



Catherine Meets the Highlander (Scottish Highlander I Never Knew #3)

Author: *Rebecca Preston*

Category: Historical

Description: When Catherine steps through the door of a mysterious professor's home, she doesn't expect to wake up centuries in the past—or to find herself caught between two men vying for her heart

A history doctoral candidate studying the Donald-Campbell conflict on Islay, Catherine is no stranger to tales of Fae magic and feuding clans. But when she's transported to the heart of the conflict she once studied, she quickly learns that surviving the past is far more challenging than reading about it.

Rescued by Eamon MacDonald, a skilled archer and scout for Clan Donald, Catherine begins to adapt to life at the rugged Fort Donald. Eamon's kindness and bravery ignite a spark between them, but her presence also attracts the attention of the sophisticated and manipulative Sir Kellan Campbell, who has his own reasons for pursuing her.

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CHAPTER 1

“Thanks for the tip! See ya tomorrow in class,” Catherine shouted to a student she had just finished a tutoring session with as they departed ways.

She looked at her phone, realizing that she was going to be late if she didn’t hustle. “Oh, no. Alright, where is...?” She turned down a path of the old University campus and quickened her step.

In the heart of modern-day Edinburgh, amidst the venerable spires and age-worn stone archways of the university campus, postdoctoral student Catherine Braddock strolled with purpose. The juxtaposition of old and new was woven into the very fabric of the place, as time-honored architecture embraced modern academia. Gothic facades stood as silent sentinels, bearing witness to generations of scholars while modern accents seamlessly blended, a testament to the passage of time.

The sky above was a canvas of cold gray, the Scottish weather painting an atmospheric symphony. The air held a biting chill, weaving whispers of mist through the stone structures that had seen centuries unfold. Catherine's breath mingled with the frigid air as she traversed the cobblestone paths, her steps echoing the footsteps of countless others who had tread this hallowed ground, something that really excited her deep within.

Catherine herself was a figure both rooted in the present and mysteriously linked to the past. With long, straight auburn hair cascading like a curtain of burnished silk, she possessed an air of elegance that caught the eye. Her green eyes, as vibrant as the Scottish moors, held a spark of intelligence and curiosity that shone like a beacon in

the gray surroundings, which was a testament for an American girl.

Clad in comfortable but warm clothing, her jeans hugged her tall, slim frame, accentuating her poise. Boots, sturdy and laced, carried her through the campus with unwavering steps keeping her feet dry. A cozy sweater embraced her figure, cocooning her against the chill, while a wool pea coat draped gracefully over her shoulders, adding an air of sophistication to her ensemble.

Yet, beneath her modern attire, Catherine was more than a product of her times. She carried with her a passion for history, particularly the enigmatic tapestry of 17th-century Scotland. A postdoctoral candidate, she was dedicated to unraveling the threads of time that connected her to that distant era. Her scholarly pursuits were matched only by her feisty determination to leave her mark on the academic world, especially feeling as an outcast amongst the locals.

As she walked the grounds of the university, Catherine's thoughts danced between the ancient stories she unraveled and the vibrant life that pulsed around her. The murmur of students in lively discussion, the rustle of leaves stirred by the breeze, and the distant echo of church bells created a symphony of moments intertwined with the echoes of history.

In this juxtaposition of eras, where old and new converged in a harmonious dance, Catherine moved forward. She was a modern woman driven by an insatiable curiosity, destined to be entangled in a tale that spanned centuries, a narrative that would unveil the secrets of her own heart and the timeless beauty of the Scottish highlands, and at the moment she couldn't be late. Catherine's steps led her to the edge of the university campus, where the bustling world of academia met the tranquil embrace of woodlands. The transition from scholarly walls to the untouched wilds was a portal into a different realm, a realm where knowledge mingled with the untamed whispers of nature. The boundary marked the intersection of the known and the unknown, and as Catherine crossed it, a sense of anticipation coursed through her

veins.

She stepped beneath the canopy of trees, their branches reaching out like ancient fingers, touching her with a hushed reverence. The woods welcomed her, the chorus of birdsong and rustling leaves serenading her journey. Her purpose was clear, her destination etched in her heart and mind. She sought the cottage of a reclusive professor, a sage of knowledge in her field of history, Professor Jameson, a man who was to illuminate the tapestry of 17th-century Scottish history.

Amongst the trees, she moved with a quiet determination, each footfall a testament to her resolve. The path was not well-worn, a reflection of the professor's own solitude, his connection to a world that had once been his life. She had sent him an email, and in his cryptic reply, he had promised to impart his wisdom on the nuances of the clan conflicts, a historical enigma that had captivated her academic pursuits.

As she ventured deeper, the stone cottage emerged from the verdant landscape like a hidden treasure. Gray stones held stories within their rugged surfaces, climbing vines clung to the walls, weaving a tapestry of nature's artistry. It stood as a solitary guardian of knowledge, its windows like watchful eyes peering out into the wild expanse.

Her heart pounded with a blend of excitement and trepidation as she raised her hand and knocked on the cottage door. The silence that followed felt as though the woods themselves held their breath. But there was no answer, no sign of life within those ancient walls. The eeriness of the quiet sent a shiver down her spine, a ghostly reminder that she had entered a realm of mysteries, both historical and present.

Filled with uncertainty and determination, she raised her hand to knock again, her knuckles tapping against the heavy wooden door. No answer. Venturing around the cottage, Catherine's gaze fixed upon the back door, slightly ajar, as if inviting her into a realm of secrets. The whispers of the wind seemed to beckon her forward, to cross

that threshold and uncover what lay within. With a steadying breath, she approached, her heart echoing the rhythm of her footsteps.

Summoning her courage, she called out, her voice a cautious melody that carried through the air. "Hello, Professor Jameson?" The absence of a response left her with a decision to make, a choice to venture further into the realm of the unknown. Pushing the door open, her fingers brushed against the rough wood.

Though hesitating at the threshold, Catherine's curiosity surged, compelling her to peer inside. What greeted her gaze was unexpected—a man with dark hair that tousled slightly in the breeze. His face bore the scars of a life lived, marking his journey with tales untold. Despite the rugged scars, there was a certain attractiveness to him, an allure that transcended the surface, reminding her of life's complexities beyond the pages of her academic pursuits.

The realization of her own vulnerability in the face of an enigmatic figure left her feeling uneasy but filled with excitement.

The man with the scar spoke, his voice carrying a hint of gravel and warmth. "Please, come in lass," he said, his words a gentle invitation that hung in the air like a delicate thread.

Catherine's gaze met his, uncertainty swirling in the depths of her eyes. The enigmatic figure before her held a certain intrigue, and though caution urged her to retreat, curiosity pulled her forward. "Are you the Professor?" she inquired, her voice a mixture of anticipation and unease.

A smile curved on his lips, a response devoid of words but heavy with affirmation. "Do come in, lass, we've much to discuss."

Catherine stood on the threshold full of doubt, but also intrigued by this man. She

pondered the significance of this encounter, her scholarly mind weaving threads of logic and curiosity.

“You’ve come to learn about the past, have you not? You’ve been drawn to it since a child, do you no longer wish to understand why?” he asked, arching a brow as he watched her hovering on the doorstep.

With a breath that steadied her resolve, she took the leap, her feet carrying her over the invisible boundary that separated her from the man with the scar whose enigmatic gaze never left hers.

But as she stepped across the threshold, a sensation unlike any other enveloped her—a floating, ethereal feeling that defied description. Darkness swirled around her, a velvety abyss that swallowed her senses whole. The world seemed to unravel, the cottage and the man fading into nothingness as she surrendered to the enigma of the unknown.

Time held no meaning in this expanse of obsidian, her senses suspended in a state of liminal surrender. Weightlessness embraced her, a sensation akin to fainting, the edges of her awareness fraying like old parchment. She drifted, the boundaries of her person, dissolving into the infinite darkness, leaving behind the world she knew and stepping into the realm of uncertainty that lay beyond.

In this intangible void, Catherine was adrift, her consciousness untethered. Yet, even within the emptiness, a whisper of connection persisted—a thread of consciousness that bound her to the scarred man and the mysteries that had led her to this precipice.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:19 am

CHAPTER 2

Catherine awoke, her senses returning to her one by one, smell, blurred vision, and feeling wet grass beneath her. She looked down and found herself lying on the damp ground, nestled amidst the embrace of foggy woods. The world around her was obscured by mist, a hazy curtain that seemed to veil anything near her. As her mind grappled with the fog of disorientation, Catherine struggled to rise. The cold seeped through her bones, and her limbs felt stiff and unyielding. She shivered, the chill a stark reminder of the unfamiliarity of this place, and of the events that had led her to this disconcerting moment, whatever they were, she thought.

Catherine's voice trembled as she whispered into the thick air, "What? Where am I? Professor Jameson? Hello?"

The silence that answered her was profound, a stark contrast to the lively interactions she had experienced before.

The cottage had vanished leaving behind only memories of having been there just before she blacked out and so many questions that she didn't know what to ask first. Catherine saw a muddy road in the distance. Apprehensively, she moved toward it, each step wet and sloshy, the sound echoing through the fog-drenched landscape. All she could make out were the road and the occasional tracks in the mud that looked like those left by wagon wheels.

"Where's the campus?" Catherine's words fell from her lips, a sentiment of confusion and disbelief that resonated within the depths of the mist. Her voice grew louder as she ventured further, shouting her words into the near unknown. "Hello! Anyone

there?" The words seemed to be absorbed by the very essence of the Scottish highlands, which she was fairly certain she was still in, but where exactly in the highlands she was, she wasn't sure.

Moss covered gray boulders emerged like silent sentinels, remnants of a world untouched by time. She hugged her arms because the air was laden with a damp coldness that clung to her skin, a reminder that she couldn't be out here after nightfall or she could succumb to hypothermia. It got pretty cold at night this time of year in Scotland. Catherine's senses sharpened as the distant sound of hoofbeats reached her ears. She turned, her gaze directed down the road in the opposite direction, a flutter of anticipation igniting within her chest. Emerging from the mist was a pack of men, a company of riders on horseback that seemed to materialize from the fog.

As the horsemen drew nearer, Catherine's thoughts raced, her instinct urging her to move aside to make way for their approach or to hide, unsure if they would help her or hurt her. She stepped onto the side of the road, but not out of view, her heart echoing the rhythm of the hoofbeats. Her eyes fixed on the approaching figures, a mixture of apprehension and curiosity intertwining in her gaze.

In that fleeting moment, as the riders neared, Catherine continued to debate herself. Should she wait for them? Who were they? Should she seek refuge, concealing herself in the fog? Her mind wavered between the choices. As the horsemen drew even closer, Catherine's attention shifted from her internal struggle to the scene unfolding before her. There was something unusual about these men. Their figures conjured images of Scottish legends and tales whispered through the generations, that she had studied in school. Strange, but not unprecedented, as she had gone to festivals and seen many people dressed in traditional clothing.

Closer and closer, their features slowly becoming clearer through the mist. And yet there was something different about these men. She felt within her bones that something was simply not right about them, but what?

As they grew closer and Catherine could see their attire, it was as though she was looking into the past. Their tartan kilts adorned in shades of blue and green, they were the colors of a clan, but she had no idea which one.

Drawing to a halt, the men's curious gazes fell upon Catherine. Their conversation flowed in the melodious cadence of Scottish Gaelic—a language that felt both foreign and hauntingly familiar to her ears. She knew it from her studies, but by no means was she fluent and though she'd been in Scotland for some time now, she hadn't heard it spoken often. These day, most Scotsmen and women spoke more modern English.

One of the men dismounted his horse, and he approached her with an air of authority. He stood beside her, his fascinated gaze studying her. He was a massive man, broad shouldered, wide even, but he was silent as he took her in.

The air around Catherine felt charged with electricity. As if she reached out it would spark from the static connection. Breaking the silence, she summoned her courage. "Hey, um, I think I'm lost. Where on campus am I?" the midwestern American accent she had was a stark contrast to the Gaelic accents these men shared.

The man's eyes met hers, a flicker of comprehension mingling with his curiosity. He exchanged a glance with his companions, the unspoken exchange revealing their collective intrigue at their encounter.

"I am Eamon MacDonald, and you are in Scotland," he introduced himself. He was tall with short, light blond hair and piercing green eyes, he embodied the very essence of a rugged Highlander.

"I'm Catherine, and I realize I'm in Scotland, but where's the college?" she responded.

One of the men on horseback, a voice as rich and textured as the landscapes they traversed, interjected. "Aye, the lass has a strange accent, like the others."

Eamon's nod conveyed his agreement. With an air of camaraderie, he acknowledged the observation. "Aye."

She puzzled over their meaning—had they truly never heard an American accent before? The thought left her intrigued and bemused. How was that even possible in this day and age?

Her attention shifted to the man beside her, Eamon MacDonald. His rugged handsomeness was undeniable, a sight that drew her gaze and ignited a spark of recognition within her. It was his eyes that held her captive—green as the rolling hills, with an intensity that spoke of hidden depths that she had a startling craving to explore.

The tunics, the kilts, the leather belts adorned with swords and daggers painted a picture of a bygone era. She pondered their purpose in this attire, the significance of it as they rode together. Were they re-enacting some sort of event? Was the college hosting something like that and she hadn't heard about it?

"Are you all coming from like, a festival or something?" she asked.

"No, no festivities, lass. We are on patrol," Eamon said.

And as her gaze lingered upon Eamon's rugged features—the line of his jaw, the curve of his lips—she recognized just how authentic he was. If she didn't know any better, she'd think she'd conjured him and the men with him right out of one of her history books.

His words finally registered. He'd said he was on patrol, but patrol for what? And she

still didn't know where on campus she was. "Sorry, but I don't know how I got here, or where here actually is. And please, don't say Scotland, I know that. I mean where exactly am I?" "You are on the isle of Islay," he declared, his voice dipped into the rich hues of the Scottish brogue, stronger than any she'd heard before.

Catherine's brow furrowed in confusion, her voice carrying her bewilderment. "What?" she uttered, her tone a mix of incredulity and disbelief, the question a reflection of her disoriented state. "How did I get here from Edinburgh?"

Eamon's eyes held an understanding that reached beyond words, and he seemed almost sad for her. "Tis a lot to comprehend, lass." He spoke gently, his words a lifeline in the swirling sea of uncertainty that was Catherine's mind. "Perhaps you should come with us. There are others who will be better equipped to explain."

"Where?" Catherine's inquiry hung in the air, as she twisted her fingers in anxiety. Still she was curious and was considering going with them. Her gaze shifted between the men, the rugged figures on horseback who seemed both familiar and foreign. She didn't feel unsafe with them, which considering their sizes, was surprising.

"We will take you back with us to Fort Donald." Eamon's words carried a warmth of assurance. "We'll get you a hot drink, and you can warm yourself by the fire," he added, his tone laced with kindness.

Should she go with these men? she wondered as she met his gaze. Could she trust them?

The notion of wandering the woods alone into the depths of night seemed a daunting prospect, a path fraught with uncertainties. Eamon's offer held the allure of companionship, warmth, and perhaps answers to the riddles that clouded her perception.

“There are other women who came before you that can better answer your questions,” he added, obviously sensing her hesitation. What could he mean? Women that came before her? That was an odd thing to say. “What do you mean came before me?” Catherine’s asked, not giving her answer until she clarified what was going on.

The men exchanged glances, and it was as though a silent conversation laden with unspoken meanings was taking place between them. Eamon’s reticence held a weight that seemed to echo among the men, a knowledge they carried like a shield.

“I promise, you will be well if you choose to come with us, lass, we mean you no harm and offer Clan Donald’s hospitality to you,” he said, urging her to say yes.

He’d been nothing but polite and she didn’t feel unsecure with them, so she gave him a nod of acceptance. “All right, I’ll come with you.”

With a gesture as gallant as a knight of old, Eamon mounted his steed, extending his hand to her. “Come, lass,” he urged, his gaze unwavering as it bore into hers, offering both reassurance and an invitation as he offered to bring her up onto the horse with him.

With her heart pounding in fear, she weighed her options—trying to navigate the isle of Islay on her own, or a leap of faith into the arms of an enigmatic, attractive, stranger.

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CHAPTER 3

Catherine stood there completely unsure of herself. The woods, once silent witnesses, now grew louder as if echoing the turmoil of her thoughts, as every creature seemed to make its presence known and what she would have to deal with if she stayed the night in the woods. That was a thought that made her shiver with goosebumps.

"Lass, I cannae leave you out here on your own. Tis not in my conscious," he declared, his tone bearing the weight of responsibility and honor.

With a breath, she reached out and took his offered hand. She felt the shock of connection move through her with his touch, but she quickly dismissed it as he lifted her up and settled her behind him on the horse.

With practiced ease, Eamon took the reins of his horse. "Hold on, lass, less you fall off."

Catherine's arms found their place around his waist, her touch tentative because they were in such an intimate position. Her senses drank in the solid strength that lay beneath the fabric of his tunic. His abs, firm and unyielding, seemed to tremble beneath her touch. Was he perhaps effected by her as much as she was by him?

As the horse's hooves carried them through the woods, Catherine's inner reflections danced like shadows against the canvas of her mind. The world around her unfolded in a montage of trees and mist, the absence of modern civilization left her bewildered and a bit scared. Worry crept into her thoughts, a seed of doubt that sprouted amidst

the uncertainty.

As they journeyed onward, a cluster of humble farm huts materialized on the horizon, structures that seemed to belong to a different epoch, a time untouched by the advances of modernity. These quaint abodes, with their thatched roofs and wooden beams, stood as silent sentinels of a world that Catherine had only read about in history books.

Her eyes traced the contours of the huts, noting the absence of modern technology, the absence of the trappings she had grown accustomed to. In this moment, the past felt tangible, an unspoken truth that lingered in the air like a whispered secret. How had this place not advanced along with the modern world? How was it possible to remain so untouched by the world?

"Eamon, do you know how I ended up here on Islay?" she asked.

Eamon's voice, thick with the lilt of the Highlands, echoed through the mist. "Nay, lass, we dinnae ken how you came tae be here. 'Tis a puzzle, it is."

Catherine's brow furrowed as she struggled to understand his words. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that? Your accent is quite strong."

Eamon chuckled, a sound that carried the warmth of the Scottish countryside. "Ah, dinnae fash yerself, lass. I'll slow down a bit for you. We're as baffled by your arrival as you are, you understand?"

Catherine nodded, her ears adjusting to the cadence of his speech. "I'm gonna be honest, I don't quite know how I ended up here either. I was in Edinburgh at the university and then I woke up in that grassy field."

"Ah, a mystery, then," Eamon mused, his eyes twinkling with humor. "Ye've a bonnie

accent, I must say I quite enjoy it.."

Catherine offered a wry smile. "I suppose my mid-western American accent is a bit out of place in the Highlands, but there are a bunch of American students at the University, so we aren't all that unusual."

"Aye, I am sure you're wrong about that, lass," Eamon said with a hearty laugh. "You've traveled far, so welcome to our lands, lass."

Amidst the rhythm of hoofbeats and the hush of the fog, Catherine's curiosity got the better of her. She had to know why they were dressed so authentically. "I have to ask, why are you dressed in traditional Scottish attire? Are you part of some group or something?"

Eamon looked over his shoulder at her, his brow lifted showing his surprise at her question. "I dinnae know what you mean, lass, how else are we to dress?" he replied. He sounded curious as to why she would ask such an odd question. "We wear the family colors of Clan Donald."

Catherine's lips parted in response, and then quickly closed for a moment. "Clan Donald?" she echoed. He'd mentioned them before and that they were going to Fort Donald. Her mind churned with thoughts, memories of her studies intertwining with the reality unfolding before her eyes. The pieces of the puzzle began to align, though the picture they painted remained unreal. Catherine ruminated that she had heard of the clan name in her studies, but perhaps these men were the modern descendants of the clan but liked to uphold tradition by wearing the garb?

Catherine clung to Eamon's form as the horse carried them through the woods. "Do you really not know how I ended up in the woods alone. You said I was like the others?" She knew she was repeating herself, but she couldn't help it. She couldn't wrap her head about how she'd gotten here.

Eamon sighed. Then he finally said, "I cannae say for sure, lass, but it seems you've been brought here, the same as the others, by the willful nature of Dub Sith."

"Dub Sith?" Catherine's brow furrowed. The unfamiliar name hung in the air like a riddle waiting to be unraveled. She glanced to those they traveled with, and each seemed to have a knowing smile on their face. There was something about the smiles that sent a shiver through her. What weren't they telling her?

"I dinnae know if it will make sense to you, lass," Eamon admitted, his words carrying a touch of bemusement. "Not without more proof than I have to share at the moment."

"Try me," Catherine responded, her voice laced with annoyance.

Eamon glanced over his shoulder, his eyes held hers, the depth of his gaze a silent testament to what he wanted to share. "Very well. The legend of Dub Sith," he began, "goes back hundreds of years. He is one of the Fae. An ancient being who has blessed Clan Donald in a particular way over the centuries. You see, he has delivered women to us from the future times several times before."

Catherine's lips parted in an audible gasp. The shock of what he'd said made no sense to her. It wouldn't make sense in anything but a fairytale. "What are you talking about? Fae? Future times? Why are you telling me children's stories?"

Fae, she knew, were creatures of mythology, the stuff of fairytales. Yet, his casual mention of them left a dissonance that unsettled her understanding of what was going on now. Was he merely trying to placate her until they reached wherever they were going? He had to be because what he was saying made no sense. But then... why would he say something like future times?

"I speak truth, lass, and I know it tis a wonder and sounds outlandish, but I pray you

will keep calm and not panic, as I am sure you are want to do," Eamon replied.

Catherine didn't know what to make of that statement. She wanted to know what he meant. "Future times?" she repeated, trying not to let her inner turmoil boil over.

"Aye," Eamon's voice remained steady. "You and the others are from a time far into the future from here. At least I imagine from your clothing you are from a similar time as they."

Catherine's incredulity flared, her brow arching as her thoughts raced to make sense of his declaration. Her hands tightened around him. "Are you trying to tell me that I've traveled back in time?" Her tone was full of skepticism because that was impossible. Nobody could travel backward, or forward for that matter, in time.

"Aye," Eamon's reply was unwavering, as though he absolutely believed what he was saying. "Tis the truth of it, lass."

Catherine's laughter spilled forth, a boisterous sound that echoed through the woods like a chorus of disbelief. He had to be joking. He was entertaining her instead of being serious. There was no way he was serious. Right? "You're pulling a prank on me. That's fine," she retorted, her tone both amused and adamant. "Just get me to a phone."

Eamon glanced back over his shoulder, but there was no mirth in the gaze, only sorrow and uncertainty. "You will see, I speak the truth," he began, "It's less of a surprise now than it was when the first showed up, but unfortunately, I haven't talked much with the other time travelers."

The landscape stretched outward in a breathtaking expanse of undulating hills and sweeping horizons, the heather-covered moors a tapestry of purples and greens that seemed to blend with the shifting sky. The air held a crispness that spoke of the

wildness of the Highlands, carrying with it the heady scent of earth and freedom. Catherine gasped as she viewed the expanse. It was beautiful and confusing to her because once again there was nothing modern within sight. Could what he was saying be true? Surely not.

As the horses slowed to a halt, Eamon dismounted and helped Catherine down as well. Eamon and his men led the horses to a stream that meandered through the moors. The soothing melody of the brook was a welcome sound to Catherine's ears. She looked around, hoping to see something, anything that was modern, but there was nothing but nature. She turned her frustrated gaze to Eamon.

"I still can't believe this," she said. "Traveling back in time? That's something out of science fiction, not reality."

Eamon's eyes met hers, a hint of amusement dancing in their depths. "You doubt what you see before you, lass?" he challenged.

Catherine's frustration bubbled to the surface, her voice edged with exasperation. "I'm a historian, for crying out loud. I deal with facts, evidence, not fairytales."

Eamon's lips curled into a wry smile, his gaze never leaving hers. "Ah, but sometimes the lines between fact and legend blur, and the truth you seek lies in the spaces betwixt."

Catherine's eyes flared with determination, a spark that rivaled the intensity of the moor's beauty. "I've studied history my entire life, and nowhere in any record I have read about are there people traveling back in time. It's preposterous!"

Eamon's gaze held a mixture of patience and a touch of mischief, a glint of challenge that danced within his eyes. "History, lass, is written by those who lived it. What if the tales have been hidden, buried in tomes long lost?"

Catherine shook her head, her frustration evident in the sharpness of her tone. "Hidden? Buried? Lost? That's just a convenient excuse for embracing fantasy over reality."

Eamon's lips curved into a knowing smile; his demeanor unwavering amidst their verbal duel. "You have a stubborn spirit, I'll give you that. But perhaps it's time to expand your notion of reality."

Catherine's hands clenched into fists at her sides, her voice carrying the weight of her determination. "I can't just accept something so fantastical without evidence. It goes against everything I stand for. I'm a scholar."

Eamon's gaze softened, a touch of understanding entering his expression. "I dinnae expect you to believe it all at once, lass. The truth will reveal itself to you in time."

"And what if I can't accept this truth? What then?"

Eamon's eyes held a warmth. "You'll find your way, lass. The moors have a way of bringing clarity to even the most tangled of paths."

Catherine's gaze flitted over the sweeping landscape. The beauty of the Highlands was undeniable even in the moonlight, which was brightly shining and making the stars twinkle brighter than she'd ever seen in her life. Yet, in this moment, her heart was a battleground, where reason and intuition clashed like waves against the rugged shore, and she wanted to take it out on someone and that someone was Eamon.

Catherine's brow furrowed, as she found a boulder to sit on and pout.

Eamon pulled a leather bag from his belt, opened it and put it to his mouth, taking a drink. He then held it out for her. "Would you like some water?" he offered.

Catherine took the leather pouch and gulped it down, not realizing how thirsty she was. "Thank you," she said as she handed it back.

"Stretch your legs, lass. We will be back on horseback for a wee bit longer," he said.

Catherine's annoyance simmered beneath the surface, as she attempted to make sense of what was going on. As she stood up and paced the area by the stream, she searched for something, anything modern, but there was nothing. Not even an airplane passing overhead. Her gaze was drawn to the night sky again. It was full of stars, so many and so bright that it made her pause. It looked different than she remembered.

As they returned to the horses, Catherine's thoughts remained a whirlwind of disbelief and mistrust. She didn't know what or who to trust. Was Eamon telling the truth or was he some sort of play actor trying to gaslight her? She felt uneasy as she watched the sky. She didn't know if she could believe him, even with the natural world around them hinting that he was speaking truth.

She gripped him tighter as he urged his horse to go faster, as the other men trailed behind them. Catherine leaned into his back and said, "I'm sorry. I don't know if you're lying to me, or if you actually believe what you've been saying to me, but I'm a logical, skeptical person and I can't just believe you. I need proof."

Eamon's response was a soft chuckle. "You dinnae have to believe it all at once, lass. The truth has its own way of revealing itself."

Catherine growled in her throat in frustration. "You keep saying that and it's driving me crazy. You keep saying it's the truth, but it contradicts everything I've ever known and if you're right, I don't know if I can handle that."

Eamon reined in his horse, and directed the men to keep going. He turned slightly, as much as he could upon the horse to look at her. "You'll find your way, Catherine.

This place has a way of showing you?—”

"Stop, Eamon. Can you just not right now? Please?"

“Very well, lass, but mark my words, you will come to see I speak the truth.” He smiled. “Now, let us catch up to the others. The sun will be rising soon.”

Catherine glanced at the sky again and realized it was getting lighter toward the east. She had no idea what time it actually was anymore. The whole night had passed in a blur of a handful of hours, or so it seemed to her. They rode on, catching up to the other men, where Eamon maneuvered through them and into the front of the group once again. “Anything to report?” he asked of those around them.

“Nay, nothing significant. All is well with the lass?” one of the men to their left said.

“Aye,” he replied, glancing over his shoulder at her.

Within the next hour, the sun broke over the horizon and the sky lightened significantly. She could see hills in the distance, and at the bottom of one of the larger hills stood what looked to be a grouping of buildings. Old buildings made of stone with thatch roofs. At the top of the large hill, there looked to be another massive building.

“Is that where we are going?” Catherine pointed toward the group of buildings. “Will someone there have a phone I can use?”

Eamon chuckled. “We will pass by those homes, but we are not stopping. We are headed up the hill. You can see the fort fairly clearly from here now.”

“The fort?”

"Aye. Fort Donald, lass," Eamon offered. "Tis our home. The home of Clan Donald."

Catherine's heart began to beat erratically in her chest as she took in the sight. Fort Donald was huge and almost regal looking as it sat majestically upon the hill overlooking the small village at the bottom of the slope. Even from here she could make out the timber and stone towers that stood sentinel at the corners of the fort's gate. She couldn't see all of it yet, only the top half of the inner building, but the fact that it stood at all had her head reeling.

"Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore," Catherine murmured as her eyes drank in their fill of the scenery.

"What was that, lass?" Eamon questioned.

But Catherine couldn't reply. Her voice was stuck in her throat as she realized there might be some truth to what Eamon had been telling her. The question was, how on Earth was this even possible?

CHAPTER 4

The village at the bottom of the hill was bustling with activity and Catherine's head was on swivel as she noticed the men and women in medieval Scottish attire going about tasks that seemed straight out of one of her history books. They each looked back at her, curiosity and suspicion upon their faces as they took in her jeans and sweater. As though they'd never seen anyone dressed as she was. She suddenly felt extremely out of place and slightly embarrassed, but then lifted her chin and straightened her back. She wasn't going to be intimidated by anyone.

Eamon and the others had slowed the horses to a walk as they passed through the tiny town. Some of the men came up to them, offering them things, but the men all declined with a nod of thanks and a few words of gratitude. Once past them and headed up the hill, Eamon said, "We don't take from them what will be provided to us at the Keep."

"Were they asking you to buy it?" Catherine asked. The accents had been much thicker than she was accustomed to at the university, and she hadn't understood everything that had been said between the people in the little village and the men around them on horseback.

"Nay, they offer it because we protect them, but our Chief would rather we only accept when we are in desperate need, which we are not at the moment."

"Chief?"

"Aye, our Chief, Cam MacDonald. He is the head of Clan Donald."

“So the Laird?”

“Sadly, nay. We no longer own the land here, but that is a story for another time.”

Catherine’s breath caught in her throat as the wooden gates began to open onto a spacious courtyard full of activity. She could see the massive fort in the center, the stone and timber in near perfect condition as though it had been built just a few years prior.

The clang of metal against metal caught her ear and she turned her gaze from the building to the activity around them, the sound of sheep bleating, the people moving about the area, rushing to get tasks completed was an overwhelming sight that had her feeling lightheaded.

"This can't be real," she whispered, her voice carrying the weight of her disbelief.

"Aye, it tis," Eamon said, his words matter-of-fact.

“How is this even possible?” she questioned, her gaze following one person only to be captured by another trailing off in the opposite direction. “Braedon, run and fetch Niall and Mae, would you, lad?” Eamon said as he dismounted, then helped Catherine down.

Catherine's curiosity swelled like a tide as she wondered what would happen next.

"Who are Niall and Mae?" Catherine ventured; her gaze fixed on Eamon.

“Niall MacDonald, he isn’t the chief, but he may be better equipped to answer your questions than I. As for Mae... well, I suspect you and she come from a similar place. She is Niall’s wife.”

Catherine wasn't sure what he meant by that. A similar place. Did he mean she was American? Or did he mean she was from the future as he claimed that she was? As she contemplated those thoughts, the doors to the fort opened and a statuesque, redhead with bright green eyes stepped out into the morning sun. The sun made her auburn hair look like burnished brass. It was rich and thick, braided, and hung over her shoulder, down her chest. She wore a dress made of the same tartan as Eamon and the other men wore.

Next to her stood an even taller man with a lean build. He had short, curly reddish gold hair and pale blue eyes. As soon as he saw Eamon and Catherine, he made a comment to the woman and she grinned, her whole face lighting up as she lifted the skirt of her dress and practically ran straight toward Catherine and Eamon. She came to a stumbling halt in front of them as the man who followed a few steps behind her chuckled.

"No way, another one?" the woman's voice held amazement.

Catherine's lips curved into a smile as she detected the familiar cadence of her American accent. "Oh good, you're American too," Catherine murmured, feeling a bit of relief. Perhaps now she'd learn what was really going on.

"Niall, Mae, this is Catherine, we found her wandering the woods in the middle of the night," he said, the gravity of his statement underscoring the remarkable nature of their circumstances.

"You must be so confused, I know I was," Mae said, a genuine smile on her lips. "And I'm going to bet hungry and tired too."

"That's an understatement. What is going on? What is this place? I know Eamon said it's a fort of some kind, but none of this makes any sense to me."

“I’ll try to explain, but it’s going to be a strange and long story. First let’s get you inside.”

“That’s a good idea, love. It tis a pleasure to meet you, Catherine, but would you mind very much if I speak with Eamon while my wife sees to your needs? It tis a matter of urgency, I am afraid.”

“Of course,” Catherine replied.

“We’ll be in the dining hall,” Mae said and looped her arm through Catherine’s.

As Catherine gave Eamon and last glance and started toward the doors of the building with Mae, she overheard Niall speaking.

"Eamon, we’ve had word that an exile is said to still be hiding in the area. From what I’m told, he’s dangerous enough that the Chief wants you to investigate. You’re one of our best trackers, so we’re hoping you can find the troublemaker," Niall's voice held a note of urgency.

"Aye, I will gather supplies and some of the guard to head back out," Eamon replied as Catherine and Mae moved up the steps.

Led by Mae's guiding presence, Catherine stepped across the threshold of the castle, an indelible sense of awe sweeping over her like a whispered secret from centuries past. The little bit of sunlight that made it through the doors cast a flickering dance of shadows upon the gray stone walls, each step echoing with the resonance of history itself. It was as though she’d stepped into one of her own history books.

"Oh my God," Catherine whispered.

"I had the same reaction," Mae laughed.

Catherine's gaze moved over the walls in the corridor which was adorned with ornate tapestries, their vibrant colors bright looked almost new. Each scene depicted on them seemed to come alive before her eyes with various images of the Highlands.

They entered another set of massive doors to a large room filled with wooden tables. "You've arrived just in time for breakfast, lucky you," Mae said, grinning. "Everything will still be warm. Do come sit." She directed Catherine toward a table. "After we eat, I'll show you to your bedchamber."

"My...bedchamber?"

Mae laughed. "Sorry, living here, it's so different. The fort has plenty of extra rooms, while we eat, I'll get Sally to make up a room just for you. It's yours for as long as you like." She raised her hand and waved it at a woman in a brown dress with a white apron over it.

The woman rushed over. "Good morning, Mae, what do you need?" Her gaze drifted to Catherine, but she didn't say anything.

"Sally, this is Catherine. She's like me and Jen. Would you be able to fix her up a room? Perhaps find her a gown and..." Mae glanced at Catherine and then back to Sally, "perhaps a bath as well?"

"I'll see it done." She gave a nod and smiled at Catherine. "Welcome to Fort Donald, Miss Catherine."

"Thank you," Catherine replied.

"Now, we've got porridge, which is like oatmeal, but a little thicker, add some honey and it's chef's kiss. And homemade bread, and," she lifted the lid on a platter, "oh eggs and ham, today. Help yourself to whatever you'd like. We've also got water and

ale, and don't worry, the water's safe. Jen made sure to get that sorted when she got here." Catherine's head was reeling again. Suddenly everything was overwhelming, and she couldn't believe what she was seeing. What she was hearing. It was all too much, and she burst into tears.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:19 am

CHAPTER 5

“ O h, crap, I didn’t mean to make you cry. What is it? Is it the breakfast? Are you vegan?” Mae asked, rubbing Catherine’s back.

It was such an odd question in this ancient place that Catherine began to giggle through her tears. “No, it’s just all of this.”

Mae made a face. “I get it. It’s overwhelming being here for the first few days. It does take some getting used to. We don’t have to talk about it right now. There’s loads of time to do that. For now, let’s get some food into you and then I’ll take you to your room where you can rest, because I’m sure you’re dead tired. I know I was.”

Catherine had to agree. She felt as though she hadn’t slept in a year, but couldn’t understand why that was. She’d often gone a day or two without sleep and not felt this crazy kind of tired that she did right then.

Mae handed her a bowl and said, “Eat, you’ll feel better soon. I promise.”

Catherine took the offered bowl and spooned a mouthful into her mouth. The flavor of the porridge with honey dancing on her tongue. “Oh, wow. This is good.”

By the time she finished, Sally had returned and given Mae directions to the room she’d fixed for Catherine. “If you be needing anything, you jest ask for Sally. There is a bath already prepared for you and I’ve set out a nightdress as well as a gown for you. Though you may be needing a bit o’ help with it. Lady Jen and Mae both did.” She smiled.

“Thank you,” Catherine murmured as she and Mae stood.

Mae led her up the stone staircase and down a hallway to a wooden door. She opened it, and Catherine saw it was a medium sized room with a single bed, nightstand, small table and chairs, and a wardrobe. There was also a fireplace that held a roaring fire, and in front of it sat a tub filled with water. It looked like one of those metal water troughs that cows drank out of.

“I know it’s not what you’re used to, but I promise, the bath will feel good, so take it while you can. I’m sure you can manage the nightdress on your own, but I’ll come back tomorrow and help you with the gown.”

“Tomorrow? But it’s barely mid-morning,” Catherine replied.

Mae grinned. “Trust me. You’re going to fall asleep and I’m betting you’re not going to wake for about eighteen to twenty hours. You’ve been through a lot, it’s exhausting.”

Catherine frowned, but didn’t say anything to that. Instead she asked, “So is there not a bathroom?”

“About that...” Mae moved over to a table that held a bowl and pitcher on the top shelf, and a pot on the bottom shelf. “The bathroom.” She gestured toward it. “Your sink,” she pointed to the pitcher and bowl, and then to the pot, “Your potty.” She gave a cringy smile that was more of a grimace. “Sorry, one of the downfalls of being here, but the staff will take care of cleaning it, so there is that.”

Catherine’s heart dropped to her stomach. “You mean...”

“No modern conveniences here, well anywhere anymore. But we’ll talk about all that tomorrow. Anything else you might need?” Mae asked.

Catherine shook her head. "Thank you, Mae."

"Get some rest."

In the wake of Mae's departure, Catherine found herself enveloped by the room's solitude. The door's quiet closure made the weight of her situation press heavily upon her. She lowered herself onto the chair by the small table and began to cry softly. How had she gotten here? Why was she here? How was this possible? The questions ran through her mind on a loop.

The minutes stretched into an eternity as Catherine sat with her thoughts. The near silence seemed to mirror the vastness of the unknown that stretched before her. All she could hear was the crackling of the firewood.

Her gaze moved from the fire in the fireplace to the tub of water in front of it. She decided Mae was probably right. She should take advantage of the bath while she could. Undressing, she slipped into the tub, which wasn't large enough to fully stretch out, but was bigger than she had originally thought. There was a washrag and piece of soap on a small stool next to the tub as well as a larger, rough piece of fabric she took to be her towel.

Catherine tried to relax in the water, but it wasn't working. She decided to just wash and get out. She'd just put on the nightgown when there was a knock at the door. Eamon immediately came to mind, but she was pretty certain he had no clue what room she was in, so she dismissed that thought as she pulled the door open.

"Miss Catherine, you've had a nice bath then?" Sally asked, a glass decanter in her hands.

"Yes, thank you, Sally. Did you need something?"

“Oh, aye, sorry. I thought you might like a wee bit o’ whisky afore your slumber. An’ I thought I’d send the others in to clear the tub if’n you’re finished.”

“Whisky would be good,” Catherine replied with a nod. Something to help relax her would be amazing.

Sally waved to a couple of women in the hall who were dressed the same as she was. They came in and made quick work of bailing out the tub into buckets and then carrying them and the tub out of the room as Sally poured her a glass of the whisky.

“Here you are, Miss. That will do you well. Is there anythin’ else I can get fer you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Then I’ll leave you to your rest,” Sally said as she headed out the door and pulled it closed behind her.

Catherine lifted the glass of whisky to her lips and took a sip, feeling the burn all the way down her throat. It was just what she needed as it helped to calm her frayed nerves. The bed beckoned, and she suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion hit her again. She set the half drunk glass on the night table and climbed into the bed. As she lay down, her eyes began to drift closed.

A proper deep sleep remained elusive, though, like the flicker of a distant candle in a vast, shadowy room. Dreams danced on the periphery of her consciousness, teasing her with fragmented glimpses of both the reality she knew and the enigma she had stumbled upon. Each time she stirred, she half-expected to awaken in her own bed, casting this surreal escapade as nothing more than a bizarre figment of her imagination.

Catherine's sleep remained restless, each passing moment pulling her deeper into her

own thoughts. She had expected that by closing her eyes, the medieval world she had found herself in would dissolve, leaving her safely ensconced in the familiarity of her university apartment, as if it had all been a bad dream. Yet, even as her body succumbed to the embrace of the hay-stuffed mattress, her old world surroundings persisted in their stubborn existence.

As consciousness reclaimed her the following morning, Catherine's gaze traversed the room. The stones, ancient and solid, remained in place. She was still at Fort Donald, and not back in her university apartment. It hadn't been a dream, much to her dismay. She still couldn't believe that she was, as Eamon had told her, in the past. It was impossible. But her surroundings told a different story.

She climbed from the bed and moved toward the window where the sunlight was streaming in. She could see a lake in the distance and if she looked closer in, the village at the bottom of the hill.

A gentle knock on the chamber door roused Catherine from her contemplation. With a hesitant breath, she eased the door open, revealing Mae accompanied by Sally. "Oh, good morning," she said, only feeling slightly disappointed that it wasn't Eamon, and she wasn't even sure why she'd thought it might be him.

"Good morning," Mae practically sang. "How are you feeling? Rested?"

Sally moved into the room, a tray in her hands, and headed for the table. "I've brought you some breakfast, we thought you might like to eat here afore takin' in the sights."

"Thank you," Catherine replied. "And I feel okay, massively confused, but yes, I got some sleep."

"Good. I thought we could eat, then I'll show you how to get into the dress, and we

can talk as I show you around Fort Donald.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Sally said, excusing herself from the room.

Catherine sat down across from Mae and fixed a plate from the food on the platter Sally had brought. Her thoughts were going a mile a minute as she ate, savoring the taste of everything. It was all so good. “Is this bread homemade?” she asked.

Mae laughed. “Everything is. Kind of have to do it all, well Mira and her staff do anyway, but yes, everything is made with natural ingredients. No more processed foods for us.” She smiled. “And after a while, you won’t even miss them.”

Catherine didn’t like the way she kept making statements like that. As though she was going to be stuck here. Like she was trapped with no way out. There had to be a way back to the university. Even if she had to steal a horse and ride out herself. She’d go and get somewhere that wasn’t lost in time, find a phone and get the heck back to reality.

“You don’t believe me, do you,” Mae said, smiling. “That’s okay, you will, but we don’t have to talk about it just yet. Finish eating and let’s get you dressed.”

They did just that, though eating took a lot less time than putting the dress on, it seemed to Catherine. She’d always admired period clothing, but she’d never imagined having to wear it herself.

"Now that you’re dressed, I’ll show you around the fort. This is your home now, for as long as you want anyway, and you should know how to get around."

Catherine’s voice wavered as she responded, "I get that I’m staying here right now, but my home ? I already have an apartment at the University of Edinburgh. "

“Oh, sweetie, sit down.” Mae gave her a gentle look as though she was fragile and might fracture at any moment. “Did Eamon not explain?”

Catherine frowned. “He said I’d traveled back into the past, and while all of this gives me pause,” she waved her hand about the room but really meant the entire fort and the surrounding area, “I simply can’t believe that. Time travel is impossible.”

“I believed that too, but it has happened. And it’s not some science fiction machine or anything that brought you here, it was actually a Fae.”

Her brow furrowed as she stared at Mae. “Fae aren’t real.”

“I know you think they aren’t, but I can assure you, they are. What do you recall from right before being in that field where Eamon and the others found you?”

“I went to see a professor. I knocked on his cottage door, there wasn’t an answer, so I went around to the back. The door was open and when I looked in?—”

“Let me guess. You met a man with a scarred face, black hair, and brilliant blue eyes.”

“I—how did you know that?” Catherine gasped.

“You met Dub Sith. He’s a Sidhe Fae with the power to move through time. He brought you here.”

“But...why?”

“That is a long story, but I can assure you that were currently in the mid-1600s and there’s no going back home.”

Catherine felt tears well in her eyes. “But there has to be a way... right?”

Mae shook her head. “None that Jen or I’ve found, not that we’d want to go back anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Catherine sniffled. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Mae’s face lit up like it was Christmas and she had just opened the best gift ever. “Because of Niall. And I know Jen would never go back and leave Cam. She’s married to the Chief.”

“So you’d stay for these men?”

“Pretty much. But honestly, being here, it’s kind of amazing. Peaceful. Easy, even without modern conveniences.”

“I’ll take your word for it then.” Catherine brushed the few tears that had fallen from her cheeks.

“Come on, let me show you around. I really think you’re going to end up loving it here.”

Guided by Mae, Catherine stepped into the heart of Fort Donald, a world both strikingly foreign and oddly familiar. First she led Catherine outside to the courtyard to start off their tour. Catherine was amazed at the activity. There were children running and playing games, though some of the older ones looked like they were doing work, carrying things for some of the men, brushing horses, and feeding chickens.

The entire courtyard was alive with activity, people going about their tasks with a sense of purpose. Catherine's gaze swept over the scene, from the women tending to

the gardens, to the men repairing tools, a picture of unity and industry. There were men honing their skills in the practice fields, the glint of steel catching the sunlight, their movements a dance of strength and discipline as she watched completely enthralled.

“The guardsmen are pretty fun to watch, right?” Mae said from her side. “You should see Jen out there with them. She’s taught them some more modern ways to fight. She’s a mixed martial artist.”

Catherine glanced at her. “She taught these Scottish Highlanders to do martial arts?”

Mae giggled. “Yep, pretty much.”

Mae led Catherine back into the castle to the heart of the fortress as she called it, the great kitchen. The aroma of herbs and roasting meats enveloped them, mingling with the warmth radiating from the massive hearth. She introduced her to Mira as well as the kitchen staff who were all busy preparing the evening meal. Catherine had asked about lunch, but had explained the mid-day meal was sliced meats and cheese with chunks of homemade bread.

As they continued their journey, Mae opened the doors to what looked like a seamstress’s workshop. The scent of wool and the rustling of fabric greeted them. Bolts of cloth in a solid colors as well as the clan tartan lined the walls as the rest of the room held looms and sewing tables.

Mae introduced Catherine to the two clan members that were in charge. “Catherine, this is Seamus and Bridie, the Donald’s clan’s tailor and seamstress. Seamus takes care of clothing the men while Bridie designs the most beautiful gowns for us.”

“Oh, Mae, you flatter me,” Bridie said, turning a bit pink in the face. “Pleased to meet you, Miss.”

“Pleasure,” Seamus murmured, giving her a nod before returning to the project he’d been working on.

“Do you have time to take Catherine’s measurements, Bridie?”

“Of course. We’ll get you turned out quick as can be,” she replied.

“Do you make everything?” Catherine asked in wonder as Bridie measured her from top to bottom.

“Aye, me and my girls, my daughters, you understand. I’ve taught them well, you needn’t worry about tearing a seam with our dresses.” She smiled. “Now, we’ll have a proper wardrobe ready for you soon. You just go enjoy the rest of your day with Mae and leave the sewing to us.”

“Thank you, Bridie,” Mae said, smiling and then showed Catherine back out of the rooms.

Throughout the tour, Catherine marveled at the seamless integration of life within the fort. Every corner seemed to whisper of heritage, every stone seemed to echo with tales of generations gone by. The people moved with a purpose, a shared camaraderie that was woven into the very fabric of their existence that Catherine realized could not be taught in a lecture at school. It was as though history had come to life before her, and she was amazed by it.

As they finally emerged into the open air of the courtyard once again, Mae led her to a set of steps that led to the wall. As they reached the top walkway, Catherine took a moment to absorb the sights and sounds around her. On one side she could see the hustle and bustle of the courtyard. On the other, the hill sloped downward toward the village and beyond that, stood a lake, or a loch as it was called here in Scotland. “Which loch is that?” she asked, pointing toward the water.

“That is Loch Ballygrant. If you follow the road out of our small village down there,” Mae pointed toward the dirt road, “it will take you to the town of Ballygrant.”

Catherine looked around, her gaze turning toward the clear blue sky. Not an airplane in sight. “I still can’t believe this place. I can’t believe I’m here,” she said, but this time her tone held a hint of wonder and amazement.

Mae's gaze met Catherine's. "Welcome to your new home, Catherine," Mae said, grinning.

CHAPTER 6

As Catherine walked alongside Mae on the top of the wall, they heard horse hooves approaching. A moment later the massive gates of Fort Donald creaked open, and Eamon and his men on horseback galloped through them, returning from their mission. The sight of them entering with a sense of purpose filled Catherine with awe and trepidation. As she stared down toward them, Eamon's eyes found hers, a fleeting connection that sent a warmth coursing through her veins. He waved and a warm smile curved his lips.

"I see Eamon's returned," Mae said, something akin to teasing in her voice.

Catherine barely heard her as she watched Eamon guide his horse over toward the stables. The play of sunlight on his rugged features seemed to accentuate his charisma, his presence of strength and assuredness captured her attention. She couldn't take her eyes off him until he disappeared into the stables and was out of her view. "I should go say hi," Catherine murmured, turning for the stairs.

"Oh you definitely should," Mae said with barely contained laughter.

Catherine didn't know what Mae found so funny about her wanting to tell Eamon hello, but she didn't let it bother her. She moved swiftly down the stairs to the courtyard and started toward the stables.

Halfway to them, Eamon emerged and met her and Mae in the midst of the courtyard. "Catherine, lass, you are well?" he asked, greeting her.

“I am, thanks. You?”

“Aye, I am quite well. I must say, the dress suits you. You look bonnie, lass," he remarked with a twinkle in his eyes, his brogue imbuing his words with a musical cadence that enveloped her in warmth.

"Thank you," Catherine replied graciously. She couldn't deny the unspoken connection danced between them. It was almost tangible.

“Has Mae been showing you around the fort?” he asked as they walked.

“I have,” Mae answered. “I’m wondering though if I should have waited for you to do it.” The grin on her face was mischievous.

Eamon cleared his throat and then said, “I’d have liked that, if I hadn’t been seeing to a task for the Chief.”

“It’s okay. I had a good time with Mae,” Catherine replied feeling like she was missing something in the conversation.

“I wondered if you would care to join me for a mid-day meal? I’m famished and thought I’d take myself off to the dining hall. Have you eaten?”

Catherine found herself nodding, her curiosity mingling with a growing sense of comfort in Eamon's presence. "Yes, I am hungry," she admitted. “All this walking has really increased my appetite.” She smiled at him.

“I think I’ll go see if I can track down Niall, you two have fun.” Mae’s smile was wide as she skipped away.

Together, Catherine and Eamon made their way to the dining hall. “This smells good

in here. I thought Mae said all there'd be was sliced meats and cheese?"

"Sometimes Mira will heat up any leftovers from last evening's meal. We had a hearty stew last night, which is what you're smelling. There must have been plenty leftover." Eamon led her to a table where they each picked up a plate and filled it with stew, and some bread.

With their laden plates in hand, Catherine followed Eamon to a wooden table.

"So, lass, have you come to realize I spoke the truth to you?" Eamon asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

Catherine sighed. "Yes, I don't know how, but you appear to be correct."

"I understand." He gave her a gentle smile. "I'm very curious to know what your world was like. Will you tell me about the place you come from?"

Catherine took a sip of her drink, her gaze sweeping over the dining hall before settling on Eamon. "I'm not even sure where to start." She took a look around again, and then began, "Take this castle for instance, we don't have many of them in our time, most are gone now. People live on their own, either in homes or in apartments, which I guess is kind of like here, but on a larger scale? I mean modern apartments have a couple of bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom. God I'm going to miss indoor plumbing."

"You have a room just to bathe in?"

Catherine laughed. "We do. We like things convenient in the future. We do our own cooking or go out to restaurants, we drive cars, which are motorized carriages, we have things called airplanes that allow us to travel great distances over land and water in a matter of hours. Everything is very fast paced. We carry phones which allow us

to physically talk to people who are thousands of miles away, but mostly we watch videos and play games on them. We can see and know everything that is going on in the entire world, or near enough with just a tap of a button.”

He raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement playing at his lips. "Aye, that does sound like a world far different from here. Was this in American?"

Catherine smiled. "I am an American, our country is the United States of America, but from what Mae has told me, we're currently in the mid-1600s?"

"Aye, thereabouts," he replied.

"Well, it seems my country hasn't even begun yet. People are there, it's been discovered, but they are merely just getting established. In a hundred or so years from now there will be a war with England and my countrymen will win, which will establish us a country of our own."

"Your country beats England?" A wide grin spread over his face. "I'm glad to hear someone does." He chuckled. "I recall you saying you were a scholar?"

"Yes. I study history. I came to Scotland because your culture is fascinating to me and there is so much rich history here. I attended the University of Edinburgh." Catherine paused and her eyes widened. "The college was built in the late 1500s, do you know it?"

Eamon shook his head. "I know Edinburgh, but the only college there is Tounis College."

"I know that name... Oh, yes, that is what it was first called, and then the English king... James VI changed the name to King James' College in 1617, I think that's right."

“T’will never be King James’ College.” Eamon smirked. “No true Scotsman would call it that.”

Catherine had to grin. The animosity between the Scots and English was renowned. “Well, it will soon change its name again to the University of Edinburgh and the name will stick.”

“And they will allow women to study there?” Eamon asked.

“Do you think woman shouldn’t be allowed to study there?” Catherine asked, her tone was a clear warning that he’d better watch his step.

Eamon smiled widely. “I’ve no doubt woman are fully capable of learning anything they put their mind to, lass, I am just aware that currently Tounis College is a place for young men to take on scholarly pursuits.”

“Well, that is true. It’s not until 1869 that the first group of women will be allowed into their hallowed halls. Sophia Louisa Jex-Blake is one of the reasons I wanted to come to Edinburgh in the first place. And to think, she’s not even been born yet.” Catherine shook her head in wonder.

“What is it about her that drew you?” Eamon asked as he ate.

Catherine set down her fork as she thought about it. “She’s an amazing woman. Well educated for a woman of her time, a rebel in a way, which speaks to my American spirit.” Catherine grinned. “She went to college in England, despite her family’s wishes, and worked in mathematics, but her father wouldn’t allow her to accept a salary for her work. She traveled to my country after the civil war for more schooling and then returned to Great Britain where she campaigned to be allowed to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh and won. It didn’t end well though, sadly. A certain group of men decided to harass her and the other women who she’d recruited

to join her in her scholarly pursuits to the point the University ended up removing them and withdrawing their degrees.”

“Why? I donnae understand,” Eamon replied, his brow furrowed. “Couldnae they do the work?”

“Oh, they could, and very well too, but egos were involved. So the women left and went to study elsewhere in Europe and earned their degrees. Sophia eventually became a doctor and established the London School of Medicine for Woman.”

“And do you wish to become a doctor as well? Is that what you were studying?”

“No, not at all. I was a history major. I love studying about the past and I have a passion for sharing things that have long been forgotten and helping others become fascinated in it as well.”

“I can see how passionate you are about it, your eyes brightened when you were speaking about this Sophia woman.” Eamon smiled.

Catherine blushed and looked down at her plate. “Enough about me. Tell me about your life here in this time. I know a lot about history, but to actually be here now, well, I’d like to know what you think of your life here.”

Eamon chuckled. “I suppose from what you’ve said that our life must seem a struggle to you. We cannae travel great distances in hours, it does take many days even just to reach Edinburgh. To be able to travel to other countries would take a long time indeed, so we donnae travel very often. Not that we feel the need to. Everything we need we have here. The clan is nae just a family, lass, we are a community. We are proud of our country, our family, our traditions. We may live a simple life in comparison to the life you came from, but we are hardworking and are bonded to one another.”

“I have noticed that, Eamon. Even just being here for a couple of days, I am amazed at how everyone works together.” She couldn't help but admire the strength in his words, the pride he held for his way of life.

“Donnae they do the same in your time?”

“Not really, no. I mean people are generally proud of their countries, American's especially, but it does seem as though most people are more concerned with getting themselves ahead rather than working for the good of the community.”

“Aye, we have those that do the same in our time, but they are few and far between.” Eamon nodded.

Catherine finished eating and then sighed. “I just can't believe I'm actually here. I mean it seems like I'm in the middle of a dream and I'll wake up any moment and be back in my apartment at the university. It's very surreal. I mean how does this even happen?”

Eamon's eyes held a hint of mischief as he leaned forward, his voice lowering. “You see, lass, tis magic. Fae magic.”

Catherine chuckled softly, amusement in her tone. "Yes, as you have said before and now Mae said the same, she mentioned Dub Sith? She told me he is a Fae. but honestly, it sounds like something out of a child's tale."

