returned to them, it was a good decision to get them to join you in her rescue, Jamie. What made you think of doing

that?" Cam asked.

"You couldnae send anyone and she is one of theirs only felt right that they help." Jamie shrugged.

"Aye well was a grand idea and I am glad it worked." Cam smiled.

"You know Malcolm is still out there plotting. We might have won this skirmish, and averted a war with the Campbells, but he is nae going to stop," Jamie said with a sigh.

Cam's eyes bore a flicker of frustration at the mention of Malcolm's name, but he quickly composed himself. "Aye, I fear you're right, Jamie, but we'll find him and deal with him. Hopefully the Campbells will nae be so quick to judge us next time." With a hint of weariness, Cam continued, "You both must be exhausted from your journey and the battles you've faced. Take the time to rest and refresh yourselves. Tomorrow, we shall have a feast in your honor to celebrate your bravery and resourcefulness."

As they left the meeting room, Jamie and Annabelle exchanged glances. The prospect of a feast, a Highland tradition filled with laughter, music, and the warmth of camaraderie, was a welcome respite after the trials they had endured, and Annabelle was looking forward to it.

Jamie offered to walk Annabelle to her bedchamber, but Annabelle paused and smiled at him. "My bedchamber? Not yours?"

Jamie smiled back. "I didnae wish to presume, lass, but if you insist, my bedchamber might be a wee bit more comfortable."

They hurried their steps but just as they reached his corridor, he paused. Annabelle stopped next to him in confusion. "Is everything okay?"

In the privacy of the dimly lit hallway, Jamie turned to her. "Annabelle," he began, his gaze earnest, "I must admit, I had my doubts at first. But working with you, your bravery and resourcefulness, it is truly impressive. I apologize for ever questioning your abilities."

Annabelle smiled, her heart touched by his words. "That means a lot to me, Jamie, but you don't have to apologize. I know it's not the norm for a woman in this era to do the things that I do. The fact is, you trusted me, and we did what we set out to do."

Jamie kissed her, but was interrupted by the arrival of Sally, who coughed. She was accompanied by others of the household staff carrying steaming buckets of water and the tub as well as a tray laden with a spread of hot, comforting food.

"Excuse me, Lady Annabelle, but Lady Jen instructed me to bring you a hot bath and a meal."

Annabelle smiled. "Sally, that's brilliant. I'll have to thank Jen when I see her next. Can you bring it to Jamie's chamber? I um..." She felt her cheeks heat as she looked up at Jamie.

"A course," Sally directed the staff to set things up in Jamie's room.

Jamie's bed chamber was a cozy haven, warmed by the glow of a crackling fire in the hearth. The flames danced with a golden fervor, casting enchanting shadows upon the stone walls. Sally and the others positioned the large tub near the hearth and filled it, the water gleaming in the firelight. Annabelle could feel the inviting warmth even before she stepped into the steaming water.

As she sank into the bath, the heat of the water seeped into her skin, soothing away the tension that had gripped her during the past several days' events. Her aching muscles, hardened from hours in the saddle and moments of intense battle, gradually

relaxed.

Jamie used the washbasin as Annabelle soaked in the tub. He moved toward her once he'd finished and began to knead her shoulders. "Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, that feels so good." Annabelle sighed at the pleasure of the massage he was giving her.

"Might I wash your hair for you?" he asked.

Annabelle tipped her head back and looked up at him. "Really?" She'd never had anyone other than a hairstylist wash her hair. "That would be great."

Jamie grinned. He took the braid out of her hair and Annabelle scooted beneath the water, getting her hair wet. Picking up the soap, which smelled of lavender, he rubbed it on her hair and then massaged her scalp. His calloused fingers worked in circles, soothing and relaxing her. This was something she could get used to. He was so good at pampering her.

Annabelle followed his directions, dipping her head back into the water so he could rinse it, and then he used one of the buckets over the longer strands to make sure he got all the soap out. Once her hair was finished, he picked up the wash cloth and scrubbed her back and the rest of her for her. When he was done, he held up the fabric for her to wrap herself in.

Emerging from the bath, Annabelle stepped toward him, allowing him to wrap her in the warm wool. "Thank you, Jamie, that was amazing." She smiled, feeling a blush form on her cheeks at the way he was looking at her.

"Come, let's eat some of this stew Sally brought us." He led her over to the table.

The aroma of savory dishes wafted through the air as she sat down at the table. There were steaming bowls of rich, hearty broth, thick with chunks of tender meat and fresh vegetables. Fluffy potatoes, creamy and buttery, nestled beside roasted cuts of succulent game. The centerpiece was a small golden-crust pie, its filling a tantalizing blend of savory herbs and tender cuts of meat.

"This smells delicious," she murmured.

"Aye, Mira is an amazing cook," Jamie agreed.

Annabelle savored every bite, as she and Jamie conversed about their childhoods. Annabelle giggled at some of the tales he told, but she wasn't sure she believed half the stuff he told her he got up to. "You did not," she said, shaking her head and laughing as he told her that he'd once tried to ride the dairy cow out onto the moor.

