



Highlander Obsessed

(Highlander In Time #16)

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Category: Historical

Description: When Amelia Cosgrove takes a jog into the Scottish mist, she never expects to stumble back in time—or straight into the arms of a man who believes she's the reincarnation of his murdered wife

As a champion MMA fighter, Amelia has faced down every opponent, but none as formidable as Lord Percival Taffington, a scheming English noble determined to impose his cruel will on the MacClaran clan. After arriving at the Keep, she finds herself caught between her growing feelings for the dashing diplomat Hamish MacClaran and the threats of Taffington, who views her as a prize to be claimed.

Hamish, a widower haunted by the tragic loss of his gentle wife, is captivated by Amelia's fierce strength and sharp wit. Together, they must navigate a treacherous game of diplomacy and defiance as Taffington's dangerous obsession escalates. When Amelia's fighting skills prove invaluable in defending the clan and her own honor, she and Hamish discover a bond that transcends time itself.

But with the stakes growing ever higher, Taffington issues a chilling ultimatum: the reinstatement of an archaic, barbaric law that would claim Amelia as his own. To protect her and his people, Hamish must decide whether to risk a dangerous duel or play a more cunning game of wits and courage.

Highlander Obsessed is the sixteenth book in the Highlander of Time series, a spellbinding tale of love, loyalty, and defiance, perfect for fans of time-travel romance and strong heroines who refuse to back down. Grab your copy today, and enter the exciting world of Highlander of Time!

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CHAPTER 1

It was getting harder and harder to find a bar where they could drink in peace these days. Amelia had always sworn she wouldn't become one of those people who complained about how hard it was to be rich and famous, knowing firsthand how aggravating it was to hear when you weren't similarly afflicted, but it had been a long damn season and right now if one more grinning fan popped up wanting a photograph, she didn't trust herself not to snap like a twig.

Thank God for Carmen. She'd shot through an address an hour ago, and though the cab driver had questioned Amelia twice before he'd accepted her fare and let her get out of the car, she knew right away she was in the right place. Out in the outer suburbs of the big city, far enough away from all the glitz and glam that there wouldn't be any tourists with their eyes peeled for celebrities. It was still Los Angeles, though, which Amelia was hoping would mean that the locals would be jaded enough by their own encounters with Hollywood A-listers that spotting someone like Amelia wouldn't even register on their radar.

It was a rough neighborhood, Amelia noted — no wonder the cab driver had been so wary of leaving her here by herself. A young woman, late on a Saturday night and alone in a neighborhood like this... she was glad she'd tipped him well. But his concern about her told her that he hadn't recognized her. If he had, her safety in a place like this would've been the last thing on his mind. Grinning to herself, she pulled her jacket a little tighter around her shoulders — it never got properly freezing out here, not like it did back home, but the night air was chilly. With the week she'd had, honestly, she'd have welcomed a bit of trouble from a stranger on the street. It would be nice to get some frustration out, and to teach a scumbag or two to think

twice before they bothered a woman walking alone...

Not that she made a habit of stalking the streets like Batman, of course. Maybe when she'd been a kid, just starting out with her martial arts training, she'd allowed herself to fantasize about that idea. But it hadn't taken her teachers long to beat that idealism out of her. The best fighter in the world would lose to the worst every time, if the worst was armed. A gun or even a knife tipped the odds too far. There was a reason cops were armed with more than just their fists. But Amelia had never liked weapons much. It was hand-to-hand combat that she loved, not keeping the peace. And so, after a brief flirtation with the idea of joining the police force or the army, she'd chosen her path.

And it had been a hard, bloody path — quite literally. She had the genetics, she had the physical resilience, and she had the grit to train harder and harder with every passing day... but even then, she was well aware how much luck had been involved with getting her to where she was. Stronger fighters than her had fallen by the wayside — fighters with more talent, with more determination, with more sheer strength knocked out by misfortune, by a blow that hit just the right spot to cause a career-ending injury — or even worse, by pointless industry politics, by pissing off the wrong promoter at the wrong time, or choosing the wrong manager.

Well, Amelia hadn't chosen the wrong manager. Amelia had Carmen. Carmen Fianto, these days the most sought-after manager in just about the whole damn game... but a decade ago when they'd met, she hadn't had that reputation to go on. Amelia had had to trust her gut, and her gut told her that she liked the pint-sized fireball with the fierce blue eyes who'd bounced out of her seat at the bar to pull her into a hug instead of the usual sterile handshake. There had been plenty of buzz back then, with Amelia's prospects growing by the day as the industry began to sit up and take notice of the young rookie with the buzzcut black hair. There were bigger names she could've gone with ... but she'd trusted her gut, and her gut had rewarded her not only with a manager who'd never put a foot wrong, but with a lifelong friendship she

treasured more than just about any other relationship in her life.

Which explained why she was walking into a dingy bar in the Los Angeles suburbs right now, scanning the smokey room for that familiar silhouette. Carmen was in the most inconspicuous booth in the place, of course — old habits. Not that anyone would have seen them even if they'd sat at the bar with a neon sign above their heads.

“This place is perfect,” Amelia said with a relieved sigh, sliding into the booth opposite Carmen. Her friend flashed her a smile, manicured nails rattling rapidly off her phone screen. Her typing speed was nothing short of alarming — but Amelia had seen how quickly her email inbox filled up, and she'd long since given up trying to talk her friend into putting the phone down until she was good and ready.

“Well, when you drink with me, you only get bothered when you want to.” Carmen grinned as a final flurry of taps signed off her final email, then set the phone triumphantly down on the table. “So. What're we drinking to first?”

“The fight,” Amelia fired back, returning the grin. There was a pitcher of beer on the table already, and she poured them both a generous glassful.

“Sorry to put you up against such a pushover,” Carmen said, eyes sparkling. “I'll try to find you more of a challenge next time.”

Amelia laughed as she raised her glass. “Oh, yeah. If there's one thing they say about Ruby Gunn, it's how easy she is to knock out.”

Carmen was messing with her, of course. The fight had been one of the most grueling of Amelia's career to date, and winning it ranked among her top five proudest career moments to date, easy.

“Here's to you, you absolute machine. Top of your game and still climbing.”

“Wouldn’t be here without you,” Amelia responded, clinking her glass against her manager’s. They both drank deeply, letting the atmosphere of the bar fill the almost reverent silence between them.

“Alright,” Carmen said briskly. “That’s enough sappy stuff for the night. Next subject.”

“That’s it? I beat one of the toughest female fighters in US history, and we take a single sip of beer before we’re talking about the next one? You’re a hard taskmaster, Fianto.”

“Absolutely not,” Carmen retorted sharply. “We’re wallowing in this victory for a month at least. You didn’t think I’d forgotten about our deal, did you?”

“Our deal?” Amelia tried not to look as guilty as she felt. She’d hoped that Carmen had forgotten about the agreement they’d made at the beginning of the season, but she knew she should’ve known better. Carmen had a mind like a steel trap — and just in case that failed her, she wrote absolutely everything down, too.

“Yes, our deal. Our deal that you’re going to take a damn break.” Carmen’s smile was suddenly steely. “I’ve seen more than enough fighters burn themselves out then go down to an avoidable injury, Amelia. You’re going supersonic right now, and that’s exciting, but I’ll be damned if I let that happen to you.”

Amelia had locked eyes with some of the most formidable women in the country, but none of them ever put the kind of fear into her that Carmen did with that smile. She spread her hands in surrender and nodded agreement, relieved to see the tension in her manager’s smile drop a few notches. “A break. Agreed. Absolutely.”

“Try to sound a little less like I’m sending you to the gallows, maybe,” Carmen said drily. “It’ll be good for you. A couple of weeks somewhere, lots of food, lots of

sleep... do I really have to twist your arm on this one? Sunshine! Beaches! Or mountains, or... you know, we've known each other a decade and I genuinely don't know what you do to relax."

"Neither do I," Amelia admitted, winning a laugh from her manager. "But I'll figure it out."

"Hawaii's always a safe bet," Carmen said with a shrug. "Throw some of those winnings at a fancy resort, you'll be a different person when you come back. A few cocktails by the pool, maybe a holiday fling with some sun-kissed stranger..." Carmen sighed. "My sales pitch is too good. Now I want to go."

"Come with me," Amelia suggested. "I'm sure there'll be plenty of sun-kissed strangers for two of us."

Carmen snorted. "Yeah, maybe. Get back to me once I get through my backlog." One manicured finger tapped on her phone, still face-down on the table between them. "Should be anywhere from three years to three centuries."

"Shame." Amelia sighed. "I don't know, though. Hawaii feels a little close to home, you know? Not to sound like an absolute asshole, but... I want to go somewhere where nobody recognizes me. I'm so damn sick of being Amelia Cosgrove." She finished her beer and poured herself another one, gathering her strength. "I didn't tell you about my date the other night, did I?"

"I was maintaining a respectful silence," Carmen said gravely. "But I'm guessing it wasn't great, based on the rage you brought to the fight."

Amelia snorted. "Yeah, I guess I've got him to thank for the win. He was a perfect gentleman the whole night — none of the dealbreaker fame-seeking bullshit, wasn't weird about it when fans recognized me, actually wanted to hear about who I was —

and I mean, I showed you his picture, right? That didn't hurt."

"You've always had a weakness for blue eyes," Carmen said, fluttering her lashes over her own bright blue eyes. "That's why we get on so well."

"His hotel was closer, so I walked him home," Amelia continued after another steadying draft of beer. "I could've sworn he was ready to call it a night right there. He played this so well, Carmen, I can't even tell you. I basically had to invite myself up."

"You absolute wildcat," Carmen said, eyes glowing with approval. "Love this. Loving this for you. So far," she added, her smile fading a little at the look on Amelia's face. "I'm guessing things got weird?"

"Cameras, Carmen. He had three damn cameras set up around the bed."

"No!"

"I swear he did. They were well-hidden, too. I wouldn't have seen a damn thing if I hadn't noticed one of the boxes in the trash. This asshole was trying to film a sex tape with me. Can you imagine—" She broke off, feeling her hands clenching alarmingly tightly around the glass she was holding. It wouldn't be the first glass she'd broken.

"What did you do?" Carmen's eyes were wide. "Is this the part where I help you hide a body? Because I just got my nails done, but I'm willing."

"I refrained from inflicting physical harm," Amelia said with as much dignity as she could muster. "On him, anyway — which I think he was surprised by." She huffed laughter.

The one redeeming memory of the whole horrible evening had been the look of abject

fear on the guy's face when she'd pulled his first camera out of its hiding place and turned to confront him.

“Smashed the cameras up, though.”

“Flick his name and the name of the hotel through to me,” Carmen said immediately, scooping her phone off the desk. “Let me make his life hell over this for a little while, huh?”

“You don't have to?—”

“I want to,” Carmen cut her off sharply, blue eyes burning. “That's shitty as hell, what happened to you, babe. It happened because you're hot, and female, and young, and famous, and that's absolute bullshit — but what also comes with money and fame is power. I doubt you're the first girl this creep has preyed on, but if you let me, I can make sure you're the last. Let me make him suffer, Amelia. Please?”

“Hell yeah. Let's be Batman,” Amelia said, and the savage glee on Carmen's face was enough to make her feel a little less shitty about the whole situation — at least for a minute or two. “It would've been more satisfying to beat the shit out of him, but... you know. Moral high ground and all that.”

“Ah, the high road. Famously lonely.” Carmen grinned. “What's that old song you used to sing back in the road trip days? You take the high road, and I'll take the low road?—”

“—and I'll be in Scotland before you,” Amelia finished the melody, laughing. “My grandma's favorite.”

She sipped her beer, watching as Carmen tapped furiously on the screen of her phone. No doubt the creep she'd been on that date with would be having a very difficult

weekend. The song kept echoing in her mind, and she felt an idea beginning to coalesce as she finished her second beer. By the time Carmen looked up again, the idea had taken a fragile shape. Like Carmen had said, her star was well and truly on the rise here. But it was a wide, wide world... and though she might have been reaching household name status here, she'd never so much as left the United States.

“I think I know where I want to go on vacation.”

“Great.” Carmen beamed, ever the professional — then pulled a laptop out of her handbag and slammed it down on the sticky bar table. “Let’s get you booked .”

CHAPTER 2

Was this a stupid idea, Amelia kept wondering? She'd been two beers deep and still buzzing on the adrenaline of her triumphant final fight of the season when she'd made this decision, and Carmen had brought the idea of striking while the iron was hot to a whole new level. Right there in the bar, using spotty wifi from the bar, they'd booked the whole damn trip. In another life, Carmen would have made an amazing travel agent. Amelia had only had the faintest idea of what she wanted to do, but within an hour they had a fully fleshed-out itinerary — a three week international trip to Scotland, to investigate her own ancestry.

Not that she knew the first damned thing about her ancestry that was. She'd spent precious little time with her grandmother before she'd passed away, and though she had a distant memory of her pleasant Scottish accent that was just about the only information she had to go on. But Carmen had been undaunted. She'd scoured the web for just about everything a tourist could get up to in Scotland, firing question after question at Amelia until she was beginning to worry that this vacation was going to take a year, not a few weeks.

Sensing her panic, Carmen had agreed to keep it simple. The point of the trip wasn't to do a whirlwind tour of every single city and town in the entire country of Scotland — she'd had more than enough of that kind of travel. They narrowed down a list of interesting potential accommodation, ranging from the absurdly luxurious to the intriguingly rustic — and in the end, booked her in for a three-week stay at a historic hotel in the countryside. It had once been the home of an English lord, before falling into disrepair over the centuries. Then it had been restored — some effort by a descendant of the original lord, from what the website said — and turned into a hotel

that allowed its guests to experience a glimpse of history without forgoing all the modern conveniences. The staff even dressed up in period-appropriate costuming, something that made Carmen roll her eyes, but that Amelia privately found rather charming.

There were plenty of other options on the long lists that Carmen kept showing her, but there was something about the Weatherby Manor that she kept coming back to. And so they'd booked it — a three week stay in the most luxurious room on offer, a suite that had originally been Lord Weatherby's most impressive guest quarters. The cost was exorbitant — but that was nothing compared to Carmen's next pitch.

"A private jet?" Amelia had demanded, half convinced her friend was messing with her. "Are you kidding?"

"You hate airports, Amelia. Remember that guy at Kennedy who stared at you for our whole stopover? This is supposed to be a break from all that. I'm not letting you start and end the trip with airport sandwiches and the — the teeming masses. And don't start on me about the cost," she warned her. "You know I've always admired how thrifty you are, but there's a time to save and a time to treat yourself, and the time to treat yourself is right the hell now."

She'd blamed the decision on the alcohol, in the end... but she had to admit, as embarrassed as she felt to be climbing aboard her own private jet, there was an intense sense of relief that she wouldn't be worrying about being sat next to a fan who'd pepper her with questions for the entire flight. The staff were pleasant and friendly, and if they found her complete lack of familiarity with private jet protocol amusing, they didn't let on. Soon she was sipping champagne in a comfortable armchair, looking out over the last American sunset she'd see for a month.

Something kept telling her not to get used to it, that was the trouble — some kneejerk reaction that still hadn't faded since her childhood. You learned to think a certain

way, when you grew up as poor as she had, and that kind of thinking didn't go away overnight. Amelia could still hardly believe the numbers she saw whenever she checked her bank account. Some part of her wanted to march into a bank and withdraw every last cent and bury it in the woods somewhere, so paranoid was she that the money would all disappear overnight. Money never stayed, that was the lesson of her childhood. It got eaten away one way or another... whether on bills or rent or yet more repairs on their busted old car, or on the cheap whiskey her father drank every day of his life until the last one.

A shiver ran down her spine, and she put that thought firmly out of her mind. She was on holiday for the first time in years, and she was damn well going to enjoy it.

It felt almost wrong, getting an actually decent sleep on a plane, and when the steward came in to tell her that they'd arrived in Scotland, she was almost sad to be leaving the jet. She was escorted by yet more smiling staff from the jet to a car waiting on the tarmac, which had already been loaded up with her bags. After a moment of hesitation, she sat in the front seat beside the driver, who flashed her a warm smile before starting the car. Should she talk to him, she wondered? Or was that not the done thing?

But any awkwardness she might have felt was quickly eclipsed by the view through the windows. With the airport left behind, they were quickly surrounded by rolling green hills, the kind of thing that she'd only ever seen in cartoons. Feeling like a kid, she all but pressed her nose against the window — the driver rolled it down for her and she couldn't help but laugh a little as the cool breeze tousled her hair. She pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Carmen, confirming firstly that she'd arrived safely, and secondly that as always, her manager had been right about everything. Private plane, private car... this beat the hell out of a crowded economy flight and a shuttle bus full of gawking strangers.

The drive felt like it flew by, and soon they were rolling up the driveway of a

picturesque manor. Amelia gazed up at the familiar facade, catching her breath a little — somehow, the photos on the website hadn't quite done it justice. There had been before and after shots on the website, pictures of what the run-down old ruin had looked like before the restoration team had worked their magic, and she made a note to learn as much as she could about that process. It was such flawless work that she could hardly believe the building had ever been in such disrepair. Again, she thought of her father, who'd been a handyman and a decorator when he'd managed to hold a job down — and again, she firmly dismissed the thought. This trip was about having fun in a brand new place, not dredging up old trauma.

The driver helped her inside with her bags, and though he tried to protest that the gratuity had already been taken care of, she forced a tip into his hand regardless. She might be stepping into a lavish new lifestyle, but she sure as hell wasn't going to become the kind of person who didn't tip.

Taking a deep breath, Amelia stepped through the front doors of Weatherby Manor, looking forward to being transported back in time.

CHAPTER 3

The woman at the front desk greeted her cheerfully, but she was relieved to see no hint of recognition on the woman's bright face. Amelia's bags were bustled off to her room, which lay at the far end of a winding corridor upstairs — the receptionist led her up the stairs and pressed a map of the premises into her hands, promising that she'd know the maze-like corridors like the back of her hand before the week was out. The room was gorgeous, of course — far more space than the hotel rooms she'd gotten used to over the last few years, and tastefully decorated with what the receptionist told her were restored antiques, many of which dated back to the year the manor had been built. Already worried she was going to break something irreplaceable, Amelia unpacked carefully, wincing at every squeak of the antique armoire's drawers.

She knew what Carmen would say, of course — that if she broke something, she had more than enough money to pay for it to be replaced. And she'd be right. And anyway, these old things had withstood the centuries intact. How likely was it that Amelia would be what finally took them out? She'd never been clumsy — she liked to think that the discipline a fighting career had taught her extended to a certain level of carefulness in her day to day life, too. She was dangerous in the ring, of course, but that was about it.

It was mid-afternoon, and though the receptionist had encouraged her to get some rest after her long journey, she found herself with energy to spare. Dinner wasn't for a few hours, she was already unpacked, and her body was feeling antsy after so much sitting down over the last couple of days. She'd discussed the break with her trainer, who seemed to share Carmen's opinion that it was about time she get some rest, but it

wasn't like she was on bed rest, was it? Feeling oddly like she was breaking the rules of her own holiday, she slipped on her running shoes and headed down the stairs.

The fresh country air made a welcome change from Los Angeles, where she'd spent the last few months of her life. The manor itself had been built at the center of the Weatherby estate, and the original walls had also been restored, marking off a section of countryside that was dotted with walking trails and picturesque picnic spots for guests of the hotel to enjoy. Amelia picked a path at random and set off running, grateful to be finally stretching her legs again. She'd always loved running, but being a professional athlete had taken some of the fun out of it. It felt incredibly good to be out like this without any pressure to hit a certain pace or heart rate. Hell, she wasn't even wearing her watch.

She spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the estate, alternating between running and walking when something caught her eye. The trails were well marked and there were plenty of signs up with interesting trivia about the area, and about the original inhabitants of the land she was standing on... those with a truer claim to it, some might say. Amelia was a little embarrassed about how little she knew about the colonial history of Scotland. She had known from the website that Weatherby wasn't a Scottish name — that the man whose manor she was staying in had been an Englishman, probably there to harass her ancestors. Still, the manor was in Scottish hands now — everyone she'd met so far shared that same delightful accent, with the hotel staffed and run by people from the surrounding towns. What would Weatherby think of that? she wondered. What would her ancestors think of their far-flung descendant, coming all the way back across the sea to visit the homeland?

“Sorry I didn't find out more about you,” she said softly to the unruffled waters of a small pond at the southern end of the estate. There had been several placards about the local Scotsmen and their relationship with the Weatherby's, but though she'd scanned for her surname, she'd come up short. Was Cosgrove even a Scottish name? It had been her grandmother's maiden name, but before that, she had no way of

knowing ... her father hadn't exactly been a font of knowledge about their family history. She grimaced at the water, annoyed to find her father's memory stirring again, then bounced to her feet, suddenly restless. The sun was getting low in the sky — no sense sitting out here until she caught a chill. She pushed herself a little on the run back to the manor, and by the time she arrived, the sun had set, and she was pleasantly sweaty.

One indulgent and definitely not period-accurate hot shower later, Amelia was warm, dry, and looking forward to one of the hearty meals for which Scotland was so famous. When she reached the dining room, she was surprised to find it half-full already, with many fellow guests already seated around the quaint little tables that filled what had once been a formal dining room favored by Lord Weatherby and his most honored guests — at least, according to the plaques on the wall. She was looking forward to touring the kitchens later, but for now she contented herself with a seat at a communal table of fellow solo travelers. Here it came — the moment of truth. Had her fame followed her across the ocean? There was an old man sitting opposite the place she took, and for a moment the sharp look he shot her made her heart sink.

"I know you," he said slowly.

"Oh?" Amelia said faintly, already wishing she'd opted to have dinner in her room.

"Yes, I'm certain of it. Didn't I see you out running this afternoon?"

Relief hit her like a truck — she vaguely remembered a passerby raising a hand to her in greeting as she pounded down the pathway back toward the manor. "Yeah, I remember. Sorry I didn't stop."

"No, lass, you were a woman on a mission. Quite a pace you were setting. Are you an athlete, then?"

“I do enjoy athletic activities,” Amelia replied, smiling.

The meal passed rather pleasantly, after that. They were soon joined by more solo guests, including a middle-aged history professor on sabbatical, a retiree who was doing a tour of all the castles in the area, and — to her particular interest — a young man with bright blue eyes and a fetching mop of tousled ginger hair that kept falling in his face. At first, he was a little evasive about what had brought him to Weatherby Manor, but a bit of good-natured prying from the history professor soon had him confessing that he’d booked the trip a few months ago to celebrate an anniversary with his girlfriend. Amelia’s disappointment was quickly banished, however, when he explained that the girl had unceremoniously dumped him before he could surprise her with the news.

“I looked into getting a refund,” he said with a shrug. “But they’d have taken my deposit and I’d already gotten the time off work... it’s a shame, really. She was the one who was into all of this stuff. I’ve never met someone so obsessed with Downton Abbey...”

“Still, nice that you’re making the most of it,” the history professor said, her green eyes twinkling.

“There are certainly worse places to nurse a broken heart,” agreed Gregory, the old man who’d greeted her when she’d first sat down. “Perhaps you’ll discover your own passion for history.”

Or maybe for something else, Amelia couldn’t help but think, sipping thoughtfully at her wine and pretending not to notice the way the young man’s eyes kept sliding across the table toward her. She was well aware of the effect she had on men. A lifetime of mixed martial arts training had thankfully never caused a broken nose or similarly disfiguring injury, and her dedication to healthy living and hard training had accentuated the gifts nature had given her. She knew her beauty was part of what had

made her famous, and she'd resented it for a while — until Carmen told her to suck it up and quit complaining. Most athletes were genetic freaks in some way or another. The woman she'd fought a few weeks ago for example, Ruby Gunn, had an absurdly long reach for her frame — a quirk of genetics, and definitely a big part of what had gotten her to the level she was at. Why feel guilty about her natural beauty doing the same thing for her career? It wasn't like she hadn't paid for it, either — unbidden, the thought of the creep who'd tried to shoot an unlawful sex tape with her crossed her mind. Hopefully, Carmen had already worked her magic. The more she thought about it, the more Amelia liked the thought of revenge.

CHAPTER 4

After supper, the companionable little group slowly dispersed, with cheerful promises to meet back at the same table the following evening. Amelia was pleased to hear it. She'd been a little worried about feeling isolated out here — almost as worried as she had been about being mobbed by fans, which was an entertaining little irony. But knowing that there were a handful of solo travelers who'd welcome her back to their table made her feel good... as did the lingering gaze of the handsome young man who she bumped into at the bar, as if by accident. They shared a glass of wine and talked a little more, and though she studied his face closely when she told him she was a professional fighter, his flash of surprise seemed genuine.

Still, her most recent encounter with the opposite sex warned her strongly against taking things too far on this first night — so once she'd finished her drink, she bid Steven goodnight and made her way up to bed, hoping that the wine-related sleepiness she was feeling would be enough to overcome the strangeness of the time difference between this place and back home. It helped that the bed was one of the most comfortable she'd ever climbed into, of course. She had just enough presence of mind to remember to switch her mobile phone alarm off, and for the first time in months, drifted off to sleep without the knowledge that she'd be woken before dawn for a grueling workout.

But old habits died hard, and a well-rested Amelia was still among the first sleepy guests in the dining room for breakfast. She treated herself to exactly what she felt like, a carb-heavy plate of buttered toast and sweet breakfast pastries, then headed out onto the patio to eat them. It looked like they were in for some of that famous Scottish weather, she thought, looking thoughtfully up into the dark gray sky. A thin

mist of rain was already falling over the grounds, giving everything a dim, romantic feel, and though she could hear the dismayed reactions of other guests through the patio doors behind her, it wasn't enough to dim her good mood.

Her first scheduled activity of the tour would be taking place later that afternoon — a tour of what had once been the servants' quarters, led by what the brochure claimed were actual time-travelers. It would be cheesy as hell, no doubt, having actors lead them around the manor, and Amelia couldn't wait. She was on holiday — she was allowed to indulge in as much cheese as she liked. Besides, she was looking forward to exploring the building a little more. The grounds were beautiful, and the facade of the manor itself breathtaking, not to mention her room... she was looking forward to seeing the rest.

But that left the morning to kill, and she had a feeling she knew what she wanted to do. Last night at dinner, the history teacher — Margaret — had mentioned that there were all kinds of ruins in the area, many of which weren't as well restored as Weatherby Manor. The biggest tourist attraction was the castle, of course, which stood about twenty miles away across the moors and through the forest — but there were smaller points of interest between here and there, much less frequented by tourists, which was a major draw for Amelia. And so, once she'd finished her breakfast, she set out on foot to explore, a map from the receptionist tucked under her arm. The woman had gone to such a lot of trouble to find it and give it to her that she hadn't had the heart to tell her she'd most likely just navigate with her phone.

The light rain was still falling, but as a Seattle native, Amelia wouldn't have gotten far in life if a bit of rain could stop her. She'd brought a lightweight, hooded rainproof jacket with her for just such an occasion, and she lifted the hood as she set off down the driveway, headed for the gates. There wouldn't be enough time to get to the castle ruins today, so that particular trip would have to wait, but she was eager to explore what lay closer to Weatherby's for the time being. Perhaps she could accompany Margaret to the castle, if the little friendship they'd struck up last night

continued to grow. It would be nice to have a well-informed companion with her as she explored.

Amelia had been ready for the rain, but what she hadn't expected was the fog. What had seemed like a light morning mist while she'd been eating her breakfast looked a lot more formidable on this side of the wall, and though the occasional patch of sunlight broke through the thick gray clouds above, it didn't do much to the mist. She found herself checking and re-checking her phone, wary of how unreliable her signal was out here — and grateful, after all, for the physical map that the receptionist had fetched for her.

Her initial plan had been to wander from the path whenever she felt like it, but with the thick, ominous fog pressing in on her, Amelia quickly revised that plan. Stick to the paths, she told herself. There'd be plenty to see on the beaten track — she could worry about finding the more elusive spots when visibility was a little higher. Even on the path, though, the fog was formidable. She found herself losing track of time as she walked, her footsteps oddly loud, as though the fog was magnifying their volume — and oddly enough, making her feel even more alone than she was.

It wasn't long before she decided to turn back. Jacket or not, the rain and mist were making this trip miserable, and she was already thinking fondly of the restored fireplace in her room and revising her plans to an afternoon spent reading by a crackling fire. There'd be plenty of time to explore later... and if there wasn't, well, she'd come here to rest, not to map the whole of Scotland. She dropped into a light run as she turned back, eager to see the manor gates come into view.

But they didn't. Amelia checked her phone a few times, frowning as she tried to remember exactly when she'd left the manor — surely she should have been back by now. She'd only followed this one path, and yet the trees just kept coming, wreathed in that thick, billowing fog that was beginning to press in on her face and throat, not just on the path ahead of her. Her maps app was struggling to update her location, and

she grimaced at the endlessly spinning wheel — and the zero bars of service blinking at her from the toolbar. Annoyed, she jammed the phone back into her pocket and pulled out the map instead, but that wasn't much help either — it only told her what she already knew. The path she'd come along was a straight line from the gates — she should have reached them by now. She thrust the map back into her pocket and ran for another ten minutes for good measure, an easy mile — and still, the horizon remained stubbornly free of manor gates.

Amelia was actively beginning to worry, now. It could only have been midmorning, and yet it felt strangely dark under the trees, for all the world as though the sun out there was setting. Perhaps her jetlag was to blame? She'd been feeling fine earlier, but they did say it came in waves sometimes... could delayed jetlag be responsible for her having somehow gotten lost on a straight path? Maybe she'd taken a weird turn without realizing it. Maybe she'd set off down a different path altogether. Maybe?—

And just as she was talking herself into a frenzy, as if in mockery of her rising panic, there they were. The gates to Weatherby Manor, looming proudly over the trees in the distance. Her relief was so sharp she let out a wild burst of laughter, before immediately clapping a hand over her mouth, embarrassed. Still, the uneasy feeling didn't quite leave her... especially when she drew closer to the gates and realized that they were shut. They'd been wide open when she'd left, wide open the day before when she'd arrived... were they in the habit of closing them during the day, for some reason?

And that was the other thing. According to her phone, the last time she'd looked, it was barely past ten in the morning. But where the trees gave way to clear room for the gates, she could finally see the sky — and she didn't like what she was seeing. Not only were the thick, gray clouds of that morning completely gone, something else had changed, too. The bright, clear sky above her was pitch dark and blanketed with stars.

What the hell was going on here? She'd been known to lose track of the time before, especially when she was interested in something, but she'd never walked into the woods in the morning and emerged well after nightfall. Amelia stood staring at the sky like a woman who'd never seen it before, her mind racing helplessly in an attempt to explain what was happening.

How could she have lost hours of her life without even noticing that something was wrong?

CHAPTER 5

Right, she told herself firmly, trying to channel Carmen's business-like approach to confronting situations. First things first, she needed to get back to her room. If she'd been gone all day, it was possible the hotel staff were missing her — especially as she'd have failed to turn up for the tour she'd been so looking forward to. She wasn't looking forward to explaining where she'd been, but that problem could wait until she was actually back on the premises... which might be a harder problem than she'd expected. The gates were not only closed, they were shut tight — all her considerable strength wasn't enough to budge either one, and she exhaled with frustration as she stepped back to give them a calculating look. They weren't so high, were they? She'd scaled more than a few walls in her time, she certainly had the upper body strength for it... the bars of the gate were each topped with a metal spike, but aside from that there were relatively few hazards.