He chuckled in response, a hearty sound that warmed her. "Aye, I suppose it does. It tis nae often the wee folk show themselves to us, but Dub Sith made a promise to our ancestor, and it seems he is determined to see it through.”

“A promise?”

“Aye, though now is nae the time to go into what that promise was, for I donnae believe you are quite ready to believe it, so I will save that for another time. What I will tell you is that Dub Sith is very powerful, and he assisted my ancestor in battle. A pact was made and now Dub Sith is doing what he can to restore Clan Donald.”

Catherine arched a brow. “And somehow I’m involved?”

“Aye, lass, that you are.”

“And you’ll tell me at some later time when I am ready to believe?” she said skeptically.

Eamon chuckled. “That I will, lass. Come, let us finish our meal before I fall asleep in my stew.”

Catherine giggled. “We can’t have that.”

“Nae we cannae. I must get some rest before I set off on my next patrol.”

They quickly finished their meal and carried their plates to the kitchen.

“This has been nice, thank you for sharing a meal with me.” Eamon said, gazing into her eyes, a smile on his lips.

She returned his gaze, her voice sincere. "Thank you, Eamon. You've made this... transition much easier."

They exchanged a lingering look before Eamon turned to leave. Catherine watched him go, his figure receding down the hallway toward the staircase, and then she sighed softly.

Later that evening she took supper with Mae in Mae's bedchamber, an idea that Mae had as to not overwhelm Catherine by having supper in the dining hall with everyone. Catherine felt it was a good idea as well and enjoyed the quiet company of Mae and Niall, hearing all the stories of Mae's life from back home. Her story made Catherine feel less alone.

Heading back to her bedchamber that evening, Catherine's mind was awash with thoughts and emotions. She sat down on the edge of the bed to think. As she undressed the layers of clothing, she couldn't help but feel a strange sense of connection to the past. Almost as if she actually belonged here.

As she put on the nightgown, Catherine's thoughts returned to Eamon, his warm smile, and the way his Scottish brogue rolled off his tongue. It was an odd feeling, this attachment she was forming to a man from a time so distant from her own.

Catherine lay down, her gaze fixed on the stone ceiling as the flickering light from the tallow candle she'd lit when she'd arrived back in her room danced across the stone walls. There was also a fire in the hearth that warmed the room nicely. Sleep didn't come easily, her mind churning with questions about the mysterious Dub Sith and the possibility of being trapped in this time. Yet, as the night deepened and the castle settled into its quiet rhythm, Catherine felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, she could find her place here, and the bonds she was forming would lead her to answers and, perhaps, a way back to her own time. But, she wondered, would she want to go if there was a way back? She wasn't actually sure of the answer to that at the moment.

Days melted into one another as Catherine adjusted to her new life within the fortress walls of Fort Donald. Each morning, she would rise with the sun and set about finding something new to learn.

Her days became a whirlwind of activity. She assisted Mira in the kitchens, learning

the art of preparing meals and what went into each one. She spent a day with Bridie learning how she and her daughters sewed every dress by hand, how to stitch the intricate designs into the bodices, and how they were able to make such beautiful attire out of the bolts of cloth. Catherine had read about these things, but it was quite different getting firsthand experience in doing them.

She'd also watched the guards doing their training, helped in the stables caring for the horses and pulled weeds in the garden. Anything to keep busy. It seemed there was always something to do, and she was never bored. She barely ever had time to feel melancholy or miss home.

Her evenings too were somewhat busy as she joined Mae, Niall, and Eamon in the dining hall for supper. There were often festivities in the evenings, music and dancing, story-telling of battles won and lost. She met so many new people it was hard to keep them all straight, but it was enjoyable, and she often went to bed exhausted from everything that had gone on that day.

One morning, sitting by her chamber window, Catherine pondered her situation. The Donalds' generosity had saved her from a life of uncertainty and peril in this time period where anything could have happened to her had Eamon and his men not stumbled upon her in that field. Her heart swelled with gratitude for the Donalds. She was now doing something that scholars the world over had probably dreamed of. Getting to live in a time long past and experiencing things firsthand.

Catherine's journey had taken her from a university campus in modern times to the heart of 17th-century Scotland. Though uncertainty still loomed over her, she wasn't alone. She had forged bonds with the people here, and as the days turned into weeks, she realized that perhaps her place wasn't in the modern world, but here, helping to create the history of this amazing place.

Three weeks after arriving here, Catherine found herself navigating the labyrinthine

corridors that wound their way through Fort Donald. She knew them almost by heart now, she'd traversed them so often over the last several weeks. It was a familiarity that brought comfort to her and made her feel as though she belonged here.

As she reached Mae's door, Catherine hesitated for a moment before giving a gentle knock. She had a favor to ask, but she didn't know if she should be bothering Mae about it. Still, she wasn't going to accomplish anything if she didn't at least speak to her. The door opened and Mae smiled.

"Catherine, hey, I wasn't expecting you this morning, come in."

Catherine stepped through the entrance into the front room of Mae and Niall's rooms. Theirs had a receiving room and a bedroom, unlike Catherine's smaller room that was just a single bedchamber.

"Thanks, I've been thinking."

"What about? I hope you're not trying to find your way back to our time. I mean Jen and I both have looked, but there's really no way back there, and really, now that we've been here a while, we wouldn't want to go anyway and I'm pretty sure you won't want to either—" Mae rambled.

"It's not that. I mean yeah, if there is a way home, I'd like to find it, but that's not what I've been thinking about."

"Oh, okay, so what is it?"

"You know I was at the university, studying history, right?"

Mae nodded. "Of course."

“Well, I’d like to keep up my studies, so I wondered if there was pen and paper somewhere?”

Mae smiled. “Oh, yeah, that’s an easy one. Though, you’re probably going have to get used to it. No ball-point pens here, just quills and inkpots. But we’ve plenty of parchment.” She walked over to the desk under the window. “Here, you can take these.” She opened a drawer for Catherine.

Catherine looked in the drawer and saw several quills and a couple of inkpots, as well as parchment paper. She lifted them out reverently, as if she were touching prized things of the past when in her current reality, they were normal and not relics to be treasured.

Niall stepped out of the bedchamber. “You know where you should take her?” he said, grinning at Mae.

Catherine looked between him and Mae, who suddenly nodded and gave him a grin. “You’re right. She’ll love it.”

“Go on then.” Niall laughed.

"Come with me. I wanna show ya something," Mae said, excitement in her voice as she headed for the door.

Catherine's heart quickened as she followed Mae out of her room and down the corridor, then up the stairs to the highest floor. Mae paused in front of two wooden doors and then flung them open. She and Mae then stepped into an expansive room that revealed itself to be a library, a treasure trove of knowledge and history. The air within was musty, yet carried the scent of well-preserved parchment and leather-bound tomes. Sunlight filtered through small windows, casting intricate patterns on the floor and illuminating the rows upon rows of rolled parchments and books that

lined the shelves.

The sheer volume of knowledge contained within these walls was staggering, and Catherine's excitement was palpable as she scanned the book titles and felt the weight of history in her hands. Mae's eyes twinkled with amusement as she watched Catherine's enthusiasm unfold.

“This is amazing, how did I not know this was here?” she asked in wonder.

“Well, I didn’t think to show it to you. Not many of us have a reason to come in here very often. Hope you can read Latin and Gaelic, because a lot of this is, unfortunately, in those languages.”

Latin had been one of the languages Catherine had studied in high school since she’d known she’d wanted to study history. Gaelic she’d only started learning after coming to the university, but she’d picked up a lot of it pretty easily. She was fluent in several languages in fact.

“That’s not going to be a problem.” She smiled brightly. “Can I read any of these? Can I take notes and study them?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not. Cam’s not going to mind.” Mae smiled. “I’m going to go grab some breakfast with Niall before he has to go to training. I’ll see you later, okay?”

Catherine nodded, but her mind was already busy scanning the texts to find one she wanted to start with. “Yeah, bye.”

Mae giggled. “Have fun.”

Ten minutes later, seated at one of the desks that stood amidst the sea of books,

Catherine felt a thrill of anticipation. She opened one of the volumes she'd chosen to start with before her, its pages brittle yet brimming with wisdom from ages past. As she began to read, the quill in her hand scratched against the parchment as she meticulously translated passages that piqued her interest.

The tome she was currently transcribing passages from was on the history of the area surrounding Fort Donald. Reading about some of the bygone battles had her mind turning to Eamon and his visage floated through her mind. He was rarely far from her thoughts these days, but reading about his ancestors and some of the things they'd been through had her thinking more about him and she couldn't help but be awed by how strong they were as a family.

As Catherine continued writing, she added her own thoughts and commentary on the passages, relating them to the current occupants of the Fort, mainly to the one Highlander who'd captured her attention. She'd even sketched a small portrait of Eamon into the margin of her paper, from memory. The likeness was pretty good she thought as she looked it over. It had been a while since she'd done any sketching, and doing it now with a quill and ink and having it come out properly made her feel good.

Lost in her thoughts, Catherine hardly noticed the passage of time as the sun began its descent, casting a golden hue over the library. She was too taken with her studies to even consider stopping for the day. She had an insatiable appetite for learning and these tomes were the best meal she'd had to satiate her appetite in a very long time.

CHAPTER 7

Catherine walked into the dining hall a few evening later. The banquet tables were laden with sumptuous food, a feast that seemed to stretch the length of the hall. Platters of seafood from the Sea of Hebrides had been brought in for this special occasion. Crabs, clams, and mussels mingled with the freshest catch from the nearby loch. Catherine had learned that the chief, Cam MacDonald had sent some of his men to barter with some fishermen on the coast to bring the best they could find to welcome her to Fort Donald. It was nice gesture, and she was touched by it.

Aside from the seafood there was also roasted game hen and a medley of colorful vegetables gracing the platters, accompanied by hearty meat pies as well as haggis. The scent of spices mingled with the smoky aroma of roasted meats, created an intoxicating symphony of flavors. There was also plenty of whisky, ale, and mead wines to partake of.

In the corner of the hall, the quartet of musicians plucked the strings of their instruments, their melody weaving through the air like a gentle breeze. The music added a touch of magic to the ambiance, as laughter and lively conversations filled the spaces of the room.

Cam MacDonald, his presence exuding a quiet intensity, sat next to his wife, Jennifer at the head table. Her connection with Cam was evident in the subtle glances they exchanged and the secret smiles between them. Catherine had been introduced to them both upon her arrival, but she'd not spent much time in their company as they were both very busy. Cam with being the head of the family and Jen with training the guard and anyone else who wanted to learn in the martial arts.

As the feast continued and laughter echoed off the stone walls, Catherine's senses were overwhelmed by the richness of the experience. The blend of flavors, the melodies of the music, and the camaraderie of the clan members all painted a picture of life in this era and she marveled at it. To be a part of it was an experience she'd never forget. And as the night wore on, she found herself swept away by the magic of the moment as she became a part of the Donald Clan's history.

The conversation flowed easily as everyone exchanged stories and enjoyed the variety of foods spread before them. The seafood's delicate taste, the richness of the meat pies, and the earthy goodness of the haggis were all revelations to Catherine's palate. The only thing missing in her mind, was Eamon. He'd been sent out on a mission, and she couldn't help but wonder if he'd be back in time to enjoy this evening with her.

"Back our time, we had nothing quite like this," Catherine admitted, savoring a bite of roasted game hen.

Mae nodded, taking a sip of her mead wine. "Yeah, it's a different world here, to be sure."

Catherine's gaze traveled over to the musicians. "They're very good. You didn't tell me that Niall played the harp."

"He's got very nimble fingers, doesn't he?" Mae grinned, taking a bite of her crab.

"I'll take your word for that," Catherine said, giggling.

"So where is Eamon this evening? I can't believe he's missing your welcome feast. He's the one who told Cam he should send some men to barter with the fishermen on the coast. Do you know how rare it is for us to be able to do that?" Mae shook her head.

“This was Eamon’s idea?” Catherine asked in surprise.

Mae nodded, her eyes twinkling. “Yes, which is why it’s strange he’s not here for it.”

“When he left a couple of days ago, he said he’d be back for the feast, but maybe he got caught up in something?”

“Possibly. There has been some trouble lately, since before you arrived that I know the men have been dealing with.”

“It’s not dangerous, is it? This trouble?”

“It can be. Depends on what those thugs have been up to. Hopefully, it’s just something easily taken care of that has delayed them.”

“I hope that’s the case,” Catherine agreed, but she couldn’t help but worry.

An hour later, there was a ruckus in the hallway and a moment later, in walked Eamon, his presence commanding everyone’s attention. A cheer went up from everyone upon seeing them, mugs of whisky and ale raised in salute to the men who’d returned.

Catherine's heart quickened at the sight of him, her gaze fixed on his face and vibrant green eyes. She watched as he acknowledged the cheers with an assured nod.

Beside her, Mae said, "Hey look who's back from the wilds."

Catherine's eyes followed Eamon as he strode deeper into the room, heading for the head table and to Cam.

Catherine's gaze remained fixed on Eamon as he engaged in conversation with the

Chief, his manner confident. She couldn't hear what was said, but she watched as their interaction played out, a silent observer of their world. It was obvious that Eamon was giving a report on his patrols.

As the conversation concluded, Eamon moved to a nearby table, filling his plate with hearty fare and pouring himself a mug of ale. Catherine couldn't help but notice the ease with which he carried himself, the way his rugged features seemed to come alive in the flickering torchlight as he made his way toward her.

Eamon's smile widened as he reached her. "Mind if I join you, lass?"

"I'd like that," she said as he settled beside her on the bench. The clatter of plates and the hum of conversation surrounded them.

"Welcome back, Eamon, now if the two of you will excuse me, I'm going to go track down my husband," Mae said, getting up from the table with a grin.

Catherine and Eamon both watched her go and then turned back to each other. "How was the patrol?" Catherine asked.

"Eh, just the usual troublemakers," Eamon replied, his voice a rich baritone that resonated through her. "Malcolm MacDonald being a pain in the backside."

"He's a MacDonald? Is he part of the clan?"

"Used to be," Eamon said. He explained that Malcolm wasn't happy when Cam was chosen to lead the clan over him.

"I see."

"Ever since, Malcolm has been a thorn in Cam's side, and aye, he's been a pain for all

of us for quite some time, even before he left," Eamon explained, his eyes holding a mixture of frustration and determination. "He's a snake, that one, always scheming."

Catherine leaned in, her brow furrowing. "What has he done?"

Eamon detailed Malcolm's attempts to undermine Cam's leadership before he took himself off, the tension palpable in every word. Catherine found herself drawn into the tale, captivated by the layers of intrigue and conflict of the story.

Catherine had never imagined and it was possibly more dangerous living here in this time period than she had thought. Her curiosity about the situation burned brighter with every word that flowed from Eamon's lips. She leaned in closer, as if drawn by an invisible force, captivated by the tale that he was weaving.

"But why have you all been searching for Malcolm?" she pressed, her gaze locked with Eamon's. "Has he made some recent threat?"

Eamon met her gaze. "Nae, lass, not a recent one," he said, his voice a deep rumble that sent a thrill through her. "Though, there's fear that he's not done with his schemes, as we've had word that he's returned to the area, perhaps with mercenaries or bandits by his side."

Catherine's mind raced, trying to comprehend the gravity of the situation. "Could it all be rumors, though?"

Eamon's expression grew serious. "Nay, lass. Aine has foretold of his return. Given the treacherous acts he committed before, we cannae afford to dismiss the warning."

"Who is Aine and what do you mean she foretold of his return? She can see the future?" Catherine questioned.

“Aye, lass. Aine is one of the Fae. She lives on the small islands in Loch Ballygrant. She had divinity abilities and has been a tremendous help to Clan Donald.”

Catherine blinked at him as he spoke so casually of another Fae person. “You mean there’s another Fae who could help me get home?”

Eamon’s face fell and he looked down at his plate. “Do you wish to leave already?”

Taken aback by his question and the devastated expression on his face, Catherine back tracked. “No, not really. At least not right now, but is it possible?”

He shook his head. “Nae, lass, tis not. She doesn’t have that kind of power. Her skills are in divination and herbology. She’s a healer.”

"I see," Catherine said, a strange feeling of relief filling her. She wasn't ready to go home, not yet, and the longer she stayed here, the more she didn't want to leave. Her question had actually been more out of curiosity than anything else. "It's just so different from what I know. In my world the Fae are mythical, at least that is what the majority of people believe."

Eamon's gaze softened, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "Aye, I can imagine it's a lot to take in. Our ways and those of the Fae are likely strange to you."

Catherine's heart skipped a beat at his words, her cheeks warming under his gaze. "I... I'm still trying to grasp it all."

Eamon's tone grew gentler. "You'll find your way, lass. I'll be here to help you." His hand grazed hers and she felt a heat ignite inside of her.

After the festivities, Eamon walked Catherine to her bedchamber. Catherine's heart raced within her chest as she felt Eamon's hand brush against hers. She stole a glance

at him, her breath catching as their eyes met. There was something about the way he looked at her with warmth that made her pulse quicken. It was an intense look that set her skin on fire.

Catherine found herself drawn into Eamon's presence, her senses heightened by his proximity, and she couldn't help but to link her hand with his. His gaze found hers once more, this time even more heated. She felt her heart flutter at the look he was giving her. His fingers wrapped around hers more securely and she didn't want him to ever let go.

As they reached the door to her bedchamber, time seemed to stand still for a moment. He continued to hold her hand as they stood there watching each other. Catherine wanted to invite him in, but knew it was too soon. If she were back home, she wouldn't think twice but doing something like that here and now... it might get her into trouble she couldn't handle. Holding his hand was going to have to do for now.

"Good night, lass," Eamon said softly, his voice a husky murmur that sent shivers down her spine. "I've found joy in your company since your arrival. I am glad Dub Sith has brought you to us."

Catherine's heart swelled with happiness and a touch of uncertainty. Did he mean himself or everyone? Did he feel the same as she did? She wasn't sure. "I am too," she admitted, her voice barely more than a whisper, hoping he meant himself and not everyone there. Feeling brave, she continued, "Having you to talk to, to share this strange journey with... it's been thrilling."

As if guided by an invisible force, Eamon leaned in, his lips brushing against hers in a tender but hesitant kiss.

Time seemed to stand still as their lips met, a gentle and lingering connection that spoke volumes. Catherine leaned forward more and pressed her lips more firmly to

his, enjoying the moment and the way her skin seemed to flame at his touch. And then, just as quickly as it had begun, the kiss ended, leaving Catherine breathless and her heart pounding.

Eamon stepped back, his eyes still locked with hers. "Rest well, Catherine," he said softly, his voice a soothing balm to her racing heart as he let her hand go.

With a final lingering look, he turned and walked away, his footsteps on the stone floor fading into the distance. Catherine stood there, her heart a whirlwind of emotions, her bedchamber door a threshold between the reality she had known and the uncharted territory that lay ahead.

CHAPTER 8

The next day, Catherine was wandering through the bustling courtyard of the fort, watching everyone going about their tasks for the day. She was near the gates, looking out over the hill, which was a patchwork of green and gold beneath the bright spring sky.

Coming up the hill, her eyes caught sight of a man who seemed a stranger to her. He rode his horse with a purpose through the gates and into the courtyard, his dark blond hair and beard contrasting against his fair skin. From where she stood, she could see his pale blue eyes held a distant quality, and his posture exuded an air of confidence that set him apart.

Catherine's curiosity piqued as she observed him. There was something undeniably handsome about him, his presence carrying an aura of distinction that set him apart from the rugged men of the fort. He seemed important, polished.

As her gaze lingered, their eyes briefly met, and Catherine felt a flush creep up her cheeks for being caught staring. Yet, his gaze turned away from her almost dismissively, as though she wasn't worthy of his precious time. It was a bit unnerving to be dismissed in such a way.

Just then, Sally passed by carrying a basket of freshly harvested vegetables. Catherine halted her with a question, "Sally, who is that man over there? The one who just entered the courtyard. I don't believe I've seen him before."

Sally followed Catherine's gaze and frowned. "That tis Sir Kellan Campbell. He

comes and goes as he pleases, dispatched by the Laird to collect the clan's taxes."

"He's a Campbell?" Catherine queried, her interest growing. "Wait, so Clan MacDonald has to pay the Campbells taxes? Why?"

Sally nodded. "Aye, he's a Campbell and tis because the Campbells own this land. Given to them by the king," she sneered. "That one," her eyes flashed to Sir Kellan, "claims he's here to keep an eye upon us. He's a snobbish one, he is. Best stay clear of him, Miss."

With that, Sally continued on her way, leaving Catherine to contemplate the warning. However, rather than heed it, Catherine found herself drawn by the enigma of Sir Kellan. Her scholarly curiosity and her fascination with the Campbells, drove her steps toward the stables. She recalled reading about the war between the Campbells and the Donalds and how the king had attempted to destroy the resilient Donalds, but had been unable to fully eradicate them, thankfully. Still he'd taken their land and bequeathed it to the Campbells who were loyal to him. The thought of the Donalds then being made to pay for the pleasure of maintaining their home here at Fort Donald, a place they'd previously owned for centuries, was appalling, but at least they were alive.

Catherine hesitated. Here was a chance to engage with someone from another clan, a rival to the Donalds, to gather firsthand knowledge that no history book could provide. All she had was the account told by the Donalds in those tomes from the library, which she thought might just be a bit biased. Not that she thought whoever had written the accounting on the Donalds' behalf was lying, but it was possible they'd embellished the truth. Catherine thought perhaps she could find out more about the other side of the event from this man.

She knew from the book she'd found that the Campbells were a powerful and expansive clan, who cast a long shadow over the landscape. Their connections and

influence were vast, and they were known for their ambitious pursuits, which often encroached upon others' territories.

Intermarriages, she recalled, had at times occurred between the two clans, though rather than quelling the tension, these unions often ignited further animosity. The Campbells accused the MacDonalds of luring their women away, using it as one more reason to fuel their long-standing feud.

In the clash of perspectives, at least according to the writings in the text, the Campbells viewed the MacDonalds as uncultured and Fae-linked, tainting their reputation with a connection to the mystical realm. Clan Donald, however, saw the Campbells as cunning opportunists, manipulating court proceedings to wrest lands from their rightful owners by virtue of being loyal to the English king.

The Campbells' dominance over the island was unmistakable, leaving the Donalds, few as they were, with a stark choice: to pledge allegiance to the Campbells and face heavy taxes and tributes, or leave Scotland altogether, something Clan Donald was too proud to do. These pressures, Catherine understood, had driven a wedge between the two clans, breeding open hostility.

As Catherine approached the stables, the echoes of these historical tensions resonated in her mind. The chance to meet Sir Kellan Campbell, even briefly, had ignited a yearning to understand these complexities on a personal level. The clash between the Campbells and the MacDonalds was more than just history; it was a living, breathing enigma that she was determined to unravel.

"What do you want, lass?" Sir Kellan said startling her from behind as she stood in the stable's doorway. His demeanor was cold and aloof as he stared at her.

Catherine's heart raced as Sir Kellan's voice suddenly broke the silence, his words carrying a touch of disdain that sent a shiver down her spine. Her voice quivered

slightly as she replied, "I apologize, I was simply... lost in thought."

Kellan's lips curved into a half-smile that seemed to dance on the edge of mischief. "Ah, a lass lost in thought amidst the hay and the horses. Quite the picture." Suddenly Kellan smiled a slightly wicked, but attractive smile as he said, "And one with that odd accent too, very interesting."

"Odd accent?" Catherine questioned, unsure of how to address the issue of her own lineage.

"Aye, the same as Lady Mae and Lady Jennifer. Are you from the same area as they?"

Catherine gave a slight nod. "I am."

"And are you here visiting?" he asked.

"I have come to stay with Mae for a while," Catherine kept her answer vague because she didn't know how much this Sir Kellan knew about her, Mae and Jen."

"I suppose I should introduce myself then, I am Sir Kellan Campbell, at your service."

"Lady Catherine Braddock." She nodded as regally as she could, trying to keep a straight face at calling herself that.

"A pleasure to meet you," he said, giving her another wicked smile.

"And what about you, Sir Kellan? Do you often spend your time, lurking in stables?"

His smile broadened, revealing a glint of amusement in his pale blue eyes. "Oh, I

have my moments of lurking in stables, but today seemed like a good day for a bit of eavesdropping."

She straightened her posture, unwilling to back down. "Eavesdropping? And just what were you eavesdropping on, may I ask?"

Kellan's expression turned contemplative, his gaze studying her with a new intensity. "One never knows what one might learn with a little eavesdropping, lass."

Catherine's brow furrowed. "You know listening at keyholes you might hear something derogatory about yourself, I would not recommend it, Sir Kellan."

Sir Kellan's gaze assessed her with amusement. "Especially here at Fort Donald, I would imagine."

"I have been told that the Campbells and the Donalds have a long history of shall we say animosity, don't they?" she asked.

A faint smile touched Sir Kellan's lips, a glint of something beneath his reserved demeanor. "Indeed, a history as old as the land itself. But history is often woven with tales and biases, wouldn't you say?"

"Perhaps," Catherine acknowledged. "Will you be staying with us long?"

"I couldnae say, lass, though I've a mind to stay much longer than I intended after meeting you." The wicked grin was back on his face.

"Then I am sure I will see you around the castle. Have a good day, Sir Kellan." Catherine nodded and walked away, her back straight as she felt his eyes on her.

Over the next two days, Catherine found herself encountering Sir Kellan more

frequently. It was almost as if he had made it his mission to seek her out whenever she wandered into public territory.

Their interactions were marked with playful banter and heated debates, and Catherine discovered that she was both amused and exasperated by Kellan's persistent skepticism of anything mystical, not that she shared the fact she had firsthand experience of the Fae with them bringing her here, nor the fact that she barely believed in them herself. He had a way of challenging her views, especially when it came to the dynamics between the Campbells and the Donalds. Despite his occasional infuriating attitude, there was an undeniable spark between them that kept her engaged in their conversations.

On the third afternoon, Kellan's voice rang out as she was strolling by the shores of the loch, the water's gentle waves creating a soothing soundtrack to their verbal sparring. "You know, lass, for someone who's new to Scotland, you seem awfully comfortable here."

Catherine turned to face him, her eyes narrowing. "Well, Sir Kellan, one must adapt to survive. Besides, it is either acclimate or wallow in misery and what kind of life would that be?"

He smirked, his expression taunting. "Ah, survival, is it? Is that all that keeps you here in Scotland? Or is there another reason?"

Catherine raised her chin defiantly. "I'm not sure what you're implying, Sir Kellan, however, my being here has nothing to do with survival. I am here to learn and grow as a scholar. If you are implying that I am here for anything other than that, then you don't know me very well at all."

"And what is it you've learned?" he asked, but his tone was one of disbelief, as though he didn't think a woman could be a scholar or learned.

Catherine's nose flared at his insinuation. "I would have to say from both my studies and my observations, that like the Donalds, I do not see King James, nor the Campbells as the saviors of Islay nor Scotland. In fact I find their greed and need for power rather disgusting."

Sir Kellan's gaze was full of amusement. As though he thought she was joking. "You've got spirit, I'll give you that. Not many would dare say such a thing to a Campbell."

Catherine huffed, feeling as though he'd been mocking her. "And you've got a penchant for stirring the pot, Sir Kellan," she shot back.

He chuckled, the sound low and melodic. "Aye, well, what's life without a bit of a stir now and then?"

Catherine couldn't decide what to make of Sir Kellan. He was attractive, physically, but his attitude and tone left much to be desired. She couldn't decide if she even liked him or not. She liked debating with him, that was for sure, but beyond that, she didn't think she could even consider him a friend. Not really, even though he seemed to be friendly with Mae and Niall. Mae said he'd even given them a wedding gift, which, considering he was a Campbell, was unexpected.

At the end of the day, Catherine had to question what his motives were concerning her and why he was even here. Was it that he was spying upon the Donalds and using her as an excuse to stay? That was what most of the Donalds claimed. Or was there some other reason he was sticking around. Either way, Catherine was determined to figure it out.

That evening, Catherine went about seeking out Eamon. The atmosphere was alive with the hustle and bustle of the clan, the courtyard brimming with activity as people went about their daily tasks. Eamon's presence was like a beacon in this lively scene,

his tall figure standing out among the others. He was finally back from patrol again and she was glad to see him. Catherine's heart fluttered as she approached him, a warm smile gracing his lips.

"There you are, lass. I looked for you when I arrived back, though I feared you had retired and I would not have a chance to see you," he greeted her with a charm that sent a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

"I apologize for not being here when you returned, I meant to be. I've made a new acquaintance, and I fear I was caught up in a debate with them," Catherine replied.

Eamon's grin widened, his gaze curious as he took her hand in his. "Ah, and who might have stolen your attention from me?"