"Aye, I did. Thought I could train it like I could my horse." He laughed.

With dinner finished, and the fire in the hearth crackling with a warmth, they settled upon the bed together, their hands found each other, fingers entwining with an electric connection that amazed Annabelle every time they touched. She could not believe this was her life now. It was magical and enchanting and exciting and everything she could have ever imagined.

Jamie turned to her, his face mere inches from hers. "I love you, Annabelle," Jamie whispered.

"I love you too, Jamie," she responded, her heart full of passion for him. She felt like the luckiest woman on the planet.

Jamie kissed her and pulled her close. He worshiped her body as they made love and then they drifted off to sleep wrapped in each other's embrace. As Annabelle slipped



into sleep, she couldn't help but be thankful that Dub Sith had found her that night and brought her to a time and place where she could be so well loved.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, Fort Donald was adorned with banners and torches, its stone walls echoing with the sounds of laughter and celebration. The feast that had been prepared in honor of Annabelle, Jamie, Eamon, Artair and the others who'd helped rescue Maeve and capture most of Malcolm's men. The long wooden tables of the dining hall groaned under the weight of the savory dishes Mira and the kitchen staff had prepared, and the air was filled with the irresistible scent of roasting meats and freshly baked bread.

Annabelle and Jamie were seated at the high table together, next to her new found friends and their spouses, along with Artair and the others who were being celebrated this day. The atmosphere was festive, and music played by the fiddlers wafted around the massive room. Everyone was talking, having various conversations as they ate. It all felt like a dream to Annabelle, a dream she never wanted to wake from.

Once everyone had finished eating, Cam stood up and called for attention. "Lads and Lasses, today is a day we shall not soon forget. It tis a day of celebration and rejoicing, for we have witnessed the strength and valor of our own kinsman, my brother, Jamie, Eamon, Artair, and all who went out to rescue a Campbell, as well as our welcomed new member to our clan, the remarkable Annabelle Fox, a woman of courage and determination."

A wave of applause and cheers rippled through the dining hall causing Annabelle to blush. Cam raised his hand, and the hall fell silent once more.

"We gather here nae only to honor their bravery, but also to recognize the bonds that tie us together, a clan forged in the fires of history, unyielding in the face of

adversity.” Cam looked out to all of the Donald Clan seated at the long tables as he spoke. “The Donalds have long suffered from the abuse of the Campbells and from the monarchy, but we donnae let that affect how we conduct ourselves. We are men and women of honor and these lads,” Cam gestured toward Jamie and all the men at the high table and then looked at Annabelle, “and lass,” he grinned, “have proven that we are resilient and honorable in the face of danger.”

The hall erupted in applause once more.

"As we raise our goblets in their honor tonight," Cam concluded, "let us remember this moment, the strength of our clan, and the unwavering spirit that defines us. For as long as we stand united, no force can sway us from our path. To all of you, may your strength and honor be as unbreakable as the bonds of our clan."

With that, the hall erupted in jubilation once more, the clinking of goblets and joyous voices echoing through the stone walls. They sang merry songs and raised their goblets high, their voices filled with gratitude for the courage displayed by Jamie and the others, as well as for Annabelle's unwavering determination to help find Maeve and rescue her.

As the celebration went on, a man in Campbell tartan approached with a missive for Cam. Jamie and Annabelle were still seated next to him and Jen at the high table and paused at the interruption. Annabelle was nervous seeing the Campbell man and hoped it didn't mean there was about to be more trouble between the clans.

“Chief Cam, the Laird sends his best wishes and his gratitude for the return of his cousin, Maeve. He has sent me with this for you.” The guard handed over the letter. “I am to wait for a reply.”

Cam took the letter and opened it. As he read it, his mood shifted to a more serious one. “I see.” He handed the letter to Jamie.

Annabelle read it as well.

MacDonald,

I wish to thank you on the safe return of my cousin Maeve. She has informed me that it twas your cousin Malcolm MacDonald who ambushed the envoy, slaughtered my men and captured her. And twas only thanks to your brother and your men as well as mine that she was freed. In that regard you once again have my thanks.

That being said, I want that bastard Malcolm caught and brought before me, or dead and his head on a pike. As he is your relation, you will handle his capture. If you cross me in this, there will be war between our two clans. There will be nae peace between us until this matter is settled.

Annabelle saw that he'd signed it, Your Laird, Colin Campbell.

As Annabelle and Jamie read the letter, Cam said, "I you will give me a moment, I shall pen a reply." He rose and left the dining hall with the Campbell guard trailing him.

Annabelle and Jamie exchanged knowing glances. "Looks like we're going to have to track down Malcolm and bring him to the Laird if there's going to be peace between the Donalds and the Campbells."

"Aye, love, it does look that way," Jamie replied with a nod.

As the feast continued around them, Cam returned and the four of them, Cam, Jen, Annabelle, and Jamie huddled in earnest conversation, plotting their next moves, and formulating a plan to track down Malcolm. The fate of Fort Donald and its people rested on their shoulders, and they were prepared to face whatever challenges lay ahead in the name of honor, love, and loyalty to their clan.

