



Hunt A Highlander

(Highlander Across Time #9)

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Category: Historical

Description: When high-powered attorney Danielle Longchamp stumbles into the ruins of Dunscaith Castle, she expects a reprieve from her hectic life. What she doesn't expect is to be transported to 16th-century Scotland—or to find herself caught up in the mysterious world of the MacLeod Clan...

After stepping through a magical doorway, Danielle is rescued by Graeme MacMillan, a rugged mercenary with a troubled past. Graeme's gruff demeanor hides a kind heart, and his unexpected charm begins to thaw Danielle's defenses. But as she navigates life in this unfamiliar time, Danielle learns that Graeme's loyalty to the MacLeods is questioned by many, making her growing affection for him even more complicated.

When Graeme's brother is accused of theft, Danielle's skills as a defense attorney are put to the ultimate test. Together, they uncover a conspiracy tied to the clan's enemies—one that endangers not only Graeme's family but the fragile peace of the Highlands. As tensions rise, Danielle and Graeme must work together to prove the truth, even as their feelings for each other deepen.

Total Pages (Source): 27

CHAPTER 1

The fog rolled in outside the window off the California coast. The skyscraper was lost in it, and condensation formed on the tall glass windows.

Danielle put her fingers on the glass and traced along the water droplets. She wanted to be anywhere but here, and the fog felt like it could carry her far away into another world. Away from her office in the powerhouse law firm in San Francisco.

Her office phone rang loudly, startling her out of her imagination.

“This is Danielle,” she said, picking up the landline phone on her desk. She looked at the stack of caseloads on her polished oak desk. “Yeah, I’ll be there.”

She hung up the receiver, sat down, and began her morning task of shuffling through paperwork. Danielle had had enough of looking at scumbag behaviors laid out right in front of her day after day. It weighed on her now more than ever.

At thirty years old, she was one of the youngest partners in her law firm. She had been known as a criminal defense rockstar, but there was a darker side to her sudden rise, and that was burnout. Having graduated high school at sixteen and gone straight to the University of California-Berkeley followed by UC Davis for law school had Danielle pushing herself to the extreme year after year.

So, although some might experience burnout at their job much later in life, it had caught up with Danielle at the age of thirty.

“Why did I do this to myself?” she mumbled as she turned from the papers on her desk back to the window. Her office was in one of the tallest skyscrapers that looked out over the city, but Danielle was miles away in her mind, in Scotland.

She could not wait to be on a plane to take her first vacation in years. It was well-deserved and very much overdue.

“Give up yet? You can always hand it over to me,” a deep voice said from her doorway.

Danielle turned to see Jay, her ex-boyfriend, work colleague, and bonafide jerk standing at the door with a smug grin. As if things could not get any worse, having her ex constantly on her case—and after her case—was the cherry on top of her workday.

“What do you want, Jay?” she asked.

“Just seeing if you want me to take over the case. I know it might be too much for a girl like you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked, already knowing what it meant. He was a misogynist who didn't think a woman could handle a high-profile criminal case of money laundering. She also knew he would do anything to get his name in the papers and was jealous of her success.

“It means I see you shuffling through that case in frustration. I know you, remember? I've seen you naked,” he said with a grin.

“That's enough, Jay. Leave me alone.”

“You're due in court in an hour, aren't you? Let me take this case off your load or

convince your client to share. You're about to leave on vacation anyway and this case won't get your full attention until you get back. Give it to me to watch over," he said.

"You mean give it to you so you can steal it. Don't think that I don't know what you're up to. Yes, I have court, so unless there are more insults you want to hurl my way..." She glared at him.

"Come on, Danielle. I don't really mean it. Just because I don't think you deserved to be made partner doesn't mean I don't value your work."

"And there it is. See? I knew you had one last insult inside of you." She moved to the door, pushing him out of the doorway and closing the door in his face.

"Jerk," she muttered. He always found a way to get under her skin. She knew she deserved to be a partner, but a little self-doubt made her think maybe she didn't. Maybe the title was just given to her because she was one of the youngest lawyers in the city, and that notoriety made the law firm look good, not because of her actual work.

She moved back to her desk and looked over the case she had that afternoon, defending a scumbag who had beaten his wife. She knew she could win, but she didn't feel good about it. This was the source of her burnout. She had been very competitive and focused on the game of law. With every case, she knew how to help even the dirtiest criminals from being put behind bars, but just because she could didn't mean she should. That was starting to weigh on her conscience. She was beginning to have a distaste for the job, something she thought would never happen. Even rehabilitated criminals were starting to make her feel like they didn't deserve a second chance. That was why she'd booked the vacation. She knew if she could just get away to an exotic land for a while, she would return refreshed and renewed and be the competitive criminal lawyer she knew she could be.

Danielle opened the drawer and pulled out a bottle of Ibuprofen. She popped one in her mouth and chased it with a drink of water. It would be the only one she could take that day even though she needed two or three to get rid of the headache throbbing at her temples. Her stomach was too sensitive to take more than one a day. It was probably due to the enormous amount of stress.

“Perhaps it's time to consider joining the District Attorney's office,” she mumbled.

At least there, she would be defending victims of crime instead of the criminals with money. Perhaps that would make her feel a little better about the job, even if it came with a drastic pay cut. She filed that thought away to review while she was on vacation. With her incredibly busy schedule, she often had to put thoughts away to think about them later.

A few minutes later, she got ready to head to the courthouse. She knew she could get all three of her clients off, even though two of them were guilty as sin. But she had to do the job, and the job required winning in court.

She pressed the intercom to speak with her assistant. “Michele, I’m ready. Have the car pulled around,” she said.

“Yes, Ms. Longchamp. Right away.”

Danielle put on the long black trench coat that she loved because it complemented her raven-black hair. She pushed her caseload into her high-fashion leather briefcase, grabbed her long umbrella, and walked out of her office.

“Ms. Longchamp, I got you something,” Michele said standing up from her desk and stepping toward Danielle with a small, wrapped box.

“You did? You shouldn’t have,” Danielle said, stopping to set her things on

Michele's desk and unwrap the gift. Inside was a small umbrella.

"It's travel size," Michele said. "I know you only have massive ones for San Francisco weather, but you'll need something that fits in your purse. Scottish showers are sporadic."

"That's so nice," Danielle said with a smile. "Thank you so much. I will definitely use this. Can you put it on my desk? I'll be back after court."

"Absolutely. And good luck," Michele said.

Danielle gathered her items again and then stopped. "By the way, have you seen Jay lurking about? I don't want to run into him. When you were on your lunch break, he came to hover in my doorway, and I've had enough of him today," Danielle said.

"Ugh, I'm sorry. That man, I swear." Michele said.

"He is an ass; I know." Danielle laughed. "I gotta go."