"It was Sir Kellan Campbell." The change in Eamon's expression was subtle but immediate. A shadow passed over his features, and his voice held an edge when he spoke. "Sir Kellan? Best you stay away from him, lass."

Catherine was taken aback by Eamon's strong reaction. She didn't like feeling as though he was giving her an ultimatum and telling her who she could and couldn't speak to. She pulled her hand from his. "Stay away? Eamon, I understand he's a Campbell, and the Donalds and Campbells are rivals, but from speaking with him, I find him interesting, if a bit snobbish and somewhat rude and high-handed. Still, that doesn't give you the right to tell me who to speak to or not to speak to."

"You dinnae know the truth of him. Sir Kellan's nae a good man. He's a Campbell. He's here to watch us for his own clan's interests, to gather taxes, and some say, to seduce our women."

Catherine's brows arched. Eamon sounded almost jealous, but his tone held a bit of fury in it. "Seduce our women? That seems a bit sexist. You don't own the women of

this clan, Eamon. We aren't property."

Eamon's jaw ticked. "Lass, you know not of what I speak, please trust that I have your best interest in mind when I say this. Kellan Campbell is a man with ulterior motives, and he'll use his charm to get what he wants. Stay away from him." With that, Eamon walked away.

Catherine stood there in a state of shock. How had that conversation gone so wrong?

CHAPTER 9

The morning light filtered softly through the small window of Catherine's bed chamber, gently nudging her awake from her slumber. As her eyes fluttered open, she found herself enveloped in a sense of calm. Her feet met the cold stone floor, sending a slight shiver through her body. She approached the wash basin, the water refreshing as she splashed it onto her face, dispelling the remnants of sleep.

Dressing herself, Catherine marveled at how accustomed she was becoming to these unfamiliar garments, and she was becoming quite the expert at putting them on. Today's gown was a new one that Bridie had delivered to her. It was a nice shade of blue and had dark blue embroidery along the neckline and trim of the skirt. Catherine liked the way it fit her perfectly the way only something custom-made could.

After dressing, she descended down the stairs and headed to the dining room where she fixed herself a bowl of porridge with honey, her new favorite breakfast, and listened to the conversations flowing around her. She missed Mae's company, and that of Eamon's if she was honest, but she wasn't going to seek him out after last night's conversation. It was too fresh in her mind.

Stepping outside once she finished her breakfast, the crisp air greeted her, and she inhaled deeply, feeling alive in a way she hadn't before. The fort's courtyard was alive with movement, as everyone got started on their morning tasks. For the past week, Catherine had taken to going on morning walks, leaving the fort and going down to the small village and to the shore of the loch. It was quite beautiful here, and she enjoyed the calmness and peacefulness of the scenery.

As she walked, Catherine's thoughts turned to her life as a history scholar. The opportunity to live within history rather than simply studying it was a dream come true. The books she once pored over now paled in comparison to the lived experience she was accumulating. It was as though every moment spent in this time had become a chapter in a story she was writing with her very presence. Not that she neglected her studies. She still poured over the texts in the library at Fort Donald and she was learning a great deal about their history and the history between the Donalds and the Campbells as well.

The deeper she dove into all of it, the more drawn to this place and time she was. It had captured her heart, her interest in a way nothing else ever had. She felt as though by being here, with these people, with the Donalds, that she was becoming a part of this history. A part of their history and it was an amazing feeling.

Later that day, after spending some time in the library, Catherine headed for the dining hall. Her eyes scanned the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone familiar. Her thoughts drifted momentarily to Eamon and his intense gaze, a memory that never failed to send a thrill through her. But she was still upset with him from the night before.

As she settled at a corner table, a plate of meat and cheese before her, Eamon's warnings about Sir Kellan echoed in her mind, a voice of caution that warred with her own curiosity. It wasn't as though Catherine hadn't come across men like Sir Kellan before. He was handsome and knew it. He used his wit like a weapon and his charm, when he chose to use it, was undeniable. But, were this the twenty-first century, she'd look at him and know he wasn't boyfriend material. She figured the same applied here. What had her angry though was that Eamon thought so little of her that he'd demanded she stay away from him. Like she was a child with no opinions or thoughts of her own.

With a sigh, Catherine took an angry bite of her cheese. Despite her growing feelings

for Eamon, she was still pissed off at him and she wasn't ready to forgive him, let alone search him out and spend any time with him.

After eating, Catherine decided to clear her head and attempt to let go of her anger by taking a walk in the courtyard, only to find Sir Kellan seated at a table near the guards office reading a book. Feeling a bit defiant, and the urge to debate, she approached him.

"Good day, Sir Kellan."

Kellan's pale blue eyes lifted from the pages, a smile quirking at his lips. "Ah, Lady Catherine, what brings you out to the courtyard this fine afternoon?"

Catherine's own lips curved into a small smile as she replied, "Perhaps the same reason that brought you here, a desire for solitude and a good book."

He chuckled. "Have a seat, though, I fear you may have forgotten something."

Catherine's brow furrowed. "Have I?"

"Two things actually." He smirked.

"And what might those be, Sir Kellan?"

"First, if you're looking for solitude, then you're doing it incorrectly, and second, you've not brought a book with you." He grinned wickedly.

Catherine laughed. "You're right, of course. Perhaps I should have said you had the right idea and that is what I should be doing, but here we are." She smiled. "What are you reading, if you don't mind me asking."

As she settled beside him, he turned the book to her, revealing the cover of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure. "Have you read it?" he asked.

"I have actually. Not one of my favorites, but I recall somewhat enjoying it."

"And what did you like about it? Did you nae find it crude?"

"What, because Angelo tries to blackmail Isabella into fornicating with him, despite the fact she was a nun?" Catherine arched a brow.

"I suppose that too could be found crude, though I meant Claudio impregnating Juliet before even marrying her. Was the entire tale nae too crass for a lady of your station?"

"Sir Kellan, what I found enjoyable was Angelo getting his comeuppance, from the Duke, and from Mariana who he betrayed continuously. As to it being crass, and me being too delicate, well, I think you mistake me for some vapid young miss." Catherine hoped she had the right vernacular. She was fairly certain vapid had been a word used to describe boring young women of this era.

Sir Kellan chuckled. "Touché, Lady Catherine. Vapid is nae a word I would use to describe you. Bonnie perhaps." He gave her a wicked grin.

Catherine gave him a wary look. She couldn't tell if he was mocking her again, or if he thought he was being charming. "And what pray-tell do you like about this particular play, Sir Kellan?" she asked.

"I find I relate more to the Duke of the tale. Disguising himself in order to observe how Angelo runs the city in his absence. Observing people when they donnae know they are being watched, is rather enticing, would you nae agree?" he smirked.

“If you believe that people don’t know that is what you are doing, you’re sadly mistaken, Sir Kellan.” Catherine’s lips twitched, but she didn’t let herself smile.

He chuckled and then pushed himself up from the table. “As delightful as this conversation has been, my dear Lady Catherine, I’m afraid duty calls. I’ve letters to write. Have a pleasant afternoon.”

Catherine watched after him. Thinking back over their conversation, she realized she’d enjoyed the challenges he presented. He was obviously well-educated, was witty and charming, but he reminded her a bit too much of a player. She was just a distraction for him, she was sure. She strangely enjoyed his company and conversing with him, but that was all it was.

Eamon on the other hand... Eamon stirred things in her that she’d never felt before. His touch set her skin ablaze, his kiss was like a spark to tinder. He was strong, rugged, and handsome. And while he may not have the obvious education that Sir Kellan had, he was smart as well. He was a problem solver. The way his mind worked intrigued her. He also had a way of pissing her off without realizing it, but it was sort of cute the way he’d seemed jealous when she’d mentioned talking to Sir Kellan.

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the courtyard as Catherine paced near the stone well, lost in her thoughts. She hadn’t seen Eamon since he’d walked away from her the night before and she missed him. She still didn’t like the fact that he’d basically demanded she stay away from Sir Kellan, but she thought maybe she’d been too harsh on him. She wanted a chance to talk to him again without tempers flaring, so she was anxiously awaiting his return.

He’d gone out on patrol again, per usual, but he and his crew, which was how she thought of them, were due to return this evening, which was why she was out here in the courtyard wearing a path in the ground by the stone wall. She was on her

hundredth pass when the rhythmic clatter of hooves drew her attention, and her heart skipped a beat as she spun around to see Eamon riding into view. The presence of him and his men commanded the attention of everyone around. Dismounting with the fluid grace of a seasoned Highlander, he strode toward her, a warm smile gracing his lips.

"Good eve, lass," he greeted, his voice a deep rumble that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Hi, Eamon," Catherine replied, trying to steady her breath as his intense blue gaze locked onto hers.

He leaned against the stone wall, his arms folded, and his ankles crossed, his eyes still on her. "How's your day been, then?"

Catherine offered a smile, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her skirt. "Oh, much like any other day. Exploring the surroundings, reading in the library."

"Ah, I wish I could have joined you in your exploring or even in the library. But alas, I'm kept busy with my duties," Eamon said with a hint of regret.

"I know you are, but I wish you could as well. I know you and your men are trying to keep everyone here safe, don't think I don't appreciate that." She laid a hand on his forearm. He chuckled, a low and melodic sound. "We do our best. So tell me what else you did today. Did you read anything interesting?"

Catherine wasn't one to play games, and she wasn't going to hide the fact that she conversed with Sir Kellan today. "I did. I was reading up on the Donald history, and then this afternoon, I had a conversation with Sir Kellan about one of Shakespeare's works. It was entertaining."

Eamon's expression fell and his arms unfolded as he pushed off the wall. "I see."

Catherine sensed a tension in the air, and the lack of Eamon's usual playfulness made her uneasy. "Eamon, are you alright?"

He sighed, his gaze flickering away briefly before returning to her. "Aye, lass. I'm fine. Just...busy thoughts, is all."

"Okay?"

Eamon excused himself with a polite nod. "Excuse me, lass. I have somethings to take care of." With that he strode away.

She bit her lip, a heavy feeling settling in her chest as she realized the effect her interactions with Sir Kellan were having on Eamon. She hadn't meant to make him more jealous. She wasn't trying to push him away. She had only meant to share her day and not hide anything from him. She had to wonder if he thought otherwise. Did he think she was hinting that she was interested in Sir Kellan? Catherine frowned and slowly walked toward the door to return inside. Maybe things would be better tomorrow.

The library was bathed in the soft glow of candlelight, creating an intimate atmosphere that seemed to envelop Catherine as she sat at one of the wooden tables, engrossed in a thick tome of historical accounts. She hadn't been able to sleep, so she'd dressed and come to the library. Now she sat, her fingers tracing the faded ink on the pages, and she lost herself in the tales of centuries past.

The creak of the library door drew her attention, and her heart skipped a beat as Sir Kellan strolled in. She felt a moment of trepidation at his presence. Had he known she was here? Was he following her?

"Good evening, Lady Catherine," Kellan greeted, his voice a rich melody.

"Good evening, Sir Kellan," she replied, hesitantly.

He took a few steps closer, his gaze fixed on her. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything too engrossing, lass."

Catherine smiled. "Not at all. I was simply lost in another time."

Kellan's lips curved into a charming smile, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "Ah, lost in the past while surrounded by its relics. I find you quite enchanting, I must say."

As he moved closer, he extended a hand, presenting her with a beautifully bound book. "I thought you might like to borrow a book from me. A collection of poets from my own humble library."

The thought was a sweet one, but Catherine once again questioned his motives. Still it was a nice gesture. "Thank you, Sir Kellan. I appreciate you thinking of me. I'll be sure to return it to you before you leave."

His brow furrowed. "It tis meant to be a gift, Lady Catherine."

"Oh," Catherine was startled by that. He had said borrow, and now she felt off balance. "Well, thank you, then. I'll treasure it."

His expression cleared and he smiled. "I hope you do."

Catherine gave him an uneasy smile and then looked around. "I suppose I should be getting back to my room. Um... good night, Sir Kellan."

“Good night, Lady Catherine. I hope you sleep well,” he remarked, his eyes still on her.

Catherine gave the table where she’d been working a final glance, picked up her notes and her candle, then headed for the door. She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled before going to her room.

She had to wonder what in the wide world of sports was going on here? Had that really just happened? Was Sir Kellan actually interested in her? Was she wrong about him being a player? Or was he playing a different game altogether? Either way, Catherine was determined to find out.

CHAPTER 10

Catherine walked with a brisk steps to the stables. Sally had knocked on her door early that morning to let her know that Eamon had requested her presence at the stables.

The morning sun cast a golden glow over the fort as Eamon stood by the stables, a sturdy horse at the ready. Catherine approached with a mix of anticipation and excitement, her heart dancing within her chest to see him.

"Good morrow, lass," Eamon greeted with a warm smile, his eyes lighting up as they met hers. "I see Sally delivered my message. Care to join me on a ride?"

"Good morning, Eamon, and yes, I'd like that," Catherine replied, her voice laced with a touch of nervousness.

"Would you like to ride with me, or would you prefer your own horse?" he questioned.

"I'll ride with you. It has been a long time since I've ridden on my own. I'm not sure I remember how, actually."

"We'll have to rectify that soon, but for now, come, I'll help you up." He mounted and then extended a hand, helping her mount as well with a gentle strength that sent a shiver down her body. As she settled onto the back of the horse behind him, her hands instinctively found their place on his waist, her fingers curling around the fabric of his shirt.

"Ready, lass?" Eamon asked, his voice a deep rumble that resonated through her.

"Yes, I'm ready," she replied.

With a gentle kick of his heels, the horse started moving, and they were off. The wind whispered through Catherine's hair as they rode, the rhythmic beat of the hooves creating a soothing melody beneath her. She held onto Eamon, her fingers tightening unconsciously around him.

They passed through the village and headed for the shores of the loch, which stretched out before them, the water sparkling under the sunlight. Eamon guided the horse along a well-trodden path, their bodies swaying in unison with the horse's movements. Catherine stole glances at Eamon's profile, his strong features bathed in the soft light, and she felt a rush of emotions that she couldn't quite put into words.

"Eamon," she began, her voice carried away by the wind.

"Aye, lass?" he replied, his gaze meeting hers briefly before returning to the path ahead.

"Thank you for this. I am very much enjoying it," she admitted.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his eyes holding a warmth that reached the depths of her soul. "I'm glad you're enjoy it, Catherine. 'Tis my pleasure to share such moments with you."

The air seemed charged with an unspoken connection as they continued their ride, their bodies moving as one with the horse's powerful stride. Catherine couldn't deny the flutter of her heart, the intoxicating mix of the breathtaking scenery and Eamon's presence. As they rode next to the beautiful water of the loch, Catherine realized that this moment would be etched in her memory forever, a cherished piece of her time

with him.

Eamon's horse came to a gentle stop. "I thought perhaps we could picnic here?" he said, turning in the saddle to look at her, a question in his eyes.

Catherine grinned. "A breakfast picnic? That sounds amazing."

"Put your foot in the stirrup and I'll help you dismount." He smiled, taking her hand and holding tight as she did as he said.

Eamon didn't let her hand go as she reached the ground, he simply held it as he too dismounted and then stood close to her, her hand pressed between his and his chest. He gazed into her eyes for a moment, as if lost in his thoughts and then he smiled and took a step back. He let go of her hand, but then set his on the small of her back. Eamon's touch was firm yet tender, and as he guided her toward a grassy knoll overlooking the loch, and her heart danced with excitement.

"Wait here while I gather everything." He smiled and headed back to his horse, pulling things from the saddlebags she hadn't even realized contained what they needed.

Returning to her side, he spread out a tartan blanket with practiced ease, the colorful fabric contrasting beautifully against the lush green surroundings. Catherine watched in silence, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotions. Eamon untied the bundle he'd taken from his saddle bag and laid out a simple but hearty feast. Catherine couldn't help but feel a flutter of anticipation.

The scent of freshly baked bread and the earthy aroma of cheeses filled the air as Eamon arranged the food before them. The loch sparkled like a sapphire gem, a breathtaking backdrop to this breakfast feast.

Catherine settled onto the blanket, her heart racing as Eamon sat across from her. The sunlight played upon his features, highlighting the rugged angles of his face and the kindness in his eyes. As he poured them both a cup of water, Catherine wondered if perhaps Eamon held a hidden layer of romance beneath his handsome and rugged exterior.

"Eamon, this is... truly wonderful," she said softly, her gaze meeting his as she offered a sincere smile.

His eyes held a warmth that sent a thrill through her as he gazed at her. "I'm pleased you like it, Catherine. 'Tis a simple pleasure, this meal, but the company and beauty of the land makes it extraordinary."

Catherine felt her heart swell at his words. "I would have to agree." She smiled at him.

As they ate, Catherine glanced over at him. "Eamon," she said with a smile, "would you tell me about the Treaty of Ardtornish?" She had been reading about it, but she wasn't sure exactly what had happened.

"'Tis nae a pleasant story to tell, lass, but I will do my best. How much do you know of English history?" he asked.

Catherine explained she knew about the War of the Roses and that during the time of the treaty Edward IV of the house of York was the king. "He wanted to conquer Scotland, correct?"

"Aye, he did, but there were those who wished Henry VI was returned to the throne. You see my ancestors were very powerful at the time. Clan Donald's Chief, John MacDonald of Islay, the Lord of the Isles, ruled much of the lands north of the sea. He signed a pact with Edward IV and the Earl of Douglas to help Edward IV conquer

Scotland, and upon winning the war, they would be officially given land to rule over for the king of England. Unfortunately, it didnae go well and John was tried for treason, and because we sided against James III, our Scottish king of the time, we lost our land and our leader. It twas a dark time for the Donalds.”

“So how did the Campbells end up with the land?” Catherine asked.

“James III was an ineffective king who held a grudge against the MacDonalds, because of his father who had a vendetta against us as well for a slight by my ancestor. When John MacDonald signed that treaty, it was the end of Clan Donald holdings. He was forced to forfeit the title of Lord of the Isles and our land, which James then annexed to the crown and subsequently set the Campbells up as lairds and tax collectors for the last hundred and fifty so years.”

“But what did John MacDonald hope to accomplish with that treaty? Wasn’t he essentially signing away Clan Donald’s right to the land over to the king of England anyway? Why take it out of Scottish hands?” “Aye, in a way, but it twas to get it out of James III’s hands. John would effectively become the ruler, and we’d merely have paid taxes to England, but they would nae have a say in how we were governed.”

“And you’ve had a number of rulers since then, right?”

“Aye, we have. There was peace for a time, as there is an uneasy peace now between us and the Campbells, as we pay our taxes and work our land. There are nae many of the Donalds left, as over the years we’ve been set upon by various clans wishing to put an end to us, but we Donalds are resilient if anything.”

“Scottish and English history is so fascinating to me. My country in comparison is fairly young.” Catherine laughed. “It’s so strange to think it’s not even been established yet.”

“Tell me about your country, where is it?”

Catherine reached for a piece of bread, her fingers brushing against Eamon's for the briefest of moments. It was a touch that held a promise of something deeper, a connection that transcended time itself. As they shared food and stories of their countries, their laughter and conversation carried on the breeze, becoming a part of the landscape that surrounded them.

In the midst of their picnic, Catherine realized that she was falling for Eamon harder than she would ever have imagined and that perhaps she was exactly where she was meant to be.

The sun began its descent as Catherine and Eamon rode back to the fort, they had spent the entire day away from the fort and now, their shared journey on horseback was filled with a quiet contentment. The wind whispered through the tall grasses, carrying with it a sense of serenity that seemed to envelop them both. The bond between them had grown, woven from shared stories and moments like this, when words weren't necessary to understand each other.

As they reached the fort's entrance, they dismounted the horse, but their serene interlude was shattered by the presence of Sir Kellan. He approached with an air of calculated charm, his eyes glinting as they settled on Catherine. Eamon's expression tightened, a ripple of tension running through his powerful frame.

"Ah, Lady Catherine," Sir Kellan purred, "a pleasure to see you've return. I hope your ride was to your liking."

Catherine exchanged a glance with Eamon, sensing the underlying tension. "It was lovely, thank you," she replied, trying to figure out what game Sir Kellan was playing.

Eamon's gaze didn't waver as he spoke, his words crisp and direct. "Catherine was in safe hands, Sir Kellan. No need for concern."

Sir Kellan's lips curled into a knowing smile. "Of course, Eamon. I'm certain you provided the utmost care."

The exchange crackled with an unspoken challenge, a battle of wills that hung heavy in the air. Catherine's heart sank as the realization dawned upon her that she was the cause of this tension, the catalyst for a rivalry that seemed to grow stronger with each passing encounter.

"Aye, I did. More than you could ever offer," Eamon said as he stepped closer to Kellan.

"I could provide more for her than brute strength and brawn," Kellan said as he came chest to chest with Eamon.

"Is that a challenge?" Eamon growled in anger.

"Enough!" Catherine's voice cut through the tension like a blade as she stepped between the two men. She turned to both men, her eyes a mixture of frustration and pleading. "I'm not some prize to be won. I'm here to learn, to experience, and to forge connections. And I won't be a pawn in your rivalry."

Eamon's gaze softened, his concern evident as he looked at her. "Catherine, I didnae mean?—"

"Save it," she interrupted, her voice gentler now. "Both of you, just go your separate ways. I won't have my time here overshadowed by petty arguments. I appreciate both of your company, but this needs to stop."

For a moment, the fort seemed to hold its breath. Sir Kellan's features shifted. He seemed surprised at her words, but then something that almost resembled contrition crossed his expression.

Catherine turned to look at Eamon. His eyes were full of regret and understanding. He gave her a nod and without a word walked away.

Kellan too retreated. Left alone with her thoughts, Catherine sighed, hoping that her words would put an end to the rivalry that threatened to overshadow her time in this extraordinary place. As the evening settled around her, she found solace in the quiet and the knowledge that, at least for now, the echoes of their argument were fading into the distance.

The fort's heavy wooden doors swung open, allowing Catherine to step inside. She walked through the corridors, her footsteps echoing softly on the stone floor, lost in her thoughts. Arriving at Mae's door, Catherine knocked gently and was welcomed inside.

“Catherine, I feel like I haven’t seen you in days, what’s up?”

“I’ve got a problem,” Catherine shared.

“Come sit and tell me what’s going on.” Mae directed her to the sitting area in her front room.

Catherine told her of her growing feelings for Eamon and of Sir Kellan’s attention and her mistrust of his motives. She explained that despite not intending to make him jealous, she could tell that Eamon actually was and that Sir Kellan was making things worse by playing at being a suitor and that she didn’t know what to do about any of it.

“Okay, well I’ve known the both of them for a little while now and despite your impressions of him, Sir Kellan isn’t really all that bad.”

“I don’t think he’s bad... more a posh frat boy, you know? Snobby, but smart, witty, and charming when he wants to be, but more than likely isn’t looking for anything serious.”

“I can see that. Still, I don’t think he’d pursue you if his intentions weren’t at least a little serious. He never struck me as someone who would go for a girl who wasn’t as interested in him.” Mae looked at her. “Are you?”

“I’m—” Catherine stopped and re-evaluated their various conversations. “I enjoy talking to him, debating with him. He’s smart and he challenges me, and he is attractive, but...”

“He’s not Eamon.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Then you need to figure out what you’re going to do about them. And please remember, Sir Kellan has no idea where we’re really from, and he can’t know. If he finds out, then the Campbells will know and that wouldn’t be good for Clan Donald. They have the king’s ear and trust me when I say, calling attention to us wouldn’t do us or the clan any favors,” Mae cautioned her.

“I hadn’t even considered that. I suppose they’d think we were some kind of witches or something, wouldn’t they?”

“More than likely.”

“All the more reason to resolve this and soon,” Catherine replied. “Thanks, Mae.”

“Anytime.”

CHAPTER 11

As Catherine left Mae's room, her mind was focused on the path ahead. She wandered through the dimly lit corridors of the castle, her steps echoing softly against the stone floors. It was in this quiet space that she encountered Sally, coming out of her bedchamber, a pail of ashes in her hand.

Sally's warm greeting brought a small smile to Catherine's lips. "Good evening, Catherine," she said.

Catherine paused, her fatigue evident in her eyes, and she spoke softly, "Sally, do you think it's possible for me to have supper brought to my room tonight? I'm really tired and just don't think I can face the dining hall tonight."

"Aye, of course. I'll be quick as can be with a meal for you, but perhaps, if you are feeling a bit piqued, you might like some warm water brought up for a bath? Lady Mae and Lady Jennifer do enjoy one when they are feeling out of sorts. Is it the same for you?"

Catherine felt a swell of gratitude for the woman. "Thank you, Sally. Actually, a warm bath sounds heavenly right now."

"I thought it might. I'll have the tub brought to your room and bring up that meal as soon as I can as well."

In the solitude of her room, Catherine prepared herself for the evening ahead. She changed into the dressing gown, which was like a robe and settled herself near the

window, gazing out at the moonlit landscape beyond. The castle seemed to hold both mystery and familiarity, a place where the past intertwined with her present.

Catherine pulled out her journal from the table by the bed and opened it. The flickering candlelight cast a warm glow across the pages as her quill scratched the parchment. She was engrossed in capturing the intricate details of the life she had found herself thrust into – the simplicity of 17th century Scotland that contrasted so starkly with the world she had left behind.

With each stroke of her quill, she recorded the observations she had made – the sound of horses' hooves against the muddy courtyard, the scent of the hearth's embers that permeated the air, and the gentle hum of voices speaking in the Scottish dialect.

As Catherine wrote, a sense of wonder and fascination colored her thoughts. The tapestries that adorned the walls, depicting scenes of the Scottish countryside, held stories of their own. The authenticity of the furnishings, the rough-hewn textures of the wooden beams overhead – every aspect of this world seemed to breathe with its own history.

A gentle breeze rustled the curtains, and Catherine paused in her writing to rise from her seat. She approached the window, looking out at the loch that lay serenely in the distance. Moonlight danced on the water's surface, creating a pathway of shimmering silver.

In this moment of stillness, Catherine's mind drifted to her own time, to the modern world she had left behind. The reality of her situation still felt like a dream at times – a beautiful, complex dream, but one that she struggled to fully grasp. How could she truly be here, in a time she had only ever read about?

Her reflection was interrupted by the distant call of a night bird, a haunting sound that seemed to echo through the night sky. She closed her eyes briefly, allowing herself to

be enveloped by the ancient landscape outside her window. The breeze carried with it the scent of the earth, a reminder that this was a tangible reality, not a mere fantasy.

With a sigh, Catherine returned to her writing. Her journal lay open, waiting for her to continue the tale she was weaving – a tale of a woman caught between two worlds, navigating the complexities of the heart and the mysteries of time.

As the evening deepened, casting the room in a cozy ambiance, Catherine's solitude was interrupted by a soft, rhythmic knock at her chamber door. She rose from her seat with a curious smile and opened the door to reveal two maids, their faces aglow in the flickering candlelight. Between them, they maneuvered the tub into the room. With care, they positioned it near the hearth, ensuring it caught the warmth of the crackling fire.

A moment later, several more maids entered with pails of water that had been warmed and they filled the tub. Catherine watched the steam curling up from the tub of water as it rose in level.

Just as the tub was nearing its brim, Sally entered, bearing a tray laden with sustenance. The aroma of stew, freshly baked bread, and other treats wafted through the air, making Catherine's stomach growl with anticipation. The tray also held a bottle of whisky and a glass for which Catherine was grateful for. The whisky was just what she needed to calm her nerves.

Sally set the tray down on the table. "There you are, Catherine, is there anything else I can get you?"

"Thank you, Sally, I'll be fine now."

"Then I'll send the staff back up in two hours to fetch the tub. Have a good night," Sally said with a wave before departing.

Catherine settled at the table, her appetite heightened by the day's activities. She savored each bite, as she relaxed at the table, eating. Her eyes occasionally drifted to the tub, which was a vessel of warmth and indulgence awaiting her.

As the last morsel of bread disappeared from her plate, she pushed her plate away and rose. With a contented sigh, she approached the tub, the warm water inviting her to sink into its embrace.

Removing the dressing gown, she gently eased herself into the tub, the water enveloping her in a cocoon of comfort. The flickering firelight danced on the water's surface, creating a mesmerizing interplay of light and shadow. Catherine closed her eyes, allowing the warmth to seep into her bones, the cares of the day dissipating like morning mist.

In the heart of the night, when the moon's silvery glow painted patterns on the floor, Catherine stirred in her sleep. A vivid dream had stirred her senses, one that left her pulse racing and her body aching with sensations that felt all too real. The remnants of the dream clung to her mind like the tendrils of fog on a Highland moor.