Once a plan was tentatively in place, Annabelle and Jen went to join the other ladies to talk. They found Mae and Catherine seated near the musicians where Mae's husband Niall had joined in the fiddle playing. Catherine's husband Eamon was still seated with Jamie and Cam as they went over strategies to find Malcolm.

"Okay, so tell us, what's going on between you and Jamie?" Jen said, "We want details."

The others laughed.

"Yeah, you were looking pretty cozy when you got back... share with the class," Catherine added.

Annabelle's eyes sparkled with happiness. "I've fallen hard for him. I mean who wouldn't? Look at him. And he's so sweet and caring and always happy, but also fierce and protective and ugh. What the hell happened to men? I mean they don't make them like this in our time." Annabelle stared up at the high table at Jamie.

Jen and the others burst into laughter. "No they don't," Jen agreed. "At least not that I found."

"Me either," Mae injected.

"Same," Catherine added. "Our Highland men have a way of captivating us, don't they?" She grinned.

"They are fiercely loyal, and they do love pretty hard. I've never met anyone like that back in our time," Mae said.

Annabelle couldn't help but smile as she gazed toward the men again, lost in her thoughts of Jamie. "He's also a bit stubborn and headstrong," she added with a

chuckle.

Jen, Mae, and Catherine all laughed along with her. “You could say that about all of them. These Highlander men are pretty hard headed, but in the right way,” Jen replied with a smile.

“You never did tell us why you agreed to come here when Dub Sith asked. Not the real answer,” Mae said, eyeing her. “You ready to share yet?”

Annabelle sighed. “As I’m sure you figured it out, I was trying to get away from well...everything. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my job, but it was the only thing I had that was good in my life. I was dating a guy that was abusive, controlling, manipulative. You name it and that was Edward. He was a lot like Malcolm actually, now that I’ve met him. I was scared to leave him. I actually tried once, but he reeled me back in with false promises and then held me there with threats of violence.”

“But you were a cop, why didn’t you...” Catherine started but then stopped when she saw Annabelle’s face. “What did he do?”

“I know I was a cop, and I should have seen the signs before I got so in deep with him, but I was in the academy when we met, so while I learned the signs as I went along, I didn’t know them beforehand. And once they have you, they’re hard to get away from.” Annabelle glanced down at her hands.

Mae reached across the table and patted her hand. “I get it. I was in the same kind of situation, more or less. The kind of guy that would rather kill you than allow you to live your life without them. You do what you can to keep yourself safe.”

Annabelle looked up at her, grateful. “Exactly. So when Dub Sith found me in the grocery parking lot, offered me a way out where Edward couldn’t follow, I took it, and I don’t regret it for a second.” She smiled, her eyes straying back to Jamie.

“We’re so glad you did,” Jen replied.

As the night continued, the conversation lightened and they all shared stories and laughter, forming a bond of sisterhood that was as unbreakable as the bond formed between the people of the Donald Clan. In that moment, Annabelle felt a sense of belonging that she had never known before.

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“I can’t believe this is happening,” Annabelle said as she stood in the small bedchamber that she’d used when she’d first gotten to this time and place.

It had been a little more than a month since she, Jamie and the others had gone out searching for Maeve. It had flown by, especially after Jamie had proposed to her. She’d been over the moon and gone right to the girls to ask for their help in planning the wedding. Jamie hadn’t wanted to wait, but Annabelle wanted to do it right, so she’d asked for a month to put things together.

“Well you had better believe it.” Jen laughed as she helped Annabelle into the traditional plaid dress of the Donald Clan. Bridie had made it especially for her. “You’re getting married in just a short while.”

“Try some of this, Lady Annabelle, tis a scent, just dab it on your neck and wrists.” Sally offered her a vial.

Annabelle took it and pulled the cork topper then lifted it to her nose. It smelled of lavender mixed with heather. “That’s pretty,” she said, doing as Sally said and put it on her neck and wrists. “Thanks, Sally.”

Sally smiled.

Annabelle looked at her reflection in the ornate mirror before her. Her eyes sparkled with excitement and anticipation. Her cheeks bore a natural rosy hue, a testament to the joy that had filled her heart since the moment she met Jamie MacDonald.

Jen, stepping back to admire her handiwork. "You look positively radiant. A vision of

Highland beauty and grace."

Annabelle replied, "It's all thanks to your efforts, Jen. I never imagined I'd find myself going back in time, falling in love and preparing to marry a man from the past."

"None of us did," Mae said with a smile.

"Here's your bouquet." Catherine handed her the bundle of wildflowers tied with a ribbon made of the Donald tartan.

"Thanks, Catherine." Annabelle lifted the bouquet to her nose and felt joy at the scent. It reminded her of Jamie. Of being here in this special place.

"Are you ready to go?" Jen asked.