She had both hands on the bars and was ready to start climbing when a shout from behind her caught her attention. Suddenly feeling like a teenager caught breaking into an abandoned house again, she rocketed away from the gate with a blush rising to her cheeks. Coming down the same path she'd gotten so bafflingly lost on was the silhouette of a person, emerging from the fog with some kind of light source lifted in their right hand. The warm, flickering light put her in mind of a flame — and it was with a jolt of surprise that she realized she was right. As the man emerged through the fog, she saw he was holding a stout stick aloft, with a real flame at its tip.

But that wasn't all that was old-fashioned about the man. He was wearing what looked like medieval armor, too — the torchlight was glinting from the chainmail that covered his chest, and though a cloak of thick blue fabric covered his arms and much

of the rest of him, she could see that there was more armor beneath. To finish off the picture, he had a scabbard hanging at his belt — and one hand resting, with an unmistakable aura of caution, on the hilt that protruded from it.

“Oh, right,” Amelia said after one frozen moment of utter confusion. “You’re one of the actors.”

The man’s dark eyes narrowed, and he studied her for a moment. Thrown by her accent, maybe? A few of the other guests had been surprised to hear an American so far from home. But there was something else on this man’s face as he moved toward her, nodding toward the gates behind her.

“Were you about to scale the walls of Weatherby Manor, lass?”

Despite her disorientation and confusion, she couldn’t help but grin at the man. He deserved full credit for staying in character like this — he was probably on his way to lead a tour or something, but he was clearly already committed to his role. “I’m afraid so,” she said, affecting contrition. “I hope you won’t have to clap me in irons, sir knight.”

He wrinkled his nose at that. “I’m no knight. You’re one of those, aren’t you?”

“One of those what?”

But the knight — or the guard, or whatever he was — clearly wasn’t listening. He strode forward, raising his voice to shout a name, and to her surprise, it wasn’t long before a head popped over the wall. This man had a thick, impressive beard and a metal helmet perched on his head. She hadn’t realized the actors made use of the tops of the walls as well. After a brief and somewhat confusing conversation, using what Amelia assumed were a series of code words designed to discuss misplaced guests without breaking character, the gates squeaked open enough to admit Amelia and the

first guard, and the two of them stepped inside the manor grounds again.

“You wait here,” the guard said warningly when Amelia started off in the direction of the manor. “I’ll be fetching someone who can sort you out.”

“That’s okay,” she said quickly, worried she was getting caught up in the performance. “You don’t have to break character or anything, but I got kind of lost in the woods back there and I just want to duck back to the hotel to make sure nobody’s worried about me. But I’ll be back to see all this, for sure.”

The guard sighed, doing an impressively realistic impression of a man being confronted with a task several notches above his pay grade. “Mick? Can you keep her here while I fetch Baldric or someone?”

“Take her with you,” the guard called from the top of the wall, sounding affronted. “Isn’t right to keep a lady out here, especially one dressed like that. She’ll catch a chill.”

The first guard sighed again, then jerked his head in her direction and set off walking in the direction of the manor. She followed, torn between being genuinely chastened by the irate guard’s attitude — and delight at how realistic it all was. She stopped herself from complimenting his outfit, not wanting his grumpy persona to intensify any further, but she took in as much as she could while they were walking, fascinated despite the unusual circumstances. She’d known the staff here committed to the costuming, but this was well beyond what she’d expected.

The manor looked different at night. She couldn’t quite put her finger on what had changed, especially as the guard was hurrying her rapidly past the manor’s facade — was it that she hadn’t actually seen it from outside this late at night before? Instead of going up to the main doors, the guard seemed to be taking her around to one of the side entrances she hadn’t had an opportunity to use yet — maybe he was avoiding

interrupting the tour, she reasoned, working to keep up with the man's long strides. He shuffled her into the building through a side door into a room she didn't recognize.

"Wait here," the guard said gruffly, gesturing toward a rather beautiful armchair positioned by the small fireplace. "Warm yourself, and I'll have one of the maids bring you something hot to drink."

There was something almost apologetic in his demeanor. Worried he'd pushed the grumpy guard act a little too hard, perhaps? She nodded agreement, though it felt wrong to sit on the armchair he'd indicated, like it was too valuable an antique to be used like this. Could it be an antique? It looked so new. They really had hired the best restorers available, hadn't they?

The guard left her to her own devices then, slipping off down an unfamiliar corridor that led deeper into the house. It wasn't long before that door swung open again, though, and a small, elderly woman in a faded apron shuffled in with a tray in her wizened hands. Amelia was a little thrown by the clothing — this was quite a different uniform to the ones the staff she'd met so far had been wearing. The woman set down the tray on a side table by the armchair, then flashed Amelia a look that was equal parts curious and frightened. Was another scene about to begin? But before she could so much as greet the woman, she was on her way back to the door, bowing as she went.

"The Lord and Sir Baldric will be with you presently," the woman promised.

Amelia nodded, thoroughly mystified. Baldric... that was the name the guards had mentioned, wasn't it? Perhaps he was the main character in whatever reenactment drama she was currently witnessing. She just wished she felt a little less disoriented and worried about what had befallen her in the woods. There was no doubt in her mind, now, that she'd lost the better part of a day — and there weren't many

explanations for that kind of amnesia that didn't send a cold chill down a professional fighter's back. She needed to get checked out by a doctor, the sooner the better.

Those thoughts were making it difficult to focus, and she jumped a little when she realized she was no longer alone in the room. The old woman had left the door ajar, and there was a man lingering in the hall outside, framed by the gap between the door and the doorframe. She guessed at once he was another of the actors, from what he was wearing — which included, most notably, a rather silly wig. He was a tall, rather heavysset man in his mid-forties, dressed like some kind of nobleman... could this be the Lord, she wondered? Perhaps this actor had been cast to play Lord Weatherby himself ... though from the portraits she'd seen of the man, the physical resemblance wasn't exactly top-notch.

Amelia waited for the lingering man to enter the room, toying with the idea of getting to her feet when he entered and trying a curtsy — she wanted to be a good sport, confused or not. But he stayed where he was, lingering in the doorway, his pale blue eyes fixed on her and a faint smirk curling his fat lips unpleasantly. It was a good act, she thought, feeling a very real shiver of disgust move through her. He was doing a bang-on impression of the kind of creeps she'd spent most of her career doing her best to ignore... and right now, that was the last thing she wanted.

“Watch your eyes,” she heard herself snap. It was one of her grandmother's expressions, and it felt well and truly at home here in this quaint medieval parlor room.

The stranger's pale eyes widened with surprise for a moment — but then his smirk widened, and he chuckled, not averting his gaze in the least. If anything, she noticed him drop his eyes more pointedly, his gaze roaming across her chest and then down to her legs. It's an act, she told herself, not liking how quickly her pulse was rising. He must be playing some creepy character, this is all part of it... but as the seconds ticked by and the creep continued to ogle her, she ran out of patience. Act or no act,

she was part of this scene, too. And she wasn't going to let anyone stare at her like that, no matter the context.

"I told you to watch it," she snapped, rising to her feet and taking a step toward the doorway with her hands in loose fists at her sides. Would he back down, she wondered — the same way the guard had eased up on his grouchy routine? Part of her almost hoped he wouldn't. She'd like an excuse to rough him up a little — make him think twice about the conclusions he'd clearly drawn about the capabilities of a pretty young woman.

But before the man could react, they were both distracted by the sound of footsteps and raised voices in the hallway. The man in the wig was gone as quickly as he'd arrived, but Amelia didn't have any time to wonder why. She was too distracted by the men who'd just stepped through the open door... or more specifically, by the man who was sizing her up with the weary, put-upon expression of someone who'd been just about to go to bed. She recognized his face... not only from the portraits, but from the website and the brochures. There was no mistaking who she was looking at.

This was Lord Weatherby. And he was looking at her like she was the biggest problem he'd dealt with all week.

CHAPTER 6

“ They’re always so pretty,” the man said boredly, glancing sideways at his companion. “And always in such bizarre clothing.”

Amelia had barely taken in the second man, so shocked was she by the uncanny resemblance of this actor to the Lord for whom the manor was named. He was tall and broad, dressed in black, and something in the way he was sizing her up told her she was looking at another fighter. She loosened her fists and dropped a little of the rigidity from her posture, aware that she’d been more or less squaring up to hit that other guy in the face. No sense antagonizing these newcomers in whatever game it was she was playing... though she had to admit, as time went on without any kind of explanation forthcoming, she was beginning to feel a little agitated about the whole situation. Had they mistaken her for someone else, perhaps? Had another guest at the hotel signed up for some kind of immersive, all-in roleplaying experience and the actors at the wall had assumed it was her? She’d have hoped her clothing would be some kind of giveaway... the kind of guest who’d be interested in this kind of thing probably wouldn’t take part wearing modern workout gear, complete with logos.

“What’s your name, Miss?” the man in black said now, breaking a silence that Amelia realized with a start had been stretching for longer than she’d intended.

She cleared her throat, glancing guiltily at the Weatherby lookalike, feeling like an actor who’d missed her line. “Amelia Cosgrove,” she said after a brief pause in which she considered giving the fake name she usually used for fast food orders and the like. Nobody over here recognized her — there was no need for that kind of secrecy.

“Welcome to Weatherby Manor, Miss Cosgrove.”

The man in black had a different accent to the locals, she noticed — English, rather than Scottish, though she didn’t know the place well enough to place it more specifically. The Lord, of course, spoke with the posh, polished English accent she usually associated with the upper-crust English gentry, but it didn’t seem his guard had picked it up.

“I’m Sir Baldric. May I introduce Lord Reginald Weatherby?”

“Right,” she said, hiding a smile. Of course the lookalike was playing the Manor’s namesake. “I’ve seen your portrait, My Lord. Impressive resemblance.”

The Lord looked at her with one eyebrow raised, glancing sidelong at his guard. “Another slow one, I suppose? Have we sent a messenger to the Keep yet? I don’t really have time for any hand-holding just at the moment.”

The man called Sir Baldric nodded, and Amelia didn’t miss the brief flash of annoyance in his eyes at the Lord’s rudeness. He turned back to her, speaking almost quickly enough to cut his Lord’s words short. “Miss Cosgrove, I’m afraid we’ve got some rather — major news for you. Now, you’re a guest at Weatherby Manor, is that correct?”

“I checked in yesterday,” she said, a little surprised by this sudden shift in focus. Had they received some message that something was awry — that they had the wrong person for whatever this was?

“When the men met you at the gate,” Sir Baldric continued, his expression oddly serious. “Had you been lost in the woods beyond the manor?”

“Not lost, exactly,” she said with a frown. “I went in a straight line and came back the

same way, so I can't say I was — lost. But I do seem to have lost some time. It wasn't even midday when I left, but when I came out of the trees it was nightfall already. It's a bit of a worry, honestly. Have people been worried about where I've been?"

"I daresay they will be," Lord Weatherby muttered under his breath, examining his nails.

Sir Baldric didn't shush him exactly, but the sidelong glance he shot his Lord told her that he was firmly suppressing that instinct.

"First of all, there's no reason to believe anything's wrong," Sir Baldric said, and though the words should have been a comfort.

She felt an uneasy tingle run down her spine.

"With you, I mean. Your body, your mind — everyone else this has happened to have shown no other signs of harm, so no need to worry. About that, at least," he added, intensifying her unease. "But you have... traveled."

"Traveled," she repeated, frowning a little. "Right. Okay. Sorry, I did want to play along with all this, but I should come clean — I don't really know what's going on here. I don't know if you have the wrong person, but if this is some historical re-enactment thing, I'm — I didn't sign up for it, or anything. So if you're expecting me to know some lines or something?—"

"Oh, she thinks it's theater! How charming."

"Lord Weatherby," Baldric said through gritted teeth.

To Amelia's surprise, the Lord raised his eyebrows and fell silent, for all the world

like a husband accepting a wife's rebuke with good-natured apology.

"Miss Cosgrove, I'm afraid this isn't theater. We aren't players — we're... well, we're ourselves."

"Right," she said impatiently. "You're the real Lord Weatherby. Explains the resemblance. Sorry, but I'd really like to get back to my room?—"

"I think we'd better just show her, Baldric," Weatherby broke in, suddenly sounding more amused by the situation than exasperated. "Would you care to accompany us on a tour, Miss Cosgrove?"

And so it was she found herself walking the hallways of the hotel with the strangest tour guides imaginable — the fussy Lord Weatherby and his looming, black-clad guard. For a while, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to be seeing. She hadn't been to this part of the building yet, which for a while explained why it was so unfamiliar... but as they continued to walk, she felt the unease building like a low buzz in her chest. Something about the place was just... off. None of the decor was quite what she remembered, and it took her a moment to realize that the lighting was different, too.

A quick glance at the ceiling showed her why — there were no overhead lights in this part of the hotel. Thoroughly disoriented by the winding hallways, she blinked with surprise when they emerged into a rather grand little hall, at the end of which stood two large and rather familiar doors. Her eyes widened as she placed it. They were standing in the reception area. There were the stairs that led to her room — there was the side door that led to the restaurant — and through the front doors she could see the driveway where she'd walked up with the guard from the wall.

But that was just about all that was familiar. Gone were the electric lights, gone was the reception desk with its discretely placed, but undeniably modern computer, gone

were all the brochures and pamphlets telling guests what the area had to offer. Gone, too, were the plaques that explained the history of the various artifacts around the room. Even the wallpaper had changed.

“How—”

She turned in a circle, staring in utter disbelief at the room around her. This kind of remodeling would have taken days, not hours — how long had she been gone? And why would they have done something like this in the first place? This room wasn’t a hotel lobby — why, it could have been someone’s home.

“How did they change all this so fast?”

“They didn’t,” Sir Baldric said softly, moving up beside her. “Miss Cosgrove, there’s no easy way to tell you this, so I’m just going to say it. You’re not in your own time any longer.”

Her mind seemed to rebel against that sentence. “Where am I?” she said slowly, grasping for some explanation. “Did you — did I get brought to some other place, somehow? Did I?—”

“No, Miss. You’re in Weatherby Manor, just as you were this morning. But you’ve traveled several hundred years back in time.”

Amelia looked up at the grave face of the man who’d just said about the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard, wanting to laugh. But something about his expression told her, as absurd as it was, that he was telling her the truth.

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CHAPTER 7

“Time travel,” she said, after what felt like several hours’ worth of silence. “That’s what you’re telling me.”

“Would you believe it happens all the time?” Lord Weatherby’s voice broke in.

While she’d been staring around the room, he’d arranged himself in an ornate armchair in the far corner and was primly adjusting his clothing.

“There’s at least a dozen of you travelers at this stage, maybe more. I’ve genuinely lost count.”

Before Amelia could ask any further questions on that subject, the door behind her swung open, and she gritted her teeth as a familiar figure stepped into the room with that same unpleasant smirk on his features. It was the man who’d been leering at her through the doorway earlier, the heavysset man in the strange white wig. She felt Baldrick tense up a little at her side, heard a slight constriction enter Lord Weatherby’s voice as he spoke again.

“Ah. I suppose we might as well introduce our guests to one another, hm? May I introduce Lord Percival Taffington, a cousin and delightful presence around the manor of late.” There was something about his tone that made her interpret that last part as sarcastic... though she supposed it could have just been the nature of his accent. There was something about that particular way of speaking that always made her nervous, as though even the positive things they were saying were somehow tinged with an irony she couldn’t quite parse.

Still, at least Weatherby didn't look at her the way this guy did. She'd take vague passive aggression over this kind of leering any day. Lord Taffington swept forward at the sound of his name, stooping into an obsequious little bow as he did so and lashing out to grab her hand. His rubbery lips pressed a lingering kiss to her knuckles, and she pulled her hand firmly out of his grip to put a stop to it, the urge to break his nose returning in full force.

"A pleasure," he said in a voice that grated on her nerves. "A delight, even. I hadn't thought I'd be fortunate enough to encounter anyone so lovely while here..."

"Miss Amelia Cosgrove," Baldric said tautly.

Though his tone was clipped and polite, somehow Amelia could feel him bristling with the same revulsion she felt. There was something going on here, she suspected, and if she hadn't been currently grappling with the unbelievable revelation that she'd traveled through time, she'd have been curious to find out what it was.

"A name as lovely as its bearer," Taffington crooned.

Did he think this was actually effective? she wondered. Or did he not really care one way or the other? He held himself like a man who was used to getting what he wanted — she'd met enough rich men to know that type very well indeed. At best, they were annoying. At worst, they were downright dangerous... and she definitely didn't like the way his eyes were roaming across her body. Sir Baldric seemed to be aware of it, too — or was it a coincidence that he'd moved casually forward to stand so that his considerable bulk was obscuring her form a little? She reflected with a grimace on the women she'd seen in the hallways — each one wearing enough fabric to make a whole second outfit, from what she could tell, enormous skirts that swept down from waist to floor, obscuring every trace of leg and hip. Compared to them, she was basically naked right now, and this realization made a full-body shudder move through her.

“Are you chilly, Miss Cosgrove?” Baldrick said quickly, reaching up to unclasp the black cloak he was wearing. “Please, take this.”

She wasn’t cold in the slightest — if anything, the stuffy atmosphere was making her sweat — but she accepted the cloak gratefully, wrapping it completely around herself. Sure enough, a vague flicker of disappointment moved across Taffington’s face, though he quickly obscured it.

“Well, I shan’t outstay my welcome,” he said, his tone cooler than it had been. “There’s a bottle of brandy awaiting me in my quarters, at any rate. I’ll bid you all a goodnight... especially you, Miss Cosgrove.”

She fought the urge to grimace at the way he said her name.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again soon.”

There was a grim silence once Taffington had left, broken by an impatient huff from Lord Weatherby. “For a man who’s so eager to have his debt repaid, he’s drinking me out of house and home,” he grumbled to Baldrick, seemingly forgetting that Amelia was there.

“Watch out for that one,” Baldrick said quietly, as if to himself. Then, as if he hadn’t spoken: “As I was saying before we were interrupted, Miss Cosgrove, you’re not alone in this predicament.”

“You mentioned others,” she said, wanting to get away from the subject of Taffington as quickly as possible. “Other — people who arrived as I did, is that it?” Part of her was still hoping all of this was some kind of elaborate joke, but the more practical side seemed to have taken over. If it was a game, there was no harm in playing along. If it was real... well, she needed to get on top of the situation as quickly as possible. She’d wasted enough time already. “Do they live here at the manor?”

Lord Weatherby gauffed, an amused smile on his lips, which Baldric ignored.

“No, Miss. The majority of them live up at the Keep, having found husbands among the Clan there.”

“The Keep?” she repeated slowly, remembering dozens of pamphlets with rocky ruins displayed proudly on the front. “Do you mean the ruins nearby?”

Baldric smiled faintly. “MacClaran Castle is far from a ruin, Miss. It’s one of the largest strongholds in the area, and Clan MacClaran is the most powerful family of the area as well. We’ve sent word to them that you’re here, and they’ll no doubt be coming to fetch you tomorrow. For tonight, of course, we’ve guest chambers prepared.”

“Thank you,” she said, not quite dazed enough to forget her manners. “It’s kind of you to take me in. But — these MacClarans, what do they have to do with me?”

“They’ll explain that better than I can,” Sir Baldric said with a shrug. “But I can assure you that they’re good people. We’ve a long and rather interesting history with them, of course,” he added, shooting a smirking Weatherby a quick glance. “But the peace we’ve established in the area says a lot about their strength and their honor.”

“Yes, yes, we all love the MacClarans,” Weatherby said impatiently. “More to the point, Miss Cosgrove, there are a dozen or so women with your strange accent who’ll be able to explain what’s happened to you. Then I suppose you’ll do the same for the next stray that wanders in.” Weatherby shook his head. “And the whole cycle will begin anew.”

“Let me show you to your room,” Sir Baldric said gently, seeming to sense that she was feeling a little overwhelmed by all of this. “I imagine you’d like some time to think about all of this.”

“Thanks,” she said gratefully. “And — thank you, Lord Weatherby, for your hospitality.”

The Lord seemed a little pleased by her attempt at a curtsy, though it might have been amusement. “Oh, you’re more than welcome,” he said casually. “It’s a refreshing change, a guest whose date of departure is clearly known. Goodnight to you.”

Another prickle of curiosity at that — she had a feeling she’d noticed more than a touch of tension between Lord Weatherby and the leering Taffington. She was tempted to ask Baldric about it as he escorted her down the unfamiliar hallways, but when she opened her mouth, she found herself yawning instead. The room he let her into was small but cozy, with a freshly-set fire crackling in the grate and a bed with its covers turned invitingly down in one corner.

“Get some rest,” Sir Baldric told her gently. “This will all make more sense in the morning, I promise.”

Amelia hoped he was right as she unlaced her shoes. They felt decidedly out of place as she set them down by the door — as did the rest of what she was wearing, come to think of it. She paced in her bare feet, her exhaustion warring with her rising anxiety. What the hell was all of this? Was she just going to take these strangers at face value, accept that the most ridiculous imaginable thing had happened to her? She pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket and frowned down at the screen. Plenty of battery left, which was a relief at least — she gave the room a hopeful scan, but it would clearly be too much to hope that a powerpoint might make itself known. Just as she’d thought — no signal, not even a single bar.

She keyed Carmen’s number into the phone anyway. It felt stupid, but she didn’t want to give up on the idea of hearing a familiar voice right now. She listened to the error message with a heavy heart, then dialed the number again, just to be certain.

Nothing.

No service in the distant past, she thought, feeling a strange laugh rise in her throat. It was a sad little sound that escaped her, half-chuckle and half-sob. That wasn't proof, some truculent part of her pointed out. There were plenty of places in Scotland where she didn't get any service, being out of range right now didn't necessarily prove that she'd traveled through time. This could all still be a joke, couldn't it? Some elaborate prank... it was a comforting thought.

But when she finally slid into bed and settled her head against the pillow, she couldn't help but thinking that the evidence that was stacking up was definitely not in her favor.

CHAPTER 8

Amelia woke abruptly, disoriented and at a complete loss as to where she was. That wasn't unusual for her — she'd done enough traveling during her career that waking up to an unfamiliar ceiling was probably more familiar than waking up to her own. But this felt immediately different, for reasons that came creeping back to her as she sat blearily up in bed to dash the sleep from her eyes. Some part of her, she realized dully, had hoped that all of this had been some ridiculous dream. But this wasn't the room she'd been in at Weatherby Manor, back when it was a hotel... and when a soft knock on the door came again, she wasn't surprised to see a maidservant in medieval garb come bustling into the room with a small tray in hand. There was a strong curiosity in the girl's eyes when she looked at Amelia, and she wondered belatedly if word had spread about the strange new arrival. As weird as Amelia was finding all this, she imagined it would be even stranger for the locals. She knew she'd have snuck more than a few sidelong glances at someone if she knew they'd arrived from hundreds of years in the future...

The tray held a breakfast of warm oatmeal and milk, and Amelia was surprised by how hungry she was as the smell reached her nose. Then again, she hadn't eaten since the previous morning's breakfast — and maybe time travel took a certain amount of energy. She was just finishing the last of the bowl when another soft knock came at the door. She hastened over to answer it herself, and found Sir Baldric waiting in the doorway for her. He'd changed his clothes since the night before, though he was still wearing all black, and she realized belatedly that she still had his cloak around her shoulders. She handed it back to him quickly, and he smiled his thanks before clearing his throat softly.

“The delegation from the Keep has arrived, if you’re ready to meet with them, Miss Cosgrove.”

“You can call me Amelia, you know,” she said.

“Amelia, then.” A brief flash of a smile. “Are you ready?”

She considered the question for a moment. She wasn’t really ready for any of this nonsense, if she was truly honest, but what good would that do to say aloud? So instead, she hoisted her best smile onto her face and nodded.

Sir Baldric led her down the corridor, and she followed obediently, though she let her gaze wander a little more curiously than she had the night before. This part of the manor was familiar — it had been hotel rooms, back when she’d first arrived, which meant that they were about to come out in the restaurant.

Of course, the room was no longer a restaurant. Instead, it was a formal dining room, and she felt her eyes widening as she remembered the plaque that had explained the restaurant’s origins. The sketches had been almost exactly right — irrationally, she found herself wishing she could get a message back to the historians who’d done such painstaking work, telling them how close they’d been. It was almost enough to distract her from the people sitting at the great dining table, clearly waiting for her arrival. Two broad-shouldered men in matching tartan were the first to catch her eye — they reminded her a little of the guardsmen she’d met the night before, and she guessed that they played a similar role at the Keep.

But sitting beside them was a woman, and it was her that held Amelia’s attention. She was a pretty woman with blue eyes and sleek, straight black hair, and her features were set off rather well by the dark gray dress she was wearing. As she rose to her feet, there was such familiarity and recognition in her warm smile that Amelia was almost convinced they’d met before — but that was impossible, wasn’t it? At least, it

was if the time travel theory was to be believed... and overnight, Amelia had more or less given up on the fading hope of all of this being some kind of prank.

When the woman spoke, she got another shock. “You must be Amelia,” she said in an unmistakable North American accent. “My name’s Delilah — this is Kieran, and this is Brian. We’re all of Clan MacClaran.”

The men had risen to their feet, and they both nodded politely at their introductions — but it was clear to Amelia that Delilah was running the show, here. “Nice to meet you,” she said faintly, feeling ridiculous. Was there really any point in niceties right now? “You’re American, aren’t you?”

“Guilty,” Delilah said, that amused smile widening a little. “I was born in the States, and traveled here around the early twenty-first century — just like you, I’m guessing. I arrived here a few years ago.”

The question seemed obvious, but Delilah was clearly waiting for her to ask it. “How did you get here?”

“The same way as you, I’d imagine,” the woman said simply, spreading her hands. “Magic.”

Amelia fought the urge to laugh — it felt rude, in the face of this woman’s warmth. Besides, nothing else here made the faintest bit of sense — who was she to decide which explanations were ridiculous? “Magic,” she repeated. “That’s all, huh?”

Delilah laughed, and Amelia was glad she’d controlled her kneejerk doubt.

“I know how ridiculous it must sound, but there’s really no better way of saying it,” she said, shaking her head. “I can explain in more depth, but — well, how overwhelmed are you feeling, on a scale of one to ten?”

“About a fifteen, but I’d still like to know what’s going on.”

Delilah smiled. “A woman after my own heart. Would you like to sit down?” She nodded at the seat opposite her. “Weatherby’s kindly given us the room for as long as we might need it, so we can talk for a while without being disturbed. Have you eaten? Do you need anything?”

Amelia shook her head. “They brought me breakfast.”

“That’s good. The trip takes it out of you in a strange way. Quite a few of us got horribly ill when we arrived — different germs, I suppose — so keeping yourself well-fed is a very good idea. Though you look like you’d know something about that,” she added, tilting her head. “Are you an athlete?”

Amelia blinked. This was the absolute last place she’d been expecting to be recognized. “How did you know?”

“Magic,” Delilah repeated promptly, and Amelia found herself laughing before she could help herself. “Just a hunch. Your posture. What is your sport?”

“I’m a fighter, mixed martial arts.” Amelia answered, proudly.

“Aye,” the man who’d been introduced as Brian broke in, looking at her curiously. “You do look as though you might be a warrior, Miss, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“I’m a professional fighter, not a warrior,” she said, feeling a little silly to be talking about her career in this strange little room. “Nothing with a sword or anything, unfortunately,” she added, nodding at the sword hilt she could see at Brian’s belt.

“Fascinating,” Delilah said thoughtfully. “There aren’t many athletes among us.”

“What do you do? Or — what did you do?”

“I was a folklorist,” Delilah said with a grin. “With a special interest in the paranormal.”

“That must’ve made it easier, ending up here.”

“You’d think so, but... no, I struggled a lot.” Her expression was suddenly solemn. “It’s not an easy adjustment to make. None of us were exactly planning on ending up here — I’m afraid the journey is inevitably an involuntary one and a one way trip. Unless you’re about to tell me different,” she added, lifting an eyebrow.

Amelia smiled as she shook her head. “I just went for a walk in the woods, and suddenly ...” She gestured around the room. “Suddenly my hotel was replaced with a real life English manor in the middle of Scotland, and here we are.”

Delilah nodded. “I’m glad you made it through safely. Some of the stories you’ll hear are a little more — well, dramatic. But all’s well that ends well, isn’t it?”

Amelia bit her lip, not wanting to be rude but feeling a certain impatience. “I guess my main question is — why? How’s a close second, but... I mean, magic. Fair enough, we’ll accept that for the time being, but... why me? There were dozens of other people staying at the manor. Was I just the unlucky one who was walking in the woods at the wrong time?”

Delilah shook her head. “Definitely not. This is the tricky part, I suppose — or at least, the part that’s the hardest to believe. You have Scottish ancestry, don’t you?”

Amelia blinked. “On my grandmother’s side, yeah. How do you know?”

“Because we all do,” Delilah said simply. “Each one of us is the direct descendant of

a woman who was born and raised in this century. My own ancestor was named Morag — she was a powerful herbalist and healer, and — not coincidentally — a witch.”

Delilah paused for a moment, her eyes on Amelia’s face as if waiting for some objection to this, but Amelia only shrugged. If she was going to believe in time travel, why not add witches to the mix?

“She was deeply in love with a MacClaran man, but their union was forbidden by the Laird, and she was banished. In an attempt to pressure the Laird into reversing his decision, Morag laid a curse on the MacClaran men, saying that any woman they loved would be lost tragically young. She intended to reverse it as soon as the Laird saw sense — but unfortunately, she was killed before the matter could be completely resolved.”

Amelia found herself leaning forward, curiously taken in by the story. It had something to do with the soft, understated way Delilah was telling it — and with the look of vivid sadness in her bright blue eyes.

“With her dying breath, Morag attempted to lift the curse, not wanting to let such tragic magic outlive her. But she didn’t have the strength to break it, only to alter it, adding to the spell that the MacClaran men’s loves would return to them. And so — they do.”

Amelia blinked, nonplussed by this. “What do you mean? They come back from the dead?”

Was she going to have to add necromancy to the growing list of fairytales she was being asked to believe in?

CHAPTER 9

“ N o.” That was Brian, his expression shadowed, his handsome face drawn. “The women lost... they’re lost for good.”

“But instead, the magic reaches out through time to find someone to take their place,” Delilah said, a soft smile on her face. “I’m the spitting image of Morag, and I don’t doubt some part of her spirit still lives within me... but I’m not her, any more than Brian’s lovely wife will be the same woman he lost.”

The guardsman nodded agreement, a smile lighting his face though his eyes were still grave.

Amelia frowned. “So — you’re saying I’ve been brought back to replace a woman who died here?”

Delilah nodded cautiously. “That’s — the simple version, yes. I could talk your ear off about theories of fate and destiny, similar stories through folklore across the world, but... yes, that’s the Cliff’s notes version, for sure.”

The modern analogy felt so out of place in this formal dining room that Amelia heard herself laugh again, though her confusion and concern were still the dominant feelings in her chest.