"Good luck. I know you'll crush it," Michele said.

Danielle headed out, hoping to avoid another encounter with Jay, but it was impossible to avoid a predator that constantly hunted its prey.

"It's about time," he said, coming around the corner of the hallway. "I didn't think you were going to leave at all."

"Damn it, Jay. Don't you have anything better to do than harass me? You need to find something to do that doesn't involve proving over and over why I left you," she said as she stepped into the elevator with a smirk.

As the doors closed, she watched as his face turned red before he marched away.

The elevator began its journey and the smile on her face fell. Seeing Jay around the office reminded her of how blind she had been to who he was. She had allowed his good looks and her lust to override her better judgment. Yes, her, a criminal lawyer who judged people professionally. She had to let all of that go because her body responded to him in a way she wasn't used to. After he showed her what a jealous, sexist idiot he was, and that he would step on anyone including her to get his way, she vowed to never allow her lust to override her judgment again.

She stepped out of the building and crossed the plaza to a waiting town car. The driver opened the door, and she stepped inside. This was the company's car and driver who always drove her to the courthouse. She was used to the luxury her job provided her, from her skyrise office to her penthouse apartment that overlooked the ocean. It was all a part of her, but she wasn't sure it was entirely satisfying.

"Hold on a moment, please," she told the driver as he slid into the driver's seat.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Danielle opened her briefcase to double-check that she had the correct case file because she had an odd sensation that something was wrong, or that something was going to happen.

She saw she had all her case files, and nothing was amiss. Danielle turned toward the building, and her jaw dropped. Jay stepped out of the building, hand in hand with her assistant, Michele.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" she said watching them.

"Pardon me, miss?" the driver said.

“Nothing, nothing,” she said.

Danielle watched as they stopped and Jay pulled Michelle to him. He planted a firm kiss on her and squeezed her bottom. It was obvious to Danielle that they were quite comfortable and had been doing this for some time.

She gasped. Had they been having an affair while she was with Jay? She wouldn't put it past him, but Michele? Danielle had trusted her. No wonder Jay thought he was king of the world with that arrogant attitude.

Danielle narrowed her eyes with rage. She'd had enough of the law firm life and knew she would leave it after her trip; this was just the icing on the cake. She reminded herself to throw away Michele's gift and buy a compact umbrella of her own to take on the trip because it was a practical idea.

Danielle arrived at the courthouse and went straight to work, with one hour between each case and rage in her heart. She was fierce and driven when the situation called for it. She won all three of her cases, even though that meant two criminals walked free and if they did any harm in the future, it would be her fault.

This vacation would be not just a physical vacation, but one of the mind, heart, and soul. Taking this trip was her prescription to search deep within herself to discover what would make her happy.

For so long, her career had been the number one priority in her life, but now that she had it and was a superstar, it wasn't fulfilling her needs. But what needs did she need met?

That was the question, but she didn't know if the Scotland trip would provide the answer.

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CHAPTER 2

Danielle arrived in Scotland and already felt better and more alive than she had in so long. Scotland was green with dark gray-blue skies and charming people. It felt like a world away from her life. The air smelled fresh and clean, not smoggy like San Francisco.

After mulling about the mainland for two days, she decided to go to an island for some adventure.

She took a ferry to the Isle of Skye to walk around the ruins of a place called Dunscaith Castle. She read on the brochure that it was once the home of the legendary warrior Scáthach, who trained Cú Chulainn. There were many stories attributed to the Castle of Shadows, as it was sometimes called in what she was reading, and many were steeped in strange magic.

That intrigued her and was exactly the kind of escape she needed. It would do her good to get away to a place where logic was the last thing on anyone's mind. Magic and mystery were a refreshing change from the order in the court of law and all its rules and regulations. She boarded the ferry with a cup of steaming hot coffee and an open heart for anything that came her way.

She read more of the brochure and looked at the few photos next to the descriptions. The castle had changed hands multiple times before falling to ruin, but in its heyday, it was the home of the Clan MacLeod, who fought over it with their rivals, the MacDonalds.

“Typical male ego and fighting,” she mumbled. “Always trying to take things from each other, fighting, or claiming something.”

The next image was much more interesting. The caption below said it was rumored to have been built in one day by a witch named Scáthach and that its stones were said to be steeped in ancient magic.

“That’s more like it.” She smiled. “Bring on the magic. I’m ready for it.”

After the ferry ride, she hopped on a tour bus to Dunscaith and arrived an hour later.

She was not prepared for the beauty of the ruins that lay before her. They were magical to look at it. She felt like the energy shifted as she walked around the grounds. She could imagine that it must have been quite a beautiful castle in its time.

The vines and moss on the wall were beautiful along the partial towers that remained. Not a lot of the castle was still standing, but she got an idea of how large the castle had been back in its heyday.

After having a look around the ruins, Danielle sat on a wall made of gray stones that looked like others had helped themselves to the stones, possibly carrying them away to make something else. The wall was about as high as her waist and a perfect place to take a much-needed rest.

A seagull caught her attention. The sky overhead was gray, as was to be expected in the north, but the consistent darkening had Danielle worried. She had forgotten to bring the umbrella that she had bought after tossing the one Michele had given her.

It had been three days since Danielle's last day at the office, but the amount of travel made it feel like a lifetime. It had been so long since she had been overseas that it felt like a different planet.

“This is exactly what I needed,” she said as she allowed the breeze of ocean air to move her hair. She closed her eyes and let it wash over her, not just the scent of salty air, but the thought of living a different life if just while on vacation.

“It is unbelievable, isn't it?” she heard a very sexy British accent ask.

Many tourists from the tour group moved about. She opened her eyes to see a very attractive man with short brown hair, gray-blue eyes, and a smile that seemed just for her.

“Oh, yes. It is unbelievable and very pretty,” she said looking at the ruins before her.

“Yes. Very pretty indeed,” he said. But she noticed that he was not looking at the ruins but at her. “You're American, are you not?”

“Yes, I am. I guess the accent gives it away, doesn't it?” she said flirtatiously.

“I like it,” he said.

Danielle smiled. Maybe this vacation would be better than expected. The idea of a fling with a hot British man suddenly felt like it was on the table. It would be nice to release some of the stress with a love affair with someone who didn't live back home or know about her life there. She could lose herself and become someone else.

She indulged this flirtation just a little. “Thank you; I like your accent as well. Are you from...?”

“I'm from London. I live in a nice borough called Highgate. I think you would like it there. It is old but nice, and out of the way of the busy center of London,” he said.

Danielle liked where this was going. Perhaps she would be going to London. Messing

around with this hot guy in a small hamlet outside of the city sounded ideal. The more she talked to him, the more plausible it seemed.

“May I?” he said pointing to the wall.