Annabelle nodded. As they left the chamber and ventured through the echoing corridors of the ancient fort, Annabelle's heart thrummed with a mixture of nerves and excitement. In the quiet corridor a subtle clearing of the throat caught her attention. She turned to find Dub Sith standing there. He had played a significant role in her journey to this place, to finding Jamie and falling in love.

"You! Where have you been?" Annabelle was both amazed and flabbergasted at his appearance. She looked back at Jen, Mae, Sally, and Catherine who were all smiling.

"We'll just wait over here." Jen pointed down the hall as they moved off giving Annabelle a moment alone to speak with the Fae man.

Dub Sith regarded her with his enigmatic smile. He seemed curious and yet, all knowing. "So, lass, do you feel you made the right decision in letting me bring you here to this time and place?"



Annabelle hesitated, recalling how she'd felt when she first arrive, disoriented and in shock. It had soon gone though and she'd quickly not only fallen in love with this land and its people, but she'd found Jamie. She couldn't deny that this place was indeed special and she held it and them in deep affection. Jamie especially had stolen her heart, and she had never been more glad of it. He'd healed her from the damage Edward had done and made her life so much better with his love. "I absolutely do. I love this place, this time, and the man I'm about to marry. Jamie is everything I could ever want in a partner." She smiled.

Dub Sith, ever the perceptive presence, probed further, "And what of Edward, lass? Do you regret leaving him and your time?"

"I don't regret leaving him in the least. He didn't love me, he only loved himself. He's not a good man, he never was," Annabelle replied.

"Do you wish to know what becomes of him?" he asked, his gaze meeting hers.

Annabelle paused. At one time she recalled wondering exactly that. Actually hoped that he was blamed for her disappearance, but now she couldn't care less what happened to him. Anything that happened was on his own shoulders and didn't involve her. "You know what, I don't. I don't care what happened to him. I don't care if he goes on to find someone that makes him happy, I don't care if he gets the blame for my disappearance, I don't care to know anything about him."

"And if he were to go on to do to someone else what he did to you?" Dub Sith asked.

Annabelle's voice caught in her throat, and she met his gaze as she paled. "Please tell me he didn't." She couldn't imagine someone else going through what she had at Edward's hands.

Dub Sith smiled. "You have a good heart, Annabelle. I'll just say that did nae occur.

You've nae need to worry about any other unsuspecting woman falling for his charm and deceit."

"Thank you. It wouldn't have changed my mind about being here, but I would feel guilty for putting that on someone else."

The mysterious man nodded in understanding. "Congratulations on your pending nuptials, lass. I know you will live a long an' prosperous life with Jamie MacDonald. You have my blessings." And with that, he vanished into the shadows, leaving Annabelle with a sense of closure and a heart full of anticipation for the life that awaited her as she embarked on this new chapter with Jamie MacDonald.

Jen, Mae, and Catherine rejoined her, but Sally had gone off to make sure things were ready at the small church at the bottom of the hill in the small village where Annabelle and Jamie would be married.

"Wow, he actually offered to tell you what happened when you left, and you didn't ask to know? I don't think I could have done that," Mae said with a laugh.

"I admit it was tempting to ask, but I'm just glad he assured me that other women are safe from his abuse. Anything other than that and I really don't care. I'm actually happier here than I have ever been in my life. I'm marrying the man of my dreams, and I have you all as my sisters, and I couldn't ask for more." Annabelle smiled at them.

"Well, let's go get you married," Catherine said, hugging her.

The path down the hill to the church was lined with the vibrant colors of wildflowers, their petals glistening with morning dew. The fragrance of heather and thistles perfumed the crisp Highland air, infusing Annabelle's senses with the intoxicating essence of the Scottish moors. She couldn't have picked a better day for her wedding

if she tried. It was absolute perfection.

As the church came into view, its stone walls weathered by time but still standing strong, Annabelle's heart swelled with a deep sense of gratitude. The Highland winds whispered their blessings, and Annabelle knew, without a doubt, that she was exactly where she was meant to be.

As Annabelle entered the church, she saw Jamie, her rugged Highlander, looking dashing in a kilt and plaid of the Donald Clan's tartan. His tousled curls framed a face that was now graced with a contented smile, a stark contrast to the stern warrior she had watched take part in a fierce battle with bandits a little more than a month ago. His eyes lit with joy at the sight of her walking toward him and Annabelle's heart leapt with the love she had for him.

The ceremony, presided over by the local priest, was a blend of the ancient Scottish tradition of handfasting, and the solemn vows of the church that bound their hearts together. The hymns and prayers filled the sacred space with a sense of reverence, and when the moment came for Jamie to put a ring on her finger, she nearly gasped.

Annabelle had never seen a ring more lovely than the one Jamie placed on her finger. It consisted of three, interlocking bands of gold and was adorned with a fiery ruby at the center surrounded with both small diamonds and blue sapphires. It took her breath away as she looked from it to him.

As he slid it onto her finger, Jamie said, "Annabelle, this ring represents my passion for you in the ruby, our unbreakable commitment to one another in the diamonds, and the heaven you've brought me here on earth in the sapphires. I will love you and protect you till death do us part."