“That’s... pretty awful, I have to say.”

Delilah’s smile faded a little. “You’re right,” she said softly. “I don’t pretend to

approve of my ancestor's choices, though I understand why she made them. It was reckless, and a lot of innocent women paid a terrible price for the risk she took. If it's any consolation, though — the curse has been broken. I took care of it some years ago, with my ancestor's help."

"But I'm still here," Amelia pointed out.

"Yes, travelers are still arriving regularly," Delilah agreed. "Clan MacClaran is a large family, and the curse took effect on ... well, a dreadful number of young lovers." She sighed. "No more of these fateful losses will take place — none of supernatural origin, at any rate. But there are still MacClaran men whose loves have not yet made their return."

Amelia was beginning to read between the lines of this strange prophecy. "So you're telling me that my great, great, great grandmother or whoever — fell victim to this curse, because she was in love with a member of this family. She died, and hundreds of years later, I got yanked through time to take her place?"

"That's — more or less the situation, yes," Delilah said.

"So I'm what, some kind of mail-order bride?" She could feel her skin crawling, and a horrible thought occurred to her. "Wait. Does that — I met some creep last night," she said rapidly, glancing over her shoulder to make sure that nobody was listening. "He stared at me like he wanted to eat me alive. I was this close to breaking his stupid nose. Is that why he was leering at me like that? Because he knew I'd been brought here to marry him?"

Delilah's eyes widened. "No," she said quickly, shaking her head. "No, absolutely not. I think I know the man you're talking about, and — no. The curse only affected MacClaran men, nobody else. Definitely not the English."

Amelia felt her pulse settle a little, though she still felt suspicion prickling at her. “Then why was he acting like such a creep?”

Brian cleared his throat at that. “If we’re talking about the same man... you’re not alone in having felt uncomfortable with his attentions, lass. One of Lord Weatherby’s visitors, hmm? He’s been here long enough that every woman in the county is sick to death of him. It’s gotten to the point the Laird’s sent for a diplomat to see if the situation might be resolved somehow.”

“Ideally by him going home to London where he belongs,” the other guard muttered — Kieran, Amelia remembered. “But Weatherby won’t?—”

“Let’s save that for the road,” Delilah said quickly, her blue eyes darting to the corners of the room before returning to the group. “It wouldn’t do to speak out of turn about our gracious host, hm? Amelia — we’ve brought a spare horse on the presumption you know how to ride and you’d be willing to return to the Keep with us. Quarters have already been prepared, and you’ll be an honored guest of the Laird himself for as long as you choose to stay.”

Amelia hesitated. “That’s kind of you,” she said.

Delilah reached across the table to squeeze her hand. “I know how frightening this can all be,” she said softly. “I want you to know — you’ll be safe at the Keep. No matter your resemblance to your ancestor, nobody will put any pressure on you to take her place. Do you understand?”

Amelia nodded, still torn... but she had to admit, she didn’t much like the idea of staying around Weatherby Manor any longer, especially if Lord Taffington was going to be a regular presence here. Sure, she was a little unnerved by the idea that one of these Scottish men was going to think she was his long-lost wife back from the dead ... but there was something about Delilah that made her want to trust her. Besides, if

there were more than a dozen other women who had experienced the same thing she had, then surely she ought to meet them. How else was she going to figure out how to get back home? Though Delilah did say it was a one way trip. She shook her head; she'd worry about that once she figured out more of what was going on.

She looked back up at Delilah, who was clearly waiting for a response, and nodded slowly. "Yes, I can ride. It's been a while, but it's like riding a bike, right?" she replied.

"I'm glad you're agreeing to come with us and that you can ride," Delilah said softly, squeezing her hand again.

"I mean, I'll just be happy to put some distance between myself and Taffington," Amelia said, grimacing a little. "Though he might be disappointed. He made some decidedly creepy comments about wanting to see me again."

Delilah chuckled. "As far as I'm concerned, it's for his own protection. I don't think you're the kind of woman that many men mess with."

If only that were true, Amelia thought sourly. Still, she smiled in agreement and followed Delilah and the two guardsman out into the bright morning sunlight. Lord Weatherby was nowhere to be seen, but Sir Baldric found them quickly, and Delilah filled him in on the situation.

"Take care, Miss Amelia. Lord Weatherby and I wish you a safe journey to the Keep." Baldric said, kissing the back of her hand

No reference was made to Lord Taffington, to her relief. He didn't seem like the kind of man who got out of bed early, and she was hopeful they'd be out of here before she had to set eyes on him again.

“Thank you, Sir Baldric. I appreciate your hospitality in such unique circumstances.” Amelia smiled and followed Delilah outside.

She was relieved to see that the horse she’d be riding was tethered to Delilah’s by its bridle. It had been a long time since she’d ridden a horse in any capacity, and though she more or less remembered how to keep her balance on one, she certainly didn’t trust herself to steer. Still, at least she didn’t need to suffer the indignity of being helped on board — the bay mare huffed peacefully enough as Amelia settled onto her back, and before long the four of them were on their way.

It felt strange, riding down the driveway toward the manor’s gates — especially when her most enduring impression of this place still belonged to the contemporary world from which she’d come. Once they were through the gates and into the trees beyond, though, she found herself relaxing. This road was completely unfamiliar, and that, for some reason, was more of a comfort than the eerie not-quite-familiarity of Weatherby’s manor. She was grateful, all things considered, that she hadn’t visited the ruins of the Keep she was being taken to.

Delilah took the opportunity to chat with her a little more as they rode, filling her in on a few details about the other women who’d been brought back in time to make a new life here in medieval Scotland. She really hadn’t been kidding — there was an incredibly wide range of professions and backgrounds among them, from medical professionals and academics all the way through to a professional jewel thief. She still felt utterly disoriented and half-mad, but she still found herself looking forward to meeting some of these strange women. The familiarity of Delilah’s accent was comforting, and she had a feeling she’d be a little more at home with more of those voices around. As pleasant as the Scottish lilt was, it didn’t exactly remind her of home.

Then again, given what her home life had been growing up, maybe a change was a good idea.

The ride was pleasant and the weather warm, and Amelia was surprised when Delilah let her know they were nearly at their destination — she'd been expecting a much more grueling journey. But the twenty mile or so journey had gone by much more quickly than she'd imagined on horseback. Her eyes widened when she saw the undeniable shape of a castle coming into view up ahead.

“That’s home,” Delilah told her, an unmistakable note of reverence in her voice. “That’s Castle MacClaran.”

The building was every bit as impressive up close. They reached the gates after a short ride through the thick trees to where Castle MacClaran had been built on a modest hill, presumably to give a good view of the surrounding countryside. Atop the wall, she could make out half a dozen men, all wearing the same tartan as the two guardsmen riding with them, and the men exchanged cheery greetings in their pleasant brogue before they rode through the open gate into the courtyard. The horses’ hooves clattered against the flagstones beneath their feet, and Delilah took in the sight of the great castle that loomed above her. A great stone behemoth with at least half a dozen stories, judging by what she could make out by the windows... and well protected, too, if the strapping men in armor were anything to go by. She had to remind herself not to stare as her horse paced placidly by a group of men in the courtyard, training with wooden swords.

She climbed down from her horse, waving aside the offer of help as she landed a little heavily on the hay-strewn floor of the stables. Delilah waited a moment for her to get her balance, then took her by the hand and led her through the stables and back out into the courtyard. They paused for a moment out there, enjoying the sunshine. Not for the first time, Amelia glanced uneasily down at her clothing. Baldric had insisted on lending her a cloak for the ride, but it was just about the only part of her outfit that didn’t feel utterly out of place.

“Don’t worry,” Delilah said, as if reading her mind. “You’ll be all settled in no time.

This place will feel like home by the end of the week.”

“You promise?” Amelia said drily.

Delilah grinned and squeezed her hand — and with that, her new friend led her up the stairs and into the medieval castle that was about to become her new home.

Well, Amelia thought. She’d come here to get some distance from her old life, hadn’t she? Right now, she couldn’t imagine a more distant place to be.

CHAPTER 10

The first few days went by in what felt like a waking dream. As much as she kept trying to jolt herself into believing it, Amelia kept struggling with the persistent feelings of unreality. She'd be distracted in the middle of a conversation, or halfway across a room — surely not, she'd hear herself thinking, surely all of this was just some fascinating dream... and then she'd pull herself back into reality and have to apologize to whoever it was she'd just tuned out completely.

At least everyone was absolutely lovely about it. She'd been a little worried at first, as Delilah introduced her to the Laird and what seemed like a small army of cousins and kin. The MacClaran clan were hardy and joyful. The men were handsome and strapping, even the older members of the clan carried themselves with a strength of purpose that made everyone in the room take notice. There was a kind of charisma that couldn't be taught, and this family had it. And on top of that, they were kind to her. Laird Donal put her at her ease almost immediately, stumbling over her words as she was when she met him and his sharp-eyed wife, Fiona, whose North American accent revealed her to be yet another one of the time travelers.

"I know you're going through the strangest time of your life," Laird Donal said kindly. "But rest assured, you're in the best of company. Your fellow travelers will help you settle in, and you'll be at home here before you know it."

"They certainly helped me," Fiona agreed with a firm nod. "And that was back when there were only a couple of us."

There were a great deal more than that now, Amelia was to learn. That first day,

Delilah made sure to shelter her a little, not wanting to overwhelm her with too many introductions. But once she'd settled into the charming, rustic little room she'd been allocated as her own, and Delilah had taught her the basics of how to dress herself in the dresses the women here wore, she began to make the acquaintance of the other time travelers who'd settled at the Keep. There was Fiona, of course, the Laird's wife, who introduced her to Marianne and Karin. Marianne had been a telephone psychic in her old life, something that made Amelia laugh — Karin was an epidemiologist who now regularly made use of her skills to control disease outbreaks and similar in the village and surrounding areas. The following day she lunched with Brianna, a retired cop from Chicago, who spent much of the meal exchanging barbs with Scarlet — who Amelia eventually learned was the jewel thief that Delilah had referred to the previous day. And on her third day at the Keep, she met Audrina and Cora. Like a few of the other women, Audrina and Cora had known each other in their twenty-first century lives — they'd been best friends, in fact, working at the same hospital as a trauma nurse and midwife, respectively. Audrina was the first of the travelers to have arrived, and Amelia was a little humbled by her story. She was struggling enough to settle in, and she had all this help and support from the women who'd arrived before her... she could hardly imagine what it would have been like to find herself here without the faintest idea of where she was or how she'd gotten here. She and Cora had been here for nearly twenty some odd years now, she was told.

In between these meetings with her fellow time travelers, who were all understandably curious to hear about the latest news from the twenty-first century, she did her best to get to know the locals a little, too. The Keep was staffed and inhabited not only by members of the MacClaran family, but by locals from the surrounding area, too — all of whom had nothing but good things to say about the strange women who'd arrived here, though not all knew they were from the future. Many thought they were from various parts of England to account for their strange American accents.

Delilah had warned her that only the main staff, Sir Balderic, a few of his men, and

Weatherby were aware of their time traveling because of the time period. It made sense when she explained about the witch hunters that had been through the area over the last twenty plus years.

Rumors about the women here spread often because it seemed that quite a few of her fellow travelers had performed incredible feats during their time here — finding lost children, resolving serious disputes, even helping manage and control disease outbreaks. Many of the women had brought anachronistic improvements to the Keep, too — it seemed Fiona was the main culprit here, but there was also a suspiciously advanced hospital on the ground floor of the castle, and the MacClarans had a growing reputation for being the people to reach out to with stubborn or mysterious ailments.

“Doesn’t that cause problems? With the witch hunters and such I mean?” Amelia asked over breakfast one morning, her fifth day in Scotland. She was feeling especially bold that morning — she’d managed to get her dress on without any help at all, and the Keep was feeling a little less intimidating than it had. “I mean, all of us bringing back this knowledge from the future... doesn’t it cause, you know, time paradoxes? And don’t those who don’t know about us think we’re performing some sort of voodoo?”

Delilah shrugged. “We worry about that from time to time,” she agreed casually. “But it doesn’t seem to have caused any issues... not the kind of stuff that happens in science fiction, anyway. But you’re right, the major worry is accusations of witchcraft.”

“Is it a big worry?” Amelia looked around, wondering if she needed to be careful of things she said or did here.

Delilah nodded. “We’re safe here in the Keep,” she said, sounding cheerful enough despite the bleak subject matter. “But outside of our courtyard, it’s best to be very

careful about what you talk about. Audrina and Cora both fell victim to some pretty nasty accusations when they first arrived here, and it doesn't take much to get rumors started, especially in the village. I mean, my ancestor and Fiona's were both witches, but it wasn't actual evidence of magic that caused the rumors that got my ancestor killed. Being an intelligent woman in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's usually all it takes."

"What about Fiona's?"

"Fiona's was murdered by witch hunters, but her magic was really strong and Fiona actual arrived within minutes of her ancestor's death. I wasn't here for it, but I'm told it was a tumultuous time."

"Okay, I'll be careful," Amelia promised, feeling a sudden weight in her belly. "Hell, I'll just stay in the castle until I'm eighty. There's enough to explore."

It was true — she was having a grand time exploring the winding corridors and stairways of Castle MacClaran. On her first day, Delilah had shown her around a little, making a point of taking her to the roof to admire the view of the surrounding area. That view remained a highlight, but she was still enjoying wandering the hallways, stumbling upon all kinds of odd little nooks and crannies, statues, paintings, tapestries... she'd always loved wandering around in museums, and now she lived in one.

She'd planned to spend most of her morning wandering the Keep again, but something else caught her attention — first in the form of a couple of whispering servants, who invited her into their little huddle when they saw that she'd overheard them. Pleased to be taken into their confidence, Amelia was surprised to learn that a diplomat would be arriving later that day — the diplomat, so the young servant said, who was going to get rid of 'that awful man' once and for all.

“Which awful man is that?” Amelia asked, feeling like she already knew the answer.

“Lord Taffington,” the servant said promptly, her bright face twisting into a grimace. “He’s a guest of Lord Weatherby’s, and he’s disgusting. Tries it on with any girl he sees, no matter how young. Why, my sister’s engaged to be wed, and he still had his hands all over her.”

“He’s rotten, that one,” the other girl said softly. “Best keep clear of him if you can, Miss. If he corners you alone there’s no telling what he might get up to.”

“Hamish’ll see to it,” the other servant said firmly. “Hamish’ll have him sent packing in a minute, that’s what everyone’s saying.”

And so it was that Amelia found herself drifting toward the courtyard later that afternoon, when the distant sound of horses arriving caught her attention. Sure enough, she wasn’t alone in her curiosity — there were several dozen people present to greet the diplomat, who was riding through the gate on a proud white horse, looking for all the world like something out of a fairytale. It was impossible not to notice how handsome he was. He was younger than she’d expected a diplomat to be — in his late thirties, by her estimation, with light auburn hair and a pair of piercing blue eyes that made her heart flutter. From what she’d heard from the servants, he’d been in Edinburgh for the last few years, negotiating with the King on behalf of the MacClarans and their allied clans. Amelia had been more focused on trying to hide her utter ignorance about the political situation in medieval Scotland than she had been in the living history lesson that had been available to her, and she made a mental note to ask more questions in future.

Laird Donal was there to greet the diplomat, and when the man swung down lightly from his horse, she saw that he was the same height as his cousin — a broad man, as powerful as any of the other MacClaran men she’d met so far. Idly, she found herself wondering if he was the husband of any of the time traveling women here — he

seemed more or less the right age to have been afflicted by the curse. She wanted to ask someone, but something made her bite her tongue against the question — there were more than a few young women in the crowd who were looking up at the diplomat with stars in their eyes, and she didn't want to be lumped in with that lovestruck assortment.

Perhaps she'd meet him later, she decided. The idea appealed to her, she had to admit, and not just because he was so easy on the eyes — she was curious to know what a diplomat's work looked like in a time like this. She was also very interested to hear about how he intended to get rid of the unpleasant presence of Lord Taffington. Perhaps she could help, she thought, warming to the idea. Perhaps her testimony about the Lord's creepy advances could help get him sent back home to London with his tail between his legs...

A prickle ran down her spine, the uneasy feeling of being watched, and when she looked up, Amelia realized with a start that she was right. Hamish MacClaran was staring right at her, those vivid blue eyes trained on hers, and the shock that ran through her was quickly followed by another at the expression on his face.

"Amy?" she heard him say, his voice cracking in the middle of the syllable as though unable to bear the weight of it. "It can't be."

CHAPTER 11

Amelia felt her heart pounding against her chest as she slowly made her way forward, ignoring the curious stares of the people gathered around her. Nobody had called her Amy since she was a child — as soon as she'd been old enough, she'd insisted people use her full name, not liking it to be shortened in any way, but especially not in the specific way her father had always shortened it. It felt strange, hearing that old name on this man's lips. The Laird was looking at her closely with a look of recognition dawning on his face, and he cleared his throat before making a quick gesture that had the crowds around them quickly dispersing.

"Cousin, let me introduce a new arrival to the Keep," Laird Donal said carefully. "Amelia Cosgrove, this is Sir Hamish MacClaran."

"Oh, don't," the diplomat said, wrinkling his nose and holding up a hand. "Please."

"Hamish MacClaran, then," Laird Donal allowed with a roll of his eyes, "who doesn't like being reminded of his well-earned knighthood, but has one nonetheless."

"Amelia, was it?" Hamish still looked absolutely shell shocked, but she could almost see him reassembling the mask of politeness. "A pleasure. I — forgive me." He glanced up at Laird Donal. "You — you look a great deal like someone I once knew."

"She knows," Donal said softly. "About the curse, about all of it. Delilah has filled her in on the aspects of it all."

"I see." Hamish returned those bewitching blue eyes to her face and uttered a forced

little laugh. “In that case — well. I must beg your forgiveness again, I suppose. This must all seem terribly strange to you.”

“I think I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” Donal said, clearing his throat slightly. “Hamish, we’re grateful to have you back here. You and I will discuss the situation a little later, once you’ve settled in. The staff have readied your usual room.”

And with that, the two of them were left alone. Amelia was surprised by how much her heart was pounding in her chest. Hamish was a stranger — meeting him wasn’t any stranger than meeting any of the other medieval Scotsmen she’d encountered during this strange, strange week. If anyone had the right to feel overwhelmed here, it was Hamish. She’d had the opportunity to hear everyone’s stories at this point — the arrival of all of the time travelers, how they’d encountered the MacClaran man whose lost love they so closely resembled. The women were all very different, that much was true — but what she had noticed about each and every one of them was that they’d all ended up marrying their MacClaran man.

It put a strange, heavy kind of pressure on this introduction that was certain. And from the look on Hamish’s face, she was sure he was thinking along the same lines... though with the added burden of grief.

“I’ll go out on a limb and guess that Amy was your wife?” Even as she spoke, she wondered if she was making a terrible mistake. But Hamish seemed to appreciate her broaching the awkward subject immediately — she saw his shoulders relax a little, noticed a slight unclenching of his jaw as he gave her a little nod.

“Aye, she was. The two of you could have been twins.” He looked at her closely, a thoughtful look in those blue eyes. “Though there’s something different about you, for certain.”

“I’m guessing the accent,” Amelia said. To her delight that won a soft chuckle from

Hamish. He looked a great deal younger when he smiled.

“Of course, very different voices. You’re much louder than she was.”

Amelia tilted her head, wondering if it was a slam.

The diplomat hastened to add, “That’s a compliment. Amy was quiet as a mouse. Too quiet for her own good, she often said so herself.”

“Well,” was all Amelia could think of to say. The silence that fell between them wasn’t exactly awkward, but it did seem to crackle with a strange electricity. “How long ago did you lose her?” she asked, hating that she couldn’t think of any other way to break the silence. Was this really her best move? Interrogate the grieving widower about his lost wife?

“Four years ago now,” he said. “The curse, as you know.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I guess that must be strange, coming from me, but — I’m sorry.”

There was that smile again — she felt a little guilty for the way her pulse accelerated at the sight of it, given the gloomy context.

“My thanks — that’s kind of you to say.” He hesitated for a brief moment before continuing: “I’d best get to my quarters, I think. But I’d like to speak with you more, if that would be alright. Perhaps dinner, tomorrow evening?”

She blinked, caught a little off-guard by the formality of the invitation.

Hamish seemed to misinterpret her hesitation and hastened on with a note of apology. “I’d suggest tonight, of course, but I’ve promised my evening to Laird Donal —

much to discuss regarding the diplomatic situation I've come home to resolve."

"Tomorrow is fine," she said quickly, feeling herself flush a little and hoping it wasn't too obvious. "I'll let you get to your room; I know you've had a long journey..."

Besides, she thought faintly as she watched him go, she could use a little bit of time to herself right now — time to get her idiotic urges under control, for a start, and to figure out exactly what she was going to do here. She wandered aimlessly around the courtyard for a few minutes before she hastened inside, hoping to find one of her new friends. Instead, she found herself drifting through the hallways toward her room... where, to her surprise, she saw a servant dragging a chest into the room beside hers.

"My apologies, Miss," he said quickly when he saw her. "Sir Hamish brought quite a few things with him."

That was just her luck, she thought drily as she let herself into her room and settled down on her bed. Of course he'd be in the room next to hers... and a guilty part of her was thrilled about it, already beginning to scheme accidental meetings and casual encounters in the hallways. It was completely insane, of course. He was a complete stranger, a man she'd just met at what was the most chaotic time of upheaval in her entire blasted life... and to make things worse, she was the spitting image of his wife, who'd died tragically young. Was she really going to just rush headlong into some kind of dalliance with this man?

Well, a treacherous voice whispered in the back of her mind, hasn't it worked for all of the others?

Suddenly, she felt very tired and very sad, all at once. She'd been doing her best to get plenty of rest — the other women had all warned her that there was a curious physical weariness that came with the transition to a new time, and that if she wanted

to avoid falling ill her best bet would be to get as much sleep as her body seemed to want. It was the middle of the day, but she found herself loosening her bodice and lying back against the pillows, grateful for the embrace of sleep to take her away from her racing thoughts.

When she woke again, it was dark, and she jolted to her feet, alarmed by how much of the day had slipped by without her notice. She was almost at the Dining Hall before she even remembered Hamish's arrival, though it wasn't long before that curious adrenaline he brought about in her came creeping back into her awareness. Firmly putting it out of her mind, she headed into the hall for dinner, looking forward to a heaping helping of the rather delicious fare in which the kitchens specialized. That was the way, she thought, her mouth full of meat and gravy. If she just kept distracting herself with food and rest, she wouldn't have to worry about Hamish at all. Maybe she'd get back into training, too. She'd never really needed a fancy boxing gym to train — she'd never have gotten out of her amateur phase if that was the case, with only her backyard and driveway to practice her techniques in. There was plenty of space out in the courtyard for what she needed to do. And training had always been great for keeping her mind off her troubles... after all, it was how she'd survived her entire wretched childhood.

She stayed quiet that evening at dinner, letting the ladies chat and gossip about the newcomer in town — and if any of them wondered whether Hamish might have been the man who'd caused Amelia's arrival here, they certainly didn't mention it. She was grateful for that much, at least, though part of her wondered — as she headed back to her room that evening — whether it might have felt good to talk about it. Maybe, she thought. But as kind as her fellow travelers were, none of them were the woman she wanted to talk to right now.

Amelia slipped her phone out of the inside pocket that was sewn into the bodice of her dress. The battery had lasted rather well, but only a quarter remained. Knowing it was unreasonable, knowing there was no way anything was going to happen, she

opened Carmen's contact, feeling her heart break again at the silly photo of the two of them, their arms around each other's shoulders. She could remember taking that photo — they'd both been trying to get the other one in a headlock, and the camera had gone off before either of them had actually triumphed. Both of their faces, frozen forever in a hysterical fit of laughter. Not forever, Amelia thought dully. Once her phone's battery died, this photo would be lost forever.

And that thought was enough to unleash the flood of tears she'd been holding back since before she'd arrived.

CHAPTER 12

Amelia never cried, that was the thing. Ever since she was a kid, and had learned very quickly that tears were at best ignored by her father, and at worst would make her a more active target of his frustration, she'd simply chosen not to cry. Pain, disappointment, frustration, grief... every emotion that some people would respond to by weeping, Amelia found a different way through. Usually, it was training harder. Don't get angry, she'd tell herself as she clocked yet another late-night session — get even. Don't let the bastards win.

But right now, staring down at a photo of a best friend she'd never see again, she could no sooner have stopped herself crying than she could have turned back the tides. And it was as though some great floodgate had opened, as though the tears had been building up inside her for years and years and were now finally bursting their messy way free of her. She dropped onto the bed, shoulders shaking with sobs, then buried her face in the pillow to mute the undignified sounds she was making. She wept for what felt like hours — first for the fact that she couldn't reach her friend, then for the isolation she felt here in this bizarre place, then for the life she'd lost back home.

But before too long, it was more than just her situation she was weeping about. She could feel her mind jumping from memory to memory, working its way back through her life, digging up old frustrations and heartbreaks that she hadn't even realized were still needling at her. Half a dozen breakups reared their ugly heads, most of them short-term relationships that she'd broken off because they were threatening to interfere with her career. Several career disappointments that had been crushing at the time, disappointments she'd thought she'd handled by simply intensifying her

training regime. A few friendships that had dropped by the wayside or disappeared completely out of a mixture of misunderstanding of her busy schedule and jealousy of the success she was finding... and then she realized she'd worked her way all the way back to the last time she'd seen her father alive.

Strange, that it wasn't his funeral that she remembered, here in the depths of the storm that was shaking her. No — his funeral had been, if anything, kind of peaceful. The man in the box bore no resemblance to the man she'd lived with most of her life. That man had been gone, on the day of the funeral... and she'd been grateful. The last day she'd seen her father, he'd taken a swing at her. Even knowing what he knew about her training, about her career — which at that point had been taking off — he still had the arrogance to think he could still scare her. She'd dodged the blow effortlessly, grappled for a moment with the temptation to break his nose for him... then she'd walked away. Later, she'd go back and forth over whether she regretted refusing to hit him back.

But right now, what she really regretted was not telling him to his face what a terrible disappointment he'd been as a father.

This was dangerous, she realized, pulling herself back into a sitting position even as the tears rolled down her cheeks. She had an uneasy feeling that if she kept crying like this, her mind was going to start digging up childhood stuff that wasn't going to be so easy to put away. She tried to steady herself, to catch her breath, to ground herself in the here and now — but the tears kept coming, and the sobs kept shaking her with great, hiccupping sounds that made her cringe at how embarrassing they were, even in an empty room.

It wasn't until the door swung open that she realized that she'd been ignoring a soft but insistent knocking for quite some time. She froze, horrified by the thought of even a servant seeing her like this... but of course, it was much worse than that. None other than Hamish MacClaran was standing there, resplendent in clan tartan, a

worried look on his face as he hastened across the room to kneel before her like she was some kind of child.

“Amelia,” he said softly, the worry in his voice only serving to make her sob harder. “What’s the matter?”

“Sorry, sorry,” she gasped, dashing the tears away from her face and grimacing as they were quickly replaced by more. “Sorry, this is stupid, sorry if I woke you?—”

“You didn’t wake me,” he said firmly, reaching up to take both her wrists in his hands. He was warm to the touch and the gentle squeeze was unbelievably reassuring. “I just finished up with Donal and was walking back to my room when I heard you crying.” There was a rueful little flicker in his eye as he added, “My wife was a very soft-hearted woman. I heard her cry a lot. Not often like this, though,” he added, seeking her gaze again.

“I’m fine, I’ll be fine,” Amelia heard herself saying — but she sounded half-concussed, and she didn’t need to look at Hamish’s face to know he wouldn’t believe her. “Sorry. It’s just — being here, it’s all — horribly overwhelming. Sorry! God,” she added through gritted teeth, scrubbing at her face again. “I, uh. I don’t cry much.”

“I get that impression,” he said, smiling a little. “May I...?” He nodded toward the bed.

“Oh, sure.” She shifted along a little, letting him take a seat on the bed beside her. This, at least, was a little better — she could stare straight ahead and pretend he wasn’t looking at her, seeing her horribly puffy, tear-stained face... “I just — miss home,” she said, feeling her heart twist and break in her chest as she said it aloud. “I miss it. I miss my life, I miss my friends, I miss my job, I miss?—”

“Tell me about them, about all of it,” Hamish said gently.

She glanced at him sideways, frowning.

“It’s strange, Amelia — when I look at you, I think I’m looking at someone I spent a lifetime with, but I’m not. Tell me about your life.”

And to her surprise, she found herself opening up to this near stranger. First, she told him about Carmen — about their whole friendship, from the day they’d met to their last hangout the day before she’d left on this trip. She even dug her phone out to show him photos, aware she was burning through the precious battery but not caring — at least this way, once the phone died for good there’d be at least one other person who knew what Carmen’s face looked like. And that, of course, led her to telling him about her professional fighting career. He seemed genuinely fascinated by it, and asked a series of surprisingly intelligent questions before he bit his lip.

“Tell me if you’d prefer if I didn’t talk about her so much,” he said first. “But it’s fascinating to me — you and Amy couldn’t be more different. She was always so shy, so quiet and agreeable, so timid in the face of any kind of threat. I loved her for it,” he said, glancing up at Amelia. “Don’t take that as a criticism.”

“I haven’t always been like this — you know,” Amelia said, lifting her fists into a half-hearted fighting stance before dropping them to the bed again. “I was pretty timid as a kid. It’s how I got into all this, actually.”

“A warrior woman,” Hamish said thoughtfully, smiling at her. “I wish Amy could have followed in your footsteps. She’d still be here.”

Amelia wanted to question that cryptic little conclusion, but something about the distracted look in Hamish’s blue eyes told her that he hadn’t exactly meant to say it aloud — and warned her not to ask too many questions of what happened to his wife. Instead, she heaved a sigh and wiped the last of the tears from her cheeks, pleased to note that the worst of the storm seemed to have passed.

“Thank you, for coming to check on me,” she said softly, fighting her own embarrassment. “And for telling me about Amy. I know it must be hard to talk about her.”

“It has been,” Hamish said, looking at her thoughtfully. “Strangely enough, I find it much easier to talk about her with you.”

Once he was gone, Amelia settled down in her bed, worried that the awful shaking tears would come back for her... but instead, she dropped into the deepest and most restful sleep she could remember.

CHAPTER 13

The next week passed slowly. Amelia was more mindful, now, of the significant adjustment she was making, and in the interests of avoiding any more late-night bouts of hysteria, she was taking things slowly and focusing on taking care of herself. And that meant getting back to training. She was a little worried about drawing strange looks from the locals, but given that that was bound to happen anyway, she figured she might as well be doing the one thing that had always been good for her mental health.

Of course, clothing presented a difficulty. She'd had vague intentions of getting hold of some more practical clothing, assuming she couldn't just rely on the one pair of leggings she'd brought with her from the future... but the more time she spent here, the more she realized that women simply didn't seem to bother with trousers most days. The most easily available clothing were the gathered skirts that everyone seemed to wear, and though it seemed ludicrously impractical, Amelia couldn't help but reason that the women who did the bulk of the work around here — the servants and maids who kept the Keep running — seemed perfectly happy in their clothing. Surely if the skirts were so impractical, they'd have found an alternative solution. And she had to admit, there was something about having half of her body completely covered that made her feel an odd sense of relief. She'd spent far too much of her short life feeling acutely aware of the way men's eyes roamed across her legs and lower body, appreciating her in a way that had nothing to do with her athletic ability.