“Of course,” she said turning her body toward him as he sat next to her.

“How long are you in the UK?” he asked.

“Not long. I'm visiting Scotland and haven't thought much about where to go after the first few days here. I'm just kind of winging it, I guess. Maybe Edinburgh?”

“Or London?” he said.

“Maybe, if there was something to take me there. I mean other than the fact that it's a gorgeous city,” she said.

“I have an idea. If you feel that you might find yourself wandering down to London, give me a call. Can I give you my number?”

Danielle smiled. Bingo . This was an invitation, and one that couldn't hurt if she made a trip to London. It was an option on her agenda for traveling around the UK, but now, the thought of hanging out with this attractive man put the cherry on top of her sundae. If she called him and they didn't meet up, it wouldn't be a wasted trip because she enjoyed the city.

“Okay,” she said, pulling out her phone as he did so they could exchange contact information. But just as she was about to enter his number, a shrill voice came up from behind them.

“There you are, Marcus. I've been looking for you,” a woman said.

Danielle turned to see a very attractive young woman marching toward them. The way Marcus stiffened let Danielle know something was amiss. Marcus had a look on his face like he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Oh, Penelope. I was just having a bit of a rest,” he said.

“I can see that,” Penelope said, looking at Danielle. “I would expect that you would be at my side on our anniversary.”

This was a girlfriend. If it was his wife, the bastard had taken off his ring because Danielle had checked his hand to make sure. She stood, wanting to get away as soon as possible.

“Congratulations, and happy anniversary! I was just about to tour more of the castle,” Danielle said. Then she looked at Marcus, who looked frightened as his partner moved closer. “It was nice to meet you,” Danielle said and then walked away.

She heard the couple fighting behind her, and it was obvious this was not the first time Marcus had been caught in such a flirtation. What a jerk. Of course, it was her luck that the first attractive man she met was out to cheat on his girlfriend. Why couldn't she meet somebody normal and available? Was that too much to ask while on vacation?

She moved around the side of the castle, approaching the tall ruins. She imagined it had been a glorious castle back in the day, filled with fighting men who were full of testosterone and adventure. She wondered what it would have been like to be in that time and thought she would enjoy it if even just for a little while, knowing that women didn't have rights or freedom, and that she would not be able to deal with that. Imagine a strong lawyer in a time when women weren't allowed to own land or be in a position of power. She laughed thinking about it.

Just as she was about to approach the cliff to admire the ocean, rain fell fast and hard.

It was so sudden that anyone would be caught off-guard, the thick sheets of cold rain almost blurring her vision.

She ran toward a door in the wall of the castle and down the steps to the next level of the castle. More tourists followed suit, and suddenly, it was very crowded in the narrow hall. Danielle was pushed deeper down the corridor, away from the stairwell. Might as well have a look around since the rain didn't appear like it would be letting up for some time. But that was not the only reason. Marcus and Penelope had found refuge inside the hallway as well, and Danielle wanted to distance herself from the awkwardness as much as possible.

As she walked down the dark corridor using her phone as a flashlight, she helped herself to open one door after another. The spaces were empty. Some rooms did not have doors at all or their doors hung halfway off. But one particular door caught her interest. She opened it and noticed that it led to the top of another staircase.

She looked over her shoulder. No one was nearby, and she thought a little bit of solitude might do her some good. She entered and walked down the staircase that went deeper into the depths of the castle.

Something about the interaction with Marcus made her feel reckless, a sort of burn-it-all-down attitude, so she allowed herself to walk down the steps. With each noise, she was unsure if she would slip on the stone. They were thick and solid and in good shape though, and her hand slid against the stone wall to keep her balance with just her phone lighting the way.

"It just keeps going," she said as she got to the bottom of the stairs and realized there was more to be explored.

Adrenaline rushed through her. Danielle felt like a real explorer, perhaps even an archaeologist, as she moved through the corridor and into a vast, empty, stone room. Her heart raced knowing that she should be terrified to be alone in such a place, but having such a different experience from being in the office at her law firm kept her going. This was breathing new life into her, and she found herself imagining all the Scotsmen who had probably walked through this room. As she moved around, she was drawn to the far wall, where there was a small wooden door.

Keep going? She lowered herself to the door. She had gotten this far, so she might as well. Something about the door drew her in, and it seemed to glow the closer she got. She reached out and lifted the thick iron bar set in iron holders that kept the door closed. After she set it on the floor, the door swung open. She crawled through, stood up, and then tumbled. Strong arms wrapped around her, holding her steady before she could land on her butt.

“Lass? Are you all right?” he said.

Danielle’s eyes grew wide. What had she stumbled into?

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CHAPTER 3

Graeme sighed as he leaned against the wall. He had the most boring job at Dunscaith, guarding Scáthach's door. The witch was known to bring the MacLeod clan women from the future, but he'd yet to see it. So, he stood, yawning, and getting ever more bored.

Finlay, his former brother-in-law, had told him that he and his younger brother Danny needed to earn their way into the good graces of the Laird and other guardsmen who still looked at them warily. Probably the reason why he was stuck guarding this blasted door rather than up on the wall looking out for thieves, witch hunters, and MacDonalds wanting to take over the Keep.

When his father had died by Finlay's hand—an act Graeme fully agreed with since his father had been a horrible man who had murdered Graeme's sister just for marrying Finlay—Graeme had taken over the gang of thieves his father had led. He'd wanted to stop thieving and turn the gang to more mercenary work, but some stood in his way.

That had led to the worst and best thing that had ever happened to Graeme and Danny. His young niece, Mary, had run away to join her uncles as bandits, or so she claimed. That led Finlay to come after her and them, and in the end, they'd made a deal. The bandits would stop thieving in Scotland and move on to England or become mercenaries for hire. Either way, they stopped being a nuisance to the MacLeods.

After getting his men off the Isle of Skye and heading toward England, Graeme had deemed one of his men as the new leader, and then he and Danny had returned to

Dunscaith Castle to hire on as mercenaries for Clan MacLeod, pledging their loyalty to Laird Cameron.

Of course, just because they'd pledged their loyalty to the clan didn't mean the clan instantly trusted them. On the contrary, it seemed they'd be earning that trust inch by inch. Still, Graeme didn't regret the choice to return and offer their services to the Laird. Living in tents, especially on cold winter nights, was not something he wanted to go back to. His quarters here at Dunscaith, though minimal, were an upgrade.

On top of that, he had his niece, and Finlay and his new wife Eva here as well, and he often took dinner with them and Danny. It was as though he once again had a happy family. That being said, guard duty was still tedious. The door never opened, at least not while he'd been guarding it. One of the other guards had been lucky enough one eve to catch sight of the witch, if he was to be believed, but Graeme had never seen her or anyone else come through the barred door.