In the dream, Eamon's intense gaze had captured her, and before she knew it, they were locked in a passionate embrace. The heat of his body against hers, the urgency in his touch, the unspoken words exchanged through their feverish kisses – it all felt achingly real. But as they indulged, Sir Kellan entered catching her with Eamon, then storming off.

It all felt so real to Catherine. She didn't have feelings for Sir Kellan, but she feared that he might have them for her and that was what the dream was telling her.

With a sigh, she shifted in her bed, the linens cool against her flushed skin. The moonlight filtering through the window cast shadows that danced on the walls as she lay there wondering what to do about Sir Kellan.

The next day dawned with a sense of unease for Catherine. The dreams she had experienced during the night had stirred something within her, leaving her distracted and preoccupied throughout the day. Her usual tasks felt like mere background noise to the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions that tugged at her consciousness.

As she moved about the fort, engaging in conversations and going through the motions, her mind kept circling back to those dreams of her and Eamon locked in a passionate embrace – dreams that had felt so real, so intense, that they left her body thrumming with a yearning she struggled to comprehend. It was as if the boundary between her subconscious desires and the waking world had blurred, leaving her in a state of perpetual distraction.

And she still didn't know what to do about Sir Kellan. All she knew was that she wanted to be with Eamon, whether it was proper or not. But did he feel the same?

CHAPTER 12

The arduous days of searching for Malcolm had seemed to take their toll on Eamon and his men. The relentless pursuit, the weather, which had turned rainy and windy and the constant battle against fatigue had seemed to leave them battered and weary. Catherine could see that their need for rest was undeniable, and finally, Cam relented and granted them a respite that allowed them to return closer to home after being gone more than a week.

Eamon's shoulders seemed to sag under the weight of responsibility. Catherine knew he had been relentless in his determination to apprehend Malcolm, but she could see the toll it had taken on him and his men. Some were coughing, others were pale with fever, and could barely stand. Catherine couldn't help but feel a deep worry for their well-being.

As Eamon neared, she could see the shadows under his eyes, the lines of fatigue etched into his face. Yet, he carried himself with a rugged determination, refusing to show any sign of weakness in front of her.

"Eamon, you and your men are in such a state. You need rest and care."

Eamon's lips curved into a wry smile, but his eyes held a weariness that betrayed his rugged exterior. "Aye, lass. We've been through worse."

Catherine's brows furrowed in frustration. "That doesn't mean you should neglect your health. It's not a sign of weakness to admit when you need help."

Eamon's gaze met hers. "Catherine, there's much to be done. The clan relies on us."

She placed a hand on his arm, her touch gentle yet firm. "And you can't help them if you're not well yourself. You need food, and rest before you catch pneumonia." She tugged on him trying to get him to go with her.

There was a moment of hesitation, a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes before he finally nodded and started moving with her. "Aye, you're right. I'm in your care, then."

With that, Catherine led him toward the castle, her heart swelling with affection.

Catherine got Eamon into his room and then waited as he changed into a long linen shirt and got beneath the bed linens. While she was outside his door, she'd asked Sally to bring up some stew for him as well as some cool water both for him to drink as well as for her to use to bring his fever down. She'd noticed while helping him up the stairs that his skin was warm to the touch.

Sally had done as she asked, returning with all of that as well as some herbs to alleviate his symptoms. She also built a fire in the hearth as it hadn't been done yet, and told Catherine to send for her if she needed anything else.

Catherine spent the next two days nursing him, getting his fever to break and making sure he rested and ate when necessary. She was busy wringing out the cloth when he woke up.

"Ye're truly committed to caring for me, aren't you?" Eamon said, his voice still raspy from illness.

Catherine turned around and smiled, her eyes softening with concern. "Of course, Eamon. I can't just stand by and watch you suffer."

He reached out and touched her hand, the simple gesture conveyed his gratitude as he held hers. "Thank you, Catherine. You've a kind heart."

However, their harmonious atmosphere shifted when a casual conversation took an unexpected turn. As Catherine poured him another cup of herbal tea, she said, "I'm glad you are appreciative of it. Some men are resistant of seeking help when they need it."

Eamon's brows knitted together, his tone defensive. "And what's wrong with that? A man should be able to take care of himself."

Catherine's expression turned incredulous. "But why suffer needlessly when help is available?"

"Because it's a matter of pride. We're men, Catherine. We're nae meant to be coddled like wee ones."

"You're being ridiculous, Eamon," Catherine said, her hands on her hips in frustration. She'd barely slept over the last two days trying to take care of him and her nerves were frayed to begin with.

Eamon stared at her mulishly. "I'd prefer to be alone if it means keeping my pride intact."

Catherine, hurt by his words and the way he dismissed her efforts, huffed and stormed out of the room, leaving Eamon to stew in his own stubbornness.

Alone in the hallway, Catherine felt hurt by his dismissal, and a simmering frustration that their connection had been marred by a difference in perspective. As she walked away, her steps heavy with unspoken thoughts, she couldn't help but wonder if her dreams of love in this unfamiliar time were destined to be dashed by the very realities

that separated them.

In the days that followed her disagreement with Eamon, Sir Kellan's attentions only grew more pronounced, despite Catherine trying to dissuade him from doing so. He courted Catherine with his eloquent words, read her books of poetry and gifted her small tokens of affection. Each gesture was carefully calculated to enchant her, she knew that, but she couldn't bring herself to stop him because she felt as though she and Eamon were through.

One afternoon, as they sat by the loch, Kellan's fingers brushed against hers as he handed her a delicate wildflower he had plucked from the meadow. His eyes, pale blue like the loch's waters, held an intensity that made Catherine wary.

"You're a lovely woman, Catherine," he murmured, gazing into her eyes.

Catherine stared at him wishing he was Eamon and feeling guilty for doing that when Eamon wanted nothing to do with her. Sir Kellan leaned in for a kiss. Catherine didn't move, but let it happen. It was sweet and innocent, yet she felt nothing like she did when Eamon kissed her.

As quickly as it began, Catherine pulled away, guilt coursing through her because she didn't feel for him what he apparently felt for her. "I... I should be going," she stammered, feeling flustered as she jumped to her feet.

Kellan chuckled, a hint of mischief in his eyes. "You've a way of always leaving me wanting more, lass."

Catherine managed a nervous smile, her mind a whirlwind of emotions. She excused herself, hurrying back to the castle with her heart pounding in her chest.

In the safety of her room, she sank onto her bed, burying her face in her hands. She

felt as though she'd betrayed Eamon, even though it seemed Eamon no longer wanted to have anything to do with her. He'd said his pride was more important than her. So why couldn't she enjoy Sir Kellan's advances? Those thoughts caused her to burst into tears that didn't subside until she eventually fell into a restless sleep.

As the days went on, Catherine found herself avoiding Kellan as much as Eamon—not that it was hard to avoid him when he was back out on patrol, but her mind was in a constant state of turmoil over the two of them.

Her heart and body longed for Eamon, but feeling that he'd rejected her, she wondered if she should open her heart to Sir Kellan. He at least had remained steadfast in his pursuit of her. Maybe she'd been wrong to think of him as a frat boy only looking for one thing? She just didn't know anymore.

CHAPTER 13

A week had passed since Eamon had recovered and gone back on patrol and Catherine had shared that kiss with Sir Kellan. He'd not approached her in all that time, neither of them had, but Sir Kellan at least smiled at her when they saw each other across the room. Eamon had just avoided her as much as she had avoided him.

So with a heavy heart, Catherine had decided maybe she needed to move on. With that in mind, she stopped avoiding Sir Kellan. She was seated with him at a table in the courtyard enjoying an afternoon meal of sliced meat, cheese and bread as they spoke of various poets, and she laughed at the story he was telling her of a time he'd spent in school.

Catherine hadn't been paying much attention to anyone around them, so she hadn't noticed Eamon approaching her until he was halfway to them. His laughter died in her throat and her face fell as their gazes met across the courtyard. Instead of continuing toward her, Eamon turned and walked away.

Catherine watched Eamon retreat, her heart aching at the hurt she had seen in his eyes. Had she been wrong? Had he not been pushing her away? Had she had hurt him by allowing Kellan's advances? The guilt she was now feeling gnawed at her conscience. She had never meant to cause him any pain. She needed to let him know that she had no feelings for Kellan and that she wanted to be with him.

Catherine's heart raced as she rushed after Eamon, determined to clear the air between them. Sir Kellan called after her, but she ignored him as her sole focus was on Eamon. She followed him into the great hall, her steps quickening to catch up.

However, before she could speak, Cam MacDonald, the leader of the clan, who had an air of urgency about him, intercepted Eamon as he moved swiftly past her.

"Eamon, we've just had word that bandits have robbed and razed one of the farms at the far edge of our territory in the north."

Catherine paused her steps at Cam's words. How was she supposed to confront Eamon now? She wanted to pull him aside and beg him to talk to her, to clear the air, but she also knew that his duty to the clan had to come first. It was for the good and safety of everyone that he did.

Eamon glanced at her, his brow furrowed before refocusing on Cam. "Do you want me and my men to investigate?"

"Aye. We must find out what has occurred and ensure no further threat is imminent. If this is Malcolm's doing, I want him brought in. I am hearing rumors from some of the men in our small village that he has been recruiting others to his cause and has already amassed a large group of like-minded individuals."

Eamon nodded. "Aye, very well. I'll gather my men and we'll leave immediately. I assure you, we will find out what happened."

Cam put a hand on his shoulder in support. "Good. Our people need to know that though we no longer own the land, we support them and will see to their safety."

Eamon's hand rested on the hilt of his sword; his stance resolute. "They'll see it. We'll show them that the Donalds are strong and united. And if this is Malcolm and his people's doing, we shall see them brought before the clan to face their wrongdoings."

Catherine's eyes moved between Cam and Eamon, her admiration for their commitment to the clan growing stronger. In this moment, the trivialities of her own

emotional turmoil faded into the background, replaced by a sense of unity with these people and their struggles.

As Cam finished outlining his orders, Eamon nodded in understanding, his jaw set with determination. With that, Eamon turned and strode out of the hall, without another look at her.

The next evening, The dining hall was filled with a tense energy as the clan gathered for supper. Catherine's gaze kept darting toward the entrance, her heart racing with anticipation for Eamon's return. The whole atmosphere in the hall seemed charged, as if everyone could sense that something was amiss.

Finally, after waiting more than a day, there was a commotion in the doorway to the dining hall, and Eamon entered, his men following behind him. Dirt-streaked and weary, they looked like they had been through a battle. Catherine's eyes locked onto Eamon, relief flooding her as she saw him safe, but her heart sank at the exhaustion etched on his face.

As Eamon approached the head table, Cam stood. "Eamon, what news do you bring?" His voice was full of grave concern.

"We rode out to the farm, it was indeed hit by these bandits, however, we arrived too late to help. We found no survivors and no witnesses to the attack. I'm afraid that if there were any alive, they've either been taken, or they were all killed. I should have asked before, who brought you the news of the attack?"

"Twas young Seamus MacDonald. His Da told him to run to the fort and get help. I'm saddened to know we were too late." Cam's fists clenched.

"He's but a wee lad, he ran the whole way to Fort Donald?" Eamon asked, looking appalled.

“Aye, he’s a strong one, and fast, which is probably why he was able to get away. We will avenge his parents deaths and see these bandits hanged,” Cam declared.

“That we will, Chief.” Eamon and his men nodded.

Cam's gaze returned to Eamon. "Get some rest, morning will come sooner than you think, and I want you and your men back out there. I'll send others to tend to Evander, Marta, and the others.”

“What are you going to do about Seamus?” Eamon asked.

“We’ll keep him here, he’s with his aunt Sally.”

Eamon nodded, his eyes finding Catherine's briefly before he turned to leave the hall.

The tension in the air seemed to hang even heavier as the clan resumed their supper, each member acutely aware of the threats that surrounded them and the duty that bound them together.

Catherine felt a pang in her heart at Eamon's avoidance to her. No doubt he was tired and wanted to rest, but she wished she could go to him. She wouldn’t but she really wanted to. She wanted to clear the air between them and make him realize that she cared for him, but it was going to have to wait. She had research to do.

After dinner, seated in the library, Catherine pored over her research notes. The flickering light of candles cast a warm glow on the wooden tabletop and the intricately woven tapestries adorning the walls.

With a furrowed brow, Catherine scanned through her notes from when she’d first arrived here. She’d written down everything she could recall about this time period that she’d read about before she’d been pulled to this time and place by Dub Sith.

Everything pertinent to Scotland, and specifically to Islay. There wasn't much about Islay specifically, but something was floating in the back of her mind that she thought might be helpful to their current situation.

She slowly read through each of her notes, and she almost missed it. The dates were off, at least the dates she'd recalled were off, but it seemed to fit. She closed her eyes and put herself back in that lecture hall where she'd first heard about the bandits that had terrorized all of northern Scotland above the Scottish seas. She couldn't recall the names, only that they'd cut a swath of destruction through Islay, leaving numerous dead as they ransacked farms and villages.

"It has to be them," she said, opening her eyes. She went back to the notes. She'd recalled that they'd been stopped by local authorities who had begun searching for them in various villages on Islay. She couldn't recall which village they were found in though. Still it was something and she needed to tell Eamon. She needed to help.

Early the next morning, before the sun even peeked over the horizon, Catherine got dressed and rushed down to the stables. She wanted to catch Eamon before he and his men set out. She needed to tell him what she recalled. When she reached the stables, several of the men were already saddling horses and preparing to ride. Catherine was frantic as she searched for Eamon in the stables.

"Lass, what are you doing here at this time of morning?"

Catherine spun around to see Eamon watching her with a look of consternation upon his face. "Thank God. I needed to talk to you."

"I'm sorry, lass, but I haven't time?—"

Catherine cut him off. "This is about the men you're searching for. I think I know where you'll find them."

Eamon's brow crinkled as he focused on her. "What do you mean? How do you know?"

Catherine held up her hands. "Hear me out."

He nodded. "I will listen, lass, but we need to be quick about it. The sun will be rising shortly, and we need to get started."

"Okay, so last year, well, my last year, not yours, I was taking a class on the age of enlightenment in Scotland, which refers to this century we're in now. There was a section of the class that was dedicated to particular periods during the century where there were uprisings in crime. I remembered reading about a group of bandits who were finally brought to justice after their capture at an Inn."

"I am afraid I don't understand, love, are you saying they've already been captured? By who?"

Shaking her head, Catherine replied, "No, not yet, but they will be. They'll be found at an Inn. They had rented rooms in that inn, and the guards had stopped there to rest and stumbled across them. At least that's what was written in the recounting of their capture."

"Do you know which inn it twas?"

Catherine pursed her lips. "No. Unfortunately. All I recall was it was definitely in Islay, but I don't know what town."

Eamon's gaze softened as he raised a hand to her cheek. "You've a keen mind, Catherine, and I am grateful that you remembered that much. Tis a grand idea to search the villages."

“You think so?”

“Aye, I do. The men and I will investigate the nearby villages and check every inn for anyone suspicious. We've been searching the wilderness thinking they wouldnae dare set foot into a town where they might be recognized. With your knowledge, we are a step closer to finding them and bringing them to justice. I'll go and speak with Cam about your idea once I inform my men that we'll be delayed.”

Catherine smiled. "I'm glad I could help, Eamon. I hope this leads to some answers."

Eamon stepped closer, his hand still cradling her cheek. "Thank you, lass. Your help does not go unnoticed. I appreciate it, and I know Cam will as well. We'll make a Donald out of you yet." He winked.

Catherine's cheeks flushed at his words, her heart fluttering in response. "I'm just doing what I can to contribute."

Eamon's gaze held hers for a lingering moment before he nodded, his attention shifting back to his horse. "I'll tell the men, and then meet with Cam. This could bring an end to the threats we've been facing.”

Catherine placed her hand over his and stared up into his face. “Be careful, won’t you?”

“Aye, lass.” Eamon stood there for another second and then withdrew his hand and started to stride off to speak to his men, but he paused and turned back toward her. “Catherine, would you be willing to come speak with Cam as well?” he asked.

A little thrill went through her that he was asking for her to be a part of this. “I’d be happy to. I want to help.”

Eamon nodded. "I'll meet you inside."

Catherine watched him go and then hurried back to the castle. She was going to meet with the chief and hopefully help the clan as well as Eamon capture these thugs.

CHAPTER 14

An hour later, Catherine found herself installed in the office of Cam MacDonald. Eamon and Cam had brought out an array of maps, their surfaces worn and marked with the lines of history. The sun was fully up now, so the light poured through the rectangular windows, giving the room light. .

Catherine leaned over the maps, her eyes tracing the intricate patterns, and the names of the villages and towns marked upon them. Eamon stood by her side, his presence both reassuring and captivating. Cam leaned against the desk, his gaze focused on the maps as well.

Eamon's finger traced a path along one of the maps, his voice rich and steady as he spoke. "We've had attacks spread across a wide area through this section of Islay, but there seems to be a common direction of movement. If we follow these patterns, we might be able to narrow down the potential locations of the inn."

Cam nodded in agreement, his expression thoughtful. "Aye, we've been trying to gather information from the villagers as well, but so far, nothing substantial."

Catherine studied the maps intently, her mind racing as she absorbed the information. "If we take into account the distances between the attacks and the possible routes the bandits might have taken, we might be able to identify the most likely areas where the inn could be."

Eamon's eyes flickered with appreciation, his admiration for her intellect evident. "You may have the right of it, Catherine, well done."

Cam straightened, a determined look in his eyes. "Let's mark the areas we've already searched and focus our efforts on the regions where the attacks are most concentrated. If this inn exists, we'll find it."

"You know, if we look at where they're attacking, it's almost a circle. I'm going to bet that their inn is somewhere in the center of it. I know it's not exactly a circle, but if you look at these points..." Catherine indicated six different attacks, "and use a ruler to measure from diagonal points... we might be more able to pinpoint the area the inn is located."

"You remind me of my wife," Cam smiled. "She's very strategic as well and this would make sense to her." Cam used a straight edge to make diagonal lines across the map, locating the center area.

Catherine's heart swelled at both Cam's and Eamon's words. "I'm glad I can help. Let's hope these efforts lead us to the answers we seek. You know, I need to thank you, Cam. You've taken me in and treated me like I'm one of you. Helping you find these men is the least that I can do."

Cam smiled at her. "You are one of us, lass. And while your help is not expected, it is welcomed. I appreciate it."

"As do I, lass," Eamon added. His eyes held a promise as well, a silent vow that they were in this together.

A short time later, Catherine excused herself from the office and went in search of food. She hadn't eaten breakfast, and it was well past lunch. She went into the kitchen and approached Mira who was elbow deep in dough.

"Good afternoon, Mira," Catherine said.

“Afternoon, lass. What can I help you with?”

Catherine gave her a sheepish look. “I missed breakfast and lunch. Is there anything to eat?”

“Oh there’s always something around here. Let me fix you up a platter.” She took her hands out of the dough and started to wipe them on her apron.

“No, no, you’re busy. I can get it if you tell me where?”

Mira directed her to the larder, and it didn’t take long for Catherine to fill a plate with a wedge of cheese, some meats and a chunk of bread. “Look in that pan,” Mira nodded toward a covered pan on the counter.

“What is it?” Catherine asked. She lifted the towel that was covering it and peered at it. “It smells buttery and kind of sweet.”

“Tis shortbread. Go on and take some for after you eat. You seem like you need some sweetness.” Mira smiled.

“You sure? I don’t want to take something that you were planning to serve later.”

“It’s fine. There’s plenty for everyone even if you take that whole pan.” Mira laughed.

Mira wasn’t wrong, her mouth was already watering at the thought of eating the shortbread. She really did need the sweetness. She cut off a generous chunk and then said, “Thank you, Mira. You’re a Godsend.”

A moment later she was seated in the corner of the dining hall eating. Just as she was finishing the last bite of the shortbread, a shadow loomed over her. Catherine turned

to see it was Sir Kellan. She wiped her mouth and said, “Hello, Sir Kellan. How has your day been?”

“Better now that I’ve finally found you. You ran off yesterday without even a word to me. I missed you.” He seemed to be almost pouting.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Sir Kellan sat down next to her, pushing his leg right up alongside hers, which was slightly unnerving. “Are you?” he murmured in barely above a whisper.

He gazed into her eyes and leaned in, close enough he nearly met her lips, but Catherine pulled back at the last moment. She wasn’t going to lead him on when she was interested in Eamon. She liked him and hoped they’d remain friends, but she couldn’t let him think that what he was doing was all right. She shifted toward the end of the bench away from him.

He seemed surprised and a little angry at that, but he didn’t say anything about it, just, “Where have you been?”

“Studying in the library. I was looking at maps of the area,” she replied, not wanting to lie, but also not wanting to tell him exactly what she’d been researching either since it involved her experiences in the twenty-first century, which he wasn’t supposed to know about.

“Were you looking for places to visit? I would be happy to travel with you. Perhaps show you my home?”

“That would be kind of you, but no, I was hoping to help Eamon and his men figure out where these bandits have been hiding.”

Sir Kellan scoffed. “How industrious of you.”

Catherine narrowed her eyes at him. “Thank you?” she said it more as a question because she was pretty sure he was being an asshole, but just incase he was serious, she didn’t want to be rude.

“I’m sure it was a wasted effort, but I suppose it made you feel as though you were helping.”

Catherine flushed. She bit back a retort. He didn’t need to know that she had been a help to Eamon and Cam. It didn’t matter. His opinion of her didn’t matter, but his reply did somewhat change her opinion of him and not in a good way. She gave him a tight smile. “You’re probably right. You know, I think I’m going to go lie down. I’ve a headache.” With that, she rose from the bench and walked off, heading up to her room. She didn’t even look back at Sir Kellan, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d gotten to her.

CHAPTER 15

The first light of dawn filtered through the window, gently rousing Catherine from her slumber. With a newfound resolve burning within her, she stretched beneath the soft covers, welcoming the embrace of a new day.

Throwing back the covers, Catherine rose from her bed. The air was crisp, carrying with it the promise of a fresh start. She made her way to the washbasin, the water's cool touch invigorating as it splashed against her skin.

After tending to her morning ablutions, Catherine got dressed in another of Bridie's gowns, this one a serviceable dark green gown with an apron. She took time to brush and then braid her hair. A glance in the mirror told her she was presentable enough, but really caught her eye was how much she liked her appearance. She fit in here in a way she'd never really fit in back home. She didn't even really miss home all that much. Sure she missed some of the conveniences, but overall, she almost felt free of the stress from them too.

Once she had her shoes on, Catherine headed up the stairs to the next floor and down the hall. She had discovered from Mae weeks earlier where Eamon's room was, quite by accident and it was there that she was heading. She'd come to a decision last night that she wanted to physically help in the search, and she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Catherine stopped in front of his door and knocked. Moments later, the door creaked open, revealing Eamon's rugged countenance. Surprise flickered across his features, followed by a warm smile that sent a rush of emotions coursing through Catherine's

veins.

"Lass, tis everything well with you?" he asked, seeing her standing there.

Catherine returned his smile, her own apprehension mixing with a newfound determination. "I am well, thank you. I wanted to see you before you and your men left, because I have a favor to ask."

Eamon's brow arched inquisitively. "Oh? And what might that be, lass?"

Catherine took a steadying breath before continuing. "I'd like to go with you to help search for these bandits."

Eamon's surprise was evident, his gaze locking onto hers. "Catherine, do you nae think it t'will be too dangerous?"

Catherine was determined to get her way. "I'm not some fragile woman, Eamon. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I'm not saying I wish to fight these bandits when we find them, I'll leave that to you and your men, but I want to be there to help find them and bring them to justice."

"You would have to ride on your own, I cannae fight with you on the back of my horse," he cautioned.

Catherine was prepared for that. "That's fine, I know it's been years since I've done it on my own, but I think I can pick it back up fairly easily. I've ridden with you a few times now and I've recalled the movements to lead the horse." A slow smile spread across Eamon's face, and he nodded approvingly. "Very well, lass. We shall leave straight after breaking our fast. I must admit, the idea of having you with us is a welcome one. But you must understand, if we face danger, you must listen to my directions without question."

Catherine's resolve remained firm as she met his gaze. "I understand, Eamon. I'll trust your judgment completely when it comes to the dangerous parts."

"Then give me a moment and we'll go down to the dining hall together," he replied with a smile.

After eating, Eamon walked with her to the armory. Catherine wasn't sure why they were going there until he picked up a small knife and handed it to her. "What is this for?" she questioned. "I'm not doing the fighting, Eamon."

"Perhaps not, lass, but I want you to have it in case things go awry. You need to be able to defend yourself should one o' these bandits capture you. Let me show you how to use it."

He adjusted the weapon in her hand and then moved to stand behind her, wrapping his arms around her and holding her wrist. Catherine couldn't help the thrill that went through her at having him pressed up against her back.

"Now, you aim for their gut with a thrust, like this," he said, drawing her wrist back and then stabbing forward. "If you cannae do that, shift the dirk in your hand like this," he adjust it so that she was holding it like Norman Bates in Psycho , "and bring it overhead and slash down at them."

Catherine felt laughter bubbling in her chest at the thought. "Okay, let me try it on my own and you tell me if I'm doing it right." She couldn't help the grin that had washed over her face. She returned the dirk to its original position and as Eamon stepped to the side to watch her, she lunged, thrusting the weapon at her imaginary foe. After doing that a few times, she switched it to Psycho mode and went for it.

"You've got the spirit, lass," Eamon chuckled.

Catherine laughed. "I can't say I ever thought I'd be holding a weapon like this and practicing to use it properly, but I'm glad you think I'm capable." Catherine dropped her hand with the weapon to her side, the blade pointed down.

Eamon moved forward and put a hand to her cheek. "You're a fast learner and I think you'll do well if you end up in a situation where you'll need to use it. Here, add this to your skirt."

It was a sheath that would fit the dirk and Catherine took it gratefully. She'd been wondering how she was supposed to carry it. "Thank you, Eamon."

Eamon's hand found hers, his grip gentle yet reassuring. "The pleasure was mine, Catherine. You've a spirit that's as fierce as any warrior's."

Catherine felt a newfound confidence take root within her. The dirk, now in its sheath on her waist might have been a symbol of protection, but it was also a testament to the unexpected journey she had been on since Dub Sith had brought her to this time and place— a journey of self-discovery, of courage, and dare she hope of love. She chanced a glance at Eamon who walked by her side. She really hoped that last one was true, because she was falling hard for the rugged Highlander.

CHAPTER 16

After leaving the armory, Catherine had returned to her room to pack a bag since they were going to be gone for a few days. Eamon had said he would have a horse ready for her and they would await her down at the stables. She was folding up her nightdress when there was a knock on the door.

Catherine crossed the room and opened the door to reveal Sally standing there with a warm grin as she stepped into the room, a bundle of items cradled in her arms.

"Good morning, Miss Catherine. I've brought you a few things for your journey."

Catherine's heart swelled with gratitude for Sally's thoughtfulness. "That's so sweet, what did you bring me?"

"I ken you didnae have a cloak and it does get a wee bit chilly, so I've brought you one, and I had Mira make up a bundle of food for you to bring as well, in case you get hungry on your journey."

"Thank you, Sally. You don't know how much I appreciate you and how kind you've been to me all these weeks. I honestly don't know what I would do without you now." Catherine smiled.

Sally's eyes sparkled with warmth and understanding. "It tis a pleasure, Catherine." She smiled again. "You be safe on your journey."

"I will, thanks again for this." Catherine hugged her.

It was still well before the noon hour as Catherine made her way down the stairs and out to the courtyard. She could see Eamon and his men gathered, horses ready as they prepared to leave. Eamon saw her approaching and moved to take the bag and bundle from her. "What tis all this?" he asked, lifting the bundle.

"Sally had Mira pack some food. Is there room for it in one of the saddle bags? Along with my bag as well?"

"Of course, you've your own saddle bags, I'll tuck these away in Goldy's bags. That's your horse's name." He led her over to a light tan horse with a reddish blonde mane. "She's pretty friendly and reliable, so you shouldnae have any trouble with her."

"I'm glad to hear that." Catherine smiled and held her hand out to the horse. "Hello, Goldy." She stroked the horse's nose.

"Let me help you to mount."

He put his hands on her waist and lifted as Catherine slid her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself up. Riding in a skirt was going to be different, but she'd actually slid her jeans on underneath the skirt, so that she would be better protected on the ride, not to mention stay warm. She arranged her skirts to cover as much as possible, but Eamon noticed the denim.

"Nae a bad idea, lass. It t'will get chilly on the ride in the evenings. Have you a cloak? I should have thought to ask."

"Sally was kind enough to provide me with one. It's in my bag."

"I'm glad to hear it. Let me speak to everyone and then we'll be on our way." He smiled and patted her leg, then turned and mounted his own horse.