All that aside, it still took some adjustment, training in skirts. She took to rising as early as she could to make use of the courtyard before all the guardsmen came out to run their regular drills — the sound of clattering wooden swords always set her teeth

on edge, and besides, she didn't like the feeling of their curious eyes on her, even if they were generally polite enough not to bother her. She'd run drills for the first part of the morning, and as the castle began to warm up, she'd take herself out for a long run. The first few days, she stuck close to the castle, wary of getting lost in the fog again and winding up even further in the past— a fear that made Delilah laugh when she shared it later, over breakfast. But it wasn't long before she was venturing a little further afield, exploring the area around the Keep, and even running down the road toward where the local village lay... though Delilah's warning about suspicions of witchcraft rang clearly in her head, and she made sure to turn back well before any curious villagers might spot her.

It felt good to be training again, even if she was finding it more of a challenge than she'd expected to work around the skirts. Part of her was tempted to just rip them off and train in her leggings until they fell apart, but that wasn't exactly practical, was it? She had to keep in mind what the purpose of her training was right now — and as much as it hurt her to think about it, it wasn't exactly likely that many competitive fights lay in her future. What she needed was to be able to defend herself — and that meant being ready to fight in the clothing she'd be wearing most of the time.

And so she continued to train in skirts, trying to focus on the positives rather than the negatives. True, the thick fabric tangled around her legs and presented a tripping hazard if she didn't pay close attention... but the upside was that they obscured her stance and should make it harder for an opponent to figure out what her next move was. She began to work out the quickest ways of pulling the fabric out of the way to deliver a kick at full force, or to feint and dodge. Irritating as the project was, it felt good to have a project to focus on, at least. Maybe she'd master the art of medieval martial arts and share her findings with other women. From what she'd heard, the women around here were tough enough to take care of themselves — but a few tips from an expert couldn't hurt, right?

As the days passed, another pleasant surprise made itself known in the form of one

Hamish MacClaran. She'd been convinced he'd want nothing more to do with her after her embarrassing display the night he'd arrived, but to her surprise he continued to seek out her company. Their conversations didn't get anywhere near as heavy as they had that night, which was a relief — but she found he was easy company, pleasant to talk to, not to mention easy on the eyes. That made sense, she reminded herself. He was a professional diplomat — he'd had a lifetime of practice at being a pleasant conversational partner.

What surprised her was how interested he was in her training. After a few mornings of training, she decided to add an evening session to her days, knowing that she'd sleep better if she was exhausted from a sweaty training session — and it was during one of these evening sessions that she realized Hamish was watching her curiously from the steps of the Keep. The sun had set long ago, and the courtyard was dark, lit only by the glow of torchlight from the men atop the wall and the windows of the Keep itself. Hamish wasn't much more than a silhouette against the open doors behind him, but she recognized his shape immediately.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you," he said apologetically as she approached, taking a draft from a borrowed waterskin as she did. "It's fascinating work. I've not seen it's like before."

"That's not surprising," she said, catching her breath and hoping she didn't look as sweaty and disheveled as she felt. "You won't find most of these styles around here for a few hundred years I'd guess."

Hamish looked curious, patiently waiting for her to continue, but she bit her lip. Suddenly, she wished she knew a little more about the history of the martial arts forms she'd been studying since she was a child — or at the very least, that she'd focused on one enough to be able to specify where it was from. "Not that I could tell you much about who actually created them, the best I could say is they are from Asian countries mixed with some Brazilian moves," she added, grimacing.

“You could say you’d invented them yourself and we’d be none the wiser,” Hamish pointed out, sounding amused. “It’s not as though we could — Google.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his careful pronunciation of the word. Earlier that day, she’d tried to explain the Internet to Hamish — the way it had made everyone think they were an expert on anything they could type into a search bar. Much of it had gone over his head, she suspected, but he’d been fascinated by the prospect.

“You’re right, of course. I should start a school. Get famous in the sixteenth century. That’d give historians something to think about, wouldn’t it? Medieval martial arts in Scotland.” Her smile faded a little as an unexpected implication of the joke surfaced. “I’m really never going back home, am I?”

Hamish reached out to touch her arm, gently, and it was almost enough to make her cry again. She took a deep breath instead, bounced her weight from foot to foot to ground herself in her body again, and waited for the feeling to recede.

“I can’t imagine,” Hamish said softly. “Being so far from home. But I hope it’s some comfort, at least, to know you’re safe and welcome here.”

“It is,” she said, meaning it. “Truly, it is. I couldn’t be more grateful to the Laird and to everyone for being so kind to me. I just... I miss my best friend, that’s all. She’s never going to know what happened to me.”

“She might,” Hamish pointed out with a soft smile. “If you make the history books, maybe she’ll read about you someday.”

It was a strangely comforting thought. Carmen always had been more interested in the theory and history of fighting than Amelia had. For Amelia, it was all about the here and now, the fight at hand — Carmen was the one who’d always seen the bigger picture, taking an interest in the history and development of the art form. If anyone

was going to find some little entry in a history book about martial arts in medieval Scotland, it was going to be Carmen. Maybe she could get a message to her that way — tell her that she was okay, and that she loved her and missed her.

To her surprise, the next morning at breakfast, Delilah raised the very subject of letters as well as something else surprising. She wasn't the first of the travelers to have felt sad about leaving friends and loved ones behind in the future with no way of knowing what had happened to them. There was a kind of ongoing letter-writing project among them, a plan to build a kind of time capsule with messages that would hopefully survive long enough to reach the future. There was some debate, of course, about just how much information could be shared. They didn't want to risk some kind of time-travel cataclysm taking place, though a few of the women felt that this was overly cautious and indicated too much science fiction.

"Still, we're pretty sure with as many of us that are here, and with the things we've been building, well, we're pushing boundaries as it is," Delilah said with a shrug.

"Building?" Amelia asked.

Delilah leaned in and whispered, "You know your phone?"

Amelia nodded and felt sad that the battery was almost gone. "What about it? It's useless here."

"Yes and no, we've got a way to charge it some, so at least you can still view your pictures and things that are on the phone itself. Fiona and some of the others have created a battery that works to boost your phone battery life. It might not last forever, but at least you'll have the pictures and maybe a game?" Delilah said with a smile.

"Is that..." Amelia blinked. She'd never considered that the women would be so enterprising.

“Well, it’s a secret that only a few know, we don’t share it with anyone but between us and our husbands.” Delilah cautioned her. “We’d definitely be dealing with accusations of witchcraft if it were to be found out and we’ve made a pact to eventually destroy it before the last of us dies, but that will be years down the road.” She shrugged again. “But back to the time capsule. It might be nice to start working on a letter for your friends and family to put in it.”

“I don’t have any family,” she said automatically, feeling the habitual twisting of her stomach at the thought of her father. “Carmen’s really the only person I’d want to send a letter to.”

“That’s fine; oh, that reminds me,” Delilah said, wrinkling her nose a little. “I hate to be the bearer of gross news, but ... a letter arrived for you this morning.”

“For me?” Amelia was thrown. “Who would write to me? Everyone I know here lives — here.”

“It came from Weatherby Manor, along with Lord Weatherby’s response to a letter from Laird Donal and Hamish.”

Amelia’s skin prickled with revulsion as she looked down at the envelope and recognized the name written on the back in flowery, almost unintelligibly ornate script. Even his signature was annoying.

Lord Taffington, it seemed, hadn’t forgotten their brief encounter.

CHAPTER 14

“It’s just so gross,” Amelia said for what felt like the hundredth time that day. After reading Taffington’s unpleasant little missive that morning, she’d spent the rest of the day seething. Her annoyance with him had given her some useful extra power for her workout, which she appreciated, but even beating the hell out of a straw-stuffed punching bag for an hour hadn’t been enough to banish the unpleasant feelings completely. It was almost impressive, how gross he’d managed to be with only the technology of the day available to him. She’d received unsolicited photos of men’s private parts that had been less unpleasant than his letter.

Hamish, too, was furious. The two of them had met for dinner, something that was quickly becoming one of her favorite ways to spend an evening. He’d spent his own day deep in deliberation with Laird Donal about how to deal with the letter that had accompanied Taffington’s — arguably a more important subject, which made Amelia appreciate his attention to her own complaints all the more. At her urging, he’d read Taffington’s letter himself. After a whole afternoon of seething, Amelia had begun to wonder whether she was blowing things out of proportion — maybe there was some kind of cultural mistranslation taking place, and Taffington wasn’t really being as creepy as she felt he was. But one look at Hamish’s face when he set the letter down told her that she wasn’t overreacting in the slightest.

“No, Amelia,” he agreed. “This is — at best, this is insultingly overfamiliar from a man you met once. And in difficult circumstances, at that, even with him not knowing about your time traveling,” he added — she’d told him the whole story of her confused arrival at Weatherby Manor, including the details of the way Taffington had conducted himself around her. “You’re right to be insulted. Duels have been

challenged over less,” he added, and there was a dark note in his voice that made her fiercely curious — but at the same time, a little wary of questioning too closely.

“What am I meant to do about it?” she complained, taking the paper back from him as though she was handling something diseased. “If he said half this shit in person, I’d have hit him in the face. But writing a whole letter back just seems like — giving him too much attention. Would ignoring it completely be the move?” She grimaced. Social media had its drawbacks, but at least there was a reasonably reliable block function. “What if he just sends more?”

“If he were a gentleman, he’d assume that a lack of response indicated a lack of interest, and gracefully withdraw his suit,” Hamish said, scowling. “Though I hesitate even to compare this kind of unpleasantness to courtship. At any rate, we aren’t dealing with a gentleman here. I’d imagine a lack of response will only provoke him to write more, as you’ve said.”

She grimaced, remembering a particularly unpleasant guy she’d matched with on a dating app. After exchanging a few promising flirty messages, she’d gone to bed at her usual hour, mindful of her pre-dawn training regime. When she’d checked her phone on the way to the gym, she’d found no less than forty-three messages from the same guy, running the gamut from teasing queries about why she was suddenly ignoring him, all the way to a foaming all-caps tirade about how all women were manipulative psychopaths who led good men on then left them high and dry. The whole meltdown had taken place over less than three hours. In certain ways, it seemed, men hadn’t changed much over the years.

They eventually settled on a compromise — a way of responding to Lord Taffington without offering him more attention than he deserved. She still had Sir Baldric’s freshly laundered cloak in her room, waiting for an opportunity to return it to him. With Lord Weatherby’s messenger still waiting for the Laird’s response to Lord Weatherby, this was the perfect time to do so. First, she scribbled a quick note

addressed to Sir Baldric, thanking him for lending her the cloak and informing him that she'd cleaned it personally. She added a request that he pass on her greetings and well wishes to Lord Weatherby, whose hospitality she still hoped to repay someday. Then, as a postscript, she asked Baldric to let Taffington know that if he ever tried to lay a hand on her — a hope he'd described in disgusting detail in his letter — that he'd find it broken in several places.

“Too violent?” Amelia asked Hamish, whose blue eyes were sparkling with laughter as he scanned the letter. “Is it going to incriminate me, putting a threat in writing?”

“Not in a letter that isn't addressed to him,” Hamish said, grinning. “I know Baldric well — you can trust him to handle this. I don't doubt he'll relish the opportunity to put Taffington in his place, too.”

“He doesn't seem to be the only one,” Amelia observed, lifting an eyebrow as she gave Hamish a pointed look.

He flashed her one of those rueful ‘you got me’ smiles that always made her heart skip a beat, and nodded. “I'll admit I don't harbor particularly fond feelings for the man — especially after the stories I've heard about his conduct in the villages between here and Weatherby's.” His expression darkened. “Men who treat women that way... it's only a matter of time before they get violent. I'm not surprised the Laird sent for me to deal with him.” He sighed. “With any luck, he'll decide you're too much trouble and leave you alone.”

But it seemed that had been wishful thinking on both of their parts. The cloak and the letter went with the servant that evening, and a scarce two days later, yet another letter arrived, twice as long as the first and even more lascivious and revolting. In it, Taffington commended her for what he referred to as her ‘feminine machinations’, implying that the message she'd conveyed through Baldric contained some underlying sexual connotations that had been intended to drive him wild. Horrified,

she consulted with Hamish as well as with her friends, all of whom agreed that the man was dreaming.

“Ignore this one,” Delilah said firmly.

Hamish agreed.

But ignoring the letter proved to be about as effective as her rebuke. Letter after letter kept arriving via increasingly more tired-looking messengers from the Manor, each more lascivious and revolting than the last. She took to skim-reading them, torn between simply tossing them into the fire and her determination to keep the evidence of the campaign of revolting harassment he seemed determined to wage against her. What glimpses she got of the man’s psyche were both predictable and horrific. He kept repeating the same observations about her having ‘paraded herself before him’, apparently forgetting the part where she’d physically wrapped a cloak around herself to stop her from looking at her, and in the time that had passed since they’d been in the same room, he’d clearly twisted their brief interaction into some kind of psychosexual saga to rival every great work of art in the canon.

When the twelfth letter arrived in as many days, though, Amelia knew that she had to do something. She was growing to hate the sight of the pile of letters on her table — every time she returned to her little room at night, she itched to throw all of them into the flames. At Hamish’s suggestion, she had sent a letter directly to Lord Weatherby advising him of the conduct of his guest and politely requesting that he amend the situation. As Hamish had grimly predicted, she received no response — except in the form of yet more letters from Taffington, of course.

“At least he’s consistent,” Hamish confessed to her one night, looking tired after an afternoon spent discussing the same issue with the Laird and his advisors. It seemed Lord Weatherby was stonewalling them, too, on the subject of his unpleasant houseguest and the way he was treating local women — they’d sent several letters,

and where Weatherby had even bothered to respond, his response had been utterly noncommittal.

“Why’s he protecting this creep?” Amelia wanted to know. “I know they’re cousins or whatever, but from the way he acted around him I got the impression that Weatherby hated Taffington. I’d have thought he’d jump at the excuse to send him home to London.”

“There’s more to the situation, I’m afraid,” Hamish said heavily, shaking his head. “We’re looking into the situation in more detail, but from what I’ve learned from my contacts in London, there’s a debt situation that might be contributing to Weatherby’s reluctance to alienate his cousin. That being said, it’s all very clandestine. The English nobility hate having their personal affairs known, especially when it comes to wealth.” He rolled his eyes — then glanced at her, struck by a sudden thought. “I hope it goes without saying that these matters are confidential.”

“Of course,” she said quickly. “I won’t tell anyone. I don’t really have anyone to tell,” she added, winning a soft laugh from him.

“It’s good to talk all this out with someone I can trust,” he said.

She felt a warm glow suffuse her chest. She trusted him too, she realized. That might have been foolish of her, given how little she really knew about him... but she’d always trusted her gut, and her gut was telling her that this man was an ally and a friend.

It was telling her he was a lot more than that, too... but that particular subject was one that could wait. At least until she’d dealt with the creepy suitor who wouldn’t stop sending her letters.

CHAPTER 15

There was an abrupt development in the Taffington situation exactly three weeks after her arrival at Weatherby Manor. She had been on her way down to breakfast when she'd been struck by a curious buzz in the Keep, an atmosphere that told her something out of the ordinary was happening. Sure enough, when she reached the great Dining Hall on the Keep's ground level, she found herself joining a rapidly growing crowd of people who were clearly an audience to some kind of confrontation that was taking place in the Dining Hall. She wove her way through the crowds as quickly as she could — the murmurs of the bystanders were stopping her from making out what was being said.

There stood Laird Donal, tall and handsome as ever, on the dais where he, Fiona, and his advisors took their meals. As had often been the case since his arrival, Hamish was up there with them — but this wasn't their usual strategy session, Amelia could tell. Because before the Laird, in a wide semicircle of floor that had been cleared by the curious onlookers, was a group of unfamiliar men. She could only see their backs from here, but the body language was unmistakable — they were absolutely furious, all but vibrating with anger as they stood before the Laird. Had Laird Donal antagonized a group of local farmers, somehow? No, she realized as she moved around a particularly tall man to get a better look at the group who were standing before the Laird. They weren't all folk from the village. And the odd man out, looking somewhat disheveled with his head hanging low, struck a horribly familiar silhouette.

It was none other than Lord Taffington, and he looked like he'd been through the wringer. His wig was askew, and she could see leaves tangled in it, and his fine

clothes were dirty and even torn in a few places. Amelia tried to steer clear of bar fights these days, but she'd been through enough in her day to know the aftermath of one when she saw it. The story filled itself in effortlessly. Lord Taffington had done something to antagonize these men, and they'd held him accountable in one of the more direct and ancient ways available to them. And now, he was being hauled before the local authority to answer for what he'd done.

But what exactly had he done? She'd hoped to overhear the Laird pass judgment, but instead he was calling for servants to prepare a room where Lord Taffington would be held. The villagers didn't look thrilled with the result, but she saw Hamish move forward to speak to them, overhearing him promise that Taffington would be dealt with later that day. She watched as Taffington was escorted from the Hall by a couple of unimpressed-looking watchmen. As unpleasant a surprise as it had been to see Taffington here, she had to admit, it was satisfying to see him with a black eye. She only wished she'd been there to give it to him personally.

The buzz spread through the Keep, and by the time breakfast was over, it seemed everyone was gossiping about what had happened the night before in the village. Taffington, it seemed, had finally taken things too far with the barmaids at the local tavern — though the exact details of what had happened varied wildly depending on who was actually telling the story. She quickly sought out Hamish once the meal was over, and though he was clearly busy with the Laird, he still came over to exchange a quick word with her, his distraction not reducing the warmth in his smile.

“What's going to happen?” she asked, once Hamish had confirmed a few of the details of the situation and discounted some of the wilder rumors. “Will the Laird punish him?”

“It's a difficult situation,” Hamish said, frowning. “Taffington's an English lord with a lot of influence, and the Laird doesn't want to endanger the peace between the Scottish and English in the area... but at the same time, he can't be seen to let bad

behavior go unrebuked. We'll know more this afternoon. Will you be here?"

Amelia blinked. "Me? Why?"

"As a woman who has first-hand experience of the way he behaves, I think your presence and input would be very valuable. You won't have to speak or anything, if you don't want to," he assured her, clearly reading the hesitation on her face. "It's not a formal trial, Amelia, just a public hearing of what took place. But I'd like you to be there."

Torn between reluctance to interfere with local politics and her genuine pleasure that Hamish wanted her there, Amelia spend the rest of the morning worrying about whether or not to attend the hearing.

In the end, her desire to see Taffington held accountable for his actions won out, and she headed into the Hall that afternoon. There were quite a few people present, to her surprise — not only residents of the Keep, but locals from the village, too, including more than a few stony-faced women. Something told her that a considerable percentage of this audience was composed of Taffington's victims. She felt the low, burning anger in the middle of her chest intensify a little, and took a deep breath as she moved up to take a seat beside Hamish.

It wasn't long before Taffington was brought in, complaining loudly about the armed escort. A terrible insult to someone of his stature, he kept insisting, to be treated like a common criminal — the audience began to grumble, and the Laird quickly held up his hand for silence.

"Lord Taffington," he said, and Amelia was surprised by the steely note in his voice, almost unrecognizable from the warm, friendly man she'd met when she'd first arrived here. "As a guest of Clan MacLaren, I'd like to invite you to share your side of the story we heard about what took place in the village last night."

“If this is how you treat your guests, I’d hate to see how you treat your prisoners,” Lord Taffington said snidely.

Amelia couldn’t help noticing that he looked a lot less wretched than he had that morning — he’d had his wounds seen to, and even been given a change of clothes to replace the torn and dirty items he’d been wearing. She didn’t doubt he’d been offered plenty of food, too — he was clearly the kind of man who’d demand that.

“We’ve been informed by locals of the village that you spent last night in the tavern,” Laird Donal went on as though Taffington’s rude response hadn’t happened.

“If you can call that moldering old barn a tavern,” Taffington said, voice dripping with disdain. “Yes, I was there. There’s nowhere else in this wretched backwater country to spend an evening, after all.”

“We’ve heard complaints regarding your conduct with the barmaids,” Laird Donal said through slightly gritted teeth. “Not just last night, in fact, but for as long as you’ve been a guest on these lands.”

“I thought this was a hearing for the men who assaulted me,” Lord Taffington said hotly. “I’m not interested in defending myself here.”

“Assaulted you !” One of the men sitting in the front row of the crowd exploded out of his seat, his voice shaking with anger.

Amelia recognized him as one of the men who’d escorted Lord Taffington into the Hall that morning. “We hauled you off a woman you were pawing at like some crazed beast!”

Laird Donal called for silence as the room erupted into shouts of anger. Amelia could feel her heart sinking. This, she suspected, was going to be a long afternoon.

The story was eventually extracted from Lord Taffington, though it was rather like pulling teeth. Every statement made by an onlooker would be met by either a snide comment or some kind of semantic undermining of their point. At first, she wondered whether Taffington was stupid — but as the afternoon wore on, she realized that it was worse than that. He knew exactly what he was doing, getting everyone in the room riled up and furious enough to make him look calm and composed by contrast. She was relieved to see it didn't work on Laird Donal or on Hamish, though, both men remaining steely and unflinching throughout.

It seemed that Taffington had spent the previous evening in the tavern, as had been a habit of his. He'd been growing more and more friendly with the barmaids who worked there during the course of his stay, and to hear him tell it, he'd been a welcome guest who tipped lavishly — something that was firmly disputed by several of the women in attendance. But last night, he'd gone too far. After having too many drinks, he'd begun throwing money around — and it wasn't too long before he'd zeroed his attention on one of the younger barmaids, a pretty, slight young girl who'd only recently started working there. After several generous tips, for which she'd thanked him kindly, he'd followed her out of the building when she left to go home. This was where the stories diverged. Taffington insisted that she'd lured him into an alleyway — the men who'd brought him in retorted that in fact he'd dragged her there himself, shouting that he'd paid for her, and he'd be having her wherever he damn well pleased.

Amelia felt sick to her stomach for the poor girl, who hadn't come along to the proceedings, not wanting to see Taffington's face again. To her relief, the villagers explained that they'd been able to come to her rescue before the drunken lecher had been able to tear her clothes off, something he'd been doing his level best to do when they'd been alerted by her screams.

According to Taffington, he'd been lured into a trap by the barmaid. To hear him tell it, she'd been waiting in the alleyway all but naked, and before he'd so much as laid a

finger on her, the men had leapt out of the shadows to beat him to within an inch of his life. According to the men, all they'd done was pull him away from the girl — he'd been the one who wouldn't stop throwing drunken punches. At a certain point, violence had been the only language he'd listen to. One punch had knocked him out cold, and the men had dragged him with some difficulty back into the tavern for the night — this had been how the damage to his clothing had been inflicted.

“It's their word against mine,” Lord Taffington said pompously, drawing himself up and folding his arms across his chest. “And if I were you, Laird Donal, I'd be careful about rewarding these common criminals with any further attention.”

Laird Donal opened his mouth to respond, but before he could speak, a murmuring in the crowd cut him off. The doors to the Hall had swung open, and Lord Weatherby himself was standing there, his manservant Baldric looming behind him as always.

“At last,” Taffington said, an unpleasant grin spreading across his features. “The man who's really in charge around here.”

Amelia didn't need to look at Hamish's face — his sharp intake of breath told her all she needed to know about how a comment like that would be received by this crowd.

CHAPTER 16

It took nearly ten minutes for the shouting to subside. By the time Laird Donal had finally restored order to the hall, Lord Weatherby was standing beside Lord Taffington, and the two of them had had a whispered conversation that Amelia hadn't been able to make out.

"Lord Weatherby," Laird Donal said at last, a wary respect in his voice as he spoke. "We appreciate your coming on such short notice."

"Not at all," the Lord said breezily.

His face was unreadable, a mask of politeness — Amelia found herself looking at Baldrick instead, who was standing in his accustomed position behind the Lord. His face was as blank as ever, but she could see that his hand was resting a lot closer to his weapon than it usually was, and there was a tension in his body that told her he was well and truly on edge about this situation.

"Happy to clear up this little misunderstanding."

"Forgive me, Lord Weatherby, but it's a little more serious than that." Laird Donal's tone stayed pleasant, but she could see the frown he was holding back. "I'm afraid Lord Taffington stands accused of some serious acts of misconduct and violence in the village, and a punishment needs to be?—"

"Nonsense," Weatherby said sharply.

She felt Hamish stiffen at her side, and her own heart sank at the mingled shock and fury on the faces of the gathered crowd.

“A silly misunderstanding, I’m sure. My guest and I will be leaving at once.”

“Forgive me, Lord Weatherby,” Laird Donal said slowly. “A guest he may be, but Lord Taffington will answer to the law of the land like any other man.”

“I’ll remind you, Laird Donal, that the law of the land is decided by its Lord.” Weatherby’s unctuous tone stressed the difference between the titles. “If a punishment must be meted out to Lord Taffington, it is myself who shall decide it. Good day to you.”

“Lord Weatherby?—”

“Enough,” the Lord snapped. “Laird Donal, as you well know, the title of Lord carries a little more weight than simply being an Englishman and in this case, I am the final judge. Lord Taffington is exceedingly well connected, and continuing to hold him here against his will is a decidedly reckless act for a man who wishes to avoid a diplomatic incident with the Crown.”

“Why are you protecting him?” Laird Donal demanded suddenly, having clearly given up on keeping the muttering crowd under control. “Why have you defended this man’s increasingly revolting actions for weeks on end? This is far from the first of his indiscretions — you’ve ignored every last report of his behavior, even his mistreatment of your own staff?—”

“I’ll be waiting in the courtyard,” Lord Weatherby snapped, his face reddening a little. “Baldric?”

The man in black gave Weatherby a taut little nod and stepped forward to take his

place before the Laird. Weatherby swept out, calling for his servants to ready the carriage as he went. Laird Donal's shoulders dropped, and Amelia saw him look at Baldrick. The guard's face didn't shift, but was that a slight shrug of his broad shoulders she saw?

"Let me give you MacClarans a little lesson in diplomacy," Taffington said, his voice dripping with such smugness that it was all Amelia could do not to surge to her feet right then and there and smack him in the mouth. "Lord Weatherby is, to put it plainly, in my pocket. He owes me a tremendous debt, so financially speaking he might as well belong to me. Nor does he have anything approaching my influence in Parliament, or in the Royal Court. We've been hoping that your diplomat might be able to fill you in, but it seems you weren't quite sharp enough to take the hint," he said, his tone almost apologetic. "When it comes to this pathetic little backwater country, I am untouchable."

"I disagree," Laird Donal said.

Amelia could hear his voice shaking with the anger he was holding back. The crowd had grown still and silent as the grave, which was somehow even more intimidating than their previous raucous shouting.

"You are not above the law, and you are not above receiving punishment for your actions."

"Go on," Taffington sneered. "Try it. Lock me up. See how quickly you're at war with the English again, you pathetic little would-be king?—"

Amelia could see Fiona putting her hand on Laird Donal's arm to keep in from lashing out physically at the detestable man.

"Laird Donal," Hamish said quickly, rocketing to his feet so fast and so smoothly that

Amelia barely registered the movement. “I have a suggestion that might resolve the situation, at least for the time being.”

“Go on, Sir Hamish,” Donal said, gesturing for Hamish to take the stage.

Good timing, Amelia thought faintly. Donal looked like he was just about ready to punch Taffington in the face — which would no doubt worsen the diplomatic situation, if such a thing was even possible at this point and she was grateful that Fiona was there to help him keep his composure and Hamish to take on the diplomacy of it all.

“I suggest Lord Taffington is returned to Lord Weatherby’s estate today, as requested, in the care of Sir Baldric here — on the condition that he promise to stay away from the village and Keep, and not to make contact with any of the women who’ve registered distress regarding his behavior.”

“What about the girl he tried to have his way with?” one of the men shouted, drawing a chorus of support from the crowd behind him.

“A fine,” Baldric said, surprising Amelia with the speed at which he stepped into the conversation. “To be negotiated with Lord Weatherby, payable to the girl and her family as reparation for the distress she experienced.”

Amelia felt sick at the suggestion. It reminded her far too much of how many women in her industry had been paid off under the table in exchange for their silence on the conduct of influential men... had things really changed so little?

“You are speaking on the Lord’s behalf?” Hamish clarified, looking at Baldric.

“You’ve all witnessed him leaving me here to speak in his stead,” Baldric said, with the brief flicker of an eyebrow. Amelia wondered just how many times Baldric had

stepped into the Lord's shoes to clean up messes like this one on his behalf. "I'll see to it that a suitable fine is negotiated."

"Lord Taffington?"

"Oh, I don't care one jot about money," Taffington said breezily, looking down at his hands and fussily adjusting his gloves. "Give the whore her trinkets, if you must."

"That's enough," Laird Donal said through gritted teeth. "Get him out of my sight. Now."

Baldric moved quickly, for such a large man. He ushered the unrepentant Lord Taffington through the mutinous crowd and out of the Keep. It wasn't long before they heard the sound of hooves as they made a hasty retreat through the opened gate and away from the Keep, leaving only chaos in their wake. Every man and woman in the hall seemed to be speaking at once, and all of them were shouting at the top of their voices, venting their fury and disbelief at what had been said.

Amelia looked to Laird Donal, Fiona, and to Hamish, wondering if they'd try to silence the crowd, but one look at their faces told her that neither of them had the strength to do so, nor the inclination. She didn't blame them. The thought of Sir Taffington getting away with what he'd done, with barely a rap on the knuckles for his trouble — it was absolutely galling.

"At least you managed to get him to promise to stay away from the village for a while," Amelia said later to Hamish, when the two of them were alone and debriefing over a well-deserved mug of ale. It felt like the opposite of celebration, as though they were acknowledging some grim defeat... but the alcohol was definitely quieting a little of her anger. "That's not nothing."

"Aye, but it's anyone's guess how long he'll obey the restriction — if he doesn't

march right over there now to prove he's not beholden to us," Hamish said, grimacing. "I'm just hoping his cowardice wins out over his entitlement. Being roughed up by the locals is a more effective threat than any we can offer."

He sounded utterly defeated... and Amelia felt horribly powerless as she sipped her ale.

"There's one small consolation," Hamish said after a pause, and she looked up to meet those piercing blue eyes of his, shadowed with exhaustion but still more than capable of making her stomach perform a little backflip. "He's absolutely not welcome on Keep grounds any longer. Which means he certainly won't be able to bother you."

"I wish he would," Amelia said darkly, clenching her fists under the table. "I'll make what those men did to him seem like a massage."

CHAPTER 17

The days passed uneasily following the confrontation with Lord Taffington. She could tell Hamish was deeply worried about what had happened, and the two of them often found themselves lapsing into grim silence as they tried to work out some way to defeat him. His letters to Amelia continued to arrive, day after day, seemingly growing even longer — she could only hope it was a sign that he had more time on his hands than he had before, owing to the fact that he was no longer visiting the village. Laird Donal had given unofficial instructions to the Watch to ensure a few men were down at the tavern most nights, to keep an eye on whether Taffington was keeping his distance. Hamish had been right, it seemed — the roughing up the Lord had received at the hands of the locals, if nothing else, seemed to be keeping him away, at least for the time being.