As they sealed their love with a tender kiss, the church erupted in applause and joyous cheers. The newlyweds turned to face their beloved friends and family, the

bond between them strengthened by the sacred oath they had just taken.

Following the church ceremony, Fort Donald came alive with festivities. The dining hall, adorned with colorful banners and fragrant flowers, was filled with the hearty laughter and lively chatter of the celebrants. The tables held the weight of a sumptuous feast, a feast fit for a Highland wedding.

Platters of roasted meats, from succulent venison to tender lamb, glistened enticingly in the warm candlelight. Baked fish and seafood piled on platters. Bowls of hearty stews and fragrant herbs perfumed the air, as guests helped themselves to the bounteous fare. The sweet melodies of fiddles and pipes filled the hall, and couples swayed in joyful dance.

Toasts were raised, and goblets brimmed with fine Scottish whisky were clinked in celebration. The guests regaled the newlyweds with songs and stories of their shared adventures, forging new memories to be cherished in the years to come.

In the midst of it all, Jamie and Annabelle, now wed, basked in the love and warmth of their clan. The joining of their souls had brought about a union not just between two individuals but between two worlds, bridging time and history in the name of enduring love.

\* \* \*

Curled up together in the soft embrace of their marriage bed, Annabelle couldn't help but admire the ring Jamie had given her. She'd never been one to wear much jewelry in the past, but she couldn't help looking at it and recalling Jamie's words as he put it on her finger. "Where did you find this ring? I've never seen anything as beautiful as it."

"I had it made especially for you, though I think you're wrong, love." Jamie cuddled

her close.

Annabelle frowned and looked up at him. "What am I wrong about?"

Jamie grinned. "You are more beautiful than any ring. It pales in comparison to the wonders of your eyes. To your glorious smile, to the passionate heart that lies in your chest."

Annabelle moved into his arms and kissed him. She could not get over how much she loved this man. Her man. Her Highland warrior. "I love you forever," she murmured between kisses.

The day had been long and joyous, filled with celebrations and the well-wishing of friends and family. After making love again, and then enjoying the nourishment that had been left for them on the table under the window, they were once more cuddled together in bed.

Jamie's strong arms held Annabelle close, and she sighed contentedly. "Do you remember when we first met?" she asked, her voice soft and filled with affection.

"Aye," Jamie replied with a grin. "You appeared like a vision, love, in your strange attire, with your fierce spirit. You looked like an angel sent down from heaven just for me."

Annabelle chuckled, her fingers tracing lazy circles on Jamie's chest. "And you took my breath away, my brawny Scottish warrior with a heart of gold."

They shared a quiet moment, lost in their memories.

"I know that Malcolm got away, but I think the two of us together make a good team. Even during the most harrowing moments, I never doubted that," Annabelle said,

leaning into him.

“Aye, love. And we’ll find him because we do indeed make a good team.” Jamie kissed her temple.

Annabelle smiled, her heart swelling with love. “I’ll always remember these moments, Jamie, no matter how challenging things get. The love I have for you can withstand anything.”

Annabelle had no idea what the future held for them, but she knew with Jamie by her side, she could accomplish anything. The love they shared was deep and pure and true and would stand the test of time. She knew without any doubt that together they would defeat any foe, and bring glory and honor to the clan.

Leaning into his chest, Annabelle looked up at the man she loved and smiled. “I love you, Jamie MacDonald.”

Jamie pulled her even closer and kissed her breathless. “I love you forever, Annabelle MacDonald.”

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm*

At midnight, Audrina James finally laid her head down, gratefully onto her pillow.

It had been another grueling day in Trauma One, it was always the worst when the nursing staff and doctors of the trauma ward lost a child.

Audrina looked at the ceiling where she had taped pictures of stars, lush green fields, exotic ancient castles and the forests of her ancestral homeland, vowing to herself that she would visit Claran Castle in Scotland someday.

Audrina had put the pictures up so that she could clear her mind of the gruesome scenes that she faced in the E.R.

day after day, night after night.

They'd worked hard to save the boy from the ravages of a car crash, but Donald Nightingale, of sunny northern California, flatlined at eleven-thirty, after half a day's worth of surgeries, blood transfusions and plasma bags.

Audrina didn't cry much anymore after working in the trauma center. But there were a few patients who tugged at her heartstrings. Donald would be one of them.

"Look at the pictures.

Look at the pictures,"

Audrina chanted to herself.

She used them as a platform to spring her mind into more pleasant thoughts before she drifted off to sleep.

Audrina had been fascinated with the stories and lore of her ancestry when her grandfather used to sit her on his knee and recount tales of his youth, roaming the Highlands of Scotland.

That was before a potato famine reached his homeland and forced his family to immigrate to the United States.

Audrina would spend hours, daydreaming as she roamed the redwoods behind the house, pretending the tall trees were the ancient forests of Scotland.

She knew now that Scotland was much greener, and the forests were made of tall oaks, and rowan trees, beech and pine and ash.

But she had promised herself she would visit and discover it for herself someday.