Once he was seated, Eamon's voice cut through the air, firm and commanding. The murmurs among his men ceased as they turned their attention to their leader. Eamon's eyes swept over the group, his voice resonating with authority as he outlined their mission and the role each would play.

Catherine listened intently, not wanting to miss anything important. Not once did any of the men make her feel unwelcome, which was rather surprising, considering the era, but then they'd been learning fighting techniques from Jen, so she supposed they were used to unconventional women here at Fort Donald.

The journey ahead stretched out like a winding thread through the rugged hills and moors of the island. The riders moved in a determined line, their horses' hooves pounding a steady rhythm against the earth beneath them. The air was crisp with the scent of heather and damp earth, and the wind whispered secrets through the tall grasses that flanked the path.

As they rode, the landscape shifted around them, revealing dense woods. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, dappling the ground with patches of gold. The riders navigated through this natural labyrinth, their eyes sharp and senses attuned to the slightest changes in the environment.

Each small village they encountered bore its own distinct character, which fascinated Catherine. The thatched roofs and stone walls seemed to have been standing for centuries, weathered by time and history. The villagers watched with curious eyes as she and the guardsmen passed through the small village. Occasionally, one of the villagers would approach with some food or a greeting, which was always welcomed.

In these villages, Eamon and his men would gather information, asking questions and listening to the locals explain when they'd last seen anyone suspicious. When they stopped for meals, the villagers entertained them with snippets of folklore and stories of the area.

With each new encounter, Catherine found the island's history seemed to unveil itself in fragments to her. The rhythm of life here was slow and steady, steeped in tradition and shaped by the unpredictable dance of nature and she loved every second of it. This whole experience, being in this time and place was like a dream come true for her and she didn't want to ever wake up.

As they rode from village to village, Catherine couldn't help but marvel at the way Eamon navigated the social landscape. His ability to make everyone feel seen and valued was a testament to his leadership skills and his inherent kindness. Catherine found herself drawn to his warmth, finding solace in his presence even in the midst of the uncertainty that surrounded their mission.

One evening, as they set up camp, Eamon and Catherine found themselves engaged in a spirited exchange. The fire crackled nearby, casting dancing shadows on their faces as they sat on makeshift seats of fallen logs.

“And what would you do, lass, if you found yourself facing off against bandits in your own time?” Eamon asked.

Catherine laughed. “We don't have these kinds of bandits in my time.” She shook her head as she tried to figure out how to explain how things like this worked in her time.

“Your world is crime free then, is it?” He gave her a skeptical look.

“Not at all. Probably we have more crime than you do here and now, however, we have skilled police forces and law men that go after these criminals. But they don't have to do what we're doing, camping in the wilds every night, or searching every town. Do you remember me telling you about being able to speak to people thousands of miles away?”

“Aye, magic if you ask me.” Eamon nodded.

There was a murmur among the other men about that as well, which told Catherine they had heard from Jen or maybe Mae about them before too.

“Well, those same things can let police watch people from a distance. They can search using those and not even leave their office until they know for sure where the criminals are,” Catherine tried to explain in terms he and his men would understand, but she wasn’t sure she could. “And each village has their own police, so they don’t have to travel far to apprehend the bad guys.”

“And why would these bandits continue on their paths of crime if there are so many law officers there to capture them?” one of the men asked, sounding distrustful.

Catherine shrugged. “Some people still do bad things. They still steal and rob and kill others; sometimes just because they like doing those things, others because they’re jealous and want that thing for themselves, or because they’re poor and starving. It’s not perfect, but as far as policing goes, they try to be efficient and keep the public safe.”

“And what do they do with them once they are captured? Are they executed? Banished?”

“They’re put in jail,” Catherine said. “They go before a judge and if they are found guilty, they spend whatever amount of time they are sentenced to, in prison.”

“There’s your problem. If they were executed or banished, you might deter other bandits from murdering and stealing from people.”

“Yes well, for the most part, we don’t execute people much anymore. Not unless the crime is extremely heinous, like for a serial killer. Someone who murders a lot of people.” Catherine explained, but she wasn’t even sure how accurate that was when she was talking about the entire world, not just the US.

“So what would you do then, lass, if you came across a bandit like the one we are after? Call on these lawmen of yours?” Eamon asked, sounding curious. “You would nae fight them yourself?”

“That would depend. If I could safely get away and call for the police, then I’d do that. If I couldn’t, I definitely would fight with whatever weapon I had available,” Catherine answered. “I certainly wouldn’t hide and hope they left me alone.”

Eamon gave her a look of admiration. “You’ve got a warrior’s spirit, lass.”

His words warmed Catherine, and she felt herself blushing. “Thank you, Eamon.”

Shortly after that, they each bedded down in their bedrolls around the fire to stay warm and went to sleep while two of the men kept watch. Sometime during the nighttime hours, there would be a change of guard, but Catherine didn’t have to worry about that because she wasn’t in the rotation.

The next day, as they set off, Eamon explained that the town they were heading to was larger than the ones they’d visited before. Catherine was anxious to see what might be different about it. As they approached the town, she noticed the houses were a little bigger, and better kept than in some of the smaller villages they’d been to. There were more people on the roads as well, carts and horses traveling in the opposite direction, but they were all friendly.

Once they entered the town, Catherine couldn’t help but shift her curious gaze from one building to the next. This was a proper bustling town, and was every bit as thrilling to see as it was when she’d visited New York City as a girl.

Ahead she could just make out the Hound Inn, its timber-framed exterior weathered by time stood in the near center of town. The inn's wooden sign creaked softly in the breeze, depicting a fierce hound in mid-stride. Its windows glowed with warm light,

casting inviting shadows on the grass below. The scent of hearty stew wafted from within, mingling with the crisp evening air.

This was a place straight out of history, a portal to a bygone era in her mind, but she knew for everyone here, it was just normal. That didn't deter her amazement of it all. Every detail, from the thatched roofs to the flickering lanterns in the windows drew her soul. It was as if she belonged here in this time and place.

The inn's stables were a bustling hub of activity, with its constant flow of travelers seeking shelter and rest. Wooden beams creaked under the weight of thatch, creating a shelter for the weary horses that lined the stalls. The air was filled with the soothing scent of hay and the gentle sound of horses' contented munching.

Catherine dismounted her horse with a sense of excitement. The day's journey had been long, but the prospect of staying at this rustic inn added a touch of enchantment to her fatigue. She watched as Eamon expertly guided his horse into a stall, admiring the way he moved.

With the horses securely settled, Eamon turned to her with a reassuring smile. "We'll spend the night here," he informed her. "Come, let us go inside and secure rooms for ourselves."

As they made their way from the stables to the inn's entrance, Catherine couldn't help but marvel at the life that teemed around her. This trip was becoming one to remember.

CHAPTER 17

The worn wooden counter in the entryway of the inn bore the marks of countless transactions, a silent witness to the passage of time. Eamon exchanged a few words with the innkeeper, their conversation laced with familiarity and Catherine wondered if he'd been here often. She watched from the periphery, her curiosity piqued by the dynamics at play.

As Eamon secured their rooms for the night, Catherine's gaze wandered across the inn's interior. The architecture spoke of centuries past, its aged beams and stone walls giving it an air of enduring history. Eamon had explained that this inn had stood since 1520. She could see it was a living testament to the lives that had passed through its doors, and she wondered if the place still stood in her time. She hoped that it did.

With their rooms arranged, Eamon led her further into the inn. "What about the others? Aren't they getting rooms as well?" Catherine asked, wondering why he'd only booked two rooms.

"They'll camp on the outskirts of town and keep an eye out for Malcolm and his men, or any other trouble that wants to come here. I merely thought, that with us so close, you might prefer to sleep in an actual bed this evening." Eamon smiled.

"You would be correct, but I hate that your men can't enjoy the same."

"They'll be fine, probably prefer it to the busyness here." Eamon shrugged.

As they crossed the threshold into the tavern, the din of conversation and clinking

glasses enveloped them. The atmosphere was rambunctious, filled with travelers and villagers alike, each with their own tales to tell. The air was thick with the scent of ale and the warmth of camaraderie.

Eamon guided her through the maze of tables, his presence commanding respect from those they passed. Catherine observed the patrons, recognizing the fine line between merriment and mischief. There were faces etched with weariness, others flushed with laughter, and a few with the shadows of too much drink.

They joined his men at a table in the corner near the hearth. Eamon pulled out a chair for her, a small gesture that spoke volumes about his consideration. As they settled into their seats, she couldn't help but be swept up in the energy of the place, the shared stories and shared moments that bound strangers together. The hearth's warm glow danced across the faces gathered around the sturdy wooden table – Eamon, Catherine, and his loyal men. The tavern's rustic charm enveloped them, and Catherine couldn't help but be enchanted by the place.

The tavern wench bustled about, serving tankards of ale and platters of food, her steps a graceful dance in harmony with the lively ambiance as she made her way over to them to take their orders. Catherine felt the tingle of excitement on her skin from being here and seeing all of this firsthand. This entire place was living history, and she was a part of it.

Eamon's gaze swept across the room with a soldier's vigilance. He leaned in to the man on his opposite side from her, his voice low and measured, but loud enough that Catherine could hear him as he cautioned the man to watch the shadows that seemed to lurk among the regulars. Catherine couldn't help but think that perhaps the bandits were here in this inn as well.

Among the patrons, a large man with a shock of red hair and shoulders that could have bore the weight of the world stumbled clumsily among the tables. Shouts of

exasperation sounded around the room as the name William was spoken with derision. The man's drunken antics brought unease, a discordant note in the otherwise jovial symphony of the tavern.

Catherine's fingers toyed with the edge of her tankard, her gaze flitting between the men around the table and the raucous scene unfolding before them. There was a rawness to the interactions, a reminder of the unpredictability that often accompanied such gatherings. Her heart quickened, a blend of excitement and apprehension mingling within her.

As the night wore on, the tavern's ambiance shifted in conversations melded into songs, laughter softened into whispered confidences. Eamon's presence beside her was a steady anchor, his eyes a constant vigil even as he engaged in the camaraderie of his men.

In the midst of the merriment, Catherine's thoughts drifted to the task at hand – the search for Malcolm and the bandits who held the key to his whereabouts. The tension in the air was a reminder of the stakes, the delicate balance between danger and camaraderie. And as she looked around the tavern, she found herself caught in a web of intrigue and anticipation, a participant in a chapter of history that was unfolding before her eyes.

The tavern wench moved gracefully through the haze of merriment, setting down yet another round of food upon the table. There were bowls of hearty stews filled with tender meat and vegetables, flaky pasties oozing with savory fillings, and thick slices of bread that soaked up the flavors of the feast.

The men dug in with gusto, their hunger sated only by the delicious fare before them. The air was filled with the satisfying sounds of utensils clinking against plates and the murmur of conversations punctuated by laughter.

Even Catherine found herself surprised by the voracious appetite that had awakened within her. The tantalizing aromas and flavors were irresistible, and she too joined in the feast with enthusiasm. Her cheeks flushed as she took large bites, the taste of the hearty food filling her senses and satisfying a hunger that she hadn't realized was there.

Amid the joviality, a few of the tavern's regulars, fueled by the ale that flowed freely, began to approach Catherine with aggressive advances. Their words slurred, their gestures clumsy, they seemed to forget all propriety in their pursuit of her attention.

But Catherine was no damsel in distress. With a firm hand and a voice that brooked no nonsense, she pushed them away and firmly asserted her boundaries. The feisty glint in her eyes spoke volumes – she was no easy prey, no matter the circumstances.

Eamon, ever watchful, caught wind of the unfolding situation. In a fluid movement, he stood from his chair, his gaze piercing as he confronted the drunken interlopers. His tone was low and commanding, a warning that held no room for negotiation. The men, perhaps realizing the folly of their actions, raised their hands in a gesture of surrender and retreated, their bluster extinguished in the face of Eamon's authority.

Around the table, the mood shifted from tension to relief, the camaraderie once again reigning supreme. The men resumed their hearty feasting, their laughter and conversation mingling with the sounds of the tavern. Catherine's heart swelled with gratitude for Eamon's protective instincts and the unspoken understanding that existed between them.

The hearty meal had done its job in sating their appetites, and Eamon and Catherine made their way upstairs to the rooms they had rented for the night. The low eaves of the slanted roof gave the space she was given a cozy feel, while the timbers overhead added to the rustic charm of the setting. A warm hearth crackled in the corner, casting dancing shadows across the room.

At the center of the chamber stood a large, heavy bed, its wooden frame sturdy and inviting. A table and chairs were nestled against one wall, a practical addition to the room's amenities. A wash basin and a pitcher of water awaited them, a reminder of the simple comforts of life on the road.

Catherine couldn't help but wish that she were sharing the room with Eamon. She turned to him, wondering if he'd think her forward if she invited him in, but she held her tongue. She didn't want to push him into something that he wasn't prepared for.

Their gazes met and he huskily said, "Good night, lass. I'm right next door should you have need of me."

Catherine nodded and walked into the room, closing the door behind her. She moved toward the bed and pulled the blankets down. It seemed cozy enough, but it was double the size of the one she'd been sleeping in at the castle. She could picture herself and Eamon in it and sighed knowing that wasn't going to happen.

She undressed and put on her nightgown, then after washing her face, climbed into the bed and blew out the candle. She was just about asleep when she heard scratching at her door. She sat up, the moonlight casting a bluish tint on the room as she heard the doorknob twist.

Someone was attempting to get into her room. Was it Eamon? she wondered. Surely not. He wouldn't try to barge in, so who was it?

Her heart pounded hard in her chest as the door creaked open. Catherine scrambled quickly from the bed and shouted, "Eamon!"

The person who'd entered her room and was currently stumbling toward the bed, cursed, and then a moment later, Eamon stormed through the door and tackled the man. They tussled about until Catherine relit the lantern, which startled them both.

“Get off me!” the man slurred.

“What are you doing in my wife’s room?” Eamon demanded.

His words startled Catherine, but she didn’t contradict him.

“She’s fair game, saw her first,” the man slurred even more.

“Get out.” Eamon lifted the man who was half his size, and then frog marched him from the room, and then slammed the door. He turned back to Catherine. “Are you well? Did he accost you?”

“I’m fine. He didn’t even touch me. You got here before he could even get close.” Catherine smiled as he pulled her into his arms and held her for a moment.

“I should let you get some sleep.” He started to let go and back away.

Catherine held tighter. “You could stay,” she said boldly.

Eamon stared down into her face for a moment. “You want me to stay?”

Catherine licked her lips and then took a leap of faith. “You did call me your wife just now...”

Something shifted in Eamon’s gaze, and he gathered her close, then pressed his lips to hers in a passionate kiss. “You’re sure, lass?”

Catherine had yearned for this intimacy, this unspoken connection, and now that it was within her grasp, she couldn't deny herself any longer. With a surge of determination, she leaned in, her lips brushing against his in another kiss that ignited a blaze of passion between them. “I’m positive.”

Catherine pressed her hands against Eamon's strong back, and pulled his tunic up his body and over his head, tossing it aside. Her fingers moved over his bare skin, touching every battle scar. Roaming over every angle of his muscular form. Eamon sighed in response to her delicate touch.

Eamon leaned in and kissed her passionately, the longest kiss that Catherine had ever experienced. He placed his hands on Catherine's arms guiding her toward him. His massive form easily maneuvered her delicate body. He laid her down on the bed. His kisses were hungry as he caressed her body through her nightgown. "Are you sure you want this, love, I can return to my room."

"Yes, Eamon, I want this. I want you," Catherine exclaimed, hungrily pressing kisses to his lips. "All of you."

He didn't say another word as he swept her nightdress up and over her head, but sucked in a breath at the sight of her naked beneath him. With desperation he pressed kisses to her fevered skin. Down her neck to her breasts, licking and sucking until they peaked. His hands skimmed down her sides and over her thighs, finding her center. He nudged her legs apart with his knee and dipped his finger into her core.

She moaned in response, "Oh, Eamon. That feels so good. Please don't stop."

"Never," he groaned as he moved down her body, planting kisses along the way until his mouth replaced his fingers at her center. His tongue skillfully applied the right pressure, then retreated for a moment, teasing her ecstasy, before plunging in again. Over and over he moved in this pattern until Catherine loudly moaned in release.

"I want you, Eamon. Please, I need you inside me now. I can't wait anymore," she said.

"I've wanted you since I first saw you, love. The feeling has only grown inside me,

devoured me," he whispered.

His words were everything she needed and wanted to hear.

Eamon moved back up her body and cupped her breast, sucking and kissing her erect nipple. Catherine pushed her fingers into his hair, cradling his head. He placed kisses along her body until his mouth was pressed onto hers. She could feel his erection pressing into her thigh, so close and yet so far. She wanted him desperately.

"Are you sure, you want me, love?" he asked.

Catherine nodded, barely able to form words. "Yes, yes," she moaned.

Eamon moved from where he'd been hovering over her to stand next to the bed and Catherine cried out at the loss of him, but then realized he was just removing the kilt he wore. She stared at his naked form with hungry lust in her eyes. He was tall and muscular, as she knew he would be. This was what she had yearned for. Her gaze traced over him with lust and love, she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anyone in her life.

Catherine reached one hand up toward him, beckoning him to her. Eamon laid his body on top of hers, positioning himself between her thighs. The tip of his erection pressed against her wet opening. As he moved forward, he entered her, slowly, then deeper and deeper.

He kissed her, locking his mouth onto hers and she could taste his desire for her on his tongue. Together they moved in synchronized motion, their movements becoming more frenzied as passion over took them.

" Oh, Eamon. Oh..." Catherine moaned, but before her words could finish she felt herself reach the pinnacle and then crash over the edge. The shuttering pulses moving

through her.

Eamon captured her lips in the moment her orgasm hit, keeping her screams of pleasure between them only. He moved faster and faster, building her orgasm again. Catherine held onto his strong back as he moved, her nails digging into his flesh at each stroke.

"Catherine, oh my love, oh," he moaned as they both reached the peak this time and he released inside of her as she shattered into a million pieces in pleasure.

A moment lapsed as he pressed his body onto hers and they lay in blissful silence on top of the bed. Catherine couldn't help but think this was what making love was supposed to feel like. This was how being in love was supposed to feel. And she knew, without a single doubt, that she was in love with Eamon MacDonald.

CHAPTER 18

The first rays of dawn crept through the curtains, casting a warm and golden hue over the room. The world outside was painted in shades of soft orange and pink, the promise of a new day unfolding in all its splendor.

Catherine stirred in her slumber, her eyes fluttering open to the sight of Eamon's peaceful face beside her and his strong arms around her. His features were softened in the morning light, a serene expression that seemed to mirror the tranquility of the moment. As her gaze met his, a rush of affection surged within her, a feeling that filled every corner of her heart.

Their lips met in a gentle morning kiss, a sweet affirmation of the emotions that had taken root between them. The taste of his lips was a reminder of the passion they had shared the night before, a fire that still burned brightly in her soul.

As they lingered in each other's arms, time seemed to stand still, the outside world fading into insignificance. The warmth of their bodies pressed together was a testament to the intimacy they had found, a connection that went beyond the physical and reached the depths of their souls.

A soft knock on the door disrupted their idyllic moment, and Eamon let out a playful groan as he untangled himself from Catherine's embrace. He slipped out of bed, his form casting a strong and protective shadow in the morning light.

“One moment,” he called as he pulled on his kilt and tunic. He strode to the door and opened it, but stood so that Catherine was blocked from the visitor’s view. “What is

it?" he asked.

"There was trouble in town last night, that group you are looking for, I fear," the man on the other side of the door said. Catherine couldn't be sure, but she thought it might be the innkeeper.

Eamon's back straightened. "What has taken place? Why was I nae informed sooner?" he asked.

"I didnae hear about it until just this morning, when I took a delivery. Else I would have woken you."

"Very well, what did they do, this band of men who came into town?"

The innkeeper explained, "William MacCowan and his brother Ian broke into a shop sometime last night, damaged things and then ran off after setting it ablaze."

Eamon gave him a nod and told him he and his men would handle it. Catherine liked watching him being so commanding and authoritative. It was a turn on and she wished there was time for another romp in the bed, but given the circumstances, she knew there wouldn't be.

"I'll be down soon." With that Eamon closed the door and turned to her. It was evident that he didn't want to leave her, not after the intimate connection they had shared, but duty called.

As he finished getting dressed and prepared to leave, Eamon's gaze remained fixed on Catherine. There was a silent promise that passed between them, an unspoken understanding that they would find their way back into each other's arms, no matter the challenges that lay ahead.

Catherine swept the covers aside and began to get up.

"Dinnae fash yourself, love," Eamon said, his voice carrying a hint of lust in its husky tone. "I will be back soon. Stay here and rest. Have a hearty breakfast sent up." His gaze held a tender warmth as he met her eyes, a silent reassurance that he would return to her side as swiftly as he could.

Catherine's determination, however, was not easily swayed. She crossed her arms, her expression one of resolute stubbornness. "Oh, I don't think so," she replied, brooking no argument in her tone. "I'm coming along. If there's trouble afoot, I want to help."

A smile tugged at the corners of Eamon's lips, his admiration for her spirit evident in his gaze. "Lass, tis nae safe," he warned, his tone gentle yet firm. "These men are nae ordinary troublemakers. They're dangerous. I cannae focus on fighting them an' on keeping you safe as well."

Catherine's eyes flashed with a fire that matched his own, her determination unyielding. "I understand the risks, Eamon," she insisted. "But I can't just sit here while you go into danger. I want to help, to stand by your side. Besides, I have the dirk, I can defend myself if I have to."

He stepped closer, his fingers lifting her chin gently to meet his gaze. "You have a stubborn spirit, love," he remarked, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Just promise me that you'll stay close to me, and follow my directions."

Catherine held his gaze. "I promise," she said softly, her voice carrying a sincerity that reached deep into his heart. "I trust you, Eamon but you're nuts if you think I'm walking away now."

With a resigned yet affectionate smile, Eamon finally nodded. "Very well, then. You can come along."

Catherine's lips curved into a triumphant grin.

“Best get some clothes on then, love.”

Catherine giggled and hurried to get dressed.

The village streets bustled with activity as Eamon, Catherine, and his guardsmen rode through on their horses, their presence garnering curious gazes from the villagers. The morning sun cast a warm glow on the cobblestones, and the air was filled with the mingling scents of livestock and freshly baked bread. Eamon's eyes scanned the faces of the villagers, his senses sharp, as they searched for any sign of the troublemaker they sought as they headed to the shop that had been vandalized.

They spent the rest of the morning and into the afternoon helping the shop keeper clean up and repair things while several of his men kept up a patrol of the large town. Once they had done everything that they could for the shop keeper, they remounted their horses to join in the search for William and Ian MacCowan.

As they reached the opposite end of town from where they had started, a burly figure with fiery red hair caught their attention. William, the brute they sought, stumbled out of a tavern that catered to the more surly residents of the area. His demeanor was aggressive, but Catherine could tell he was blitzed beyond reason. Eamon's grip on his reins tightened as he guided his horse toward the man, Catherine and his men who had joined them following suit.

"William MacCowan!" Eamon's voice cut through the air like a blade, commanding the attention of the crowd. The villagers paused to watch the scene unfold. Eamon dismounted, his boots hitting the ground with purpose.

The drunk man turned to face Eamon, a scowl etched across his features. "What's it to you?" he spat, his words slurred from drink. His gaze flicked to Catherine and back to

Eamon, suspicion evident in his eyes.

Eamon's stance was firm, his expression unyielding. "You and your brother, Ian, caused a fair bit o' trouble in this village last night. You need to answer for it, pay for the damages."

William's lips curled into a mocking grin, and he took a step forward, invading Eamon's personal space. "And what if I dinnae feel like answering, eh?"

Eamon's jaw clenched, his patience wearing thin. His men watched with tense readiness, their hands resting on the hilts of their weapons. Catherine held her breath, as worry and anticipation churned within her.

The confrontation escalated as William's temper flared. He shoved Eamon with a force that sent him stumbling back. The villagers gasped, their eyes widening at the audacity of the act. Eamon's fingers flexed at his sides, his knuckles turning white as he restrained his response.

Catherine's heart raced as she watched the tension rise, her instincts urging her to act. Eamon's voice was low and controlled, and cut through the tension. "You'll tell me where your brother is, William. Now."

But William's defiance remained unyielding. He glared at Eamon, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "You think you can come here, boss us around? We've our own way of doin' things."

Eamon's patience was obviously wearing thin, as Catherine could see his fingers itching to draw his weapon. She felt a rush of adrenaline as she watched the standoff, her own emotions mirroring Eamon's. It was a battle of wills, an unspoken challenge that hung heavy in the air. And as the two men locked eyes, their destinies intertwined in this moment, the village seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the

spark that would ignite the impending fight between them.

Eamon's stance was poised, his muscles taut as he prepared for what was to come. With a sudden, powerful movement, William swung a fist toward Eamon's face. Eamon's reflexes were swift, his body moving with the grace and precision of a seasoned warrior. He ducked under William's punch, his movements fluid as he sidestepped and countered with a blow to William's side. The impact echoed through the air, the force of it causing William to stagger back.

But William was no easy opponent. He recovered quickly, despite his drunkenness, his eyes narrowing as he lunged forward again, fists flying. Eamon parried each blow with skillful precision, his movements a dance of power and finesse. The villagers watched as the two men clashed, their muscles straining and sweat glistening on their skin.

Eamon's movements were calculated, his strikes strategic. He deflected William's attacks, his own blows landing with deadly accuracy. It was a dance of aggression and defense, a battle of strength and skill that had the crowd on the edge of their seats and Catherine couldn't help but admire him as she watched.

With a swift move, Eamon dodged a punch and delivered a powerful blow to William's jaw. The brute stumbled back, his eyes momentarily clouded with surprise. Eamon seized the opportunity, his movements a blur as he closed the distance between them. A series of calculated strikes had William disoriented and off balance.

Before long, Eamon had the upper hand, his mastery evident in every move. He expertly incapacitated William, skillfully using his body's natural weaknesses to subdue him. With a final, well-placed blow, Eamon knocked William to the ground. The crowd erupted into cheers as Eamon stood victorious.

Breathing heavily, Eamon's chest rose and fell with each labored breath. He wiped

sweat from his brow, his eyes focused on the defeated form of William on the ground. Without a word, he moved to secure the man's hands, binding them with a length of rope.

With the brawl concluded, Eamon turned to Catherine, his eyes softening as he approached her. His heart pounded with a mixture of triumph and relief, and he offered her a small smile. "Are you alright, love?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

Catherine nodded, her eyes filled with a mixture of awe and gratitude. "I've never seen anyone fight like that before, you were amazing," she admitted, her voice tinged with affection.

Eamon's smile widened, his gaze holding hers. "A bit o' practice comes in handy now and then," he replied, a hint of playfulness in his tone.

As the crowd dispersed, Eamon's men moved to assist him. Together, they secured William and gathered their belongings. With a sense of accomplishment, Eamon nodded to Catherine, his eyes conveying a silent understanding. The battle was won, the danger subdued, and their journey continued with a renewed sense of purpose, to find the other bandit named Ian who would possibly lead them to Malcolm. If they were even the ones behind the killings at the farm.

"Take this man back to Fort Donald, we will continue our search for his brother Ian," Eamon said giving orders to two of his men.

The men obeyed the orders and began the process of setting out on the journey back to Fort Donald, taking William as a prisoner, while the other's returned to their camp.

CHAPTER 19

When Catherine and Eamon returned to the inn, the common room was a hubbub of activity, its wooden floors creaking under the weight of villagers and travelers. The air was thick with the scent of hearty meals and the warmth of camaraderie. Eamon and Catherine stood at the center of it all, the heroes of the day's events.

The Innkeeper approached them, his eyes reflecting a mix of gratitude and admiration. "You have our deepest thanks, Eamon MacDonald," he said, his voice laden with sincerity. "It tis nae often that someone steps in to handle the likes of William and his brother since they arrived here but a fortnight ago."

Eamon offered a nod of acknowledgement, his gaze steady. "Twas our job to step in as the Donald Clan's guard," he replied humbly.

The Innkeeper's eyes twinkled with a hint of mischief. "Well, you may consider this a token of our appreciation," he said, motioning toward the tables laden with food and drink. "You, the lass, and your men can enjoy a free night of rest and feast to your heart's content."

Eamon's eyes flickered to Catherine, a silent exchange of agreement passing between them. "That's a kind offer, and we'll gladly accept it," he said, a ghost of a smile tugging at his lips.

As the Innkeeper bustled away to attend to other guests, Eamon turned to Catherine, his gaze warm. "We shall stay one more night here, and give you a bit more time to rest," he remarked, his voice tinged with a hint of amusement.