It was clear that there would be no getting rid of Taffington until Lord Weatherby could be gotten on side, somehow. The political situation in the area was far too volatile to risk actively antagonizing Weatherby by going after a guest he was determined to protect... so until that protection could be removed, Taffington had effective immunity. Still, Amelia nursed a private hope that Weatherby might come good after all. She'd sensed the tension between them — she knew that he was no happier about having Taffington staying indefinitely in his manor than the locals were. They just had to find a weakness of Taffington's to exploit, some way of turning his allies against him once and for all.

But that would take time, and patience — resources that Amelia had never been particularly good at using. Frustrated, she found herself joking a little too often about simply beating the man to death — jokes that Hamish always gently, but firmly

rebuked. He was an incredibly dedicated man, she was realizing — dedicated not only to his Clan and his people, but to his principles, too, that no situation needed to be resolved with violence. Still, he could clearly tell that all of this talk and lack of action was beginning to grind on her. She was surprised when he suggested, a few days after the confrontation with Taffington and Weatherby, that the two of them spend some time in the village. He'd volunteered to help out with the semi-official posting of guards that Laird Donal had put in place in the village to keep an eye out for Taffington, and she couldn't help but feel a thrill of pleasure at the realization that this suggestion just might have been motivated by his reluctance to leave her behind.

“You haven't been down there yet, have you?” he asked. “It's high time you continued your exploration of your new home, don't you think? The rooms at the tavern are as comfortable as most of the ones here at the Keep...”

“I'd never say no to a trip to the bar,” she said wryly, which won her one of those heart-stopping smiles of his. “But — I don't know. Delilah told me about witch hunters and all of that. What if the locals get the idea I'm a witch?”

“You're not a witch,” Hamish said firmly.

“I very much did arrive here by magic, Hamish.”

“Not your own magic. But I take your point that the nuances aren't necessarily going to be appreciated by the kind of adversary you're imagining. We'll be careful,” he promised. “I'll be your chaperone. I'll make sure I head you off if I hear you saying anything?—”

“Witchy?”

“I was going to say ‘suspicious’, but I suppose yours is a little more direct as any talk about living in a future time would have them up in arms.”

And so it was that she found herself on horseback again the following day with a plan to stay at the inn for a few nights, riding down the narrow road to the village, though why they needed to go on horse was beyond her, it was quick trip. She'd packed— a few changes of clothes, a hairbrush and comb that had been a gift from Delilah, and the journal she'd taken to writing in, mostly taking notes about fighting in long skirts. Hamish seemed in good spirits, too — he whistled as they rode. She was doing her best to seem like a more accomplished horsewoman than she was, and his almost-flirtatious sidelong looks weren't helping her focus. Thankfully, the ride took less than fifteen minutes.

The tavern was still open, though the lunch rush had clearly died down, with only a few die-hards still sitting at the bar. They looked up suspiciously when Hamish entered, but Amelia saw them visibly relax once they sighted the clan Tartan he was wearing. A tired-looking woman emerged from the back room at the sound of the jangling bell over the door, and Amelia noticed the sharp, vigilant way she was studying the two of them.

“We'd like room and board for a few days, if that's possible,” Hamish said softly, setting a handful of coins down on the bar. The barmaid looked at him for a moment.

“You're here to keep an eye out for that English bastard, yes?”

Hamish, to his credit, didn't flinch. Amelia hadn't had his diplomatic training, and a burst of laughter escaped her before she could stifle it. She covered her mouth apologetically with her hand, but the barmaid was smiling when she met her eyes.

“I shouldn't laugh,” Amelia said apologetically.

“No, lass, the man's a joke and no mistake.”

“You've met him?”

The barmaid nodded, her eyes hardening. “Aye, if that’s the word for it. I nearly broke his fingers for him the last I saw him. I’d have done a lot worse if I’d been here the night he went after poor Milly. Disgusting old boar,” she said, the loathing vivid in her voice. “The minute he found out she was engaged to be wed it was like he’d been bewitched. Men like that want anything that they fancy belongs to someone else.”

“How’s she doing?” Amelia wanted to know, leaning on the bar.

“All the better for all the Watchmen who’ve been drinking here lately,” the barmaid said, flashing a quick smile to Hamish. “But we’ve all been living in fear for weeks since that monster moved in. Knowing that all it’d take would be a few minutes caught alone with him—” She shuddered, rubbed tiredly at her forehead with the back of one hand. “Forgive me. It’s been a long summer.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Hamish said gently. “What’s your name, lass?”

“Maggie,” the woman said.

“Pleased to meet you, Maggie. I’m Hamish — this is Amelia.”

“You must be the new arrival,” Maggie said, a flicker of interest in her eyes as she glanced back at Amelia. “We heard another young lass had come to stay at the Keep.”

Amelia gave her a tight smile and glanced to Hamish. She hadn’t yet memorized the lie they often told about where they all came from, and for the life of her she couldn’t recall the small English Village most of them claimed was their home before coming here.

“Aye, cousin of Lady Fiona,” Hamish said, winking at Amelia.

“How lovely. How is Lady Fiona these days? We don’t see much of her, unless she comes down to visit at her old cottage.” Maggie smiled.

Amelia wasn’t sure what Maggie was referencing, but said, “She’s doing well. Keeping busy at the Keep.”

“Aye, I’d imagine so.”

As they chatted a thought occurred to Amelia. “Maggie, I wonder — you said you were frightened of being caught alone with Taffington?”

“Him, or the man with him,” the woman agreed, glancing up at the doorway as if checking to see if the man had been summoned by the sound of his name. “Honestly, it’s his man who scares me the most.”

Making a mental note to investigate the men she spoke of, Amelia nodded agreement. “Obviously, the plan is to get rid of Taffington, and all the men like him once and for all — that’s what Hamish is here to do. But I’m not much good at diplomacy,” she confessed.

Hamish was looking at her, clearly curious about what she was about to say — but he didn’t seem to be worried yet, so she pushed on.

“What I am good at is defending myself. I’ve taken down bigger and scarier men than Taffington without breaking a sweat — and if you’d like, I could teach you, and Milly, and any of the barmaids who’d like to learn.”

Maggie looked thoughtful. “I think that would do Milly a world of good,” she said slowly.

“If nothing else, it’s a good way to get some anger out,” Amelia said. “And I don’t

doubt you've all got plenty of that bottled up, putting up with Taffington for as long as you have."

"I think that's an excellent idea," Hamish said, surprising her. "You'd be surprised how easy it is to take a man down, especially if he's not expecting it."

"I'll talk to the other girls," Maggie said, clearly warming to the idea. "Mornings would be best — after breakfast and before we begin serving the mid-afternoon meal. There's a clear space out back behind the stables."

"I'll be there," Amelia promised.

The faint, forced smile on Maggie's face had been steadily eclipsed by a real expression of hope, and as she turned back to organizing their rooms, she looked down at the coins for a long moment before shoving them back across the bar to Hamish.

"I insist," he said — but Maggie cut him off with a shake of her head.

"Your coins are no good here," she said firmly. "You can pay in full by getting rid of that pompous English Tallowcatch."

The way she said it in such disgust, told Amelia it was a definite insult.

"I can't promise that," Hamish said softly, and Amelia could hear the regret in his voice. "But I can promise you I'll do everything I can to run him out of town for good."

Maggie wasn't fully satisfied with that, Amelia could tell. But it was clear from her expression that she respected the honesty at least, and she slid two keys across the bar without further comment.

The two of them headed up the stairs to get settled in, Amelia's mind already racing with what she was going to teach the barmaids first. It felt good to have a project — some practical way to improve the situation.

If she couldn't break Taffington's nose herself, she could damn well make sure that every woman she met was equipped to do it on her behalf.

CHAPTER 18

And so began a very different week in Amelia's new life. She woke bright and early the following day, already excited to share what she knew with the locals. She'd been expecting three or four of the barmaids to turn up, if that — part of her had even worried that nobody at all would come to learn from her. But she was shocked to find a whole crowd of women waiting for her, almost a dozen when she counted. It seemed that it wasn't only the tavern's staff who had had enough of Taffington's lecherous conduct — a few other local girls were there, and asked in small voices if it would be alright to take part in the classes as well.

"The more the merrier," she said at once. "Everyone's welcome. Bring your friends, if you want to."

The morning flew by. She'd been expecting the locals to be a little shy, especially after meeting Milly, whose voice barely raised above a whisper — and true, a few of them were clearly a little leery of her, especially when she pulled off her wrap to reveal her well-muscled arms. But it didn't take long to coax them into performing a few simple exercises, and before too long she could tell she'd awoken a warrior spirit that hadn't been hidden too deep beneath the surface. She ran them through the simplest and most direct means of discouraging an attacker, using the knees and elbows to identify a man's most sensitive parts, and the women were soon laughing as they practiced kneeing an imagined attacker in the family jewels. By the time the lesson drew to a close, she could tell she had a class of self-defense mistresses in the making — even the shy Milly had demonstrated an impressive speed and ferocity with her narrow, pointy elbows.

The next morning, the class size had doubled, and by the following day, they were forced to move into a field on the outskirts of town, a short walk from the tavern, where there would be room for everyone to move the way they needed to. Amelia was thrilled to be sharing what she loved with such an enthusiastic group of learners — and it wasn't long before they were contributing their own experience, too. Several of the older women shared a few tricks relating to their long skirts, showing ways to trap and trip would-be attackers using the bulky fabric — as well as a few sewing tricks that would make the cumbersome skirts easier to move in.

“It's not just the training, either,” she told Hamish on the third night, her mouth full of stew. “It's the camaraderie. Training together always brings you closer to your community, reminds you that you're not alone.” The two of them hadn't seen much of each other since their arrival in the village, with Hamish busy with his own line of work. He'd been conducting interviews around the village with people who'd had altercations with Taffington, hoping that there'd be something in all the stories they could use to have the man driven out of town. So far, there was nothing particularly damning, though the sheer weight of the man's bad behavior ought to have been more than enough to justify his expulsion from the town. Amelia almost felt guilty about how much fun she'd been having with her class of would-be warrior women — hers was clearly a much more empowering job than Hamish's, which largely involved listening to story after story about an arrogant jerk getting away with everything except murder so far.

“I'm so glad they have you,” Hamish said with a smile. “It sounds like you're really helping them.”

“Honestly, I feel like I've just opened a door and shown them what was there already,” she said, shaking her head. “These women are ferocious. I'm a little frightened of what I've awoken, if I'm honest.”

“Well, what did you expect of Scottish women?”

She grinned, lifting her ale to toast that sentiment. But his gaze didn't leave hers, and the soft smile on his face made her feel like she was about to blush to the roots of her hair.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said, eyes darting quickly away.

They were in a reasonably secluded corner of the tavern, which was quiet this early in the evening, and it wasn't long before those bright blue eyes returned to her.

“I hope you don't mind my saying that I admire you, Amelia. I admire what you're doing here.”

There it was — the blush she'd been trying to hold back. She'd never been very good at accepting compliments — it was something Carmen had often chastised her for. “I admire you too,” she said, well aware that it was a copout to deflect a compliment with another compliment. “Your dedication to solving this problem through nonviolent means, despite how... deeply unpleasant the man is. If it were me, I'd have thrown him off a cliff by now.” They'd ridden past the sandstone cliffs on the ride down, and she'd entertained more than a few silly but satisfying fantasies of seeing Taffington plunge to his ignoble end down there. “It's admirable, your dedication to diplomacy above all.”

“Not quite,” he said softly, surprising her. “Not quite all.”

“What do you mean?”

He paused for a moment, and she saw the familiar shadow on his face that tended to appear when he was thinking about Amy. She held her breath, ready to let him change the subject if he wanted to, but fiercely curious about what he might be about

to say. In all the time they'd known each other, he'd never actually told her what had happened to Amy — what terrible tragedy had cut her life short so cruelly soon. They both knew it was the curse that was to blame, of course, but they'd left it at that.

"I have settled arguments with violence before," he said after the silence had stretched almost unbearably long. "Some quarrels can't be settled by anything but blood."

"What kind of quarrels?"

"Like the one I had with the man who killed my wife," Hamish said simply.

She stared at him across the table, stunned by the revelation, so casually spoken... though the look in his eyes told her that while the subject might have been simple, his feelings about it were anything but.

"There are some actions that diplomacy simply cannot resolve. And for all Taffington's faults, from the information I've gathered about him so far, there are certain lines he hasn't crossed — not yet, at any rate, or not to my knowledge."

Amelia felt an eerie chill run down her spine at the flat, dispassionate way he spoke, and she found herself looking at him through new eyes. Part of her, she had to admit, had considered the work he was doing a little bit soft — gathering information in the hopes that he could make some legal argument to get rid of Taffington. It hadn't occurred to her that he might also be accumulating evidence, waiting to see if it weighed heavily enough to necessitate a more violent solution.

And whatever it said about her, she couldn't help but admit that she was even more attracted to him than she had been.

The space between them stayed quiet, and she sipped at her ale, not feeling

particularly pressed to disturb it. That was something she quite liked about Hamish — the way they could simply pass the time together in silence, neither of them feeling the need to break it just for the sake of making noise. It made what they did say to each other all the more special. Which was why, when Hamish cleared his throat and sat forward a little, she found herself leaning forward to take notice.

“I never did tell you how she died, did I?” Hamish asked softly, that same shadow still hanging heavily over his handsome face. “Amy, I mean.”

“No, you haven’t. Nobody has,” she added, not wanting him to think she’d gone and found the story out from someone else. “I’d like to know, if you’d like to tell me.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then began to speak, his voice soft and measured. There was an oddly remote look on his face, as though he was telling a story that belonged to someone else. She knew that trick well — it was exactly how she went about the thorny work of telling people about her father, on the rare occasion that she had to. Just pretend you were telling a story about someone else, that was the trick. Remove yourself from the story entirely.

And as Hamish spoke, she understood more and more just why he spoke about Amy’s death so rarely.

CHAPTER 19

It had been just over four years ago. Hamish and Amy had been living in happily married bliss in London, with Hamish having obtained a sought-after position as a diplomat, hoping to play his small part in resolving the tension between the Scottish and English to bring peace to his homeland. Everything had been perfect — until Amy, always a shy and quiet woman, caught the eye of an English lord who'd been stumbling home drunk one night. Entranced by her beauty, and antagonized by her refusal to so much as look him in the eye let alone entertain his drunken suit, the man had cornered her. Exactly what had happened, Hamish explained, nobody would ever know. What he did know was that Amy had been found dead in the mouth of an alleyway, two blocks from home.

Hamish had dedicated all of his time and resources to tracking down the man who'd done it, with the help of a few eyewitness accounts from sympathetic neighbors who'd seen the man fleeing the scene. He'd found him eventually, lying low on the other side of London, and it hadn't taken long to extract a tearful confession. The Lord hadn't meant to kill her, hadn't even meant to hurt her — he'd simply wanted to strike her to teach her a quick lesson about being polite to men on the street. But drunk as he was, he'd miscalculated, hitting her hard enough to knock her out — and either that blow, or the blow of her head against the cobblestones, had proved fatal. Amelia, listening with bated breath, knew all too well how serious a head injury could be. Movies often made out as though hitting someone on the head worked the same way that anesthetic did, but the truth was, any blow hard enough to knock a person out ran a serious risk of killing them, too.

And with a curse lingering in the air that was determined to bring about Amy's

untimely death, it was no wonder that the drunken man's blow had been fatal.

The Lord offered Hamish a groveling apology, offered to pay him reparations for the damage done, offered to fund the most elaborate memorial imaginable for the loss of Amy... but the more he offered, the more numb Hamish had felt. And so he'd done the only thing he could do — he challenged the man to a duel. The lord had accepted, more out of surprise than anything, and a week later, Hamish had killed him.

“Do you regret it?” Amelia asked softly, into the deep silence that followed the end of the story.

“No,” he said, and his answer came too easily to be anything but the truth. “I’ve been told that I should, that taking a man’s life is a sin and to repent, but I cannot find it in my heart to feel anything but righteous about what I did.” He was quiet for a long moment, then he looked up at her again, his blue eyes solemn. “Thank you for hearing me out, Amelia. It must be — strange, hearing about what happened to your ancestor.”

“It must be stranger still to talk about it with someone who looks just like her,” she countered, a weak smile on her face.

“Not at all,” Hamish said. “You’re still the spitting image of her, Amelia. But you’re your own woman, well and truly. I could no sooner mistake you for her again than I could the moon for the sun.”

They said their goodnights not long after that, and she did her level best to ignore the electricity that crackled between them in the dark hallway — the rooms they'd been assigned were neighbors, sharing a wall, and it felt silly to say goodnight anywhere but by their doors. She badly wanted to kiss him, but she stopped herself with a stern reminder that he'd just gone through the harrowing experience of telling the story of the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

Besides, they were both clearly exhausted. She'd barely managed to undress before she was yawning, looking forward to climbing into her narrow but comfortable bed — Hamish hadn't been exaggerating when he'd praised the accommodation at the village tavern. She drifted quickly into a deep and untroubled sleep.

But when she stirred, something told her right away that something was wrong. The gray light of dawn usually woke her when it spilled through the window, but as her eyelids fluttered open, she realized that it was still pitch dark in her room. A quick glance out of the window confirmed the suspicion — the streets were dark and deserted, and the moon shone brightly through a gap in the thick cloud cover that was blanketing the sky. It was still well and truly the middle of the night. It was unlike her to wake from her sleep for no reason, and as she settled back down beneath the covers, a wary suspicion kept her from falling back to sleep.

It wasn't long before she heard it — a dull thud against the far wall, and the muffled sound of Hamish's voice, raised as though in fear or anger. She was up before she knew it, quickly pulling on enough clothing to be somewhat decent if she was seen in the hallway, and she hastened next door before it could occur to her that it might be considered somewhat scandalous to go into a man's room unaccompanied so late at night. At least he'd left his door unlocked — she'd teased him for his carelessness, especially given how regularly he reminded her to lock her own door, but she was grateful for it now.

He was still asleep when she entered his room, but she could see from the way the bed sheets had tangled around him that he'd been tossing and turning for some time. The patchy moonlight from his window fell across his handsome face, and she could see him frowning as he stirred and turned, muttering unclearly about some threat he was dreaming. Amelia hesitated, torn between waking him from whatever was plaguing him — and feeling a little worried about having stolen into his room in the middle of the night. Besides, didn't they usually say not to wake people from nightmares? Or was that an old wives' tale? As she hesitated, frozen with indecision,

she heard him call out again. On this side of the wall, his unmuffled voice was as clear as day.

“Amy,” he was saying, his voice thick with fear and sadness. “Amy!”

Before she could think about it, she was moving across the room, taking quiet steps on the creaky wooden floor. When she reached his bedside, she put a careful hand on his shoulder, realizing with a jolt that he wasn’t wearing anything beneath the sheet — at least, not on his top half. Firmly banishing that particular curiosity, she murmured his name as softly as she could, wanting to reassure him but not to startle him. He called her predecessor’s name a few more times, questioning — but that awful fear and pain was gone from his voice, and he seemed to have stilled a little from the thrashing he’d been doing when she’d first opened the door.

“It’s okay,” she heard herself murmuring, keeping her voice low and soothing. “It’s okay, Hamish. Amy’s okay. She’s safe,” she said, not quite sure what was motivating her words, but feeling the strange conviction that what she was saying was true. “She’s safe, and she loves you. Everything’s okay.”

She waited by his side for a curious length of time that could have been minutes or hours, watching him slowly subside back into a restful sleep from whatever nightmare it had been that had disturbed him. She brushed that light auburn hair back from his brow, tousled by sleep, carefully adjusted his bed sheets so they wouldn’t cut into him as much, then gently stroked his cheek. Slowly but surely, the worried crease of his brow eased, and soon enough he was breathing deep and even, his face relaxed and his sharp features more serene than she’d ever seen them.

Finally, she shook herself out of the strange waking reverie she seemed to have entered, and tiptoed her way back across the floor. Her own bed was cold again, and she shivered as she tugged the bed sheets up around her chin, wishing she’d just dived into Hamish’s bed with him instead. Great idea, Amelia, she chided herself.

The man was clearly already confused and heartbroken enough about his lost wife without waking up from a nightmare about her to find her doppelganger in his bed. No, she had to keep her distance right now, that much was clear... no matter how she might happen to feel about it.

But unfortunately, as she lay there, she had to admit — if only in the privacy of her own mind — that she had well and truly fallen for Hamish MacClaran. How absolutely, tragically predictable. Another dashing, blue-eyed man with a tragic past and a lot of baggage to unpack.

But part of her couldn't help but suspect that this time things just might turn out better than they had in her past.

CHAPTER 20

The next day, she got back after training with her warrior women to find ominous news waiting for her in the dining room of the tavern — Hamish, his face grim and a letter in his hand that bore the familiar seal of Weatherby Manor. She narrowed her eyes at it and hissed like an angry cat, winning a weak chuckle from Hamish but not much more. Serious news, then.

“What’s Weatherby got to say?”

“It’s not from Weatherby, I’m afraid. It’s from Baldric. He says Taffington’s likely to be visiting the village again before long — most likely tonight, if not even earlier.”

She felt her heart sink into her shoes. “What? Why now?” She realized she’d been relying on Taffington’s cowardice to keep him away at least a little longer — but from the look on Hamish’s face, that particular streak of luck had run out. “Guess he’s tired of licking his wounds, huh?”

“Baldric said he’s discovered the manor’s secret passages and started sneaking around,” he said with a shake of his head. “More to the point, his guard is back in town — a nasty piece of work, from what I’ve heard.”

She shuddered. The women she’d been training had told more than a few stories about Sir Anthony Gaunt. He was a rangy, violent man, a match for Sir Baldric in skill with a blade, but bearing none of the former’s forbearance or wisdom. He’d been visiting back home in London when Taffington had attacked the barmaid and been beaten up by the locals — but he was back now.

“I guess that’s why he’s heading out again,” she said with a grimace. “I guess he’s suddenly a big, brave guy with a trained killer behind him. I should warn the girls,” she said heavily, glancing up at the bar to see if Maggie had arrived for her shift yet.

Hamish cleared his throat, and she looked back at him, suddenly struck by the worried look on his face. He looked almost as aggrieved as he had the night before, in whatever awful dream she’d eased him out of... something she hadn’t mentioned to him, feeling a little embarrassed that she’d crept into his room so late at night. If he had any memory of the encounter, he hadn’t mentioned it either.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m worried about Taffington coming to town,” he said, gesturing with the letter he still held clenched in his fist. “For personal reasons, as well as diplomatic ones.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he comes anywhere near you, I don’t think I can trust myself to behave like a diplomat,” he said simply, spreading his hands. “I’ll wring his neck and start a war, Amelia.”

She moved closer to him, a little surprised by the force of his words. “I can take care of myself, you know,” she told him, tilting her head slightly. “You don’t need to do any neck-wrangling on my account. You stick to diplomacy, and I’ll stick to fist-fighting. Yeah?” She lifted her hands into a half-joking fighting stance — then was shocked to feel his arms close around her, pulling her into a tight embrace that she was too surprised to resist, even if she’d wanted to. His body felt so warm and solid against hers... she melted against him, a little embarrassed by how good it felt to hold him like this.

“I know you aren’t Amy/” She heard his voice, a little muffled against her hair. “But I

still can't stand the thought of anything happening to you."

"Hey," she said softly, pulling back to seek his eyes. "It's okay. I'm going to be okay. Promise."

He smiled at that — and then, before she could stop herself, as though it was something she'd done a thousand times before, she lifted herself onto her tiptoes and kissed him squarely on the lips. It was a long, lingering kiss, possibly the most enjoyable of her life, and the look of delighted shock on his face when she finally pulled away made it all the sweeter. Utterly at a loss for what to say, she opted instead for a bright smile and a weird little shrug — then she turned on her heel and walked out of the tavern, certain she was going to embarrass herself if she stayed for another second.

Let that old creep come to the village, she thought dizzily. Right now, she felt like she could fight a thousand men his size without even breaking a sweat.

There was no sign of Taffington that afternoon, but Amelia made sure to spread the word that he was likely to be visiting again soon. The women she'd been training with were understandably worried, but there was a steely glint of resolve in their eyes that told her that they weren't going to be as easy to victimize as Taffington might expect. It felt good, knowing she'd shared a little of her strength and skill with these women. In the end, it was almost an anticlimax when there was no sign of Taffington for the rest of the evening. She and Hamish spent the evening in the tavern, both of them tense with expectation, but when Maggie called last drinks and gave them both a little shrug, they had to admit that their quarry wasn't coming.

"It's good news, really," Hamish said, clearly struggling to believe that.

"It won't be long," she said with a sigh. "That creep won't stay away forever, not now he's got his bodyguard to lean on. I'm going to teach the girls how to disarm

someone holding them at knifepoint tomorrow, just in case.”

“Good thinking,” Hamish said. Then he paused. “Speaking of staying safe... I have a suggestion, but I want to stress that it’s only a suggestion. I won’t push the matter, if it makes you feel at all uncomfortable.”

“Try me.” Were they flirting? Was this flirting? She hadn’t stopped thinking about the kiss all day, but neither of them had mentioned it, and she was beginning to wonder whether she genuinely might have imagined it.

“I was thinking it might be safer for us to share a room.”

She raised an eyebrow, doing her best to hide the rush of absolute delight that that suggestion instilled in her. “Safer, yes,” she agreed slowly. “Not to mention more — cost effective.”

A faint flicker of confusion on his face quickly gave way to amusement — then a solemn little nod. “Indeed. We’ll be saving the Keep some much-needed coin.”

“Halving our costs, in fact.” That was true, wasn’t it, strictly speaking? Half of nothing might have also been nothing, but they were still technically halving the cost of their free accommodation... grinning, she followed Hamish up the stairs, hoping that the thudding of her heart against her ribcage wasn’t quite as loud as it felt.

The door had barely clicked shut behind them before he was on top of her, and Amelia quickly put aside any concern she’d had that the spark between them that morning had been imagined. This kiss was deeper, fiercer, unfettered by hesitation or the frozen shock of that morning — this was a man who’d been thinking about kissing her all day, all week, all month. She didn’t even mind when he flattened her against the closed door behind her, didn’t mind at all being handled a little roughly as he reached around to attack the lacing on her dress with a surprisingly deft hand that

got the tricky garment unlaced faster than she'd ever managed to. She returned the favor as swiftly as she could, tugging at his shirt until she grew too impatient and simply yanked the garment off him and made Hamish laugh against her lips before reclaiming them in a ferocious kiss.

At some point, they fell onto the bed together, and just as quickly, the rest of their clothes joined the growing pile on the floor behind them, but Amelia couldn't bring herself to care about any of that. All she was focused on was the man in her arms, the feeling of his hot skin beneath her hands, the demanding, possessive, delicious way he held her, caressed her, at once brand new and oddly familiar. Her pulse was climbing faster than she'd thought possible, her body already demanding more of him — his touch, his kiss, the hard press of his manhood against her thigh, she wanted all of it. How did he seem to know exactly where to touch her to get the fire started? How did he know just which part of her throat was the most sensitive, just which part of the flesh on her ribcage would make her gasp and whimper when he caressed it? How did he know exactly when to hold back and tease her, and exactly when to give her what she was wordlessly demanding? When he finally held her close and slid himself to the hilt inside her, she felt like she might actually pass out. The sensation was so good, so right, so overwhelmingly perfect. The way his body fit into hers was nothing less than supernatural, and she hoped that the desperate, demanding way she was kissing him would go some way to telling him what words seemed suddenly inadequate to convey.

Much later, when the two of them had exhausted themselves for the time being, but remained too stubborn to go to sleep just yet, she stirred in his arms. He'd been slowly but methodically stroking her tangled hair back from her sweaty cheeks, restoring order where he'd brought chaos, but he withdrew his fingertips carefully when she looked up at him, always attentive to the slightest indication she might want him to stop what he was doing.

"You're too good at this," she informed him, amused by how hoarse her voice

sounded. It had been quite some time, she realized, since she'd used her voice for anything but moaning and gasping.

"Is that so?"

God, and she'd thought that smile of his was dazzling before. Now, in the candlelight, his skin still damp from the sweat of their lovemaking... she had to fight back the urge to pull him into her arms again.

"Is it..." She took a breath. "Is this weird, for you?" Because of Amy, she wanted to say. Because of your wife... but she could tell from the way his expression had shifted that he knew what she was getting at.

"No," he said, after a silence that had stretched long enough to worry her. "I don't think so, no. Like I said, Amelia — you may look like her, but you're two very different women." He tilted his head. "Is it strange for you?"

No stranger than everything else that's been happening, she thought, fighting back the strange urge to laugh. "It's a little strange that you're better in bed than anyone I've ever been with," she said softly, enjoying the pleased smile that spread across his face. "Seriously. I don't think anyone's ever gotten me there the first time. People usually need practice."

"Well, I'm not opposed to a bit of practice."

She laughed, feeling him moving to take her in his arms, already aware of her body responding to him. Something told her that the two of them weren't going to be getting much sleep tonight... and though she knew, distantly, that they had major worries on their plate still, right now, she simply couldn't bring herself to think about anything but him.

CHAPTER 21

Lord Taffington made his unpleasant return three days later, of course, just in time to dash her fragile hopes that maybe Baldric had been wrong. He swaggered into the tavern just after sunset, clearly enjoying the grim hush that fell over the crowd as they realized just who had arrived, looking a prize fool in what seemed to be a brand new wig and a red velvet-lined cape that made him look like a child pretending to be a king. All eyes might have been on him and his stupid outfit, but Amelia's eyes were drawn quickly to the man standing behind him, doing a damn good job of looking unobtrusive... especially for a man his height.

She knew without a second thought that this had to be Gaunt. Sir Gaunt, if Baldric's letter was accurate... how a brute like that got a knighthood was anyone's guess, but she could tell just by looking at him that he was a trained fighter. He had dark brown hair and a nondescript beard, the kind of man in his early forties who'd blend easily into any crowd... if it wasn't for the scars, of course. He had one or two on his face, more visible on his arms beneath the sleeves of the simple leather armor he wore, and she didn't doubt that the beard was largely there to hide the true extent of the scarring. His cold gray eyes flicked over to her and rested on her, just for a moment — just long enough to send a chill down her spine as he sized her up.

This was a man who meant business. And as revolting as Lord Taffington was, she knew in her bones which of the two was the greater threat.

Hamish was beside her. She put a comforting hand on his forearm, knowing that he was consciously controlling his breathing from the tension she could see in his jaw when she glanced up at him. Lord Taffington was still lingering in the doorway,

clearly enjoying the attention his arrival had drawn, but thanks to where they were standing, he hadn't spotted either of them yet. His attention was focused on one of the guards Amelia and Hamish had gotten to know better over the last few days, a resident of the village and cousin to Milly who'd taken a particular interest in keeping the locals safe from Taffington. Gareth was squaring up to the man now, his hand almost trembling where it rested by the hilt of his sword.