He'd scoffed at the thought of Eva being able to get through the iron-barred door. He couldn't lift the iron on his own, so how did these women from the future do it? Eva said it was magic, and he supposed it was, considering she was here.

So, imagine his surprise when the door swung open and a tiny woman tumbled through the door and into his arms.

Dark blue eyes looked up at him with astonishment. Her pale skin was framed by hair so black that the shine bounced off the torchlight. For a moment, Graeme was struck by her beauty and almost forgot himself. Then he remembered his duties when he looked at how she was dressed—in men's trousers and boots—and the words came out of his mouth.

“Lass? Are you all right?” he said.

She was in shock as he enveloped her. She was as light as a feather, tiny and petite against his broad chest. He stared into her eyes, mesmerized by their color. She was exquisite. And silent as she stared up at him. Her bowlike lips were parted in a gasp as though she hadn't expected to be caught by someone like him. He doubted she had. Eva had said there were very few men like he and Finlay left in what she called the modern world.

The tiny woman straightened, getting her balance, and turned in his arms. "Apologies; I lost my footing. I'll just be on my way. Do you know if the storm has passed?" she said, backing away and moving toward the once-again-barred door from which she'd come. She patted her pockets as though searching for something.

"It's not storming here, lass. When I was out last, it was a bright and sunny day," Graeme replied.

"My phone. Where is it?" She began searching the floor.

Graeme had heard the word before from Eva and knew it to be a way people of the future communicated, but he'd never seen one. Still, he helped her look for the object but didn't see anything except the stone floor.

"I do not see it, lass, but I must tell you that things are not what they seem," he said.

She shook her head and frowned. "I guess I dropped it on the other side of the door," she said. "Great. Well nice to meet you, dude. See ya later." She turned to the door, only to find that it was now barred.

Graeme watched her grow confused, and he smirked. This was how it worked. The women came through the door, turned around, and the door was barred, except this time, they were unable to lift the bar. Or if they were, when they opened it, the door opened onto a brick wall.

“What? What is going on here?” she huffed, her small fists resting on her hips.

Graeme hid his smile and crossed his arms over his chest. “If you will come with me, wee lass, you will see that there is an explanation for this.”

The woman spun around and glared at him. “What the hell are you talking about? And where is everyone?” Her gaze widened, and her lips parted once more as she looked him up and down. “Why are you wearing that?”

Graeme looked down at his kilt and plaid. Then his hand went to his sword as he wondered if she was talking about his attire or his weapon. Perhaps it was the bow and quiver of arrows he always carried. He couldn't be sure which item had her so worried. Before he could speak, her questions began again.

“Are you one of the tour guides? I must say, you take your costuming very seriously. It is very good.” She eyed him once more, her hand reaching toward his plaid before she quickly pulled it back to her side as though she was afraid to touch him. “Very authentic.”

Graeme arched a brow at her, and once again had to hide his grin. “If you will follow me, all will be explained,” he said, gesturing toward the hallway beyond the large room they stood in.

“All right, I'll follow you. Take me back upstairs to the rest of the group. I don't want to miss the ferry off the island. But do you have a phone? Perhaps you can call my phone, and I can follow the sound of the ringing. I'm traveling abroad, and it's important that I have a phone. My job demands it,” she said.

“I'm sorry, lass, I do not carry one of those communication devices that people of your world carry,” Graeme answered, glancing over his shoulder at her. “Why are you talking like that?” she asked and then sighed. “Nevermind. Just take me to your

manager or supervisor, or whomever you were speaking of can answer my questions. Perhaps they can come down here with some flashlights and help me find my phone.”

They reached the stairs and Graeme swept his arm out, gesturing for her to go first. “This way, after you.” He wanted to follow behind her for two reasons: One, just in case she took another tumble, and he needed to catch her; and two, because no matter that she came through the door, she could still be a threat and he didn't fancy having a dagger shoved into his back if she carried one. He didn't think she did, but that wasn't the point.

"Fine, though I don't understand how everything looks the same as it did on the other side of the door. The room we were in looked just like the one on the other side except for the torches on the wall. And I swear that this is the same stairwell I came down before." The wee woman stopped on the step and looked back at him. Is it a magic trick?"

“Yes, exactly. The magic of Dunscaith Castle. Or perhaps that of Scáthach. She has a way of choosing who to bring through that door. Unfortunately for you, there is no way back. She does not work that way. But you can now consider this your home," Graeme replied.

The petite woman turned around fully to face him, her little fists once again on her hips. “What do you mean by that? That I should now consider this my home? Are you going to tell me what's going on here? Am I being abducted? Because those are the words of someone who abducts people, you know. You should be careful what you say. Those words of yours would hold up in any court as the words of a kidnapper, especially if I were prosecuting you,” she said with her blue eyes blazing in the torchlight.

Graeme raised a brow at her. “You have spit and fire in you, don't you, lass? I like that,” he said looking at her up and down. Her slender figure caught his eye in the

trousers that hugged her body, which he greatly admired.

She gasped. “Don’t look at me like that, you pig! I will tell your supervisor that you were sexually harassing me!”

“What?” Graeme looked at her curiously. Sexually harassing her? What was that? He understood the two words, but he'd never heard them put together in such a way. He shook his head, thinking perhaps it was a modern term; something derogatory, he guessed from her tone. “Enough of this,” he said, annoyed. He gripped her arm and marched with her up the remaining stairs, into the hall, and up another set of stairs with her protesting the entire way about being “man-handled”. Well, he was a man, and he was handling her, so he couldn't deny that.

“Hey. Hey! Let go of me! What the hell is going on here? You can’t treat tourists like this! I’m going to leave a bad review!”

Graeme ignored her comments. She was a stubborn lass; he'd give her that. Huffing, he drew her along the corridor. She tugged against his grip, and he finally had enough, drawing them to a halt. “You can come like this, or I can throw you over my shoulder. Which is it?” he said sternly.

She gulped in a breath. “No. Not over the shoulder, you big buffoon. Fine; I’ll walk. You have some manners on you, you know.”

Graeme snickered at her sarcasm. He gestured for her to walk on, and she turned in a huff. This beautiful woman was trouble. She made his blood hot, and she was desirable to look at, but now was not the time to be thinking about bedding the lass. He was still here on probation and didn't need her getting him into trouble with the Laird or the other guards. He'd leave her in their capable hands and head right on back down to guard the door.

CHAPTER 4

Danielle's boots echoed on the stone floor as she marched beside him. His hand on her elbow was strong but not tight. It almost felt nice, but she squashed that feeling. Now was not the time to be thinking about his delicious manly scent, how his muscles bulged when he'd caught her, or how mesmerizing his vivid green eyes were. She had a tour group to get back to so they could help her find her phone before they headed back to the bus that would return them to the ferry.