That was all a couple of decades ago, when Audrina had been just seven.

After high school, she had gone on to nursing school, and now was faced with the ever-increasing violence of the San Francisco Community Hospital that came through the doors.

The timing had just never felt right.

There was always one more case to oversee, or one more patient to look after and successfully care for until they walked out the door of their own volition, and not in a body bag or stretcher.

Audrina certainly had the money saved for the trip, but she always felt there was



something holding her back.

Some small fear she had that there was something Grandfather neglected to tell her about the ancient folklore.

Audrina never quite made the jump to buy the plane ticket or book the hotels.

She'd never really been sure why, but as she laid there, thinking about all of the never did's that young Donald was never going to experience, she thought, "Why am I holding back? I have no solid reason, no proof that there is anything in Scotland I should be afraid of."

"I'm going to request the time off tomorrow and start booking tickets after my trip to the museum,"

she vowed out loud.

There was no one to hear her proclamation, she realized.

There wasn't anyone in her life that she could tell really.

"I guess that makes it kind of sad, maybe even a little pathetic.

Sure, I have my co-workers, but they would all say, "Finally, you are taking a vacation,"

when I tell them,"

Audrina thought.

Audrina had become a trauma nurse after Mom had suffered the same fate as little

Donald.

She winced as the memories of that day entered her mind.

It had been much like Donald's parents rushing into the hospital.

The only difference between her grandfather being informed, and Mrs.

Nightingale's heart-wrenching screams, had been significantly different, but as equally as devastating.

That's when Grandfather had taken her in.

She didn't know who her dad was, and it never occurred to her to go looking for him. She knew that she was loved when Grandfather took her, a scared little girl, home that night. He had cared for her and she didn't need anyone else. Anyone, that was, except her mom, but she wasn't coming back. When Grandfather had passed away she was twenty-one, she was left with no one. She hadn't even bothered getting a pet. Audrina was never home because she worked so much. She'd always felt like it was her duty to save people because, well, she couldn't save her mom back then.

Audrina tried to roll over onto her side.

She was disgusted with herself that she was caught up in her own head and wallowing in self-pity.

Her vow was just that and she was sticking to it.

She realized, as she flipped back onto her back, that she had never been able to fall asleep unless she was looking up at her pictures.

Grandfather had printed them for her the week that Mom had passed.

He wanted her to have something to think about, other than the sadness of losing her mom.

As Audrina's eyes began to flutter closed, and she emptied her mind save for thoughts of faraway lands and lost familial ties, something, perhaps the moonlight, sparkled in the pictures above her.

A small light that glowed in the tower of the castle, appeared to be brighter in the picture.

But she squinted at it, and then chalked it up to fatigue and weary eyes.

Her lashes batted against her cheeks one last time, and she fell into a deep, sound sleep.

\* \* \*

Candles surrounded her in a circle, haloing the circular room with an ethereal glow.

Long thin tapers of white sheep's fat burned low and lit the gloom of the dark tower.

She'd been locked in there for so long, she had lost track of time.

There was a straw mattress, in a splintered bed of Ashwood.

The thin blanket cast across it, was worn and frayed at the edges.

A small wooden chair, equally as uncomfortable, sat at the base of the bed.

It wobbled on three legs, having relinquished one of the legs long ago, for the usage of a handle for a torch.

The torch, had long ago burnt to ash, and was scattered and lost amongst the dust and dirt that caked the cold stone floor.

She rocked back on her heels and murmured a soft prayer to the Gods, the Spirits, anyone who would listen.

The tower was a prison, a tortuous place that seeped into the soul like the smoky blackness of a demon, coming from the bowels of hell to inhabit and ingest the goodness of the person's humanity.

There were bones in the ashes and they cried out to her.

Begging her to release them of their captivity.

She couldn't help them that night.

They would remain tethered there until the angels came for them on the day of reckoning.

Thunder clapped outside the castle and lit up the tiny room in an intense light that threw the stark furnishings of the room into harsh contrast.

The candles flickered, and she feared they would blow out.

Cotswold Castle had many frivolities, protection from the elements in the prison tower, was not one of them.

Rain lashed against the stone tower and sprayed into the room in droves of unending

dampness.

It rained often in Scotland.

She hadn't been dry since she was thrown into that room.

The water collected in puddles at the base of the windows.

She sat in the middle of the room in an attempt to keep herself and her activities dry.

She knelt over a carnelian kilt pin.

It glowed in the candlelight like fire.

She reached out her hand and touched it as she murmured.

The contact sent a spiral of heat through her fingertips, and she jerked her hand back.

How could the stone set in silver be warm to the touch? There was no fire there.

The brooch had not been warmed against constant contact with her skin, as she had been shivering since she arrived there.

The cold was such that it seeped not only into her bones, but into her very soul. There was no possible way the stone could be warm.

Her eyes fixated on the glowing center of the gem as she continued to murmur, "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, through spans of time, I cannot rest.

Seek thee my kin, and pardon my sin, that I may reincarnate, and new life begin.