"You're not welcome here any longer, Lord Taffington." His voice boomed loud in the hushed atmosphere of the tavern. "Leave now, and that'll be an end to it."

"You know, I don't think I will," Taffington said brightly, taking an unctuous little step toward Gareth and lifting one finger to jab him unexpectedly in the middle of the chest. "My money spends as well as anyone else's. Better, I'd say, given how much I've got compared to you miserable wretches. Respect your betters, lad."

It happened in an instant. Gareth's face twisted, and Amelia could already see him telegraphing his swing — his left foot shifting on the floor, his hip twisting as he gathered the force he needed for what would no doubt be a prodigious haymaker. It would have done the smirking Taffington a great deal of damage, too — if it had connected, that was. Instead, with a blur of dark leather, Gaunt was suddenly in the way, blocking the blow with one hand and spinning around to drive an effortless elbow directly into Gareth's unprotected throat. With a dreadful choking sound, the young man doubled over — only to be met by an uppercut from the unfazed Gaunt, which sent bright blood splashing across the floor.

Hamish lunged forward, and for a horrifying second, Amelia was certain he was about to attack the guard. Instead, he called sharply for quiet, his voice cutting right through the uproar that Gareth's collapse had brought about.

"Peace," he said sharply, positioning himself between Taffington and the stunned tavern-goers. "There's no need for anyone else to be harmed tonight."

“Tell that to your ruffians,” Taffington sneered, gesturing to Gareth, who was still choking and spluttering as he held both hands to his freely bleeding nose. “You all saw him attack me unprovoked. Thank God for my dear sweet guardian, Sir Gaunt. He’ll always keep me safe, isn’t that right, Anthony?”

Gaunt didn’t respond. He was methodically wiping the blood from his knuckles with a stained handkerchief he’d pulled from a pocket somewhere, his gray eyes emotionless. Amelia had seen eyes like that before, usually on the other side of a boxing ring — the eyes of a person who was no longer uncomfortable with any amount of violence. She was grateful, fiercely grateful, that Hamish had managed to keep the situation under control. Gaunt and Taffington might have been outnumbered by the locals in the tavern, but in the event that a fight had broken out, she knew that that man would have done a great deal of damage before superior numbers won out.

She melted into the crowd and away toward the back of the room, mindful to keep out of Taffington’s line of sight wherever she could. Hamish had fetched a few furious-looking guards to help Gareth out of the tavern and down the street to find someone to see to his injuries, but it wasn’t long before he was back and hovering by her side like a vengeful spirit. He kept glancing down at her, then back across the bar to where Taffington had installed himself and was doing his best not to look bothered that every single person in the tavern was ignoring him.

“I think you should go back to the Keep, Amelia,” Hamish said abruptly.

She had a feeling she knew what had prompted this suggestion — Taffington was leering over the bar at one of the barmaids, and it wasn’t hard to see which part of her body he was ogling as she bent to mop up a spill.

“It isn’t safe here.”

“That’s exactly why I need to be here,” she retorted, not moving her eyes from

Taffington's shape. The barmaid had realized he was staring at her and risen to her feet, and though she couldn't hear what he was saying over the din in the room, she saw the young woman reluctantly approach him, a flagon of ale in her hand. He set a coin down on the bar and she reached for it, but before she could take it, his own chubby, ring-encrusted hand lashed out to grab her by the wrist with a smug little chuckle. Amelia held her breath — and then grinned in triumph as she saw the girl's wrist twist. Taffington's high-pitched yelp of pain was audible from even this distance, and then the girl was walking away with the coin as if nothing at all had happened. Taffington was holding his wrist, looking mutinous, and Amelia's grin spread even more widely across her face when she saw the girl look up to seek her out in the crowd to flash her a quick smile.

"One of your moves, huh?" Hamish was smiling too, though she could see that not much of his worry had left his eyes.

"One of my favorites. Doesn't leave any marks or do any lasting damage, but it hurts like hell and breaks the grip in a second. He'll think twice before he pulls that crap again." She glanced up at him. "See why I can't leave? I'm not letting some asshole and his hired thug scare me away when I've still got things to teach these women."

"You've taught them enough, surely," he tried to argue — but it was a weak argument, and he clearly knew it. A little disturbed by his determination to see her carried away to safety at the Keep, Amelia took a deep breath before responding, not wanting to snap at him. Then she frowned. The seat Taffington had been occupying at the bar was empty. Was it too much to hope that his brief altercation with the barmaid had been enough to send him home in disgrace?

"Well, well, well," she heard a revoltingly familiar voice purr, far too close for comfort. "What a coincidence, seeing you here. I knew you were getting my letters."

"If by 'getting' you mean I've been using them to light my fires," she snapped back

before she could remind herself to take the high road. “Get away from me, Taffington. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“Now, now,” Taffington said impatiently. “The thing about playing hard to get is you need to know when to cut your losses — otherwise, you end up getting hurt. Ask your little friend about that,” he added, leering as he nodded across the bar. She turned to see that he was looking at Milly, who was moving through the crowded tavern with a tray of drinks and her head held high. The girl had showed a surprisingly steely streak when she’d been told Taffington would likely be returning to the tavern, refusing to take any time off work in the interests of avoiding him. Amelia was torn between worry for her — and worry for Taffington, if he tried anything at all with her. Those elbows of hers would be absolutely lethal if she was given the right opportunity to use them.

“That’s enough,” Hamish said firmly, his usually quiet and calming voice shaking with anger. He was squaring up to Taffington, using every bit of the height advantage he had over the man — Taffington might have been heavier set, but Hamish was the taller, and clearly the more seasoned fighter.

But he hadn’t reckoned on Gaunt being there. Before Amelia could blink, she saw the man step with terrifying speed into the fray, shoving Hamish bodily away from the sneering Taffington. But he clearly hadn’t reckoned on Hamish having the turn of speed that he did. With a quick blur of motion, suddenly the tables had turned again — Hamish had moved with the shove, throwing Gaunt off-balance long enough to get a knife to his throat.

“Now, now, boys,” Taffington said nervously. “No need for all that.”

Gaunt looked almost bored as he raised both hands in surrender, as though it was a toy blade that Hamish was holding to his throat.

“I’ll remind you, Taffington, that you’re on thin ice with the Laird,” Hamish said, his voice suddenly calm again. “If you so much as lay a finger on Amelia?—”

But Taffington merely threw back his head and laughed. Hamish watched him with gritted teeth, but Amelia knew a lost cause when she saw one. She reached out to take his elbow, wishing she could tell him how much she sympathized with the futile anger on his face — she wanted to break Taffington’s nose so badly right now, but she knew who’d look like the bad guy if she did. Slowly, reluctantly, Hamish lowered the knife, and Gaunt stepped neatly back to his boss’s side, adjusting his armor as though nothing at all had happened.

“Let’s go,” Hamish suggested to Amelia, turning to give the smirking Taffington a disgusted look. “I don’t like the company here.”

CHAPTER 22

It was a lot quieter outside the tavern. Amelia hadn't realized how badly she needed the fresh air until the cool night wind struck her, tousling her hair and rustling her skirts around her legs. Hamish was striding ahead of her, clearly trying to vent some of his fury with the long, jagged strides he was taking. She followed him up the deserted street, quickening her own pace to keep up without much effort.

"You were right when you said we ought to shove him off a cliff," he grumbled once he'd cooled off a little. They'd walked right to the outskirts of the village and halfway back again, which brought them to the town square. Hamish slowed his pace to a shambling walk, kicking at loose stones as he circled, aimless and frustrated, in the empty square. With a sigh, Amelia took a seat on the edge of the raised platform that stood at the center of the square and waited for Hamish to join her.

"You know I was joking about the cliff thing, right?" she asked, quirking an eyebrow. "I don't want to give you diplomacy lessons or anything, but murdering the man would only cause bigger problems."

"I'll handle them. I'm good at big problems. That's why they brought me here." He scrubbed his face wearily as she laughed, sympathy as well as amusement coloring her voice.

"You sound like me."

"A high compliment, Miss Cosgrove." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and she leaned into the warmth of him, smiling softly. "I do think you'd be safer at the

Keep though, Amelia. Truly. Will you consider it?"

Frustration flared in her chest, and she reminded herself that he was under pressure before she responded. "I've considered it, Hamish," she said, keeping her tone level. "And my considered answer is still 'hell no'. Men like Taffington don't respond to the high road, they just take it as an encouragement to get worse." Seeing him tonight had solidified this impression once and for all, and she could feel the truth of it ringing in her voice even as she explained. "The only thing that's going to stop Taffington from behaving like he does are the kinds of consequences he can't run away from with money or influence. Like me breaking his nose," she said brightly. She'd intended it as a joke, hoping to lighten the mood, but if anything, Hamish's expression was even more dour as he took in what she'd said.

"I think you should reconsider," he said, his voice sharp and jagged. "I know you're strong, Amelia, and I know you're very wise about the world you come from, but things are different here. I don't want you to get hurt by Taffington or anyone like him. I couldn't stand it."

"I understand that," she said, fighting to keep her temper under control. "I really do. But at the end of the day, Hamish, what I do is my decision, not yours."

"Of course it is. I just?—"

"—you're just only happy with that when my decision is the same as the one you'd make on my behalf?" she countered, feeling a sudden burning anger low in her belly.

"I'm trying to keep you safe."

"You're trying to control me," she snapped, knowing it was unreasonable but finding it difficult to care all of a sudden. "Hamish, you're supposed to be the good guy here, aren't you? You're supposed to trust me. What happened to all that stuff about how

I'm a warrior? About how you wished Amy had been a little more like me, and fought back against that guy who killed her?"

She regretted it the minute she'd said it, but it was already too late. Hamish's expression had gone wooden, and he was silent for a long, horrible minute that made her feel like her heart was going to sink right through her feet and through the cobblestones. She kept trying to think of something to say — but she couldn't think of any way of taking it back without weakening her point.

"I know you're trying to protect the local women from Taffington," he said finally, his voice cold and distant. "But I'm telling you that you're underestimating the amount of danger that's putting you in."

"And I'm telling you that it's my damn choice," she said through gritted teeth. Suddenly, she couldn't stand to sit still for another second. She pulled away from him and rocketed to her feet, restless and furious. "I think we both need to cool off for a minute, alright? I'm going for a walk."

"Amelia—"

"Step back, alright?" she snapped, wheeling on him as he took a few steps after her.

She hadn't meant to do it, but old habits died very hard, and she'd dropped into a fighting stance before she could stop herself, fists shielding her face, center of gravity dropping. Hamish stopped dead in his tracks, raising his hands in surrender as he took three pointed steps away from her.

"Thanks," she said softly, lowering her hands. And before she said or did anything else she was going to regret, she turned on her heel and walked off into the night.

She walked fast, trying to steady her breathing as she went. It was quiet out here,

especially in contrast to the crowded tavern where she'd been spending the last few evenings, but somehow that wasn't much comfort. She hadn't disagreed with Hamish like that before, and it was setting off all kinds of uncomfortable thought spirals that she knew, on some level, had more to do with her own traumatic history than they did with his actual motivations. She'd never reacted well to the feeling of being controlled, even the suspicion of it — perhaps because for the longest time, she hadn't realized how controlling and coercive her own father had been. She'd been too young to remember much about her mother when they'd lost her, and no doubt some of her father's own grief played into the way he'd treated her... but she was a long way from being able to sympathize with him.

The only thing that had gotten her out of that situation, her father's demanding, controlling tendencies, the way he'd shout at her if she was even a few minutes late from school or hesitated in explaining her whereabouts, the way he'd go through her things whenever he felt like it, the way she hadn't had any privacy for most of her adolescence... the only thing that had made her feel like there was a better future ahead had been martial arts. When she was training, when she was fighting — she was never more powerful, never more in control of herself, of her own body, her own space, her own destiny. That had been the source of all her drive, all her commitment, her ability to train harder than the others, to dig deeper, to fight harder... it wasn't that she was frightened of going back so much as it was how much she valued what it would give her. The freedom of control. The inherent, overwhelming joy of self-determination.

Could Hamish ever understand that? she wondered. He was a man, in a deeply patriarchal society... could he ever know how frightening it could feel to move as a woman through these awful power structures, to know that the men around you held an awful power that you could only hope to manipulate, never to own yourself? He'd work it out, she reassured herself as she walked the sleeping village. He was a diplomat, wasn't he? If he could figure out the political complexities of two warring nations, he could use a bit of that intelligence to empathize with her plight...

It was her distraction with the subject of Hamish that meant her situational awareness wasn't quite what it usually was. That was the only reason she didn't hear the warning signs earlier. She was heading back toward the tavern with half a mind to go up to her old room — though she'd been sharing a bed with Hamish the last three nights, of course, she still had the key to the her original room, and the idea of having some time and space to herself seemed like the best course of action. But as the tavern came into view, a figure stepped out abruptly from a narrow alleyway between two buildings.

“There you are,” came Taffington's unpleasant voice. But the steely hand that was tightening around her wrist wasn't his — and nor was the hard, metallic object she could feel pressing into the small of her back.

CHAPTER 23

Was this the alley where he'd attacked Milly? she wondered. Gaunt maneuvered her off the street and she went obediently, letting her body be as still and compliant as she could while her mind raced. Years of training had made her very adept at thinking under pressure — there was a paradoxical sense of calm right now as her fight-or-flight reflexes activated, any sense of panic sliding off her back like water. She never panicked in the ring, and she wasn't going to panic now.

Taffington was smirking, leaning casually against the alley wall with his hard eyes glittering as they roamed across her face and body. "I think we should have a little chat," he purred, stepping in close.

He took both of her hands in his own, and she felt Gaunt move back, the pressure of the blade at her back disappearing. Good, she thought, letting a false mask of fear flitter across her face as Taffington stepped closer. The grip he was maintaining on her wrists would have barely held a child — he was clearly used to using his bulk and height advantage to keep his victims still. That, and his money and influence. Well, those weren't going to help.

"What do you want?" she asked, keeping her breathing steady as she readied herself. She just needed to wait a few seconds — not for Taffington, but for Gaunt's guard to relax, just a little. He was a professional, but he seemed like the kind of guy to underestimate frightened women...

"I want what you promised me when you paraded yourself around Weatherby's in that trollop's attire," Taffington said, his voice dripping with equal parts revulsion

and greed. “I want you to stop putting on airs and be an honest whore.”

The purest joy she'd felt in a very, very long time claimed her then. There was something dreamy about the way time slowed down in a fight. Taffington's face was tilted down toward hers, clearly expecting to force a kiss on her. Instead, she jerked her head forward hard enough to slam the hardest part of her forehead against the underside of his chin. As the shock made his body recoil automatically, she was already moving, hands slipping effortlessly free of his weakening grasp. An elbow to the underside of his chin, another crashed hard into his skull, and for good measure she drove her knee as hard as she could into his groin.

Gaunt. She'd known it wouldn't be long until he joined the fray, but he was hampered by the bulk of a howling, enraged Taffington, and couldn't get close enough to her to deploy his blade — which gave her just enough time to seize his wrist in a disarming grip, one of the most painful she knew. He barely flinched, though he caught his breath as the blade clattered to the cobblestones — she kicked it away, planted her foot and put every bit of her strength into an uppercut that connected with a satisfying crunch to the underside of his chin. The guard staggered, spitting blood, but he was already moving to retaliate — she pressed in close, staying inside his guard, willing to bet that most of his opponents kept their distance. She was right. From up close, he was easy to unbalance, unable to reach the sword at his belt before she'd gotten him against the other wall of the alley. She grabbed a fistful of his hair and slammed his head as hard as she could into the wall, feeling the consciousness leave his body as he slid into a heap on the cobblestones.

Taffington, bellowing with rage, grabbed her by the shoulder. She spun, surprising him by going with the pull of his hand instead of resisting it. She savored her one satisfying glimpse of the naked fear on his face, the blood running freely from an almost certainly broken nose, then she grabbed his wrist and twisted it the way she'd twisted Gaunt's.

“What did I tell you?” she asked, pleased by how level her voice was, as though she’d barely expended any effort at all. “If you lay a hand on me?—”

He whimpered, dropping to his knees as her grip on his hand tightened.

“—or any woman here — then that hand will end up — broken.”

“You wouldn’t dare, you —”

Whatever he’d been about to call her, he didn’t make it to the end of the sentence. Instead, his voice gave way to an unearthly howl as she made a clean break in three of his fingers. Then she headed for the end of the alleyway, where she could already hear men shouting for guards. A quick glance back up the alley showed her the satisfying sight of Taffington on his knees, huddled on the ground with his hand clutched tightly against his chest and blood dripping onto his fine and no doubt expensive clothing. The look in his eyes was nothing short of loathful.

“Hellion,” he hissed, and she could hear by the venom in his voice that he intended it to wound her deeply.

Amelia just let her smile widen. Behind Taffington, she could make out the figure of his guard stirring, and hid the slight relief that the sight brought her. As nasty a piece of work as Gaunt clearly was, she hadn’t wanted to kill him — just to get him out of the way long enough to give Taffington a taste of what it felt like to be powerless.

She knew the guards were on their way, and she lingered nearby on the tavern steps where she’d be in full view, just in case Taffington or Gaunt felt like trying anything on their way home. By the time the guards had arrived, Taffington was limping out of the alleyway with Gaunt at his side, discretely steadying him despite the bloody wound he himself was sporting. Amelia didn’t bother hiding her smile of smug satisfaction as she watched the two men limp toward the stables — something told

her that their evening of merriment had come to an end. Once she'd seen their carriage roll away down the quiet street, she slipped inside to find Hamish.

Word had already spread about what had happened to Taffington out there, to her amusement — it seemed the guards had prioritized gossip over coming to the Lord's aid, and something told her that there weren't going to be any follow up questions regarding her own role in Taffington's assault. Besides, pursuing her on the subject would mean Taffington would have to admit how badly she'd beaten him and Gaunt, and she had a feeling both men would find that deeply distasteful. She grinned modestly as she moved through the crowds — the mood in the tavern had improved tremendously with Taffington and Gaunt gone, and she had to turn down several offers to buy her a drink to celebrate. The barmaids looked especially pleased with the situation — she hung back long enough to compliment Maggie on how expertly she'd twisted out of Taffington's grip earlier.

There didn't seem to be any sign of Hamish downstairs, and part of her was worried that he might have left the village altogether and headed back for the Keep himself. But to her relief, once she reached the stairs, she could see a familiar figure waiting for her on the landing. She took the steps two at a time, her anger with him already forgotten — and from the look in his eyes as he welcomed her into his embrace, she could tell that he'd let go of any resentment he was still nursing from their argument earlier.

“Why is everyone toasting your name?” he asked in an undertone as they moved down the hallway, out of sight of the revelers downstairs.

“The usual reasons,” she said archly. “Also because I broke Taffington's hand in three places, and probably his nose.”

“What?” Hamish stopped dead in his tracks, and she turned to meet his wide-eyed gaze. “You're serious?”

“He and Gaunt tried to pounce on me in the alleyway,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

For a moment, she was worried he was going to argue with her about what she’d done, tell her that she’d put the political situation into even more jeopardy — but to her immense relief, instead of gentle recrimination, a broad smile spread across his handsome face.

“Really?” she teased him, stepping a little closer. “The diplomat’s pleased to hear about violence?”

“If he was trying to hurt you, he deserved twice what he got,” Hamish said softly, drawing her into his arms.

She leaned against him for a moment, savoring the unadulterated joy of the moment, knowing they were going to have to let tedious old reality back in sooner rather than later.

“Hey,” she said finally. “I think we should move back up to the Keep. We’ve done what we can here... and when Taffington decides he wants to find me again for revenge, I’d rather not have the villagers have to put up with the consequences.”

Hamish nodded, looking relieved to hear her say it. But he frowned a little. “What about your lessons?”

“You saw Maggie nearly break Taffington’s wrist before I even got to him,” she said, grinning. “I’ve taught them enough to be getting on with. Besides, it’ll be a while before Taffington’s feeling well enough to make a nuisance of himself here again.”

A while, she thought, a prickle of anxiety interrupting her joy. A while... but not forever. She’d bought them some time, at least. She only hoped they could figure out

another solution before Taffington was back to his old self... because she had a feeling he was going to get a lot worse once his hand and nose had healed.

CHAPTER 24

It was nice to be back at the Keep after a few weeks away. She was surprised to realize how much she'd missed her new friends, the other time travelers — especially Delilah, who was waiting on the steps to welcome them back the following afternoon. Somehow, word had managed to beat them back to the Keep about what had happened to Taffington in the alley, and she found herself fielding more than a few enquiries about how she'd been able to disarm his guard as well as doing such damage to him. Something told her she'd be teaching a few self-defense classes here at the Keep before too long, something she was more than happy to do.

The mystery of how word had spread so fast was resolved when the two of them were called to see Laird Donal in his quarters. There was a long letter in his hand when he called them in, composed in what Amelia could tell even at a considerable distance was very poor handwriting... almost as though the writer had been forced to use their non-dominant hand to compose it. She did her best to hide the smug grin that threatened to spread across her face... though she could see a hint of amusement dancing in Laird Donal's eyes when he turned to offer her the weakest rebuke she'd ever heard.

"I'll be writing back to Lord Taffington to let him know how dreadfully sorry you are for breaking his hand," the Laird said, pressing his lips together to hide his smile.

"Tell him I wept at your feet for forgiveness," Amelia suggested brightly, hearing Hamish chuckle at her side.

"As tempted as I am, it may not be in our best interests to goad him right now,"

Hamish said reluctantly. “Amelia, you had every right to defend yourself the way you did... but it remains the case that Taffington has the power to make things extraordinarily difficult for us. The influence he has over Weatherby is very troubling indeed.”

“Our good relationship with Lord Weatherby is a valuable asset,” Laird Donal explained. “The English are effectively occupying Scotland, and many of our neighboring clans haven’t been so lucky when it comes to English presence on their lands. Hamish and I are very concerned about Taffington potentially taking over Weatherby’s position here. From what we’ve come to understand from Hamish’s connections in parliament, that eventuality is very possible. And it goes without saying that having Lord Taffington in charge is...”

“The worst possible eventuality,” Hamish supplied grimly. “We need to tread carefully. From what I’ve been able to get out of Sir Baldric, Weatherby wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if Taffington attempted to take over his role here. If Taffington starts throwing his political weight around, we won’t be able to look to Weatherby for help.”

“So what can we do?” Amelia wanted to know. The jolly mood of joking about Taffington suddenly seemed like it had been a long, long time ago.

“Right now, all we can do is wait,” Hamish said heavily. “I nurse a faint hope that Taffington might take the medicine you gave him last night and improve himself, but I’d be the first to admit that that’s the least likely outcome.”

“And the most likely?” Laird Donal asked.

“A man like that? He’ll want revenge. And he’ll get it whatever way he can.”

There was one benefit to having broken Taffington’s hand, Amelia reflected as the

days began to creep slowly by. It seemed to have put an abrupt stop to the revolting love letters he'd been sending her nonstop since her arrival here in Scotland. The most recently dated one among the pile that had accumulated for her in her absence had arrived the day before the encounter with Weatherby in the tavern, and had all but described his intention to corner her somewhere and have his way with her... she wrinkled her nose before stuffing the missive back in its envelope and returning it to the drawer where she kept them, as far from sight as possible. Once Taffington was dealt with, she promised herself, she was going to burn every last one of these letters.

At least she and Hamish had plenty of time to spend together. She wound up spending very little time in her own room as the weeks went by — Hamish's quarters were much larger, including — most importantly — the bed. It wasn't like she had many belongings of her own to store, either. By the end of their first week back, she'd moved most of her clothes into his wardrobe, and the rest of her possessions followed quickly.

Her friends noticed, of course. For a while, she'd entertained the idea of keeping their blossoming relationship a secret, maintaining the charade of going back to her own room each night... but the spark between them was undeniable, and she quickly tired of hiding the way her eyes were drawn to him every time he stepped into a room. She could tell, from the looks on the faces of her friends, that they'd put the pieces together, but they all seemed to have agreed to some collective pact of politeness, and nobody brought it up.

Eventually, she mentioned the subject to Delilah. It had been a fortnight since she and Hamish had returned from the village to the Keep, and she hadn't been back to her own room for three or four days. She and Delilah were taking a stroll around the walls of the Keep in the late afternoon sunshine, enjoying the pleasant weather, which had been growing warmer over the last few weeks. That warmth had been the only thing anyone could talk about for the last few weeks, and Delilah was telling her that the warm summer weather always marked marriage season for the surrounding area.

She smiled, thinking of Milly and hoping the young woman was looking forward to her own wedding, despite all the unpleasantness with Taffington.

“Speaking of romance,” she said casually, marking the way that Delilah deliberately didn’t change a single thing about her posture or body language. “I suppose you’ve noticed that Hamish and I have been spending a bit of time together.”

“Oh, have you?” Delilah couldn’t have sounded any more casual if she’d spent days practicing her tone... which Amelia had a suspicion she might have. She couldn’t help but laugh, feeling very fond of her friend.

“I appreciate the effort, but I can’t say you’re very convincing,” she said, and Delilah joined her in laughing, looking apologetic.

“Alright. I’ll admit that a little conjecture might have been going around.” There was a brief pause in which Delilah was clearly struggling to be polite, before finally, impatiently, a more honest demand broke through. “Well? Tell me what’s happening!”

Amelia laughed, not even bothered by the demand. “I have a feeling you know what’s happening, Delilah! The same damned thing that’s happened to all six hundred of the other women who’ve turned up here and found out they’re one half of a pair of identical twins who were born hundreds of years apart. I’m annoyed about how predictable it all is, honestly.”

“Who could blame you?” Delilah pointed out. “I don’t mind telling you that half the girls in the Keep are in love with him. Who’d have thought that diplomacy was sexy?”

Amelia snorted. “There’s more to him on that front than the diplomacy. Not that I’ll be going into details,” she added primly. Then she hesitated. “I wanted to ask your

advice about all that, actually. Should we be... I don't know, keeping it secret that we're... getting physical? I don't want the whole village to think I'm a whore."

Delilah shook her head. "You'd be surprised by the general attitude to sex around here," she said frankly. "The only people who get their knickers in a twist about premarital sex generally have an ulterior motive. Normal people know it's part of life. Nobody's going to respect you any less for it." Her eyes were twinkling. "One thing you might need to get ready for is a proposal, though."

"A proposal?" Her eyes widened. "We've barely known each other a month!"

"MacClaran men move fast when they know what they want," Delilah said with a shrug. "I'm not saying you need to say yes, just letting you know that you might want to... prepare a response, if the question comes up."

Now that she thought about it, she had noticed Hamish looking at her sideways when he thought she couldn't see him, and he'd been a touch preoccupied of late... with the Taffington situation, she'd thought at first, but there seemed to be something else there, too. To her surprise, the thought didn't frighten her. Delilah was looking at her curiously out of the corner of her eye, clearly eager to hear her thoughts but respecting her privacy still. It was amazing how far that simple courtesy went to making her feel like she wanted to open up. Knowing she didn't have to share her feelings made her all the more comfortable to do so.

"You know, I think I'd say yes, if he asked me," she said, feeling an odd thrill run down her spine at the thought.

"You would?"

"I mean, in my old life, in the old world, I'd say it was absolutely insane. But... none of this is anything like my old life," she said, gesturing to the wall of the castle that

loomed up beside them, to the gorgeous Scottish countryside sprawled out all around them. “And I’ve never met so many disgustingly happily married women in all my life. Magic or curse or fate or whatever it is, it’s clearly working for you all.” She shrugged. “Who am I to go against that?”

Later, it occurred to her to wonder whether Delilah might have been asking on Hamish’s account — scouting out her feelings on the subject of marriage to ascertain how she might feel about a proposal. She wouldn’t have put it past the man — he was a diplomat, after all. But before they had a chance to discuss it, something happened that put a profound dampener on the subject of marriage... in the form of a long letter from Sir Baldric.

Lord Taffington, it seemed, had recovered from his wounds... and he was up to his old tricks in earnest.

CHAPTER 25

Laird Donal called Hamish and Amelia to his quarters to discuss the letter after breakfast the day after her conversation with Delilah. Confessing to her deepening feelings for Hamish had led to a rather passionate night spent in their shared quarters, and she was still feeling the drowsy, pleasant aftermath of their lovemaking even as the two of them made their way through the Keep to the familiar door. But one look at the Laird's face quickly banished those thoughts from her mind, replacing her satisfaction with worry.

"We've had word from Weatherby Manor," he said heavily, gesturing to both of them with the letter in his hand. "I've invited you along too, Amelia, as someone who's grown more familiar with the situation in the village over the last few weeks."

She nodded, feeling quietly pleased the Laird was beginning to see her as someone he could trust — and hoping, at the same time, that he wasn't hiding his annoyance with her for breaking Taffington's nose and hand. It was no secret in the Keep, and had made her something of a local celebrity — especially among the women of the castle — but she wasn't unaware of the fact that she'd made the political situation more difficult. Not that she'd have changed the decision she'd made, of course. As far as she was concerned, Taffington had broken his own hand when he'd refused to heed her clear and repeated warnings.

Hamish took the letter that the Laird offered, scanning the dense lines of script with the letter outstretched courteously in her direction so that she could read it too. It wasn't from Taffington, to her relief — that neat, dense hand belonged to Sir Baldrick, she remembered from a note he'd sent her thanking her for the return of his cloak.

The letter, though, was not good news. Baldric was giving them a warning, in the most diplomatic way possible, that Lord Taffington was on the rampage again. There was no mention of Lord Weatherby in the note, which didn't surprise her — no doubt he was trying to keep out of the whole situation, not wanting a repeat of the unpleasant confrontation here at the Keep.

One part of the letter confused her, though — and it seemed to be the line that the Laird and Hamish were both focusing on with identical looks of dismay that made their family resemblance very clear. “What does this mean?” she asked finally, pointing it out. “Baldric says Taffington's been talking about ... is that Latin?”

“Prima Nocta,” Laird Donal said, a scowl crossing his face. “I'm glad you haven't heard of it, Amelia. Tells me that we've left some things behind by your time, at least.”

“It's a barbaric old tradition that gives the Lord of an area certain rights on a couple's wedding night,” Hamish explained, a taut anger in his voice. “I know it's technically part of the law in certain areas, but I can't remember an example of the rights actually being exercised.”

“The rights,” Amelia repeated slowly. “Do you mean...?”

“The Lord is given the prerogative to deflower a bride before her new husband does, yes,” the Laird said through gritted teeth. “I wish I could say that it's likely just idle chatter on Taffington's part, but I don't think he'd mention it if it wasn't important for us to know and we've encountered it before. Some twenty odd years ago, to be exact with Weatherby's predecessor, if I'm not mistaken.”

His words surprised her and she blinked... “Not one of us...” she started, her eyes going wide at the thought of Audrina having to endure that.

“No, thank God, but her ancestor, Maeve.” Donal shook his head. “Thankfully, he paid for his crimes against us and was replaced by the current Lord Weatherby, not that he’s always been as cordial to us as he has been these past several years.”

Amelia nodded and contemplated who Taffington might be after now. She found herself thinking of Milly, imagining how the girl would react to the news that her wedding night could legally be interrupted by a visit from the most repulsive man in the area, and a shudder ran down her spine.