Not that she was anxious to leave this handsome man's company. Thoughts of having a fling with him flew through her mind. She was attracted to him, but it wasn't likely to happen. She would have to stay here on the Isle of Skye, and that wasn't on her agenda. She hadn't prepared for that; she'd left her things back at her hotel on the mainland. She was also very concerned that she'd been away from the group for too long and worried they'd left without her.

"What time is it?" she asked, looking at him.

"Heading on dinnertime, I'd imagine, lass," he answered.

Dinnertime? She was running late. As she hurried down the hallway as quickly as possible, she allowed her eyes to take in everything. She recognized the hallway as the same one she'd been in, except now, torches were mounted in iron holders and tapestries hung on the stone walls. It didn't make sense. Her gaze slid back to the man beside her. "So, what's your name?" she asked, not liking the quiet.

"Graeme MacMillan," he answered, slowing his steps and hers. "And you, lass?"

"Danielle Longchamp," she answered, feeling her anxiety build that the tour group had left without her.

"Where are you from, lass? You don't sound the same as some of the other women who've come through Scáthach's door."

Danielle frowned. "San Francisco."

"Is that in..." Graeme paused for half a second and then stopped walking, "America?"

Danielle nodded stopping next to him. "California. Have you ever been?"

Graeme chuckled. "No, that would be impossible."

Danielle stopped and frowned. "Why would it be impossible?" she asked. It dawned on her that it was possibly a money issue. "Forgive me; I shouldn't be nosy. I know a lot of people in the States who can't afford to travel to Scotland, so I imagine it's the same for some of your countrymen."

Graeme shook his head. "I'm afraid you don't understand, lass. It isn't that I can't afford it, though I probably couldn't even if it were possible, but more that America doesn't exist quite yet. As I said, you're here now, in our time, and there is no way to get to the place you came from."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?" Danielle rolled her eyes. "Are you just playing a part? You know you don't have to stay in character for me."

Graeme sighed. "No, lass. That's not what I am saying. I didn't want to have to be the one to tell you, because I don't know a lot about it. However, I will try to explain a bit. You are here in mid-sixteenth-century Scotland. When you passed through the magicked doorway, you left your time and entered ours. My brother-in-law's wife,

Eva, came through the doorway a little more than a year ago. She was from a place called Chicago, which she said was in America. But seeing as the country has only been discovered in the past seventy-five years or so, and it is clear across the globe, not very many people have made the trek. Also, Eva informed me that it is currently full of wilderness and indigenous people."

Danielle's heart started to race, and she began to feel just the tiniest bit light-headed. "What?"

"Indigenous? She said it meant people who live very primitively. Am I saying it wrong?"

Danielle shook her head. "No, no, it's not that. I meant how is this possible? How could I have traveled more than five hundred years back in time? Time travel isn't possible. You must be making it up!"

"I promise you, lass, what I'm telling you is the truth. You are the eighth woman to make it to our time."

Seven other women had been through time via that doorway? "H-how?" she asked, her eyes widening as she stared up at him.

"I can't claim to understand how it works, lass, only tell you what I've been told. You are the first I have witnessed arriving. From what I understand, Scáthach is a witch who built this castle. It is said that the stones are imbued with her magic. She travels through time, and for some reason, has decided to send women back through time to us here. Well, to the MacLeods, anyway. We do not know why she does this, though there has been some speculation that I will not go into." Graeme sighed. "I really should get you up to the Laird; he and his Lady wife can give you more information and explain things better than I can."

"So... so you're saying that I am in the fifteen hundreds?" Danielle looked around.
"That I am literally in the fifteen hundreds? And this isn't a joke?"

"Aye." Graeme nodded.

"And, and there are seven other women who have been brought through time before me?"

"Aye." Graeme nodded again.

"And you swear that you aren't joking with me? Playing some kind of prank?"

"No, lass. I swear it on my sister's grave."

Danielle took a steadying breath. "Okay." She breathed in and out a few times. "Okay." She nodded. "How... um... how did the other women handle being told they'd traveled through time?" she asked, trying to wrap her mind around the fact that she was now not only in foreign territory, she was in a foreign time, one that, from what she recalled about history, wasn't very kind to women.

"About as well as you are, lass." Graeme smiled. "Many, I have been told, also thought we were actors."

"Re-enactors," Danielle murmured.

"What is the difference?" Graeme asked.

Danielle looked up at him. "Actors are, well, those who put on a play; re-enactors are people who I suppose are also actors, but they repeat things and events from history. Which I don't suppose would be something done in your time, so of course you've not heard the term." She shook her head, still trying to comprehend how she'd managed

to find herself hundreds of years in the past. She'd wanted an adventure, but this was a bit extreme.

"Are you all right, lass?" Graeme looked at her concerned.

Danielle nodded. "Can you show me the rest of the castle?" she asked. "Maybe that will help me get my bearings."

Graeme shook his head, and regret flashed in his striking eyes for a moment. "Better not, lass. I need to get you to the Laird. It's my job, and I'm still..." he trailed off and sighed. "Never mind what I was about to say. If I could do so, I would, but for the time being, I must return to my post. Let me get you to the Laird, and I am sure he will arrange someone to show you around."

Danielle frowned. She'd hoped he would show her. She was comfortable with him now, but she understood having a job to do, especially one he didn't seem to enjoy, so she agreed. "All right. Take me to see this Laird of yours."

CHAPTER 5

"T his way, lass." Graeme opened a door and stepped into a hallway with huge ceilings. "This is the Great Hall. Door to the courtyard is that way," he nodded down the hall to the right, "and we'll be going this way to the dining hall." He gestured in the opposite direction.

Danielle took in the busy hallway that was double the size of the one they'd just been in. "I don't..." she started but then shook her head, not having the words to describe how she felt. Everything he'd said was true. They were in a real castle, there was a roof over her head, enormous wood-and-iron doors stood at one end, and well down the other was a cacophony of sound.

"What is that noise?" she asked softly.

Graeme chuckled. "That would be those not on duty partaking of the evening meal."

An evening meal? Well, he had said it was near dinner time. Her stomach grumbled, and she wondered if Graeme had heard it. She didn't like feeling vulnerable, but it couldn't be helped. She was starving, and if Graeme was right, she hadn't eaten in more than five hundred years! She needed food if she was going to make it through the rest of the evening. She wondered if they would allow her to eat.

The smell of cooking meats and vegetables grew stronger the closer they moved down the Great Hall, as did the symphony of voices. The louder it grew, the more nervous she became. A part of her hoped that when she got to the dining hall, it would be filled with the tourists from her group. She would even be happy to see that

British player Marcus and his seething girlfriend. Anything to remove the uncertainty she felt and get back to normal.