Catherine nodded, her lips curving into a smile. "Seems a good idea. I suppose the horses could use the extra rest as well. Besides if news of William's capture reaches Ian, he might return here to the tavern."

"That is a fine assessment, love," he said. "I'll inform the others of our plans."

With their arrangements settled, Eamon sent a boy off with a missive and then he and Catherine found themselves in a cozy corner of the inn's common room on their own. The hearth crackled nearby, casting a warm glow over the room as they settled in. Plates of hearty fare were placed before them, the aroma of roasted meats and freshly baked bread filling the air.

Eamon leaned back in his chair, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he surveyed the scene. "You know, love," he began, his voice a low rumble, "there's somethin' to be said for a warm meal and a soft bed after a hard day's work."

Catherine chuckled softly, her eyes meeting his. "I couldn't agree more," she replied, her voice filled with a contented sigh. "It's been an exciting day, hasn't it?"

"Aye, that it has," Eamon agreed, his gaze holding hers. "And I've been glad to have you by my side through it all."

Catherine's heart swelled at his words, the sincerity in his tone resonating deeply within her. She reached across the table, her fingers brushing against his in a gentle caress. "I'm grateful to be here," she confessed, her eyes locked onto his. "With you."

As the evening wore on, they lingered over their meal, their conversation a blend of stories and easy laughter. The inn's patrons and Eamon's men continued to come and go, their voices creating a comforting backdrop to the couple's quiet intimacy.

Eventually, the plates were cleared away, and the room began to empty as travelers

retired to their rooms. Eamon and Catherine remained, their chairs pulled close together as they savored the lingering moments of their evening.

As the fire crackled nearby, Eamon reached out to grasp Catherine's hand in his own. Their fingers entwined. In the flickering firelight, their eyes met, each gaze reflecting a depth of emotion that words could never fully capture.

With a soft smile, Eamon rose from his chair, his hand still clasped in Catherine's. "Shall we retire for the night, love?" he asked, his voice gentle.

Catherine nodded, her heart racing with anticipation. Together, they made their way to the room they'd shared the night before, the promise of a lovely night's rest ahead.

The room was cast in the soft glow of moonlight filtering through the small window, creating an ethereal ambiance that seemed to mirror the depth of their connection. Eamon's eyes held a mixture of tenderness and longing as he looked at Catherine.

Catherine's fingers trembled as they moved to unfasten the remaining laces of Eamon's shirt, her touch filled with a fervent desire. With each tie that came undone, a sense of anticipation thrummed through the air, a melody of unspoken promises that seemed to echo in the silence of the room.

As their bodies drew closer, the world outside faded into insignificance, leaving only the two of them, wrapped in the cocoon of their shared longing. Eamon's hands moved to gently cradle Catherine's face, his touch spoke volumes. Their lips met in a tender kiss, a union of souls that conveyed the depth of their emotions far better than words ever could.

With a slow, deliberate motion, Eamon helped Catherine out of her dress. She stood before him, bathed in the moon's gentle radiance. The reverence in Eamon's eyes told her that he saw not just her physical form, but the essence of her being and she fell

even more in love with him than before.

Their bodies came together with a natural grace. Every touch, every caress, was an unspoken connection that had grown between them. As their bodies joined in a symphony of love, the world around them seemed to blur into insignificance, leaving only the two of them entwined in a rapturous embrace.

Time seemed to lose its meaning as they explored the contours of each other's bodies, their breaths mingling in a harmonious rhythm. Their whispered endearments and stolen kisses were declarations of love that needed no grand gestures to be understood.

As their desires found release in each other's arms, a profound sense of completion washed over Catherine. Their bodies were entwined as if they were always meant to be together, two halves of a whole finding their perfect match in each other. A thought struck her then that perhaps she'd never found her soulmate or even anyone close to that, in her own time period and it was because Eamon was here waiting for her in the past. She'd just had to travel through time to find him.

After the waves of passion had subsided, exhaustion crept in, and she began to settle into his arms to rest. The world beyond their room faded into obscurity. The sounds of their breathing harmonized with the rhythm of their heartbeats, a lullaby of contentment that seemed to lull her into a state of serenity.

The moon cast its pale light through the window, bathing the room in a soft glow as Catherine tossed and turned in her sleep. Her brows furrowed, and her fingers clenched the bedsheets, as if trying to hold onto something just beyond her grasp. Whispers of a nightmare danced at the edges of her consciousness, threatening to pull her further into its depths.

She felt a hand brush against her forehead.

"Catherine," a voice murmured softly, it was a soothing balm in the darkness.

Her eyes fluttered open, and for a moment, the remnants of her dream still lingered in her gaze. Eamon's concerned expression came into focus, and she let out a shaky breath. "Eamon," she whispered, her voice carrying a trace of the unease that had gripped her.

His fingers traced a soothing pattern along her arm, his touch a comforting anchor in the midst of her turmoil. "You were havin' a bad dream, love," he observed gently, his eyes filled with worry and tenderness.

Catherine nodded, her heart still racing from the fading echoes of the nightmare. "Yeah, I think I was," she admitted, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Eamon's brow furrowed in concern. "What was it about?" he inquired, his gaze searching hers as if hoping to read the answers in the depths of her eyes.

For a moment, she hesitated, her thoughts tangled in the web of her subconscious fears. But Eamon's presence was a soothing and calm, a reminder that she wasn't alone. With a sigh, she began to recount the fragments of her dream, the details slipping from her lips as if unburdening her soul.

Eamon listened attentively, his expression growing more serious as he absorbed her words.

The dream had been disturbing because it had involved her actually giving in to Sir Kellan's advances and losing any chance with Eamon. She told him how she felt after he'd said what he did when she'd nursed him and admitted that Sir Kellan had been pursuing her, and even though she'd thought that he was finished with her, she didn't want to be with Sir Kellan, which was what made the dream more of a nightmare.

"Catherine," he began, his voice a blend of raw emotion and resolve, "I cannae say I'm nae hurt by what you've told me. I didnae know that he was courting you, nor that you'd taken my words to mean I didnae care about you."

Her heart ached at the hurt she had unintentionally caused him, and she reached out to touch his hand. "Eamon, I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice laced with regret. "I wasn't trying to hurt you by telling you of my dream or what occurred."

He shook his head, his eyes searching hers. "You didnae hurt me intentionally, I know that," he admitted, his voice softening. "I didnae mean to send you away with my reply from my sickbed. Nor for you to think I didnae care for you."

Catherine nodded, her fingers tightening around his hand. "I know that, I do."

"I care for you very much, love. Tis it possible that you care for me in such a way?"

A sense of determination welled within her. She met his gaze, her eyes unwavering. "Eamon," she said, her voice steady, "My heart belongs here, with you. It's you I've chosen. I would not be here with you now if you weren't the one my heart longs for."

A mixture of relief and warmth spread across his features, his shoulders relaxing as if a weight had been lifted. He reached out, his fingers gently brushing against her cheek. "So you've no feelings for Sir Kellan then?"

"I can't say I have no feelings for him, I mean, I'm not in love with him and when he kissed me, it was?—"

"He kissed you?" Eamon pushed himself up and moved away from her. "He kissed you." He stood up and ran a hand through his hair, clearly agitated.

"Eamon—" Catherine said, hoping to calm him down as she reached for him.

“Donnae.” He grabbed his kilt and yanked it on, then headed for the door.

“Please, Eamon, let me explain.”

His back was to her, his hand on the knob, but he refused to look at her. “I cannae be with a woman torn between two men. Good night, Catherine.” With that, he pulled open the door and left.

Catherine sat in the bed, the sheet at her waist as she stared after him. Tears streaming down her cheeks. He’d left her. He hadn’t even allowed her to explain that Sir Kellan’s kiss had meant nothing to her. That she felt nothing for the man but friendship. That was what she’d been attempting to explain when he’d gotten so angry.

And now she was alone, and she wasn’t sure she’d ever recover.

CHAPTER 20

The first rays of dawn barely filtered through the room as Catherine stirred from her restless sleep. Her dreams had been a tangled mess of emotions, a reflection of the turmoil that had unfolded in her waking hours. She blinked away the sleep from her eyes, her mind slowly clearing.

A soft but persistent knock echoed through the room, drawing her attention. Catherine's heart leaped, thinking it might be Eamon returning. Clutching the blanket around her, she crossed the room and opened the door, her lips parting in anticipation.

However, it wasn't Eamon standing on the threshold. It was Peadar and Marc, two of Eamon's men who had accompanied them on their journey. Their faces were solemn, their eyes avoiding hers.

Peadar's rough voice broke the silence. "Good morrow, lass. Get dressed. Eamon asked us to take you back to the fort."

Catherine's brow furrowed in confusion, a mixture of emotions swirling within her. She wrapped the blanket tighter around her, her heart pounding. "Where's Eamon?" she asked, her voice carrying a hint of accusation.

Marc scratched his head, his gaze shifting uncomfortably. "He left early, lass. We're to make sure you return safely."

Catherine's frustration began to boil over. She had so many questions, so many feelings left unsaid. "I need to speak to him," she asserted, her tone growing firm. She

was tired from her fitful night sleep after he'd left her in anger over something she had no control over.

Peadar exchanged a glance with Marc before responding. "He's already on his way, lass. Gone more than an hour now."

Catherine's heart sank, as hurt and disbelief washed over her. She turned away from the door, her thoughts a jumble of anger and confusion. How could Eamon just leave without even saying goodbye? Did she mean nothing to him?

"Leave. I'll get dressed," she muttered, defeat and frustration filling her voice. She closed the door with a sharp click, the weight of the situation settling heavily on her shoulders. As she began to change, the room seemed colder, emptier, as if it held the echoes of what was lost between her and Eamon.

The tavern was alive with the bustling of travelers and villagers, the clinking of mugs and the hearty laughter of men sharing tales. Catherine sat at a corner table with Peadar and Marc, the aroma of a hearty breakfast filling the air around them. There were eggs, freshly baked bread, sizzling bacon, and a steaming bowl of porridge that emanated warmth and comfort.

As she ate, Catherine's thoughts swirled in a tempest of emotions. The food was rich and satisfying, yet her appetite was dampened by the weight of her thoughts. She glanced up from her plate, observing the people around her as they went about their morning routines.

In the midst of the tavern's energy, Catherine found a moment of quiet reflection. Her heart ached with the memory of Eamon's departure, his anger still fresh in her mind. She knew she had hurt him deeply, even though it hadn't been her fault, and that weighed heavily on her conscience. It was a bittersweet irony that the man she cared for deeply was the one she had managed to hurt the most.

As she chewed on a piece of bacon, Catherine's thoughts turned to Sir Kellan. She had been charmed by his gestures and flattery at first, but it hadn't taken her long to see through the facade. She'd felt a much deeper connection with Eamon from the moment she'd met him and had thought he'd felt the same.

With each bite of her breakfast, Catherine's resolve grew stronger. She needed to make Eamon realize that he was always the one she'd wanted to be with. Not Sir Kellan. She wasn't going to lose him now. Not ever.

Finishing her meal, Catherine pushed her plate away and glanced at Peadar and Marc, who were engaged in a conversation of their own. The tavern's atmosphere buzzed around them, a mixture of voices and clatter that felt oddly comforting. She knew that the journey back to the fort wouldn't be easy, it had been a long trip to get this inn and it would be a long trip back.

The morning sun cast a golden hue over the landscape as Catherine mounted her horse, flanked by Peadar and Marc on their own horses. The rhythmic sound of hooves against the earth echoed in the stillness of the morning. They rode in silence, the vastness of the island stretching out before them.

As the miles passed beneath the horses' hooves, Catherine's thoughts consumed her. She was acutely aware of the weight of her actions and the consequences they had brought. A sense of regret gnawed at her. She shouldn't have given up on Eamon and turned to Sir Kellan. She knew that now, but she couldn't take it back. She couldn't undo what had happened. She could only move forward.

The landscape around them was breathtaking, the rolling hills and open fields seemingly untouched by time. But Catherine's mind was far from the beauty around her; instead, it was consumed by her own inner turmoil.

Suddenly, the tranquility was shattered as a group of men emerged from the cover of

the trees, blocking their path. Bandits, their faces masked by dirt and determination, surrounded Catherine, Peadar, and Marc. The air grew tense, and the horses whinnied nervously in response to the threat.

Catherine's heart raced as she grasped the hilt of the dagger at her side, her instincts kicking in. The bandits demanded their belongings, their eyes gleaming with a dangerous glint. Peadar and Marc exchanged wary glances, their hands moving subtly toward their weapons.

Tension hung in the air, thick and palpable. Catherine's mind raced as she assessed the situation, her fingers gripping the hilt of her dagger tighter. She exchanged a quick glance with Peadar and Marc, a silent understanding passing between them. It was clear that their only option was to stand their ground and fight or die at the hands of these criminals.

With a sudden surge of adrenaline, the situation escalated into chaos. The bandits who were on foot lunged forward, and Catherine reacted instinctively, her body moving on pure reflex as she kicked out at the one coming toward her. Around her the clash of steel against steel rang out, punctuated by shouts and grunts as Peadar and Marc jumped from their horses to engage in battle with the bandits. Catherine fought fiercely from her saddle, her heart pounding as she defended herself.

Catherine's determination to protect herself and her companions was unyielding as she slashed the dirk at her opponent.

The clash continued, but the bandits gained the upper hand. Catherine's heart pounded in her chest as she found herself yanked from her horse, disarmed, and overpowered by the assailants.

Among the bandits, one figure stood out as the leader, a man with a fierce glint in his eye and an air of authority. This man was Ian MacCowan, the brother of William who

they had encountered before. His voice carried a harsh edge as he issued orders to his men.

Before they could attempt an escape, Catherine, Peadar, and Marc found themselves bound and immobilized. Ropes dug into their skin as their hands were secured tightly behind their backs. The realization that they were now captives sent a surge of anxiety through Catherine's veins, her heart pounding in her chest.

Ian's cold gaze swept over the three of them, his expression devoid of any compassion. He spoke with a commanding tone, his voice laced with authority as he detailed his plan. It became clear that they were to become pawns in a dangerous game, a pawn that Ian intended to use to his advantage.

Amid the tension, Catherine exchanged a desperate glance with Peadar and Marc. The gravity of the situation weighed heavily upon them as they struggled against their restraints. The uncertainty of their fate loomed large, a stark reminder of the perilous world they inhabited.

Ian continued his orders, "Go! You tell Eamon MacDonald I want him to be the one to bring my brother to me. He shall meet us at the burned-out farmstead. Now!"

Peadar gave one last look at Catherine and Marc as he and one of Ian's men rode out to carry the message to Fort Donald.

Fear and frustration surged within Catherine as she watched Peadar's departure with the masked man, her heart heavy with the knowledge that their lives now hung in the balance. The tension in the air was palpable, the threat of danger ever present as they awaited the outcome of this dangerous gamble.

Bound and vulnerable, Catherine's thoughts raced as she grappled with their dire predicament. The events had taken a drastic turn, their journey overshadowed by the

shadow of impending danger. As they waited for their fate, Catherine's mind whirled with the desperate hope that Eamon wouldn't abandon her now. That he loved her as much as she loved him and he come to her rescue.

Catherine's fiery spirit blazed as Ian tightened the ropes that bound her, she let loose a torrent of protest and harsh words. Her voice rang out, echoing with defiance as she hurled insults at Ian, her anger palpable in every word.

"You fucking bastard!" Catherine spat, her voice laced with venom. "You think you can just truss us up like animals and get away with it? Eamon is going to kill you, you fucker!" She could only hope that was true and that Eamon actually would come and get her out of this predicament.

Ian's response was a cold, humorless smile that only fueled Catherine's anger further. Despite the danger she was in, she refused to cower before him. Her spirit remained unbroken, her determination to resist shining through.

As Ian slung her over the back of the horse, Catherine's body tensed with the effort to stay on it. The rough motion only fueled her anger, but she refused to let it break her resolve. She cast a defiant glare at Ian as he tied Goldy's lead to his saddle, her eyes burning with determination even as the situation grew more dire.

The journey that followed was uncomfortable and jarring, the rhythm of the horse's hooves creating a monotonous backdrop to Catherine's racing thoughts. Her mind churned with a mix of frustration, fear, and an unyielding determination to find a way out of this predicament.

The burned ruins where they eventually arrived cast an eerie shadow over their surroundings. Catherine's heart sank at the sight, the devastation serving as a stark reminder of the ruthless actions of the bandits. Her breath caught in her throat as she took in the desolation, her thoughts turning to the perilous situation they now found

themselves in.

As she was pulled from the horse and led to a makeshift resting place, Catherine's mind raced with possibilities. She knew that time was of the essence, that their only chance lay in the actions of their allies. The ropes that bound her felt like a tangible reminder of her vulnerability, but they also fueled her determination to fight for her freedom.

Despite the circumstances, Catherine's spirit remained unyielding. Her eyes flashed with defiance as she met Ian's gaze, her voice steady as she spoke her mind. "You may have us for now, but you won't for long, I can assure you. And when we're free, we're going to kill you."

Ian's response was a chilling smile that sent shivers down Catherine's spine. She knew that the hours ahead would be fraught with uncertainty and danger, but she also knew that the flame of hope still burned within her. As she awaited her fate in the burned ruins, Catherine's thoughts turned to Eamon, the man whose presence had ignited her heart and whose absence now weighed heavily on her mind. With his memory as her anchor, she steeled herself for the trials that lay ahead, determined to weather the storm, and emerge stronger on the other side.

CHAPTER 21

Catherine sat bound to a weathered wooden beam near the old hearth, her wrists chafed and her heart heavy with worry. The cold and gray day matched the somber atmosphere of her surroundings, the muted light casting a pall over the scene. Her mind churned with thoughts of escape and reunion with her companions, but the ropes that bound her served as a frustrating reminder of her captivity.

She'd tried without success to loosen them, but hadn't had any luck. All she'd gotten from her efforts was rope burn and an ache between her shoulder blades that wouldn't go away. She was tired and hungry and all she wanted in that moment was to see Eamon and make him understand that she loved him.

As the hours stretched on, the dreariness of the day seemed to mirror Catherine's own sense of desolation. She shifted her gaze toward the heavens, her thoughts wandering to the man who had captured her heart. Eamon's face filled her mind, his rugged features and piercing eyes a comforting presence even in her darkest moments. She clung to the memory of their time together, drawing strength from the warmth of their connection.

It had been a full day and one night since Ian had brought her to this forsaken place, and the passing hours had left Catherine feeling both anxious and determined. She had no idea where Marc was, and the uncertainty gnawed at her. Her inner reflection was a swirl of emotions, a mix of frustration, anger, and a fierce determination to find a way out of this situation.

The cold breeze ruffled Catherine's hair as she sat bound, her thoughts a constant

flurry of plans and possibilities. She flexed her fingers against the ropes, her mind racing as she considered every angle. The burned ruins of the farmstead seemed to hold secrets of their own, the echoes of the past mingling with the urgency of the present.

In the midst of the desolation, Catherine's spirit remained unbroken. She had faced challenges before, and this was no different. Her eyes scanned her surroundings, her determination growing stronger with each passing moment. As the gray sky above her began to darken with the approach of evening, Catherine's thoughts turned toward hope. It was all she had left. Hope that Eamon would love her enough to come get her.

The sound of rustling brought Catherine's attention sharply back to the present. Ian and his bandits had entered the area, their presence a chilling reminder of her vulnerable situation. Her heart raced as she met Ian's gaze, his eyes gleaming with malevolence. The cold realization that she was completely at their mercy settled over her like a shroud.

Ian's voice cut through the heavy silence, his rough accent sending shivers down her spine. His words were laced with a cruel amusement as he surveyed her bound form. Catherine's inner reflection took on a new urgency as she tried to assess her captors, to find any sign of weakness or opportunity. Her survival instincts kicked into overdrive, her mind racing to find a way out of this perilous situation.

As Ian and his bandits drew closer, Catherine's pulse quickened. Her thoughts were a filled with fear, but also determination to get through this no matter what. She knew that she couldn't let herself succumb to helplessness. She had faced adversity before, and she wouldn't let fear paralyze her now. The memory of her time with Eamon, the strength of their connection, fueled her resolve. She would fight for her freedom, for her chance to be with him once again.

Her mind raced, seeking any possible advantage, any glimmer of hope. She knew that time was of the essence, that every passing moment could bring new challenges and dangers.

“You best be prayin', lass," Ian sneered, his words like a cold gust of wind against her determination. "Prayin' someone at Fort Donald will come to your rescue." His sinister grin was enough to send shivers down anyone's spine, but Catherine wasn't one to back down.

Her voice wavered only slightly as she shot back, "I won't be depending on prayers alone." Her voice carried a quiet fierceness, a refusal to let his threats silence her. She may have been terrified, but she refused to show weakness.

Catherine's inner reflection took on a newfound fire. She wouldn't let herself be bullied by this asshole. She was made of sterner stuff, molded by her experiences and her own tenacity. With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and met Ian's gaze head-on, her eyes locking onto his with an unyielding resolve.

As Catherine stood her ground, Ian's companion entered and exchanged glances, a murmur of conversation passing between them. This new man had a report and Catherine strained her ears to listen in on their quiet conversation.

“We’ve been searching for Malcolm for a fortnight, with nae luck. Even burning down this place didnae bring him around,” the man said.

“He’ll show, we’re just nae making ourselves well enough known yet. But we will,” Ian answered. “Have nae doubts about it.”

Catherine felt a shiver of fear slice through her at his words, but then, like a distant promise, the rhythmic beat of horse hooves echoed through the air. Both Catherine and Ian turned their attention to the approaching sound, their expressions mirroring

the stark contrast between hope and apprehension.

Ian's bravado wavered as the hoofbeats drew closer. "What's this now?" he muttered, his confidence faltering.

Catherine seized the moment, her voice ringing with newfound determination. "They're coming for me and Marc. You'd better run now."

Ian and the others moved outside of the burned out house. Catherine strained to hear the muffled voices of Ian and the bandits outside. With bated breath, she waited for any sign of Eamon's approach, her heart thudding in her chest like the echo of distant thunder.

And then, like a whispered promise, the voices grew clearer. Words reached her ears, confirming her hopes. "Tis Eamon MacDonald from the tavern. He has William."

Relief flooded Catherine's being, washing over her like a soothing wave. Eamon was here, and he had brought William with him, just as they had demanded. Her faith in Eamon's determination swelled within her, a powerful reminder of the strength of their connection.

Still, even as relief coursed through her, a new worry began to take root. The thought of Eamon confronting these thugs, of facing danger to secure her freedom, weighed heavily on her mind. Catherine had seen his prowess in battle, witnessed his unwavering courage, but the threat of harm to him gnawed at her.

As minutes ticked by like the slow beat of a distant drum, Catherine's mind churned with a mixture of gratitude and fear. She pictured Eamon's determined face, his unwavering commitment to her safety, and a wave of warmth flooded her. Their relationship had been a journey fraught with challenges, but it had also deepened into something profound. She prayed that he would be successful in capturing Ian and his

bandits, and in rescuing her and Marc. She just didn't know how he planned to do it all on his own.

CHAPTER 22

“The lass is inside,” Ian’s voice came from the yard.

“I want to see she is unharmed,” Eamon demanded.

The air was charged with tension as Ian strode in and untied Catherine from the makeshift restraint that kept her where she was, his rough grip moving down her arm. The cold breeze cut through her like a knife, making her shiver as she stepped outside into the fading light, her hands still bound.

Eamon's eyes ablaze with anger as they locked onto Catherine. She felt a mixture of relief and guilt flood her soul— relief that he had come for her, and guilt for the trouble she had caused.

As Eamon and Ian exchanged terse words, the air crackled with hostility. Their voices clashed like thunder in the distance, each word a reminder of the precarious situation they were in. Catherine watched with bated breath, caught between the two forces at play.

“Catherine, are you unharmed?” Eamon shouted across the yard.

Before she could say a word, Ian retorted, "Eamon, you better make sure my brother is the one unharmed if you want this lass to see another day!" His tone held an extra layer of menace, and Catherine couldn't help but feel a shiver of unease.

Eamon's response was a growl, his tone laden with fury. "I'll ensure William's safety

if you do the same for Catherine. Let's end this madness now."

As their voices carried over the desolate landscape, Catherine's heart pounded in her chest like the beat of a war drum. She clung to a shred of hope, praying that this exchange would be swift and without further violence.

The exchange of prisoners was a tense ballet of movement and tension, each party eyeing the other warily. Catherine couldn't help but notice the fierceness in Eamon's stance, his readiness to protect her at any cost. It was a potent reminder of his feelings, a truth that stirred her heart.

In a heartbeat, the fragile truce shattered like glass, replaced by chaos and violence. Ian's treacherous move caught everyone off guard. As Eamon released William, it set off a chain reaction that ignited the air with tension.

Catherine's heart raced as she watched the scene unfold before her. Eamon's momentary vulnerability was seized upon by the brothers, their punches landing like thunderous blows against his solid frame. The clash of flesh against flesh reverberated through the air, a testament to the fury that had erupted.

Catherine screamed as one of Ian's men grabbed hold of her, holding her back from running toward Eamon.

Eamon fought valiantly, his fists flying in a desperate bid to defend himself. Catherine's breath caught as she saw the anger etched across his features, a stark contrast to the calm warrior she had come to know. The sheer force of his blows was a reflection of his determination to protect not only himself, but her as well.

Despite the odds stacked against him, Eamon held his ground. The brawl was fierce and wild, the bitter taste of revenge permeating the air. Each punch, each grunted curse, was a reminder of the stakes – a test of strength, of willpower, and of loyalty.

Catherine's heart pounded as the clash continued, her instincts urging her to intervene even though her hands were tied still. The man who had taken over holding her back had loosened his grip on her and in a swift surge of adrenaline, Catherine seized a charred piece of wood between her hands, her instincts driving her to action. With a fierce determination burning in her eyes, she lunged forward, using the makeshift weapon to trip William, sending him crashing to the ground with a resounding thud. She hit him on the head as hard as she could, rendering him unconscious and then she spun and rammed the thick piece of charred wood into the bandit who had been holding her back. She'd slammed it longways into his center, knocking the breath out of him and he stumbled backward, falling to the ground. Rushing toward him, she stomped on him where no man wanted to be stomped.

As the man cried out in pain, Eamon's eyes widened in surprise and the tide of battle suddenly shifted. Catherine's bold move had caught the brothers and their men off guard, creating a vital distraction that Eamon then capitalized on. With renewed vigor, he focused his energy on Ian, his muscles moving in a deadly dance of combat.

The clash of wills continued, a relentless dance of survival and strategy. Catherine's heart pounded in her chest as she realized the impact of her actions – she was contributing to the fight, playing a role in the outcome. Her earlier fear and helplessness were replaced with a newfound sense of empowerment.

As the scuffle intensified, their resistance began to waver. The combination of Eamon's skill and Catherine's continued unexpected intervention proved to be an insurmountable challenge. Slowly but surely, the balance tipped in their favor, the pendulum swinging away from the threat that had loomed so menacingly.

With one final, determined effort, Eamon managed to disarm Ian, leaving him weaponless and vulnerable. As William came too, groggy on the ground, the brothers exchanged a desperate glance, a realization seemed to settle between them – defeat was inevitable. With a defeated snarl, they turned tail and fled, leaving their men

behind, their cowardice evident in their hasty retreat.

The tension began to ebb away as the other bandits disappeared into the distance, leaving behind the charred ruins and the echoes of their brief but furious battle. "They're getting away," Catherine complained.

Eamon chuckled. "Not for long. My men are out there. They'll be apprehended before too long."

Eamon turned to Catherine, his chest still heaving with the aftermath of the conflict. A mixture of relief and concern filled his eyes as he closed the gap between them, his arms encircling her in a tight embrace. Catherine could feel the racing beat of his heart against her own, a testament to the depth of his worry.

"I'm so glad you came for me," she whispered.

With a tender yet powerful hold, Eamon murmured against her hair, his voice full of relief. "I was so worried about you, lass. You've got a brave heart, but you shouldnae be putting yourself in danger like that." He set her back from him a bit and began to unbind her hands.

Catherine looked up at him, and felt a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of the man who held her. They moved around the farmstead and found Marc battered and bruised, but alive. With relief they untied him.

They decided to return to the inn as it was closer to spend the night and give Marc a chance to recuperate a bit before making the trek back to the fort. The Innkeeper, ever a kind and practical presence, immediately sprang into action as he saw Eamon's and Marc's battered states. Guiding them to a quiet room of the establishment, he fetched water, clean cloths, and the implements needed for tending to wounds.