“We have to stop him,” she said, feeling a little foolish at how obvious the statement was. “I don’t know how, but we can’t let him do this. Can he do this? He’s not even the Lord of the area, is he?” She wrinkled her nose. “I can’t say I liked Weatherby much, but he doesn’t seem like the kind of man who’d...”

“No, I doubt Lord Weatherby would claim the right for himself, not anymore.” Hamish was rubbing his forehead, looking more exhausted by the minute. “From what Baldric’s said here, I think this is part of a bigger scheme on Taffington’s part. I imagine his failure to get what he wanted from Amelia has made him angry.”

“My compliments on that, Miss Cosgrove,” the Laird said unexpectedly, flashing her a quick smile. “Strictly between us, of course, but the tale of Taffington’s injuries was the best news we’ve received here at the Keep for some time.”

“As much as the man deserved what he got,” Hamish said heavily, “it’s clearly antagonized him into throwing his weight around with Lord Weatherby. This demand to instate Prima Nocta — it’s a play. Reading between the lines, Baldric’s saying Taffington’s offering it as an ultimatum. If Weatherby doesn’t do as he wishes, it’s likely he’ll try to take over the area as Lord himself.”

Amelia’s heart sank. “Can he even do that? I thought... I mean, the manor’s named after him.”

“Without boring us all to sleep with the details of the English government and all its intricate webs of corruption... yes, lass.” Hamish sighed. “Yes, he can. And if he does, it won’t be long before he’s put this barbarous rule into practice on his own behalf.”

“The women of the village won’t stand for it,” Amelia said. “And I’ve taught most of them enough that they can re-break his fingers for him if he tries anything.”

“Aye, I don’t doubt it,” Hamish said with a tired smile. “But if Taffington gets this law instated, then doing that will make these women criminals — and give him even more leverage and power over them and their families. We may end up with men and women having to choose between losing their homes and their livelihoods... or letting Taffington have what he wants.”

She could feel the anger in her, low and cold. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “This — this is all horribly familiar, I’m afraid. Not quite as much has changed in my time as one would hope.”

She tried not to think about all the women she’d known whose careers had been manipulated by crooked managers and industry professionals, men who saw athletic young women like Amelia as little more than products to be bought, sold and pawed at by their filthy hands... she’d always had Carmen in her corner to keep her safe from that kind of crap, but she knew how much it happened, even in the twenty-first century, when they were supposed to be so modern, so empowered.

“We’re going to do everything we can to stop it, Amelia. You have my word as Laird,” Donal said firmly.

“If there’s anything at all I can do to help, please tell me.” She hated how frail her voice sounded; how weak the offer was. What could she do, at the end of the day? If the Laird himself was powerless against Taffington — if Lord Weatherby, Sir

Baldric, Hamish, all these men with all this power and influence couldn't stop him, then how the hell could she?

She spent the rest of the morning brooding on it, running up and down the steps of the Keep with short rest breaks on the windy roof of the castle. From up here, there was a beautiful view of the surrounding area — she knew, now, where to look to spot the village, and beyond that she could make out the massive forest of trees that stood between them and Weatherby Manor. She was glaring at that spot, breathing hard from her latest sprint up the steps, when she heard footsteps behind her and felt a familiar hand touch her shoulder.

“How are you feeling?” he asked softly.

She shrugged, knowing from the look on his face that he knew the answer as well as she did.

“I'm sorry, Amelia. It's a mess. I wish you could have arrived at a less turbulent time.”

“I don't know about that,” she said, glancing sidelong at him. “If Taffington hadn't been pulling this shit when I turned up, Laird Donal would never have sent for you. We might not have even met until you came back home to visit, and who knows how long that would have been?”

“That's true,” Hamish said with a soft smile, putting his arm around her shoulders. “I wouldn't want to have missed a single day with you, Amelia Cosgrove.”

She hummed appreciation, leaning into his embrace — but there was an odd tension in him that made her stay quiet, suspicious that he might have a little more to say.

“I'll admit, this talk of Prima Nocta has been — of personal as well as political

frustration, for me,” he said softly.

“Why’s that?” she asked, trying to keep her voice casual as her heart thumped hard against her ribcage. He looked down at her for a moment, a suspicious look on his handsome face that quickly gave way to amusement before he returned those keen blue eyes to the distant horizon.

“Well, if there’s a threat of Taffington interfering with new brides, I can hardly ask you to marry me until the matter’s resolved, can I?”

CHAPTER 26

The days crept by, and Amelia was torn between the giddy joy of her deepening connection with Hamish, and her fear for the women of the area if Taffington was allowed to get his way. Reports from the village confirmed their suspicions that Taffington was back to his old tricks, staying at the tavern long into the night and attempting to flirt with the barmaids and every woman under fifty who set foot in the place. They were pleased to hear, however, that he wasn't getting away with nearly as much of his unpleasant conduct as he once had been. There were half a dozen stories of women using what Amelia had taught them to evade him, and it sounded like he was being a little less forceful than he had been, at least when it came to physical altercations.

Unfortunately, he was taking his frustrations out in other ways. According to another letter from Baldric, he had become a moody, sullen presence at the estate, often getting into screaming arguments with Weatherby at the drop of the hat, undermining his authority in front of his servants and generally making his threats to take over the whole place explicit.

"I'm only going to say this once," Amelia said one morning a few days later, when they'd finished discussing Sir Baldric's most recent letter. "And I know it makes me sound like a monster. But could we just... kill him? I know how it sounds," she said quickly, seeing Hamish perform his professional diplomatic trick of keeping his expression completely blank. "But the man has had every opportunity to change his behavior, and it's pretty clear that that's not going to happen. So — what if we just — killed him?" She hesitated, taking a beat before she spoke again, knowing that what she was about to suggest couldn't sound like a flippant idea she hadn't given due

thought to. “I’d be willing to do it myself.”

Hamish was quiet for a long moment before he spoke, and she appreciated that he was giving her suggestion due consideration. “I understand where you’re coming from,” he said softly, and she smiled a little — it was an expression he’d picked up from her. “I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought a lot about how convenient it would be if an accident befell him on the road somewhere. But the murder of an English nobleman on Scottish lands...” He sighed. “Unfortunately, the English know too much about the situation here for even the most carefully staged accident to be viewed without suspicion. If Taffington dies now, we’re likely to end up in an even more complicated political situation.”

She sighed, nodding reluctant agreement, ready to put the subject to bed. It had been a long shot — she hadn’t really expected Hamish to take her up on her offer of murdering the man in cold blood. But she was surprised when he cleared his throat, a thoughtful look on his face. “That being said,” he said slowly, “there could be another way.”

“Another way?”

“As you well know,” he said, a smile flicking across his face, “I’m technically an English knight.”

Amelia chuckled at that — his knighthood was the subject of much ribbing from his Scottish cousins, and she’d joined in on the good-natured teasing more than a few times. But what did that have to do with Taffington?

“That knighthood gives me access to certain archaic rights... like the right to challenge a man to a duel.”

Amelia felt the smile fade from her face as she remembered the tale of the last duel

Hamish had fought — the man he'd killed in revenge for Amy's death. "You could kill Taffington in a duel without any political consequences?"

He nodded. "Legally speaking, the outcome of a duel is legal, so long as the rules are followed. The problem with challenging Taffington is that it would be Gaunt I'd be fighting, not the Lord. I'd end up going through every retainer he's got before I actually reached Taffington himself," he said, grimacing. "Still, it's something I'm considering, if we can't find another resolution. At the very least, it might frighten him into marginally better conduct."

She was still thinking about the rather attractive proposition of Taffington being killed in a duel when they were called to the Laird's chambers — it seemed that another letter had arrived. She'd expected more news from Sir Baldrick, but her stomach sank when she saw the fussy, curly script on the envelope in the Laird's hand — it was all too familiar, matching exactly the writing on the stack of envelopes that were still stored in her old room.

"I don't know what to make of this," Laird Donal said, frowning. "It's a development, at least, though I can't tell whether it's promising or not."

Hamish and Amelia read the letter quickly, and she quickly understood what had troubled the Laird about it. Taffington was already writing as though he'd taken over the lordship of the area already, although from what Baldrick had told them this was far from being the case. But what was truly surprising was the offer made in the letter to negotiate regarding the women of the area. Taffington smugly asserted the right of "the true Lord of the area" to behave as he wished with any woman in the area... however, the letter also indicated that he would be willing to negotiate on an agreement for the Lord to leave the Scottish women alone. But he made the conditions of that deal very clear — he would only negotiate if representatives were sent to the manor to meet with him. And the only representatives he wished to meet with were Hamish MacClaran and Amelia Cosgrove.

“I’m surprised he remembers my name,” Amelia remarked to hide her unease. “He’s been calling me ‘that madwoman’ for so long I thought he’d forgotten it.”

“This is an insult,” Laird Donal said, scowling down at the paper. “But at the same time, it may be our best opportunity to resolve this situation. What’s your view, Hamish?”

It was a long discussion. Amelia could sense that both men were frustrated by the offer, wanting to reject it but knowing that it might be their best shot at making Taffington back down. Finally, after a debate that grew quite heated, they came to a reluctant agreement. They’d give Taffington what he wanted — Amelia and Hamish would ride to the Manor tomorrow. But they’d be taking a letter from the Laird with them, explaining in no uncertain terms that the women of Scotland were not Taffington’s to take and do with as he pleased. If the Lord wanted to have any hope of keeping the area even partially in his own hands, he’d respect that.

“You understand that this could be read as an invitation to war,” Hamish said to Laird Donal when he’d finished reading the letter, his eyes shadowed.

The Laird nodded; his jaw tight. “Aye, Hamish, well aware. There are lines I will not allow to be crossed. I won’t have my people terrorized. A peace earned that way is no true peace at all.”

“We’ll solve it,” Amelia promised, reaching out to put a hand on Hamish’s wrist as she sensed his worry. “We’ll find a way. If Taffington can’t be talked into seeing sense — well, he’s not the only person there, is he? There’s Sir Baldric, and Weatherby — we’ll find a way.”

“I have every confidence in you both,” Donal said.

Hamish looked down at her with a grateful smile that warmed her heart. What she

didn't mention aloud was that both she and Hamish were also well equipped, if the situation didn't go well, to pursue a more violent resolution to the situation. She'd noticed that Hamish hadn't mentioned the idea of challenging Taffington to a duel to the Laird, and she'd followed his lead in not bringing it up. Clever, really. What the Laird didn't know about, he couldn't forbid... and something told Amelia that they may very well need to draw upon more than just diplomacy to solve this situation.

And so it was that the two of them set off the following day, after a messenger had been dispatched to alert the residents of Weatherby Manor that their kind invitation had been accepted. Hamish had the Laird's letter tucked among his belongings, but she'd also noticed him packing quite a few weapons, which sent an anticipatory shiver down her spine.

We'll find a way, she told herself as they passed through the open gates and head down toward the village. Between the two of them, they'd find a way to resolve the situation.

The beautiful weather was almost enough to take her mind off the powder keg of a situation they were riding into. She and Hamish rode in pleasant silence, enjoying the sunshine and the fresh country air. It felt strange to be approaching the manor again, this time on horseback — she was struggling to remember what it had looked like the first time through the windows of the car. That whole section of her life was feeling more and more like a dream, like something that had happened to a different person. It wasn't, though, she reminded herself firmly. Everything she'd been through had made her into the person she was today — the person who was going to help resolve this awful situation, once and for all. Every woman who'd arrived here before her had also used their own unique skill set to resolve a problem here. She had to trust whatever strange magic or fate had brought her here — and above all, she had to trust herself.

Her gut told her right away that something was wrong. As they rode up toward the

familiar facade of the manor, she'd expected to see a few servants waiting to meet them to take their horses and belongings inside — but the men waiting all wore the livery of Weatherby's guards. They'd also expected Lord Weatherby to be there to greet them — it was technically his invitation that they were accepting, as the actual Lord of the area. She'd been looking forward to seeing Sir Baldrick again, too, hoping to get an opportunity to thank him for all his letters. But Weatherby and the familiar shadow of his guard were nowhere to be seen. Instead, it was Taffington standing at the top of the steps, his arms folded over his chest and an unpleasantly wide smile on his face. His nose, she couldn't help but notice, had set a little crooked, and she hid a smile at the thought that she'd given him a permanent memento of the night he'd tried and failed to lay his awful hands on her.

That feeling of triumph, however, was short lived. Because no sooner had they slid down from the backs of their horses that Taffington called for the guards to seize them.

CHAPTER 27

“ I ’m a little surprised that you were foolish enough to come,” Taffington said mockingly, once Hamish’s weapons had all been removed from his person and he was surrounded by enough guards to stop him from trying anything.

Amelia, too, had been surrounded by men who seemed a little uneasy about touching her. She considered, briefly, the possibility of fighting back — but when she looked up at Hamish, he shook his head briefly but fiercely.

“We came in good faith, Lord Taffington,” Hamish said, as calm as a man who didn’t have several swords pointed at him. “We’re here to discuss the diplomatic situation, at your invitation.”

“The diplomatic situation,” Taffington echoed in a high, sneering voice that made her clench her teeth. “You utter fool. I’m not discussing a blasted thing with you, or with your whore here. Take them away!” he called, clapping his hands together briskly. “Tie them up and imprison them — separate rooms, of course.”

“Where’s Lord Weatherby?” Hamish demanded, raising his voice as the guards shifted uneasily forward.

“Oh, he has more important things to worry about than you,” Taffington snarled. “Like handing his estate over to me. Separate rooms, and make sure you tie that bitch’s hands nice and tight,” he added, nodding toward Amelia.

She’d heard worse insults, but it seemed enough to send Hamish over the edge. He

surged forward, surprising the guards who'd clearly expected a diplomat to go quietly, and Taffington yelped and cowered as Hamish raised a hand as if to strike him.

"This is your last chance, Lord Taffington," Hamish said, his voice shaking with the anger he was holding back. "We can forget all this and discuss the situation as we planned."

Gaunt was at Taffington's side in a heartbeat, stepping between the cowering Lord and Hamish as he pulled a blade from his belt. Hamish stepped back with his hands raised, his blue eyes narrowing. "This is your final chance, Taffington."

Gaunt glanced over his shoulder to his lord for his response.

"I have no intention of negotiating with these Scottish dogs," the Lord said, then spat on the ground.

Amelia's heart sank as Gaunt jerked his head in the direction of the guards who were holding her — still looking apologetic, they began to lead her away toward the manor, away from Hamish. But she still heard his voice ring out, effortlessly carrying through the entire yard.

"Very well. As a knight, I challenge you to a duel, Lord Taffington."

She didn't hear the Lord's response — the guards shuffled her hastily through the front doors to the manor and they slammed shut behind her. Furious, but well aware it wouldn't do any good to hurt these men who were after all only doing as they'd been instructed, she went with them, hoping like hell that Hamish was handling the situation out there. They dragged her down the winding corridors of the house, and she realized with an uneasy start that they were in the servants' quarters, a part of the place she was considerably less familiar with. Finally, they opened a door to a room

that must have been a disused pantry, judging by the bags of flour that were moldering in one corner. Looking vaguely apologetic still, one of the guards bound her hands behind her with thick, rough rope. And with that, she was alone.

But she wasn't alone for long. It was ten, maybe fifteen minutes before she heard the sound of footsteps down the hall — long enough for her to have worked her hands free of the rope that bound her before carefully replacing it to make it look like she was still bound. It was also long enough that the anger in her had cooled a little... but had by no means reduced in intensity. It felt like her whole body was full of molten metal, but her mind was calm and crystal clear when Taffington came oozing into the room.

From the smug grin on his face, he was clearly expecting fear. She didn't give him the satisfaction. No sooner had he closed the door behind him, she was demanding to know what he'd done with Hamish.

"That would-be knight is going to be the least of your concerns in a moment," Taffington said, his ugly smile sliding from his face at her defiance. "It's time I showed you once and for all what happens to whores who refuse their betters?—"

"Taffington, I've broken one of your hands before," she reminded him, narrowing her eyes. "I'm more than happy to make it two, but I'll be breaking more than that if you touch me again." The flash of real terror on his face as she lifted her unbound hands was almost sweet enough to make the whole horrible situation worthwhile. He shrank from her, then bolted for the door, bellowing something about incompetent guards as he slammed it shut behind him. She heard the key turning in the lock and grinned to herself.

The door opened again a few minutes later — but it was Gaunt this time who stepped into the room. Unlike Taffington, he kept his distance, a wary look in his eyes that communicated his respect for what he'd seen her capable of. It was almost enough to

endear him to her a little, before she remembered that he'd dedicated himself to making it easier for his repellent boss to prey on young women.

"I've been sent to make you more cooperative," Gaunt said quietly, pulling a dagger from his belt and using its point to pry dirt out from beneath his nails. "Lord Taffington is very unhappy with the way you've been treating him."

"And I'm very unhappy with the way he's been treating everyone else," she said calmly. "Where's Hamish?"

"Sir Hamish," Gaunt said, stressing the title with an ironic little smirk, "has been released while the details of the duel are worked out. He's been offered the manor's finest quarters on the other side of the house, something for which he's expressed very little gratitude. I am so looking forward to cutting his throat. You'll be kept, of course, as a guarantee of his good behavior."

"And how will you guarantee mine?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest. The seemingly casual way he was cleaning his nails was a ruse, she could tell — his stance, the angle of his feet, the energy in his lower body told her he was poised to strike. No doubt he intended to surprise her, to get inside her guard then rough her up a little before his boss returned for what he wanted. The look he gave her was chilling — dead-eyed, cold, dispassionate, like a man sizing up a piece of meat he was about to butcher.

"Let me offer you a word of advice, Miss, as someone who's seen plenty of women in your precise position. You're the pluckiest of them by far, I'd say, but that's not going to save you. Men like Taffington always win. The sooner you accept that, the less harm will come to you."

"So your advice boils down to — give up?" She raised an eyebrow. "Sounds awfully convenient for you, Gaunt. What's the matter? Worried you won't survive a fight

with me?”

He met her eyes — and it was only her gut instinct that got her out of the way in time. His strike came blisteringly fast, the blade in his hand swishing past her as she dove clear just in time — but now he was within range of her elbow, and that was a mistake that had put an end to more than a few bouts in her time. The crunch of cartilage and breaking bone was as satisfying as it was disgusting, and she danced clear of the guard’s considerable reach with adrenaline singing in her ears. Gaunt grunted, lifting a hand to touch the blood that was already gushing from his broken nose, then turned to look at her.

“Thanks for the advice,” she said cheerfully, narrowing her eyes. “Let me return the favor with some advice of my own — get a better boss.”

“You’ll regret that,” he said softly, almost conversationally. He reached around behind him and lifted something from his back that she’d thought was some kind of backpack — but she caught her breath when she saw that he was leveling a crossbow directly at her chest. She’d seen these before at the Keep, watched the guards training with them. They had their drawbacks, as weapons went — Hamish had told her he’d never been fond of them, as they only delivered a single shot and took valuable time to reload. But the shot they did deliver could do a great deal of damage at close range... like, for example, within the confines of a small pantry. Gaunt wouldn’t need to reload the crossbow once that bolt had found home in her torso.

She might have been called reckless in her time, but Amelia knew when a fight was over. Gritting her teeth, she raised both hands in surrender, hating the flicker of approval that passed over Gaunt’s cold, emotionless face.

“Good girl,” he said softly, and she wished she was close enough to spit in his face. “Now, come with me.”

But he didn't motion toward the door he'd come through. Instead, he moved over to the corner of the room, sliding one of the sacks of flour away with the side of his foot. And then, to her shock, he pulled at what had seemed like part of the wall — which slid aside to reveal a passageway that led away at a downward angle.

“You first,” Gaunt said, gesturing to the hidden corridor with the crossbow. “Quickly, now. Lord Taffington is waiting.”

CHAPTER 28

The tunnel was cold and dank, lit only by a flickering torch that Gaunt held aloft behind her. As they walked, she tried to figure out where they were in relation to the rest of the manor, wondering whether a well-timed scream for help might alert Hamish to where she was and where she was being taken. If these were the secret passageways Taffington had found that had gotten him out of the manor without detection, there must have been other entrances. But as if he could hear her thoughts, Gaunt prodded her firmly in the back with the crossbow in his hand, telling her in a hoarse whisper that she'd do well to come quietly if she didn't want a crossbow bolt in her spine.

It felt like they walked for an eternity. At least, she could see light up ahead. There was a battered wooden door with daylight shining around it, and when Gaunt opened it, she realized with a start that they were in the forest that surrounded Weatherby Manor — the passageway had led them not only out of the house, but out of the grounds, too, beneath the walls and well into the trees. It made sense, she supposed, for an English lord in hostile territory to build his home with an escape route included. When she glanced over her shoulder to see what they'd emerged from, she saw a disused little shed that looked half run-down — and as she watched, Gaunt bolted it shut behind them.

Not far beyond the shed, they found Taffington's carriage waiting for them. Amelia could feel her stomach sinking into her feet as she realized how much planning had taken place here — the invitation to her and Hamish had clearly been extended with this as its eventual goal. At least that clarified the matter a little, she thought, feeling oddly calm despite the dire situation. They could stop worrying about whether

Donal's letter had been too inflammatory, for a start — it was clear now that Taffington was never going to read it. Gaunt pulled the carriage door open and gestured with the crossbow, and she slid inside, any thoughts of attempting to overpower him quickly put to rest by the fact that there were half a dozen armed men on horseback keeping a very close eye on proceedings, not to mention the grizzled driver of the carriage. Frightening men, all of them... and not men she recognized as belonging to Weatherby's retinue. Taffington had been busy in the last few weeks, it seemed — he must have brought his own guards over. Had he been planning to kidnap her even then? she wondered.

"How lovely to see you again," came that horribly familiar voice.

Taffington, arranged on the cushioned seat opposite her, the widest smirk she'd ever seen on his face. Amelia grimaced at the sight of another crossbow in his hands, the bolt aimed squarely at her — she'd been hoping she might be able to get the better of him in close quarters, but the crossbow put her at too much of a disadvantage. She could feel the carriage moving, hear the distant sound of the driver's voice as he urged on the horses, and Taffington must have read her question in her face.

"Never you fret, my sweet," he said, the vicious mockery in his voice almost too much to bear. "We're on our way out of this dreadful place. We'll be in London before you know it, and at last I'll have you for my very own. Who knows? I might even make an honest woman of you if you apologize sweetly enough for everything you've done to me."

"Hamish will come after me," she said, affecting a calm she didn't feel. "You won't get away with kidnapping me, Taffington."

"I think you'll find I will," he said, narrowing his eyes as he leaned forward. The swaying of the carriage was making her feel sick... or was that the look in Taffington's eyes as he appraised her? She'd heard Gaunt lock the carriage door from

the outside, but she couldn't resist trying it anyway, making him chuckle as she rattled helplessly at the firmly locked door. "Besides, I thought this was what you wanted, Amelia. I thought you and Hamish had come to make a deal. Here's the deal — I'll leave this wretched backwater and all its poxy whores to their peace. And in exchange, you'll come with me."

"I don't accept the terms," she said through gritted teeth. Taffington clicked his tongue and shook his head like a disappointed schoolteacher.

"I'd have thought you'd have learned more about diplomacy, running around like a whore with that MacClaran fool. Imagine, a man like that calling himself a knight. Whatever misguided attempt my countryman was making at peace when he gave out that knighthood, it was a wretched mistake. Maybe I'll see if I can get it overturned," Taffington said brightly. "Once we get back. Would you like that? A kind of wedding present to you... proof that I'm the kind of man who gets what I want, no matter what."

She could feel real dread rising in her now like black water, lapping at the back of her throat. She wasn't sure if she wanted to scream or throw up, her mind racing helplessly for something, anything, that would stop this. Trapped in the back of a carriage with this monster, every passing second getting her further and further away from what she knew... from her new home, from the man she loved. And he wouldn't even know she was missing — as far as Hamish was aware, she was still stuck in a room at the manor somewhere, while he waited with his trademark patience for Taffington to play ball...

"I should have killed you," she said softly, looking up at him. "When I had the chance, back in that alleyway. When you were sniveling over your broken hand and your brute of a guard was unconscious — I should have broken your worthless neck."

"Oh, keep going." His eyes glittered at her across the divide between them, and she

fought the urge to gag. “I love watching powerless women try to threaten me. It’s delightful.”

When she heard the shout, she was half convinced she’d imagined it. Wishful thinking, no doubt — her mind hoping so desperately that Hamish was riding to her rescue that it had turned some distant bird call into his voice. But then the shout came again, and she saw a faint frown cross Taffington’s smug face. Ignoring him, she slid across the bench-like seats to press her nose against the window, craning her neck to try to get a better view of the road that stretched out behind them. There — her heart leapt into her throat as she caught a glimpse of a figure on horseback. She couldn’t be sure, but it looked like?—

“Hamish,” she whispered, feeling so full of joy at the sight of him that she thought her heart might burst like a balloon. As if on cue, a window slid open behind Taffington, and Gaunt’s implacable face was peering through to confer with the portly Lord, who was suddenly looking considerably less smug about the whole situation.

“How the blazes did they see us leave?” Taffington hissed, though he was clearly trying to keep his voice down to avoid having her hear him.

“Don’t know, sir. One of the guards or the servants, perhaps. Baldric’s with them, and half a dozen of Weatherby’s men.”

“Well, what the devil are you talking to me for? Kill them! Kill every last blasted one of them!” Taffington’s face was rapidly turning purple with rage, and his expression darkened further when he turned back to see Amelia grinning at him from the other side of the carriage.

“What’s the matter, Lord Taffington?” she asked innocently. “I thought you always got what you wanted.”

“That’s enough out of you, whore,” the Lord snarled, jerking the crossbow up toward her. “I can still end your miserable life in a heartbeat, remember?—”

There was a jolt, and a shout of alarm from up ahead — she could hear the horses whinnying too, hear men shouting and the clash of blades. Then there was another sound, much closer — the dull thud of impact, just behind her head. Amelia froze, hardly daring to believe her luck, and turned to see the crossbow bolt, still quivering where it had lodged in the wall a few inches from her head. Taffington was staring at it too, clearly as stunned as she was — but when she looked back to meet his eyes, he hurled the crossbow aside with naked fury on his face.

“Faster!” he roared, twisting around to hammer a fist against the wall that divided him from the beleaguered driver, who was clearly struggling to keep the horses under control while a battle raged around him. “Faster, damn you! We need to get to the gorge! Once we’re off MacClaran lands, you’re mine for good,” he panted, glaring over his shoulder at her with such venom in his eyes that she caught her breath. The gorge — she remembered Hamish showing her a map of MacClaran territory, its southern edge marked by the natural formation of a long, narrow gorge with a river at its bottom. From memory, the road ran along the gorge’s edge for some time, before turning to cross over the bridge and out of MacClaran territory.

She couldn’t let that happen. Furiously, she tried every door and window in the carriage, rattling each in turn — but they were all bolted shut. Despair was threatening to creep in. Hamish was out there — she could hear him shouting her name. He was so close... but at the same time, so horribly, horribly far.

And from the ugly look on Taffington’s face, she had a feeling she wouldn’t survive long if they reached the other side of the river.

CHAPTER 29

A melia could see the gorge through the carriage's window. The road ran perilously close to the steep edge of the cliff, another sheer rocky wall hemming them in on the other side. The carriage was moving frighteningly quick, spurred on by Taffington's increasingly hoarse screams. Through the back window of the carriage, she could see the blurry shapes of Weatherby's guards on horseback, doing their best to keep up with the careening carriage as it hurtled along the road — and Amelia gasped as she realized that two horses were gaining on the carriage, coming up alongside it, one on the river side, one on the side closest to the cliff, ominously close to being dashed against the rocky wall by the carriage. It was Sir Baldric, his black clothes well matched to the sleek black horse beneath him — and she realized with a jolt that he was aiming a crossbow with one hand, gripping the reins tightly with another.

And on the other side... her eyes widened as she scrambled across to peer through the glass. Hamish, urging his horse on as he leaned low over its chestnut neck, his blue eyes trained on something up ahead. Sir Gaunt was half-crouched beside the driver, hurling daggers at the men in close pursuit, his strange, cold expression untouched even now. Amelia felt nothing but bleak horror as she looked at him... and when a crossbow bolt appeared as if by magic and lodged in his throat, his expression barely flickered. One hand went up to check for blood, the same way he had when she'd broken his nose — and then, expressionless to the last, he slumped from the carriage and fell from her view.

“Leave him!” Taffington shrieked, hammering with his fist on the interior of the carriage. “Get to the bridge, blast you! The bridge, I say!”

Enough, Amelia thought faintly. Enough of this. Locked and bolted the carriage may have been, but she wasn't going to let that stop her. She swivelled around on the seat, bracing her back against the carriage's plush interior as best as she could, before delivering a powerful two-legged kick to the inner door.

"It's locked, you fool," Taffington snarled, but he might as well have been speaking another language. She kicked the door again and again, refusing to let up as impact after impact seemed to have no effect. It never looked like you were winning until you'd won, that was the secret. That was what she always reminded herself halfway through a fight, when it seemed like she'd delivered a hundred blows to a seemingly invincible opponent. It wasn't the first hundred blows that counted — it was the hundred and first. She could remember the way Ruby Gunn had staggered when she'd finally gotten in the lucky hit that had won her the bout... and as if triggered by that memory, she heard the sudden sound of splintering as the beleaguered wood finally gave way beneath her kicks.

Taffington screamed with rage as she kicked the door a couple more times for good measure — she would have laughed to hear him complain of how expensive the carriage had been, had she not been focused on more important things. Like the man keeping pace with the carriage on horseback and his wild, desperate smile — he shouted her name triumphantly as she finally kicked the door clear, and it fell to the road and was crushed beneath the carriage's rear wheels... the same way Sir Gaunt had been, she imagined, a shudder running down her spine. She had no intention of joining him.

"No," Taffington panted, lunging across the seat to grab her. "You're mine, you bitch, you're mine ?—"

This time, she didn't bother breaking his hand — his fingers were so slimy with sweat she was a little worried she wouldn't be able to get a good enough hold. Instead, she delivered a dismissive little punch, quick as a rabbit, striking him hard

between the eyes and sending him reeling back against his seat. Stunned, for the time being — it should buy her enough time to get the hell out of this carriage. But the driver was still following orders, urging the horses on at breakneck speed. Hamish was holding one hand out, steadying his galloping horse with the other. What choice did she have?

Breathless, Amelia took his hand — and made the leap.

Time seemed to stand still as she felt Hamish catch her weight, swinging her onto the horse in front of him and at the same time letting up on the reins to slow the breakneck pace he'd been setting. She heard Taffington's scream of rage as he realized she'd escaped, but then the carriage was hurtling on ahead and she couldn't see him anymore, except for the disappearing silhouette of him in the window. She could feel Hamish's arms around her, gripping her tightly enough to cut off her breathing — but she couldn't bring herself to mind, she was so desperately grateful to be out of that carriage.