And with this pin I shall be returned to my love, cast through the ages, by touch of mine blood, and light from sun up above.”

The kilt pin glowed ever-brighter in a hue of burnt orange that lit up not only the room, but blazed like the dawning of the early morning’s sun, sending spirals of light from the tower window.

She heard shouts from below and quickly loosened the stone nearest the door, about halfway up the wall.

She hid the pin behind the stone, where someone had hollowed out the stone behind that, and replace the stone so that it looked seamless.

She prayed that someone would find it someday, and that she might rise up, released from the ashes of the debris of bodies from that hellish place.

She heard footsteps on the stairs and boots clunked up the stone steps.

She hurriedly pushed the stone back in place and managed to take one step back, as the door was thrown open and she screamed in terror as...”

\* \* \*

Audrina woke, sitting bolt upright in bed.

“What the hell?”

she muttered as she glanced up at the pictures.

“What the heck was that?”

she wondered to herself as she let her tired body fall back against the pillows.

She stared at her pictures and then pushed herself back up to a sitting position.

She used her hands and pushed to stand up, so that her upturned face was almost nose to nose with the picture of the castle.

Audrina stared at the tiny light in the tower.

It had faded over the years, but she could have sworn last night it glowed brightly.

So brightly it almost lit up the room.

And then...and then, that dream.

What a strange dream.

Who was that woman in the dream? What happened to her? She must have died there.

Audrina could feel the drive of her trauma nurse training kick in.

She had to save her.

But how? That's silly.

The woman...me...that was centuries ago when she cast the spell. And what kind of a spell was that anyway? Audrina's mind began to fog over, the dream becoming misty around the edges, as reality and the present day slowly seeped back into her mind. She looked around the modern-day bedroom and laughed at the absurdity of her mind's vehemence that the dream was somehow a reality way back when.

She climbed off the bed and hit the shower, enjoying the feel of the warm jets hitting her body as the ache from the previous day's strenuous shift was washed away.

She combed out her dark red hair and swiftly braided it down her back as she stared into her own brown eyes in the reflection of the foggy mirror.

She wiped away the condensation and flashes entered her mind.

The reflection of a woman in the puddles on the floor as the lightening lit up the room.

Did she have brown eyes like my own? Audrina wondered.

She shrugged and finished her braid and then donned her typical casual wear of jeans, an oversized tee-shirt and a ball cap.

The ensemble fit well on her athletic frame, and it was just what she needed to walk down to San Francisco's Museum of Natural History. Audrina enjoyed the casual wear on a rare day off, and she was equally as pleased that the museum was hosting an exhibit on loan from Scotland. She figured she could kill two birds with one stone. She could get her walk in and surround herself in ancient artifacts that made her yearn for a time and place that she had not yet discovered. She pulled her ballcap low over her eyes as she walked out the front door, not minding in the least that she had been accused on more than one occasion of being a tomboy.



*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:48 pm*

When Audrina reached the museum, she purchased her ticket and queued to get in line to be let into the exhibits.

She was about ten minutes early and so she began to read the pamphlet that was handed out at the ticket booth.

She had been to the museum so many times, she was only interested in the exhibit on loan from the Scottish Museum of Ancient History, but she figured she might peruse a few more on her way out.

She read about the various artifacts that were on display, quite impressed with the vast array of items that have been amassed.

As she flipped the cover open, she paused, staring down at the pamphlet stupidly and didn't really register what she was seeing and reading on the pamphlet.

As she stared down at the glossy photo, the memory of the dream from last night was a bit hazy, but there was no mistaking the kilt pin from the dream.

The one that the woman, that she, had cursed.

Or maybe the woman in the dream, she, had placed a spell on it.

But there it was, shining back up at her from the brochure.

Audrina blinked rapidly in the sun, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, and this was another pin that was excavated from some site in Scotland, and it just looked

similar.

But as she continued to read, the weighted feeling in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

“The Cotswold Pin, a rare and expensive carnelian-gem set pin, was discovered last year in the ruins of Cotswold Castle’s eastern most tower.

Archeologists and Historians know very little about the pin, except that it was discovered hidden behind a loose stone near the doorway to the tower, where a mason was reinforcing the towers infrastructure.

Cotswold Castle is host of a long and bloody history in the Scottish culture and it is well known that Lord Cotswold, imprisoned many native Scotsmen, in his long and cruel English reign over the Scottish people.

It is speculated that the pin was hidden by one of the prisoners.

Most likely in the event of their impending death and the desire for such a rare gem to not fall into the hands of the English.

It is known that Lord Cotswold’s reign was filled with such terrors and atrocities against the Scottish people, such as imprisonment, torture, and rape.

He often invoked the First Rights, also known as Prima, against many young Scottish Brides.

It was well known that many of the ones he impregnated he had accused of, tried, and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently sentenced to death.

It is no wonder that whoever was bequeathed such a rare treasure as this gem-inlaid kilt pin, would have wanted it hidden from such an atrocious and vindictive lord and

ruler. ”

Audrina’s hands trembled, and the pamphlet shook as she read and re-read the description under the brooch.