Graeme gestured to the open doors on their right, and they stopped in the doorway for her to take in the view. As she looked around, she knew without a doubt that Graeme had been telling the truth: She was no longer in her time. There were no tourists, no Marcus or his angry girlfriend, and no one who looked like they belonged in her century. Everyone was dressed in authentic period wear. Most of the men were dressed in kilts with plaids, though some wore trousers with linen shirts and a plaid. The ladies were dressed in gowns of a variety of colors, and the servants were dressed exactly how she expected: dark dresses with aprons for the women, serviceable tunics and trousers for the young men. There didn't seem to be any male servants older than their early twenties.

"This way," Graeme said softly, leading her toward the back of the room where a very long table and benches sat on a raised platform.

As they got closer, Danielle could see that it was four tables placed end to end. There were ladies on one side and men on the other. They came to a stop in the middle, facing a tall, broad-shouldered man with wavy, long, blond hair, and a regal-looking woman with hair the color of a raven's wing and wide brown eyes.

Graeme cleared his throat and then said, "Laird Cameron, I have brought a visitor from the doorway."

Laird Cameron looked up in surprise. The woman next to him leaned toward him and said something softly that Danielle couldn't make out. The woman's eyes then slid to her, and she grinned.

"Does our visitor have a name?"

"Aye, my Laird. May I introduce Lady Danielle Longchamp? Lady Longchamp, Laird Cameron MacLeod and his Lady wife, Maria MacLeod."

"Welcome to Dunscaith Castle, Lady Longchamp. Graeme, you may return to your post." Laird Cameron gave him a hard look. "Now."

Danielle frowned. She didn't like how dismissive he was of the man who felt like her only friend here.

"Aye, my Laird." Graeme nodded, then looked to Danielle. "You'll do fine, lass," he whispered just before leaving.

Danielle swallowed and stood uncomfortably before the Laird and his wife. She already missed having Graeme at her side.

"Where do you come from, Lady Longchamp?" Laird Cameron asked.

"San Francisco?"

"Is that in America?" he asked.

Danielle nodded.

His wife leaned close to him and said, "California, like Cara."

"Do you know our Lady Cara?" Laird Cameron glanced down the table toward a woman with a long auburn braid who waved to her.

"I don't think so?" Danielle frowned. "California is a rather large state, with nearly forty million people."

Laird Cameron blinked in surprise. "I see." He nodded. "And how did you find your way to us?"

"I was on vacation here in Scotland, came to visit the Dunscaith Castle ruins and when it started raining, I found myself in a large room with a small door. I got curious and opened it. And here I am."

Laird Cameron smiled again, and then his expression softened, and he seemed almost apologetic. "I am afraid the trip is one-way."

Danielle gazed at the women at that table. There were seven, including the Laird's wife. They had to be the seven Graeme had told her about. "I have been made aware of that fact." She nodded and then added, "Though I am not quite sure what I am expected to do here."

Laird Cameron chuckled. "For now, I would imagine you are quite hungry. Why don't you join us in the evening meal and afterward, my wife Maria will escort you to a room."

"Thank you."

Maria gestured for her to join them as the ladies shifted down to make room for her.

Danielle moved around the tables to sit next to Maria. "Thank you. I am starving."

"The trip here does leave you with a ravenous appetite." Maria smiled.

"You don't have a Scottish accent," Danielle said, surprised.

Maria laughed. "No, I'm from New York. I was a homicide detective with the NYPD." She grinned.

"You were a cop?" Danielle couldn't even imagine going from being a cop to coming here. She couldn't believe she was here at all. Still, she had to make the best of it, she supposed, considering there wasn't a way back.

"Yes," Maria's eyes sparkled as she nodded. She turned and held up a hand, stopping an older woman wearing an apron. "Heigl, will you bring Danielle a plate and goblet while I give her the rundown?"

"Of course, my Lady." Heigl bustled off quickly.

"Let me introduce you to the others." Maria gestured to her right. "Next to you is Edith?—"

Danielle smiled at the petite redhead. Her hair was slightly lighter than the one the Laird had said was named Cara, and much longer. She had very bright blue eyes.

"Hi, Danielle." Edith smiled at her. Her voice was soft and had a bit of an East Coast accent, maybe she was from one of the Carolinas.

"It's nice to meet you." Danielle returned her smile.

"—and then next to her is Carissa. She's an herbalist, so if you start feeling sick, she's your go-to person." Maria winked at the curvy brunette, who blushed.

"Hi, Danielle."

"Hi."

"On Carissa's right is Sarah. She was a private eye in Boston, but her whole family were cops. She'll ask you a million and one questions later, I'm sure." Maria laughed.

"Oh, I will not!" Sarah replied, rolling her eyes. "Hi Danielle, if you need anything or need to know anything about this place, I'd be happy to fill you in."

"Thanks," Danielle murmured, admiring the woman's platinum hair. If they weren't here in the fifteen hundreds, she would swear it was from a bottle because it was so light.

"On Sarah's right is Beth. She was a mystery author before she joined us."

"Really? That's pretty cool," Danielle commented as Heigl deposited a plate filled with roasted meat, potatoes, vegetables, and a hunk of bread in front of her. "Thank you," she said gratefully.

Beth smiled. "Not much use here, but I make do." Her smile widened as she brushed some of her wispy strawberry hair from her face.

Danielle's stomach grumbled. "Oh, excuse me." Her cheeks heated as she put her hand to her stomach. "This all smells so good."

"Go ahead and eat while I finish up," Maria encouraged her. "Next to Beth, as my husband mentioned, is Cara. She was an anthropologist who studied Celtic myths. If you want to know anything about Scáthach, just ask her; she knows a ton."

Danielle's eyes widened. "Do you know how to get her to send us back?"

Cara shook her head. "No, sorry. I don't think that sending us back to our time is anything Scáthach wants. We're pretty sure she's—" Cara broke off, her eyes staring beyond Danielle to Maria. "Er... well, she only brings us here, usually because we're needed for something or other, we think."

"I'm a defense attorney. I can't imagine there is much use for me around here."

"Oh, you never know," Maria said.

Danielle continued eating. The food tasted better than any roast and vegetables that she could ever remember. And the bread was crisp on the outside and soft in the center, just the way she loved it. If they ate like this every night, she'd gain thirty pounds in a month!

"And last, but not least, is Eva, our most recent visitor before you."

"Oh, yes. Graeme said you are married to his brother-in-law?"

Eva blushed and nodded. "Yes, Finlay and I married several months ago."

"And in another few months, Eva will be having a baby," Maria commented.

"Congratulations," Danielle said.

"Thank you," Eva replied.

Danielle turned to Maria. "So, are all of you married to men here?" she asked, feeling a bit odd. Did they have to marry? Did these men require them to marry to stay?