And not a moment too soon. Hamish shouted a warning as he looked up to see the carriage about to take a sharp turn in the road, the bridge coming into view up ahead — but the pace Taffington had been demanding was too much, the momentum too great to divert. She watched with her breath frozen in her throat as the carriage swung wide of the turn, wider, wider — then the hitch and harnesses on the horses snapped, freeing them as the body of the carriage flew out over the gorge. The driver jumped from the seat at the last second, still holding the reins as the horses dragged him in the opposite direction away from the gorge, but he hit the ground with such force, Amelia feared he hadn't survived. There was a terrible, silent moment, then an almighty crash, splintering wood and crashing water intermingled. Hamish finally brought his whinnying horse to a stop, and for a moment he just held her, his chest warm against her back and his face buried in her neck as he squeezed her for all he was worth.

"I'm okay," she heard herself saying over and over again, though she couldn't tell

whether it was for her benefit or Hamish's. "I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay."

Sir Baldric and the other guards caught up with them then, their horses' hooves clattering on the road. The man in black gave her one of his rare smiles as the others went after the horses, and she nodded to the crossbow he was still holding.

"That was a hell of a shot, Sir Baldric."

"Thank you, Miss Cosgrove," he said, ever the professional. "I'm afraid we'll need to collect Sir Gaunt's remains on our return to the Manor."

"Where's Taffington?" demanded a familiar voice.

Amelia was surprised to see that Lord Weatherby himself was approaching behind the retinue of guards, his velvet cape looking a little out of place after their more practical armored shapes. Still, he was alive with adrenaline as he slid from his horse's back and strode up to meet them, and she found herself genuinely pleased to see him. That, more than anything, told her she was likely suffering from shock.

"The carriage with Lord Taffington onboard went over the edge into the gorge, I'm afraid," Hamish said, still breathing hard from the exertion of the pursuit. "I doubt anyone could have survived that." He seemed unwilling to release her, but she wriggled free of his grip to dismount the horse. She needed to know what had happened to the carriage — needed to see with her own eyes that he was really gone. Baldric, Weatherby, and Hamish all followed her toward the cliff's edge, and she felt Hamish reach out protectively to take her arm in his — not holding her back, just ensuring that he'd be there if she stumbled. And together, the four of them peered down into the gorge to see what had become of Taffington.

The carriage, it seemed, had struck a rocky outcropping just shy of the river, which explained the crashing and splintering of wood they'd heard. The remains of the

carriage were floating in the river's shallows where they'd rolled. But where was Taffington?

"Where is he?" Weatherby demanded, staring downward. "And what of the horses?"

"The horses broke free before the momentum took the carriage over the cliff, your men have gone after them. The driver may not have survived, though he attempted to jump," Amelia answered, still looking at the wreckage.

"Taffington is there," Hamish said suddenly, pointing to a shape floating in the river — and Amelia turned her face away, feeling him put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

The four of them drew away from the cliff's edge, Sir Baldric dispatching instructions to the loitering guards behind them to find a way down to the water's edge to collect Lord Taffington's remains. Weatherby looked faintly green, but he waved his approval of these orders, adding that they ought to check on the driver of the carriage, too.

"Reckless fool, but he was only doing as Taffington told him," Weatherby said, shaking his head. "From what I saw of the way the man treated his staff, I'd have driven a carriage into a gorge to escape him, too."

"Is everyone else alright?" Amelia asked, looking around at the four of them as some of Weatherby's men began to pick their way down the side of the gorge. "I couldn't see, from the carriage... and how did you catch us, by the way?"

"Taffington's men are dealt with," Sir Baldric said with no small satisfaction. "I've been itching for an excuse to take them out since he brought them in two weeks ago."

"Brutes," Weatherby agreed with a dignified little shudder. "Just like their employer."

“As for how we caught you — that was all Sir Baldric,” Hamish said, nodding to the man in black with gratitude vivid on his face. “He’s had guards posted in secret, keeping an eye on the passageways ever since Taffington found them.”

“All without my knowledge, I’ll add,” Weatherby put in, shooting his guard a disgruntled look. “Baldric has been known to overstep his authority at times, you may be surprised to learn.”

Amelia glanced up at Baldric, whose expression was a perfect mask of grave apology — aside from the quick wink he tipped her, just out of Weatherby’s view. Something told her that the Lord might not be fully aware of all of Baldric’s communications with them — and she wasn’t about to be the one that brought them up.

“Right then,” Weatherby said now, dusting his gloved hands as he turned his gaze toward the horses where his men had finally brought the ones that had broken free. “I suggest we return to the manor, if all of the excitement is concluded. I’m going to have about a hundred letters to write about my late houseguest’s untimely fate here, and I’d prefer to be finished before dawn.”

And with that, they were riding back to the manor. Baldric remained behind to oversee the recovery of Taffington’s remains, and Weatherby left them at the manor gates, muttering a brusque and extremely vague apology for ‘all the trouble’ before promising to pay a visit to the Laird in person to discuss the political situation.

And then, at long last, she was alone with Hamish, with nothing left standing between them but the journey home to the Keep.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am

The next few weeks passed in a flurry.

The accident on the road had had what Hamish diplomatically referred to as ‘mixed results’ — but as far as Amelia was concerned, Taffington’s death was a net good for the area.

True to his word, Weatherby came to visit the Laird in person the day after the attempted kidnapping, with Sir Baldric as ever by his side.

It was a long meeting between the Laird, his advisors, Weatherby and Baldric, one that Amelia couldn’t bring herself to join — but from the faintly relieved look on Laird Donal’s face when they finally emerged, she had a feeling things had gone well.

Hamish filled her in later, and given how lengthy his description of the meeting was, she was grateful not to have been a part of it.

Weatherby was famously long winded even on simple matters, and this one was far from simple.

Hamish started by outlining the good news.

Taffington was definitely dead, and there were enough witnesses to the circumstances of his death that it would be very difficult to frame the death as suspicious.

Of particular note was the near-miraculous survival of the driver, who had managed to leap clear of the carriage just in time, suffering a broken arm and a few cuts and

bruises from his fall and being dragged, but nothing that wouldn't heal in time.

They were hopeful that the driver's testimony would come in handy in the eventual inquest into Taffington's death.

"Inquest?"

Amelia had prompted.

"Aye, there'll be an investigation into all of this, Weatherby thinks."

They were talking in low voices over a meal in their quarters — it had been impossible to talk in the Dining Hall lately, what with everyone in the Keep eager to hear their version of the story that had flown around the area like wildfire.

Hamish seemed a little embarrassed to realize he was a local hero for simply doing what he needed to do to save her life, but Amelia had pointed out that his efforts had been nothing short of heroic.

"What will that mean?"

"It's hard to say,"

he said softly. "Could be a quick visit from a couple of bored members of the House of Lords who ask a few questions then call it a day. Could be a great deal worse — especially if someone gets it into their head that this could be used for political leverage, somehow. It's a wasp's nest in London, I don't mind telling you. But either way, Weatherby's promised that he's on our side."

"It's the least he can do,"

Amelia pointed out, a little ruffled by how easily Weatherby had gotten out of taking the blame for the behavior of his guest. After all, it had been Weatherby who'd brought Taffington to the area in the first place. "I still think it's unfair that there are next to no consequences for him."

"Politics is never fair,"

Hamish agreed with a sigh. "I'm with you in spirit, Amelia. But at the end of the day, it's best for everyone to keep Weatherby as Lord here. He has his faults, and we've had our differences with him... but, well, Taffington was proof of exactly how much worse it could be."

"Better the devil you know, huh?"

She grimaced, rubbing her forehead tiredly. "A great result for Weatherby. Annoying guest gone, debts cleared, just like that." Taffington, it turned out, had no heirs, which meant Weatherby's debt to him had died when he had.

"That's a good thing for us,"

Hamish reminded her. "Freedom from debt means freedom to act according to his conscience, not his wealth. And his conscience, as we well know, is Sir Baldric."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

She grinned. The two of them had been discussing getting some kind of gift for Sir Baldric to thank him for all of his tacit support over the last few weeks — but it would have to be something subtle, not ostentatious enough to draw any suspicion from Lord Weatherby that his manservant had been acting beyond his remit again. They'd tentatively settled on a new cloak — black, of course. With any luck, Weatherby wouldn't even notice the new addition to his guard's wardrobe.

The inquest was a worry, certainly.

But even the knowledge that yet more unfamiliar Englishmen would be creeping around the area couldn't put a dampener on the ebullient mood in the Keep and village now that word had spread that Lord Taffington wouldn't be bothering the locals any longer.

The first time Amelia and Hamish returned to the tavern, almost a week after Taffington's death, she'd been genuinely worried the two of them might not survive the night.

Every single person in town seemed to want to buy them each a drink.

To listen to the rumors, you'd have thought that Amelia had killed Taffington with her bare hands — or that Hamish had run him off the road himself.

They both tried to correct the more extreme versions of the story, but it wasn't long before they'd both given up on trying to curb the jolliness of the townsfolk.

Let them celebrate, Amelia reasoned.

It had been a horrible few months with Taffington and his awful guard stalking the town.

Sir Gaunt had been confirmed dead at the same time as Lord Taffington, with word sent to London about both of their deaths — though it was unlikely that any kind of inquest would be conducted into Gaunt's death.

Men like him died every day in far more suspicious circumstances than a carriage accident.

But the best part of the situation came a month after Taffington's death.

In the middle of summer, on the most perfect day Amelia could remember, she and Hamish were married.

He'd asked her the very night they'd gotten back from the manor, after they'd thoroughly celebrated their survival in the privacy of his quarters.

Still breathing hard from their recent exertions, Hamish had rolled over and asked her to marry him, as simple as that.

And just as simply, Amelia had said yes.

After all, what was left to stand in their way?

He'd been more than willing to wait — had suggested it himself, in fact, after the initial joy of her acceptance had subsided a little.

After all, whatever he might have felt about her predecessor, the truth was that they'd only known each other a short time.

But Amelia had shaken her head.

What was the use of delaying the inevitable? He was the love of her life — some part of her had known that since the moment they'd met.

And she didn't want to put off pledging herself to him for another minute.

"Besides,"

she'd pointed out, only half-joking, "we'd better get married before some new Lord

comes in and starts talking about Prima Nocta again. I'm not interested in sharing my wedding night with anybody but you."

And so they'd been married, in a simple, beautiful service in front of all their friends and family from the Keep.

Delilah had been thrilled to step in as her maid of honor, and every single one of the other time travelers were in attendance too, as well as the rest of the Clan, Lord Weatherby and Sir Baldrick.

And with the ceremony concluded, the celebrations kicked off in earnest.

The whole Keep was transformed, with the tables in the Dining Hall pushed aside to clear room at its center for dancing.

Every table groaned with food and great kegs of ale, and Amelia could imagine the warm glow of merriment spread right out from the Keep to every corner of the countryside around them.

They danced almost until dawn, celebrating their love as well as their survival, but when Hamish finally leaned down to whisper a question in her ear, the two of them almost ran from the dining hall, giggling like errant children.

He swept her into his arms and carried her a few paces until she wriggled free, breathless with laughter as they made for their quarters.

There was a fire burning in the hearth and a bottle of wine set out for them to share — a nice touch, Amelia thought, just before Hamish wrapped her in his arms and made sure that wine was the furthest thing from her mind for quite some time.

Exhausted from the night's merriment and their lovemaking, Hamish quickly fell into

a deep, restful sleep.

Amelia lay with her head against his chest, savoring the feeling of absolute peace that had descended on her like a blanket.

No matter what the future held, no matter what this strange medieval world had in store for her, she knew that she could handle it... and what was more, for the first time in her life, she knew that she would never again have to handle it on her own.

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Anna Clarke took a deep breath in through her nose, held it for a couple of counts, then let it out through her mouth, trying to visualize all the tension in her body evaporating with the water vapor on her breath.

It didn't help at all, but it did serve to delay her impulse to march out of the house with whatever pointy object first came to her hand, and that was all she could hope for from her meditative techniques, at least for now.

She shifted her weight on her couch, gazing around her tiny apartment with distinct aggravation.

What she should do, really, was put the phone down, go into the kitchen, and cook herself a delicious and nourishing dinner.

Or put the phone down and go for a walk around her neighborhood, maybe reconnect with nature, visit with her neighbors, find a favor to do for someone.

Help an old lady cross the street or something.

That was something people did, right? Or perhaps she could just go to bed early.

It was seven thirty on a Friday night, but she was tired enough from a full day of training and demonstrating that she'd probably drop off after a half-hour or so of light reading.

It wasn't sad.

That wasn't sad.

What she did do, instead of any or even all of those extremely good ideas, was pick up her phone and send a message back to the unknown number that had been messaging her since she'd gotten home two hours ago.

Unknown number .

That was a joke, right? This had to be what, the tenth burner phone he'd picked up since they broke up two years ago? She supposed she shouldn't be surprised.

She'd eventually just quit social media altogether after too many follow and friend requests from account after account with suspiciously neutral names and photos pulled straight from a stock photography website.

Even changing her name on Facebook had only given her a brief respite from his stalking efforts.

That's what it was — stalking.

Cyber-stalking, maybe — he wasn't dumb enough to follow Anna around the neighborhood or anything — but stalking, nevertheless.

And she hated it.

What she especially hated were the texts.

She had to have her phone on for work — there were certain calls and texts she just couldn't afford to miss — and every time it vibrated, she ground her teeth a little more.

The first few times he'd pretended to be someone else, drawn her into conversations about work that got weirder and weirder until she realized who it was and blocked the number.

Lately, it was just outright abuse.

Anything he could think of that might get a reaction from her.

Anna Clarke wasn't an easy woman to get a reaction from.

A third-generation military brat, she'd had tough training in resilience and fortitude since she'd been old enough to walk and talk.

Her mother and father had met during basic training and continued a steady (if frequently long-distance) relationship for the duration of their service.

When her father had been honorably discharged after an injury to his back that put him out of commission permanently, it made sense to start a family.

So, Anna had been born.

They'd agreed, her mother and father, that they wouldn't pressure their children into following in their footsteps — but it had been impossible to stop little Anna.

Every other path they suggested was dutifully inspected, then dismissed.

Dance, painting, chemistry... she gave it all a go, but she came back again and again to stories about soldiers, about brave heroes fighting the bad guys.

The closest thing to a non-military career Anna considered was a few weeks in fourth grade when she considered being a cop. But in the end, it was the allure of the armed

forces that won her over.

Her little brother was completely different, of course.

Every family needed a black sheep.

But as black sheep went, he did okay.

An actor and comedian, he'd moved out to Chicago a few years ago, just after his twenty-first birthday.

He was living with roommates and doing pretty well, from what he said about his career.

Maybe I should call him, Anna thought, her phone gripped slightly too tight in her hands as she glowered down at the recent messages from the scumbag whose name she refused to even think of.

It had been a while since she and Daniel had chatted.

He always cheered her up.

It was no surprise to anyone in the family that he'd ended up pursuing comedy — his oddball sense of humor had always brought the house down at family gatherings.

Hell, this whole saga with her ex-boyfriend might be good material for his act.

After all, there was something pathetically funny about a man who couldn't give up on a relationship, even after two goddamn years.

What was also funny was that he thought his campaign of abuse and harassment was

seriously going to get her to run back into his arms.

Instead of calling her brother to blow off steam, Anna spent twenty minutes crafting an expertly worded text, complete with a couple of carefully placed typos that would suggest that she'd hardly paid any attention at all to the message.

Usually, she wouldn't waste her time, but she was just so goddamn sick of this man.

Billy (she shuddered a little at the name) must have figured out how to scramble the number of the phone he was messaging her from, because the messages just kept coming, no matter how many times she blocked the individual senders.

She'd heard about that kind of technology.

It seemed purpose-designed for bothering ex-girlfriends, and she deeply, deeply hated that it existed.

The message she sent was in part designed to make her feel better — knowing she'd aggravated him wasn't much consolation for the harassment she'd been subjected to for almost two years now, but it would make her feel a little better at least to know that he was fuming at least as much as she was.

But the other thing she was hoping was that he'd get so angry that he'd screw up and send some kind of identifying information that she could add to her growing file of restraining order support materials.

Sure enough, it was only about twenty seconds before her phone buzzed again, furiously.

She opened it, a satisfied little smirk crossing her face.

Sure enough, the responses were in all-caps, and her dark brown eyes widened a little at the level of vitriol in them.

Home run.

A series of profanities that would have shocked her if she hadn't been on a couple of tours of active military service with the most foul-mouthed men and women alive (all of them now closer to her than brothers and sisters) — and there, at the end of the stream of hatred, a couple of useful tidbits.

7:41: bitch u don't know what you're messing with

7:41: don't wake the dragon if u don't want to be on the receiving end of its claws

7:41: ive got some new toys to show u bitch

That was a threat, right? Poorly worded, but definitely a threat.

'Toys' was a clear reference to some kind of weaponry.

Billy had been obsessed with guns and weapons for as long as she'd known him.

It was probably what drew him to her in the first place.

She'd been sitting in a bar in town, minding her own business, when this blond guy had taken it upon himself to join her.

Handsome enough, and well-built, so she'd entertained his pretty transparent pick-up attempts, even bringing herself to listen to his boring opinions on the military.

She'd literally been in uniform, but for some reason it had taken him a few hours to

accept that he was actually talking to a soldier.

She'd even shown him her dog tags, annoyed by the way he'd laughed when she told him what company she belonged to.

He'd said she could've gotten the tags anywhere.

And he hadn't apologized, even when he'd realized he was wrong.

Just tried to turn it into a compliment — "You're too pretty to be a soldier."

That had been the first of a parade of red flags, and she fiercely regretted wasting any more of her time on him.

But waste it she had.

They'd dated for nearly two years, calamitous, horrible years.

Her whole family had hated him.

Her father, usually the kindest man she knew, had turned into a stone-faced soldier the minute she brought Billy home.

She'd almost expected him to go upstairs and pull out the gun he kept locked in a cabinet in their bedroom.

Her mother had been a little more polite, but not much more.

Both of them had given Anna horrified looks the minute Billy excused himself to go to the bathroom.

But she'd been twenty-one-years-old, and she'd thought she was in love.

But twenty-one-year-olds were idiots.

She knew that now, at the grand old age of twenty-five.

And yet Billy, a year her senior, had actually seemed to go backwards in intelligence since she'd had the good sense to break up with him.

But he'd been particularly obsessed with guns.

Anna wondered if she could use that obsession against him — take some evidence of his deep obsession with violent video games, his encyclopedic knowledge of all the various assault weapons that were and weren't legal at a state or a federal level, his stupid collection of vintage weapons that he was too lazy to even keep properly maintained.

These had seemed like things they had in common to her young, naïve self.

After all, she loved vintage weaponry — though her interest was more in blades than in old guns.

She knew her way around modern guns just fine, but her interest in them stopped at their practicality.

A gun was to keep you safe, that was all — anything beyond that was just a dick-measuring contest, and the best advantage her gender had ever given her was not giving a shit about dick-measuring.

But swords... swords, they had style.

She knew plenty about swords.

Her phone kept buzzing, and she sighed.

Was a client really likely to call her this late on a Friday evening? She could probably afford to give herself one night off at least.

With a sense of great satisfaction, she flipped the phone to Do Not Disturb.

It was satisfying to think of him, furiously typing his nasty little screeds about how she'd never find love with anyone but him and realizing that her read receipts weren't popping up.

That she wasn't even listening, let alone reacting, to anything he had to say.

Was she ever going to find love without him? Honestly, she didn't care. A lot of people were terrified of dying alone, Anna knew that from pop culture...

but after two active combat duties, Anna's list of fears had been put into pretty sharp perspective. If it wasn't running at her with a gun or a bomb, she wasn't really concerned about it.

Billy had been her first major relationship — and honestly, outside of a few one-night stands that dragged into a couple of weeks of mediocre hookups, he'd been her only one.

It was just difficult to meet people, she always explained to her mom, who asked after her romantic life constantly.

"It's not like you and Dad,"

she'd said irritably. "You guys were meant to be. I think I'm meant to be alone. It's fine," she'd added at the look of horror in her mother's face.

"I know you can look after yourself, baby,"

her mom had said — she'd grimaced a little. Nobody on the planet got away with using pet names the way her mom did. "But — it's good to have someone to watch your six, you know?"

"I'll get cats,"

she promised, drawing a reluctant laugh from her mother.

But she knew they'd have the same conversation again.

And again, and again, and again, until she got fed up and married someone just to keep her mother quiet. The only thing that would stop the conversation was a joking threat to get back together with Billy. But both women knew that wasn't going to happen.

It didn't help, of course, that so much of her life was spent in rather aggressive situations.

After coming back home from her second tour of duty, she'd decided to take a break from the Army's operational branch.

She was feeling a little hemmed in, wanting to expand her skillset a little, see what else was out there.

So, she'd gotten an apartment in town, twenty minutes from her parents' place, and picked up a job in the institutional branch.

Recruiting had bored her to death within two weeks and she'd hurried to quit, but after that fell through she managed to snag a part-time position helping with the training of new recruits.

Something about that had suited her just fine — and to chase that feeling as well as supplement her income, she'd started teaching self-defense.

The military qualification made her a sought-after instructor, and she was doing pretty well.

Well enough to move out of this tiny little apartment, honestly — but what was the point of getting a bigger place if it was just her? Besides, it was good to have a bit of disposable income to spend on her hobbies.

She wondered if he was still sending messages and flicked the do not disturb button to off to check.

God, her phone was really going off now — the screen lit up again and again with message after message, but she stopped herself from looking at any of them.

A cup of tea and an early night, that was the ticket.

She'd picked up a new book on medieval warfare a few weeks ago, but she'd been so flat-out with new self-defense clients that she'd hardly had a chance to read it.

What better way to while away an evening than by learning about all the fascinating ways people had tried to kill each other before they'd had guns?

Anna settled back onto the couch with her tea, burying herself with some relish in the huge tome.

As it always did, time flew, the evening closing in around her as she read.

Her tea went cold on the coffee table.

By about ten, she was still so immersed in the book that she didn't even hear the gentle, stealthy sounds of someone picking the lock on her apartment's front door.

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The good thing about military training was that nothing surprised her.

Adrenaline was an old friend, and when she looked up from a particularly interesting chapter about glaves to see her ex-boyfriend standing in the doorway to her apartment with a baseball bat in his hand, all she felt was crystal-clear clarity on the right course of action.

First, she got to her feet, the book falling to the couch with a heavy thud.

She held eye contact with Billy, direct and assertive.

And she stayed back.

Their height difference was likely to embolden him — he'd always been smug about how much taller than her he was.

As if height was some kind of indicator of virtue.

But the joke was on him.

At four foot eleven, she was tiny, it was true — only barely scraping the minimum height requirement for the military.

As a kid, it had kept her up at night, and she did everything she could to try to grow taller — she finished her vegetables every night, stood up as tall as she could, did lots of exercise in an attempt to try to get her bones to grow, just a little more.

But her height wasn't a drawback. Men like Billy, they saw her stature — and her gender, for that matter — as weaknesses to be exploited. But Anna was a lot smarter than men like Billy. She knew they were assets. And she used the stupidity of men to her advantage.

“Should've picked your phone up, bitch,”

Billy slurred now, his blue eyes narrowed.

She looked at him, keeping the disgust she felt off her face.

No need to antagonize him any more than he'd antagonized himself already.

But she couldn't believe she'd ever seen anything but a repulsive waste of human life in the man who now stood in front of her, swaying slightly, his clammy fingers clutching at the baseball bat in his hand.

What was he going to do? Smash her belongings? Try to smash her? Her phone was a few inches away, and she itched to pick it up, to take a photo of him as the final evidence she'd need to put him away.

“Are you trying to go back to prison, Billy?”

she asked levelly, injecting her voice with a mixture of assertiveness and kindness. It was false kindness, of course, but she was hoping she could get out of this situation without having any of her possessions smashed. She liked her things, and she hated cleaning glass out of the carpet. Plus, there was always paperwork when you beat the shit out of a civilian, even a civilian who had it coming a hundred times.

Back to prison.

He deserved it.

It was a joke that he'd only gotten the short sentence he had — rich parents and fancy lawyers, plain and simple.

If the woman he'd been dating had been anyone other than Anna — a woman without military training, a woman like the women she worked with every day now — then he might have killed her.

It had been at the last dying gasp of their relationship.

She'd already made it clear that she was moving on — but in an attempt to be kind, she'd invited him over for one last dinner together in her apartment so that he could collect his things and they could part ways as friends.

Of course, that hadn't worked.

Billy had turned up drunk and full of resentment, and though she'd tried to control the situation, he'd swung a fist right at her jaw.

When she'd blocked it, he'd just kept on swinging.

Even with her training, she'd been taken aback, and he'd landed a few solid blows on her face and head before she'd seized his arm and wrenched it behind his back, dislocating his shoulder and breaking the arm in two places for good measure.

Then he'd lumbered around her apartment like a wounded bull, bellowing and screaming and breaking all her things, until the police had been called.

Her bleeding nose and black eye told the story eloquently, and he'd been jailed for assault and battery. Six months. Better than nothing.

But it clearly hadn't taught him his lesson.

She moved away from the couch, walking backwards — and he followed her, a lopsided grin on his face.

He was a pale guy who burned easily, with light blond hair, and his complexion got ruddy like that when he had too much to drink.

He was ignoring her attempts to calm him down, to reason with him, and she heaved a sigh.

There was only one move here. In one fluid motion, she knelt by the couch, flipped open a display case she kept there, and withdrew what was inside it.

“Nice toy,”

she said, nodding to the bat in his hand. “Do you like mine?”

It had been expensive — more expensive than she was willing to let on to her parents, who had always taught her to be careful with her money.

But when she’d seen it online, she’d been exultant from signing three new clients in a row after a free session of self-defense training she’d done at a local women-only gym.

She’d deserved a treat, she’d told herself — and besides, she needed a decoration for the blank space just above her couch.

It would look great there.

But she hadn’t had a chance to put up the display case yet. Thankfully, it had arrived just on time, earlier that week.

Anna Clarke lifted the antique broadsword in both hands, taking a warrior’s stance.

Billy's eyes widened comically, and he actually staggered at the sight of the sword, as though it had taken the wind out of his sails. Suddenly he didn't look so menacing with his baseball bat. All the swagger in his gait disappeared, leaving a slightly lopsided-looking man stammering insults with a lot less energy than he'd possessed earlier.

"Bullshit,"

he spat, a sudden burst of confidence seeming to pour back into his body. She raised the sword a little, cautioning him — he at least had the good sense to keep his distance from her. But he raised his baseball bat. "You don't know how to use a sword. Dumb grunt like you probably doesn't even have a gun around."

Calling her a grunt wasn't the insult he thought it was.

Some of the finest people she'd ever met were grunts.

And he was wrong about guns.

She had a modest but deadly weapon in her bedroom.

But the truth was that Billy wasn't a big enough threat to bring that out for — not that she'd be telling him that.

No sense aggravating him unduly.

She knew him well enough to know that he'd be easily scared off with a broadsword.

Besides, she knew from unpleasant and regrettable experience that he tended to get turned on by women with guns, and she was absolutely done being his sexual fantasy.

No jerk-off material here. Only an angry woman with a sword that was nearly as long

as her body.

He was also wrong about swords, funnily enough.

It was true that the US Military didn't exactly spend much time training their soldiers in the use of antique weapons.

But it just so happened that Anna Clarke didn't just spend her Saturday nights moping about, wishing she had a date.

She spent them at a local chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronisms, where there was a thriving fencing scene.

Dozens of nerds met once a week to discuss historical re-enactments, everything from medieval cooking to clothing to (and this was a rather popular one) sword fighting.

She'd been a member since she was fourteen-years-old.

Her father's doing, actually.

She'd been struggling at school in History class, which she hated, and he thought it might be a good way to show her that it wasn't all boring old dates and dusty books — that history was still alive and well.

And it had worked better than he'd imagined.

Not only had young Anna aced History for the rest of her schooling, she'd also never wanted to leave the SCA. She'd rejoined when she left active duty, and it was a bright point in her week.

She couldn't wait to catch up with her friends there at the meeting tomorrow, actually, she thought with a grin. God, wouldn't she have a story to tell them. She'd

already been looking forward to filling them in about her new toy — now she had a thrilling tale of home invasion to add to the mix.

She took a few steps toward Billy now, raising the sword.

It wasn't sharp — it would've been far too dangerous to ship it like that for a start — but honestly, it didn't need to be.

Broadswords weren't about a sharp cutting edge, not really — they were about hitting your opponent as hard as you could, and hopefully opening a hole in their body.

If she swung this hard enough at Billy, with all the force in her wiry little body, he'd be lucky if the worst he got was a broken rib. And he knew it, too. He was looking at the sword with unease, now, and she knew she'd cracked his confidence.

“Why don't we just talk about this like grown-ups,”

he appealed to her, suddenly reasonable.

She felt a savage burst of anger flare in her chest. Just like him, to threaten her with a weapon and then behave as though they were both equally at fault when she defended him.

“Leave my property immediately, you gaslighting piece of shit,”

Anna hissed through her teeth, keeping a friendly smile fixed on her face as she said it. “Never contact me again. Never look at me again. Forget I exist. Move on with your pathetic life, you piece of human garbage. I'd rather be eaten by wolves than ever see you again, let alone talk to you. I can't believe you're stupid enough to think you've got a snowball's chance in hell of getting back together with me. Now go, before I laugh so hard, I throw up.”

It felt good to unleash on him in person — to actually see the bursts of anger and resentment in his eyes as she laid into him.

Carried away a little, she made a little feint toward him — just a quick jab with the sword.

But he clearly didn't realize it was a feint.

With a shriek of fear, he dropped the baseball bat and ran backwards out of the apartment, almost falling over the railing as he sprinted away toward the elevator.

She was glad he hadn't fallen, she reflected, amused, as she followed him out on to the walkway to make sure he was gone.

It was a two-story drop, and it would probably have killed him, and though she didn't think she'd grieve for him, there'd be cops all night and she'd definitely get a shitty night's sleep.

Her neighbor poked her head out of her door. Yasmin was a sweet old woman in her forties with a couple of extremely overweight Persian cats who was always willing to share a cup of tea and a good chat about whatever was happening on the news. Anna had always liked her and took it as a great compliment to have been entrusted with the duty of feeding Percy and Peter the last time Yasmin had gone to visit her sister interstate.

“You alright, Anna?”

“Just fine, Yasmin, thanks.”

Yasmin knew the full story of Billy — he'd made more than a few phone calls during one of their little catchups, and Anna had wound up telling her all about him.

It had felt good to get it all off her chest.

And Yasmin, surprisingly, had a lot of her own stories about nasty ex-partners.

She'd been instrumental in encouraging Anna to start teaching self-defense to women, actually.

Empowering them to stick up for themselves against abusive partners, giving them the weapons they needed to feel confident in their ability to defend themselves.

It was only one piece of the puzzle, of course — stronger sentencing for convicted abusers would be a good start — but it was something Anna could teach.

“Course you are. If you want to press charges, let me know. I heard most of that. Paper-thin, these walls.”

“Thanks, Yas,”

Anna said gratefully. “Hope you weren’t asleep already.”

“Nah, I’m a night owl. Glad you’re alright. Neat sword,”

she added with a grin, then clicked her door shut. Anna took another deep breath in through her nose, then out through her mouth. This had been a much more eventful Friday evening than she’d been ready for.