“ How can this possibly be? How is it that I dreamt of this very kilt pin, only last night? I have no memory of such a pin, even from the countless hours spent with Grandfather pouring over history and ancestry books,”

she wondered.

She only realized that the line had started to move, and people were entering the museum, when someone shouted, “Are you going to stand there all day?”

She jumped and shouted, “Sorry!”

over her shoulder as she hastened to the door.

She followed the map of the museum to the new acquisitions and the new exhibit that was on display and it took her a full ten minutes to push through the throngs of people who were gathered around the ancient claymores and thread-bare tartans.

She looked for a case, a glass case, figuring, if the museum was going to display rare and beautiful jewelry and gems, they would have it resting on a bed of velvet and enclosed in a high-security, alarm activated case such as the ones she had seen countless other relics, and objet d’art displayed in before.

She found the very case she was looking for and made a beeline for it.

She waited at the back of the line and tapped her foot restlessly, as she waited for the older couple who were fawning over the brooches and tartans and listing off their family tree and origins, dating themselves back to the days of yore and their own

ancestors.

Just when her patience couldn't possibly take any more waiting, the line moved ahead, and she was able to press in, face to face with the kilt pin.

Audrina found it extraordinary that, even after centuries sitting behind a stone, even though it was unexposed to the elements, it was still in pristine condition, as if it had never survived centuries of time passing by.

She was sure that it was probably dusty when the mason found it, possibly even the gem was scratched or worn and thus had to be restored, but the pin was pristine.

The burnt orange gem sat at the apex of a silver hill.

The silver had been bent and molded onto a swirling pattern to resemble the crest of the hill, so the gem was the representation of the sun.

From what Audrina knew of Celtic mythology, the sun symbol was more widely used in the sun cross symbols, which were indicative of Christianity's introduction to the Celtic peoples.

But this sun was a literal representation of the sun, suggesting that whoever designed and forged the pin, was still a practicing pagan, possibly giving the pin druidic or witchcraft origins.

On the outset of the circular pin, the silver swirled into a Celtic knot which was wavy around the edges, like a river.

Audrina knew this because as Grandfather and she had investigated the Claran, or MacClaran name, it was discovered that the Claran's were one of the older tribes of Scotland, but those particular tribes were ancient, nomadic druids who traveled the waters from the Isle of Eire, also known as Ireland.

The modern day Claran's were to be found inhabiting the areas on the River Clare and the name Claran literally meant, "One who lives near the River Clare."

So, Audrina knew her ancestors had been an ancient people of magics and mystery, and the warring tribes had caused them to take root in Scotland as one of the founding tribes, and they had taken their name and origins with them.

The evidence was right there in the pin that resembled the pagan magics and the river beds from whence her people came.

The tribes, like the rivers on the pin, were split between Ireland and Scotland.

Audrina felt her excitement at having found such a connection to her ancestors, begin to grow.

She stared with her face almost pressed to the glass, willing the pin to do something, anything to give her a sign that she belonged there, with it.

She felt like, somewhere deep in her soul, that the pin belonged to her, but she knew this was silly, because it belonged to the museum in Scotland.

It didn't change the connection she imagined she could feel through the glass.

As she stood there, she again realized the grumblings of the crowd around her as she had allowed herself to be lost in her thoughts.

She was about to exit the line and circle back around, when the crowd was jostled and parted by the streak of a black clothed and masked figure, who shoved them aside.

When the intruder got to Audrina, he shoved her so hard, she knocked into the glass and it smashed as the sirens from the museum began to wail.

Audrina cut the back of her hand on the glass as she tried to stop her fall, but with the rest of the crowd, she tumbled to the floor.

Audrina looked up, just in time to see the masked figure reach into the case and grab something.

A flash of orange and silver registered in her mind, and she clawed her way back up and ran after the thief, as he dashed outside the museum with what she could only proclaim as “her” kilt pin.

Audrina chased after him as the wail of sirens from the museum’s security, and the automatically notified police screeched in her ear.

As athletic as she was, it didn’t take her long to catch up to the thief, and she tackled him, expertly maneuvering him into a judo hold from her years of training with Mr.

Tanaka at his Japanese dojo.

Audrina had needed an outlet for her rage and frustration for losing everyone she had ever loved.

And she had miraculously stumbled upon it in the classes offered at the dojo and Mr.

Tanaka’s ever-patient and serene temperament.

The thief was quickly apprehended at Audrina’s capable hands, just as the police showed up and began to cross the sunny court-yard.

“Hey lady, are you nuts?”

one of the officer called.

“You don’t chase after a criminal! What were you thinking!”

he shouted.

Audrina didn’t answer him, but reached out her shaking hand toward the pin that had fallen to the ground in the take-down of the thief, and as her bloodied fingers from the cut on the glass closed around the pin, the sun shone brightly through a cloud cover, landing directly on the pin, the blood and her hand, and then suddenly, there was a black and gray mist, and Audrina was falling, falling, falling.