"We are," Maria replied, though she must have seen the concern Danielle was sure was on her face because she continued. "By choice, Danielle, each of us fell in love with a man from this time. It isn't a requirement to stay here. You are welcome no matter what."

Danielle expelled the breath she'd been holding. "I see." She had no intention of getting involved with a man here, whether or not she was stuck there. She wouldn't give up her independence and allow some man to be her ruler.

"You will." Maria nodded, but there was a twinkle in her eye as she picked up her goblet and took a drink.

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CHAPTER 6

"Come, let me show you to your room," Maria said as everyone finished dinner.

"Thank you."

"Heigl will make sure one of the staff brings you some proper attire," Maria commented as they returned to the Great Hall.

"How big is this place?" Danielle asked, looking around.

"There are five floors above ground and several below. You'll be able to see how big it is tomorrow. I'm sure someone will happily give you a tour."

"Okay?" Danielle murmured.

"I'm sorry. I'd do it, but I'm tied up with household stuff tomorrow. I'll make sure someone can show you around, though." Maria smiled. "So, you were a defense attorney? What kind?"

Danielle had hoped to avoid that question, as Maria had been a homicide detective.

"I... well, I was a criminal defense attorney."

Maria's smile slid from her lips, and she looked a little put-off. "Oh."

"I know most cops don't like us, but everyone deserves a fair trial and the right to counsel."

"I know. It's just..." Maria shook her head. "Do you know how many times we knew we had the right criminal and their defense attorney got them off on a technicality? Too many, Danielle. Way too many."

Danielle nodded. "I know, but it's the law. We have to do our best for our clients, even if we think they are scum."

"I don't know how you defended some of those people. They don't deserve to go free."

"You think I don't agree?" Danielle huffed. "Guilty people should serve time for their crimes, but my job is to make sure that if they are convicted, it is a legitimate conviction. If the prosecutor or police don't do their due diligence and a technical error comes to light, I have to press that."

Maria shook her head. "Defense attorneys use every obscure law they can find to get their clients off. It's not right."

"We're going to have to agree to disagree. The law is the law, and I follow it." Danielle retorted. She couldn't believe she was standing in the stone hallway of a castle in the fifteen hundreds, arguing twenty-first-century law with a former NYPD homicide detective. "It doesn't matter now, anyway. It's not like I can practice law here, and besides, I was thinking about switching sides before I took this vacation. That was part of the reason I came to Scotland. I wasn't to reassess what I wanted to do because I don't like representing guilty criminals."

Maria frowned. "Would you really have traded sides?"

"I don't know. I was seriously considering it."

Maria didn't say any more, she just headed up another flight of stairs, down a

hallway, and then opened a door. "There's probably a lot you don't know about this period unless you're a Scottish history buff."

"No, I'm not."

"Okay so let me give you a little background. My husband is the Laird. That means he is comparable to, say, the governor of a state, but he's also the state senate, judge, and jury. He makes the laws and enforces the laws of this region of the Isle. The other men, the husbands of the other women from our time, they are the Guard, and they're like the cops. They're also the soldiers and protectors of the people. They don't put up with any nonsense. And judgment and sentencing are almost instant. We don't really have lawyers or solicitors here. This isn't England. That being said, it doesn't mean that they aren't needed sometimes."

Danielle didn't know what to think. She knew that more often than not, in the not-so-distant past, that was often how things were done. She also knew that a lot of innocent men and women paid for someone else's crimes. "But?—"

"Yes, I know. It's possible that some innocent person has paid for someone else's crime, but that's the way it is. You aren't going to change it, Danielle, but if Scáthach sent you here, there must be a reason, and perhaps, you'll be able to help someone. Just be very careful when you do, all right?"

Danielle nodded.

Maria looked around the room. "It seems Heigl has already arranged your clothing." She gestured to the table with a pile of dresses. "The one on top is a night dress. I think you can manage that on your own. I'll make sure Heigl sends one of the girls up to help you into one of the dresses tomorrow. They are difficult to get into at first, but they aren't terribly uncomfortable."

"Thanks."

" I'm not happy with your career choice, and I don't know you, but you're here, and it's my duty to make you feel comfortable and welcome. I know I'm being a bit short with you, and I don't mean to be, but I can't help how I feel."

Danielle sighed. "It's okay. I get it. And I appreciate the hospitality."

"Breakfast is at seven. However, if you sleep in, just find Heigl in the kitchens across from the dining hall. She'll make sure you have something to eat."

"Okay, thanks."

"Goodnight." Maria turned and strode from the room without bothering to close the door.

"Night," Danielle murmured to the empty room.

She quickly closed the door and used the key in the knob to lock it. The room was probably about the size of her sunroom back in California. It held a double bed with a simple wooden frame covered with quilts. There was a night table on the right side of the bed that held a lit candle with a glass covering it. To the left, next to the outside wall by the window, sat a small wooden table and two chairs. On the wall near the door was a fireplace where a crackling fire danced merrily. On the other side of the door stood a wardrobe, and on the wall opposite the outside wall stood a washstand with a bowl and pitcher. It was a simple room with no frills, but it seemed comfortable.

Danielle got undressed and washed up in the water from the pitcher. She would miss taking a shower every morning and wondered how the women here washed their hair. Hell, she wondered how they used the bathroom. Maria hadn't explained that one to

her. Did they even have bathrooms?

As she stood there pondering, there was a knock on the door. Danielle glanced at it, and then down at herself in her bra and underwear and scurried across the small room to grab the night dress. "One minute!" she called as she pulled the white garment over her head. "One sec, I'm just— damn it, isn't there a... ah-ha!" she shook out the garment underneath the nightdress, and realized it was a robe. "I'm coming," she called, pulling it on.

She turned the key and opened the door to find a teenage girl on the other side. "Yes?"

"Evening, my Lady," the girl bobbed a curtsy. "I'm Dorine. I take care of the rooms in this hall. I just wanted to tell you I'll be here in the mornin' ta help you with yer gown and such." Her accent was very strong Scottish, but Danielle didn't have any trouble understanding her.

"Oh, thank you. And you can call me Danielle; I'm not all that formal." Danielle smiled.

Dorine smiled. "If Heigl caught me calling you by yer name, my Lady, she'd have me scrubbing the kitchen floors before I could blink!" She giggled and her smile widened, brightening her face.

"Ah, well, I wouldn't want that to happen." Danielle grinned back. "Before you go, can you tell me where to find the um..." She stopped not knowing if she'd understand the word bathroom. "The.... where I can relieve myself?"

"Oh, yes, my Lady. There should be a chamber pot under yer bed. Or there is the garderobe on the main floor, though I wouldn't use it at night, my Lady. Best to use the chamber pot and allow me to clean it out in the mornin'."