As Eamon and Marc eased onto the bed, Eamon's face contorted in pain, Catherine watched as the Innkeeper's skilled hands went to work. The older man's demeanor was steady and competent, his touch gentle but firm as he cleaned and bandaged Eamon's injuries. Each movement was precise, born of years of experience in a world where such knowledge could mean the difference between life and death. Then he helped Marc.

In the stillness of the bedroom that she and Eamon now occupied alone, Catherine found herself drawn into a moment of inner reflection. She knew that she had made the right choice in Eamon. He had cared enough to come and rescue her and Sir Kellan hadn't. There was no doubt in her mind that he'd known she'd been abducted, yet he'd done nothing.

She had definitely made the right choice, now she just had to make sure Eamon wanted to be with her as she wanted to be with him.

CHAPTER 23

As the dawn broke with a soft golden glow, Catherine emerged from the embrace of sleep, her body replenished by rest and healing. She woke Eamon gently and with cautious movements, they readied themselves for the new day, her minds still mulling over the events that had transpired.

Dressed, Catherine and Eamon made their way downstairs, the warmth of the morning sun filtering through the windows and casting a gentle glow upon the inn's interior. The innkeeper greeted them with a nod and a kind smile. His presence was a reminder of the interconnectedness of lives, the way chance encounters could intertwine destinies in unexpected ways.

Gratitude flowed from Catherine's lips as she thanked the innkeeper for his aide, her words carrying the weight of the unspoken emotions that had bound them together in the face of adversity. His response, humble and sincere, revealed a man whose compassion extended beyond the boundaries of his role as an innkeeper. He admitted to a sense of guilt, a sentiment born of the role he unwittingly played in sending them after William, the catalyst for their dangerous encounter.

Eamon, his bearing steadfast and resolute, reassured the innkeeper, "Nae, there tis nae blame to be assigned, good sir. Tis the harsh reality of our mission. Tis my duty to seek out those who wish to disrupt the peace and safety of the island."

Marc was already sitting at a table and much healed by the looks of it. He gestured for them to join him. Together the three ate a hearty breakfast. Eamon ordered Marc to stay behind and send him reports if any more trouble was to be found in the town.

With their farewells exchanged and the weight of gratitude hanging in the air, Catherine and Eamon mounted their horses. The world around them seemed to awaken with each passing mile, nature's beauty unfolding in a tapestry of rolling hills and verdant landscapes.

Catherine stole glances at Eamon, his profile chiseled by the morning light. There seemed to be a newfound closeness between them, forged in the crucible of danger and shared experiences. As they rode side by side, Catherine's heart beat with a rhythm that echoed that of the horses. She wondered if she should bring up what happened between them before she'd been captured by Ian and his bandits, but she was afraid to disturb this seemingly fresh start between them, so she held her tongue.

Eventually she could no longer take the silence and Catherine's voice, soft yet resolute, broke the tranquil air. "Eamon, I've been thinking about what Ian said back there at the farmstead. He mentioned they came here looking to connect with Malcolm, but they never found him."

Eamon tossed her a curious look as he listened to her. He glanced at Catherine again, giving her his full attention as she continued to share the revelation that could potentially alter the course of his original mission.

"What else did you overhear them say, love?" he asked.

"He, William, and their men are the ones who burnt down the farm and killed the family there. Not Malcolm. They were hoping it would draw his attention and he'd find them, but he didn't, and they'd had no luck in finding him themselves."

"So, you're saying that Malcolm is nae in the area, at least according to what Ian and his bandits know." His words held a cautious optimism, a glimmer of hope that their search might not lead them to a confrontation with a man whose motives remained shrouded in mystery.

Their horses continued to carry them forward, the landscape morphing from rolling fields to dense forests and rocky outcrops as Catherine replied, “Exactly. I don’t think Malcolm is the one behind the trouble that’s been going on in Donald territory. I think it has all been Ian and William MacCowan’s doing.”

“You could be right about that, love.” Eamon nodded. “We should return to Fort Donald at once and speak with Cam.”

The journey to Fort Donald was a rough one, the horses' hooves marking their passage through changing landscapes. As they finally approached the fort, its stone walls rose majestically against the horizon, a stronghold amidst the wild beauty of the land.

Catherine's heart quickened as they rode through the fortified gates, entering the courtyard. She had an overwhelming feeling that she was home. The air was alive with excitement, a palpable energy that enveloped them in a warm embrace as people came out to greet them.

Mae stood at the forefront of the crowd, her eyes alight with relief and joy as she welcomed Catherine and Eamon back. Niall, Jennifer, and Cam flanked her, their expressions a medley of emotions that ranged from concern to elation.

“Thank goodness you’re back safe, you had us so worried,” Mae exclaimed.

Catherine dismounted her horse, her limbs feeling slightly unsteady after the long ride. She was met with the open arms of her friends. “I’m glad to be back safe too. It was a close call. If it weren’t for Eamon showing up to rescue me, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Eamon, too, dismounted. He chuckled. “Love, if I hadnae shown up, I have nae doubt you’d have found a way to save yourself. The way you used that wood to bash in

William's head is testament to that."

"Your men brought Ian and William MacCowan in last night, we wondered where you were and feared the worst," Cam said, sounding concerned.

"We found Marc, he was in a bit of a state, so we returned to the inn and had our wounds tended to and to rest, before making our way here. I had intended to keep searching for Malcolm, but Catherine overheard something that changed our course and brought us back here."

"Oh?" Cam asked, looking from her to Eamon.

Eamon explained and said, "So I need to see what Ian and William have to say."

"That can be arranged. And we'll be having a feast to celebrate your safe return."

With the celebratory air still swirling around Fort Donald, Catherine's heart remained unsettled. Eamon had been tended to; his bandages removed, and his wounds cleaned, and then there'd been the dinner celebration with lots of good food and cheer, but Eamon had excused himself early and gone to his room. Now, as the evening descended and the golden hues of sunset gave way to the velvety embrace of night, Catherine found herself navigating the torch-lit corridors toward Eamon's bedchamber. He had insisted she stay and enjoy her friends' company, but now, she wanted to make sure he was well, that they were still okay.

When he didn't answer her knock, she quietly opened the door, her steps soft on the floor as she entered. The room was illuminated by the soft glow of a flickering candle, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Eamon lay in the large bed, his breathing deep and even, the lines of pain temporarily eased from his features as sleep claimed him. Relief that he was all right swept through her heart and eased the worry she had for him.

Even in his sleep the man exuded strength and resilience. She couldn't help but admire him. Part of her wanted to climb into the bed with him and snuggle into his side, but she knew he needed his rest and he hadn't invited her to his bed. She wasn't sure that he'd be happy about waking up with her here at the fort for everyone to know about. Was that even allowed? They weren't married and she wasn't a prostitute. As soon as she thought it, she realized that she actually wanted to marry Eamon. She didn't want to have the reputation of a loose woman here in this time. She wanted to make Eamon proud, not have him ashamed of her.

With a final lingering look, Catherine crept across the room and quietly opened then closed the door to Eamon's bedchamber behind her, the latch clicking softly. She wasn't sleepy, so she decided to head to the library. Perhaps she could find something to read that might help her get some sleep.

As she headed in that direction, she realized she hadn't seen Sir Kellan since they'd returned. He hadn't been at the celebratory meal to welcome her and Eamon back, and he hadn't been in the courtyard when they arrived either. She half wondered if he'd returned to his own estate.

As Catherine entered the library, the scent of leather-bound volumes mingled with the earthy aroma of aged paper, created an ambiance that was both intimate and inviting. Catherine's steps carried her through the rows of shelves, her fingers lightly grazing the spines of books as if seeking guidance from their ancient wisdom.

Reaching the end of the row, she spied a figure bent over the table, reading by candlelight. It was Sir Kellan, engrossed in a tome that lay open before him. He looked up as Catherine approached, his eyes meeting hers with surprise.

"Good evening, Lady Catherine," he greeted, his voice melodic as it echoed within the hallowed walls of the library.

"Good evening, Sir Kellan," she said and then noticed the skin around his right eye was slightly dark, but she dismissed it as shadows in the flickering candlelight.

"I'm glad you're safe and sound. Islay can be treacherous, as you now know. I was surprised to have heard you'd chosen to travel with the guardsmen to search for the bandits. I wouldnae have allowed it had I'd known about it."

Catherine narrowed her gaze on him. "Are you?"

"Am I what, Lady Catherine?"

"Glad that I've returned safely. I ask because it doesn't seem to me that you were concerned at all about my whereabouts or the fact that I was taken hostage by dangerous men, nor that Eamon risked his life to rescue me."

"I was indeed concerned, Catherine, but I was nae the one who was tasked with coming to your rescue," he insisted. "I had nae doubt that the Donalds, Eamon in particular, would see to your return."

His words only made her more furious. "I thought you were my friend, but I can see that I never was anything but a way for you to pass your time here," Catherine bit out each word.

He gave her a haughty look as he stood and she could now see that his eye was dark due to shadows, he had a black eye. It was a purplish and blue hue. "You made your choice when you left with that heathen."

"What happened to your eye?" she questioned, watching him.

His hand went to it for a moment before it dropped to his side. "Eamon took exception to me having an interest in you. So you see, there was nae reason for me to

attempt to come after you, he had things well in hand apparently. The two of you were clearly made for each other.”

With that he slammed the book he'd been reading closed, picked it up and walked out of the library. Catherine stood there, watching after him, trying hard not to laugh at the pompous man who'd had his pride bruised. He hadn't denied what she'd said, merely deflected, so she knew it was only his pride she'd hurt, not his heart and for that she was grateful.

As the weeks passed, Catherine found herself embracing her newfound bond with Eamon. She moved from her small room, into his, with his assurance that he did not think of her as a loose woman, and that no one there at the fort would either.

She'd had conversations with Mae about it and found that she and Jen had been expecting this outcome from the moment she arrived. They'd had a hearty laugh about it too, which had left Catherine miffed at them for about a week until they apologized for not sharing what they knew of Dub Sith bringing the three of them here to this time and place.

Catherine was still stunned that the rumor was he'd pledge to make sure the Donalds each found their true love. If she'd known that from the start, maybe she wouldn't have fretted about things with Eamon quite so much.

CHAPTER 24

With his health fully restored, Eamon had returned to his duties with a renewed vigor. He and his men were no longer on the hunt for Malcolm after confirming that Ian and William MacCowan had been behind every bit of toil and trouble in the area. Seeing as that was the case, Cam had some of the guards transfer them over to the Campbells, where they would be judged by Laird Colin Campbell for their actions. He was the one with all of the power in Islay and the only one who could decide their fate.

On this particular evening, as the sun cast a warm glow over the landscape, Catherine found herself by Eamon's side walking along the shore of Loch Ballygrant. The breeze carried the melody of the hills, and the scent of the sea. Catherine turned to Eamon, her gaze warm and sincere.

"I'm glad you're not out chasing Malcolm anymore," she said softly, her eyes meeting his. "It means we can spend more time together."

Eamon's lips curved into a playful grin, his eyes dancing with a mixture of affection and jest. "Aye," he replied, "though I must admit, lass, you're wearing me out more than those many patrols ever did."

Catherine laughed, the sound like the tinkling of a distant stream. "Is that so?" she teased, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I had no idea I was such a handful."

Eamon's laughter joined hers, a deep and hearty resonance that filled the air. "Ah, but tis a welcome weariness," he assured her, his gaze tender as he looked at her. "I

wouldnae have it any other way."

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a tapestry of hues across the sky, Eamon wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close. He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her tenderly. Catherine felt her heart soar and prayed that she never had to return to her own time.

Later that evening, the dining hall was alive with the warm glow of hearth fires and the hearty chatter of the clan. The long wooden tables were laden with platters of roasted meats, hearty stews, and baskets of fresh bread. The air was thick with the aroma of rich spices and savory flavors, an offering of sustenance to the hardy souls gathered to partake.

Amidst the bustling activity, Catherine moved gracefully among the tables, her eyes alight with the camaraderie that flowed as freely as the ale and whisky. It was a scene of unity, of shared laughter and shared stories, each individual woven into the tapestry of the clan's life.

As she walked, Mae called out, "Catherine!"

Catherine approached the table where Mae sat, a wide smile gracing her lips. "Hey Mae, Jen." She smiled.

"Come take a walk with me?" Mae said.

Catherine followed Mae to a quieter corner of the hall, where the din of the crowd seemed to soften. "If we were just going to stay in the same room, why did you ask me to go for a walk?" Catherine asked with a laugh.

"I just wanted to get you alone for a minute. I wanted to say I'm glad you chose Eamon over Sir Kellan," she said. "I don't think I told you that before and I didn't

want any of the Donalds to overhear me.”

"Honestly, I can't imagine being with anyone but Eamon," she admitted, a soft smile playing on her lips. "I have only ever thought of Sir Kellan as a friend, and now not even that.”

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but while you were gone, when Eamon came back here to get William, he and Sir Kellan got into a fight. Eamon punched him in the face and told him to stay away from you.”

Catherine cringed. “That’s my fault. I got in a fight with Eamon, and I thought we were through. I’m afraid I allowed Sir Kellan to think I might be interested in him, and he kissed me. I told Eamon while we were out hunting Malcolm, and he was furious. He didn’t let me explain and then I got kidnapped and well you know what happened after that.”

Mae shook her head and laughed. “Gotta say, these MacDonald men are pretty hot blooded. They don’t take things lightly when it comes to the women they love.”

“No, they definitely don’t.” Catherine smiled and glanced toward Eamon who was engaged in a conversation with Niall and Cam. “And I wouldn’t change that for the world.”

“Me either.” Mae grinned.

“A toast?” Catherine said, lifting her mug up to clink with Mae’s.

"Okay, how about to love," Mae declared, her eyes locking with Catherine's.

"To love," Catherine echoed as she tapped her mug to Mae’s, her gaze drifting to Eamon, his presence a reassuring anchor in her life. In that moment, as the festivities

carried on around them, Catherine felt a deep sense of belonging, of being part of something greater than herself.

The night wore on, the firelight casting dancing shadows upon the stone walls. As the feast continued, Catherine found herself drawn to Eamon's side, their fingers entwined as they exchanged soft smiles and shared laughter. The hall was alive with the warmth of kinship, the echoes of ancient traditions merging seamlessly with the present.

And as the stars glittered in the ink-dark sky outside, Catherine knew that she was exactly where she belonged.

The castle corridor stretched ahead, its stone walls bathed in the soft glow of torchlight. The flickering flames cast dancing shadows, creating an ambiance of mystery and history that seemed to echo with the stories of those who had tread these same paths before.

Catherine walked alone, her footsteps echoing in the stillness as she made her way through the dimly lit corridor. Her thoughts were a swirl of emotions, a tapestry woven with the threads of love, loyalty, and newfound belonging.

Amidst the quiet, the sound of another's footsteps reached her ears. She turned to find Sir Kellan approaching, his presence a sudden interruption in her solitary journey. His voice, rich with the lilt of the Scottish dialect, carried across the space between them as he spoke.

"I'll be leavin' the Fort," Kellan announced, his expression a mixture of resignation and something she couldn't quite place.

Catherine met his gaze with curiosity. "Leaving?" she echoed. She almost didn't believe him and thought maybe this was ploy of some kind to gain her attention.

"Aye," Kellan confirmed, his gaze steady upon her. "Laird Colin has need of me and has sent a replacement to fill my position here. 'Tis time for me to return home."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Catherine said sincerely. She had actually enjoyed being friends with him and had hoped that at some point they could return to that status.

"I wanted to give you this before I left." He extended his hand, which held a book.

Catherine took it and looked down at it. It was another book of poetry. Her fingers brushed against the aged pages, a silent acknowledgment of the significance of this parting gesture. "Thank you, Sir Kellan, I shall treasure it," she said, her voice carrying the weight of farewell.

"Have a good life, Lady Catherine, I shall remember my time here with you fondly."

As Sir Kellan turned to leave, the echo of his footsteps fading into the distance, Catherine realized that she would actually miss him. However, as the corridor once again returned to silence, Catherine couldn't help but feel a sense of closure, a chapter of her life closing even as new ones awaited her.

Catherine's footsteps carried her from the corridor into the intimate sanctuary of the bedchamber she now shared with Eamon. The room was adorned with a sense of familiarity now, each piece of furniture and tapestry bearing witness to her presence and the evolution of her experiences within these walls.

Catherine's gaze shifted to the window, where a sliver of moonlight spilled into the room. She had adapted to this life, finding her place among the clan and the rugged beauty of the Highlands. And in the midst of it all, she had discovered a love that transcended the grand gestures and poetic words—a love that was woven into the fabric of her everyday existence.

As she settled beneath the covers and into Eamon's arms, the warmth of the hearth still lingering in the air, Catherine's thoughts carried her into the realm of dreams. And in that space between wakefulness and slumber, she embraced the truth that had become her anchor—the substance of love, nurtured in the simplicity of shared moments and genuine connection, was what truly set her heart alight.

One crisp morning, a few weeks after Sir Kellan's departure, Eamon taught Catherine how to wield a bow and arrow, his hands guiding hers as they aimed for a target in the distance. The closeness of their bodies sent a shiver of awareness down Catherine's spine, and she found herself lost in the intensity of his gaze. It was a dance of trust and vulnerability, a silent promise that they would always be there to support each other.

The clan's celebrations over the last several weeks had brought them even closer, the lively music and dancing infusing the air with an electric energy. Catherine found herself swept into the whirlwind of it all, Eamon's hand firmly holding hers as they twirled and swayed. Their eyes met amidst the revelry, the world around them fading into the background as they shared a moment that was theirs alone.

Late one evening, under a sky studded with stars, they wandered to a hidden glen that Eamon had discovered as a boy. The glen was a sanctuary of nature's beauty, where the scent of wildflowers mingled with the soft rustling of leaves. It was there that Eamon took Catherine's hand and led her in a dance that seemed to transcend time itself, their movements a reflection of their hearts' rhythm as he said, "Love, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes!" Catherine shouted and threw her arms around him. She'd been hoping he would ask and could not imagine a better place for a proposal than this.

Catherine marveled at the way her heart had found its home in the Highlands, in the arms of a man who had shown her the true essence of love. Each moment they shared

was a page in the story they were weaving together—a story of two souls entwined, bound by a love that was as vast and timeless as the rugged landscape that surrounded them.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:19 am

Two more months had slipped by since Sir Kellan's departure from Fort Donald, his memory fading like a distant echo. She rarely even thought of him and the friendship they had shared. She was too busy living her life with Eamon to even care what Sir Kellan was doing.

On this day, the air was tinged with excitement and anticipation, for Fort Donald was alive with the vibrant energy of festivities. The courtyard was adorned with colorful banners and flowers, their vibrant hues a reflection of the joy that filled the air. Local villagers bustled about, their laughter and chatter creating a symphony of celebration.

As the sun bathed the fort in a warm golden glow, the castle's doors swung open to welcome the guests who had come from far and wide to witness Catherine's and Eamon's union. The halls were adorned with tapestries that told the stories of the clan's history, a rich tapestry woven with threads of courage, love, and loyalty.

Catherine stood in her former bedchamber, her heart flutter as she gazed at her reflection in the mirror. Her gown was a masterpiece of intricate lace and delicate silk, created by Bridie, its elegance a testament to the bond she was about to forge with the man she loved. Her fingers brushed over the necklace Eamon had given her, a symbol of their connection that now felt as essential as the air she breathed.

As the ceremony began, the villagers gathered in the dining hall, their faces a tapestry of emotions—joy, hope, and the kindling of memories that were etched into the very stone of the castle. Cam MacDonald stood at the front, his voice a steady anchor as he officiated the union of Catherine and Eamon.

When Catherine entered the room, everyone stood but she only had eyes for Eamon,

who was a vision of strength and honor, his kilt and plaid a testament to his lineage as he stood at the front near Cam. His eyes shone with a mix of nerves and anticipation, as she approached him.

With every vow exchanged, every promise made, the bond between Catherine and Eamon grew stronger. Their hands clasped together; their fingers entwined in a declaration of unity that went beyond words. The hall seemed to hold its breath as they sealed their love with a kiss, the echoes of their passion reverberating through the very walls.

The wedding day's radiant joy flowed seamlessly into a grand feast, a celebration that embraced the spirit of the Highlands with every morsel of food, every note of music, and every step on the dance floor. The banquet tables groaned under the weight of delectable dishes—platters of smoked fish, roasted crab meats, hearty sea stews, freshly baked bread, and an array of vegetables that reflected the bountiful land. The air was fragrant with food.

The lively strains of fiddles and bagpipes echoed through the hall, inspiring feet to move and hearts to dance. Couples swirled and twirled, their laughter and the rustling of their garments harmonizing with the joyful music. The room was alive with the energy of celebration, the walls pulsating with the rhythm of the dance.

In the midst of this euphoria, Catherine and Eamon found themselves stealing moments alone. Their fingers brushed, igniting a spark of intimacy that only they could share amidst the crowd. Eamon's eyes held a mixture of tenderness and wonder as he took in the sight of Catherine in her wedding gown, the embodiment of his dreams and the reality of his love.

As they stepped away from the dance floor, they found a quiet corner, a sanctuary of stolen moments in the midst of the jubilation. Eamon's voice was a husky whisper as he told Catherine, "I cannae believe my luck. To have found a woman who has

captured my heart in a way I never imagined."

Catherine's response was filled with the same heartfelt emotion, expressing her gratitude, "I feel the same way. And so grateful for finding a love that is strong enough to weather any storm."

Their hands found each other, their fingers intertwining as if to form an unbreakable bond. They shared dreams and aspirations, whispered promises and declarations of love, their voices blending with the soft strains of the music that wafted through the air. With each word, their connection grew stronger, deepening the intimacy they had already discovered.

The night seemed to stretch on, a tapestry of laughter, music, and the warmth of companionship. The feast continued, the tables replenished with even more culinary delights, and the air infused with the rich aroma of mead and ale. The laughter of friends and the clinking of goblets created a symphony of celebration, a symphony that would forever echo in the memory of this momentous day.

As the hours danced by, Catherine and Eamon found themselves once again on the dance floor, their bodies moving in perfect harmony. Their eyes locked, the world around them fading into insignificance as they reveled in the presence of each other. The night, like their love, was boundless, filled with the promise of a future as bright as the stars that adorned the darkening sky.

Amidst the swirl of festivities, a face caught Catherine's attention, a face that seemed oddly familiar in this lively crowd. Her heart quickened as she realized it was the same man, the man she'd thought was her professor from that fateful encounter in the cabin at University. She now knew he wasn't that professor, but Dub Sith, the Fae man who had brought her to this time and place. His presence here was as unexpected as it was intriguing, a twist of fate that piqued her curiosity.

Determined to uncover the truth, Catherine made her way through the throng, her steps guided by a mix of trepidation and anticipation. She approached him cautiously, her gaze intense as she met his eyes. The corners of his lips twitched, a knowing smile that suggested he had been waiting for this moment.

"Dub Sith," she addressed him, her voice a blend of determination and curiosity. "I remember you from that cabin. You were not my professor. But what is your true purpose here now?"

His eyes twinkled with an otherworldly light as he replied, "Ah, Catherine. I am sorry to have attempted to fool you. You've always been quite inquisitive."

She wasted no time, her voice firm as she questioned him, "Why the trickery? Why not just ask if I'd like to come here?"

Dub Sith scratched his chin, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You must understand, lass, I have lived through eras where such propositions were... well, not always received with enthusiasm by the women of your time."

Catherine's eyebrows raised in disbelief. "You're telling me that you couldn't have just asked?"

He chuckled softly. "Perhaps you're right. Times have changed, it seems."

She crossed her arms, her tone firm. "It's worth a shot. I probably would have jumped at the chance if you'd offered it."

Dub Sith's gaze softened, and he nodded in agreement. "Very well, Catherine. I'll keep that in mind for the future."

"You mean there will be more women you're going to bring here?"

His smile was enigmatic. "Perhaps."

Their exchange was both cryptic and revealing, a dance of words that hinted at mysteries and possibilities beyond Catherine's understanding. Dub Sith's eyes held a depth of knowledge that transcended time itself, a reminder that the world was far more complex and mysterious than she could have ever imagined.

As the night continued to unfold around them, Catherine felt a sense of closure, a resolution to a question that had lingered in her mind since that encounter in the cabin. The Fae's presence, his confession, and their conversation added a layer of intrigue to the celebration, a reminder that even amidst the revelry, there were secrets waiting to be unraveled, and stories waiting to be discovered. She also came to the stark realization that she had no intention of asking this Dub Sith if there were any way back to her own time. That desire had long gone from her heart, and knowing that made her very happy, indeed.

In the tender glow of the festivities, Catherine's heart swelled as she embraced Eamon. The warmth of his presence enveloped her, a comfort that spoke of shared trials and triumphs. She held him close, a silent exchange of love and gratitude that needed no words to convey its depth.

As the music and laughter swirled around them, Cam approached Eamon, his expression grave despite the joyous occasion. "The rumors persist, brought to me this eve but some of our more distant guests, Eamon," he said in a hushed tone. "Malcolm is still gathering forces and staying hidden, perhaps with allies."

Eamon's jaw clenched, his determination evident as he met Cam's gaze. "We'll find him," he affirmed. "We'll flush him out, for the safety of our land."

Cam nodded, acknowledging the unspoken commitment between them. "But for now, my friend," Eamon continued, a playful glint in his eyes, "I must dance with my

bride."

With those words, he took Catherine's hand, his touch sending a shiver of anticipation down her spine. They moved to the rhythm of the music, their steps fluid and harmonious, as if the world itself was celebrating their union.

As the music's melody waned, Eamon's hand found Catherine's once more. With a look that spoke volumes, he led her through the castle's dimly lit corridors. Their steps seemed to echo the rhythm of their hearts, the shared beat of two souls entwined.

Finally, they arrived at their room. Eamon pushed the door open, revealing a space that took Catherine's breath away. Their room had been turned into a haven of comfort and beauty, with a cozy sitting area adorned with plush cushions and rich tapestries. A roaring fire crackled in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the walls.

Beyond the sitting area lay their bedchamber, a sanctuary of intimacy and promise. The bed was grand and inviting, draped with rich fabrics that whispered of luxury. Moonlight filtered through the windows, casting a soft glow upon the room. It was a haven that seemed to be made just for them, a space where their love could flourish.

Eamon's eyes held a mixture of tenderness and anticipation as he looked at Catherine. In one swift motion, he swept her into his arms, carrying her effortlessly over the threshold. Her laughter filled the air, a joyful sound that echoed through the chambers.

Settling her down gently, Eamon's gaze searched hers, a question lingering in his eyes. "Are you truly happy, Catherine?" he asked, his voice a soft rumble.

Catherine met his gaze with unwavering sincerity. "I didn't know such happiness

existed," she replied, her fingers reaching up to caress his cheek. "But I've found it in you, Eamon."

His heart swelled, a deep emotion radiating in his gaze. "And I in you," he murmured, his lips finding hers in a gentle, lingering kiss.

As they embraced in the heart of their sanctuary, the promise of a future filled with love and adventure unfurled before them. The past and the present converged in their union, and as the moon continued its journey across the sky, Catherine and Eamon embarked on a new chapter of their story, bound by a love that transcended time itself.

Early that morning, before the sun rose, Catherine found herself stealing a moment of solitude by a window. The soft glow of candlelight mingled with the gentle moonbeams, casting a soothing ambiance. She leaned against the window sill, gazing out at the landscape that stretched beyond, lost in thought.

The memories of her life at the University, once so vivid, now seemed distant and pale. Her mind used to be filled with lectures, seminars, and endless stacks of books. But here, in this world of castles and clans, those concerns felt like ephemeral wisps of a forgotten dream.

A wistful smile tugged at the corners of Catherine's lips as she realized how thoroughly she had embraced her new reality. The people, the places, and most of all, the man she loved – they had become her present, her heartbeat. She had come to know their laughter, their sorrows, their courage, as if she had lived among them all her life.

With a soft sigh, she admitted to herself that the dusty pages of history books could never compare to living and breathing history itself. The taste of freshly baked bread, the embrace of the wind as it swept through the highland hills, the warmth of

Eamon's hand in hers – these were the things that had become her anchors.

She traced a finger along the window pane, her thoughts dancing with the play of shadows. The past, once confined to the pages of textbooks, had come alive around her. She had walked through its corridors, felt its heartbeat, and discovered a love that transcended centuries.

In this world of ancient tales and untamed landscapes, Catherine had found a truth that resonated deep within her soul. Her heart had found its home amidst the rugged beauty of the Highlands, and as she watched the stars above, she knew that she had no desire to return to the life she had left behind. The past was no longer a mere academic pursuit; it was her present, her reality, and the tapestry of her own adventure.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:19 am

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 9, 2025, 7:19 am

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.