"The garderobe?" Danielle said curiously.

"I've heard the Laird's wife call it a privy?"

"Ohhhh," Danielle murmured. "A room with a hole to..."

"Yes, my Lady, though you can sit on it. It sends the waste directly to the sea. It stays pretty busy with all the castle guards; that's why we also have the chamber pots."

"Good to know. Thanks, Dorine."

"My pleasure, my Lady." She bobbed another curtsy and left.

Danielle closed the door and using the chamber pot—something that would take a lot of getting used to—she climbed into bed, blew out the candle, and immediately fell asleep.

The next morning, Danielle woke to bright sunlight pouring in through her small window. On the table where the dresses had been sat a tray with a cover over it. The dresses and her clothing from the day before were nowhere to be seen, and the fire was once again crackling merrily in the fireplace. She'd slept so soundly that she'd missed someone entering her room and moving things about.

"Well, that's not creepy at all," she murmured as she climbed from the bed and walked over to the small table. She lifted the cover to see a bowl of what looked like oatmeal, a small carafe of honey, and a cup of milk. She poured a little bit of the honey on the oatmeal, stirred it, and took a bite. It was a little thinner than oatmeal, but it tasted good.

She had just finished her last bite when there was a knock at the door. "Come in," she called from her seat, expecting that it wasn't locked since someone had entered while

she'd slept.

The door opened, and Dorine entered. "Good morning, my Lady. I'm just returning your pot, and if you're ready, I'll help you into your dress." She slid the pot into its holder under the bed.

"Yes, thank you. And do I have you to thank for the delicious breakfast as well?"

"Heigl asked me to bring it to you. She figured you'd probably sleep past breakfast. Y'er up sooner than she thought you'd be, though."

"I'm usually an early riser. Please thank her for me, would you? I do appreciate it."

Dorine washed her hands in the wash bowl, dried them on the towel, and opened the wardrobe. "Which dress will you want to wear, my Lady?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. You choose one for me."

Dorine nodded and pulled a blue dress from the cabinet along with some white material. She brought it over to the bed and laid the blue part down. "It's not too difficult once you get used to it."

"I'll keep that in mind." Danielle took off her robe and slipped off the nightdress. She'd slept in her bra without meaning to, but she took it off now, expecting that she'd have to wear whatever undergarments Dorine had for her. "Okay, what do I do?"

"This is your chemise, so this goes on first."

It was like a long white dress, and Danielle slipped it on. "Now what?"

"Now the corset."

"Corset? You've got to be kidding me. Seriously?"

Dorine giggled. "No, my Lady." She put the material around Danielle's waist, adjusted it under her chest, and laced it up. "It's not too tight, is it?"

Danielle wiggled a little, twisted, and turned, and was surprised to find that it wasn't tight at all. "No, it's good."

"This is the last part. Hold up your arms, and I'll slide it over you."

Danielle did as she was told, and Dorine slid the blue material over her arms and head. She settled the skirt in place, had her slide her arms into the sleeves, and then buttoned up the front to just under her breasts. Danielle did a little spin and said, "How do I look?"

"Like a proper lady, my Lady." Dorine giggled again.

"Thanks, Dorine. Um, what about shoes?"

Dorine went back to the wardrobe and pulled out woolen stockings and a pair of black boots. "I figured you were about the same size as Lady Carissa. I used the pair you wore here to match. I think they'll fit."

Danielle took the stockings, pulled them on and up under her skirt, and then slipped her feet into the boots. They fit perfectly. "You did good, kid. Thanks."

"Kid? I'm not a goat, my Lady." She giggled again.

Danielle laughed. "No, you aren't. It's just a saying from where I come from."

"Do you need anything else?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Do you think someone will give me a tour of the castle?"

"I'm sure they will, my Lady. Several of the others were still in the dining hall when I was down there a little bit ago, perhaps you could ask one of them?"

"Thank you, Dorine. I'll do just that." Danielle headed out of her room and down the stairs to the dining hall. She found Eva and Cara still seated and eating.

"Danielle, how did you sleep?" Eva asked.

"Pretty well, considering I'm in a strange place and century."

"You're taking it better than most of us did," Cara said with a laugh.

"Well, I can hardly deny that I'm here, can I? That wouldn't be logical."

"Have you eaten?" Eva asked.

"I have. Heigl kindly sent up a bowl of oatmeal."

"It was porridge." Cara grinned.

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"Pretty much," Eva replied, smiling as she ate a piece of bread.

"So, I was hoping someone could show me around?"

"I'd be happy to," Cara replied.

"I would, but Finlay doesn't want me exhausting myself, and I promised Mary I'd be

up to help with reading time," Eva said.

"He just wants to make sure you aren't overdoing it, little momma." Cara laughed.

Eva rolled her eyes.

"Come on, I'll give you the grand tour." Cara hopped up and looped her arm through Danielle's, leading her through the dining hall, down the Great Hall, and out the large doors to the courtyard.

Danielle was amazed at how big Dunscaith Castle was. It wasn't as tall as her office building in San Francisco, but she was glad for that because elevators hadn't been invented yet. After walking around outside, they headed back in, and Cara showed her everything: the kitchens, privy, sitting rooms, library, armory, and nursery, and then up to the roof, where she could look out at the sea or over the highlands.

"This is breathtaking," Danielle murmured.

"Isn't it?" Cara said.

"Lady Longchamp, I see you are enjoying a tour?"

Danielle turned to find Graeme standing nearby. She smiled. "Graeme, you can call me Danielle. And yes. Cara has shown me quite a bit. It's beautiful here."

"You are enjoying it?" he asked, his vivid green eyes lighting up at her words.

"I am," Danielle agreed.

"We should head back down for lunch, Danielle." Cara tugged on her arm.

"Oh, okay. Well, goodbye, Graeme. See you later." Danielle waved to him and smiled.

He seemed sad to see her go, but he waved to her as well.

Cara didn't say anything as they headed inside and down the stairs to the main floor. She seemed almost in a hurry to get away from the roof. Or maybe she was eager to get away from Graeme; Danielle wasn't sure. The thought made her frown.

Over the next few days, Danielle noticed more people avoiding Graeme when he'd come to check on her, which she thought was rather sweet. However, the moment he came to speak to her, the others made an excuse to walk away without greeting him. She couldn't understand why everyone treated him so distantly. Was she missing something? He seemed perfectly nice and competent at his job. He carried himself well, and he didn't seem to have a temper, at least not that she'd seen. So, what had some of the Guard and ladies acting like he was contagious?

Finally, she'd had enough and flat-out asked Eva as she sat next to her in the dining hall.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Why does nearly everyone treat Graeme like a leper?"

Eva sighed and set down her spoon before turning to her. "There's a lot of history here. Graeme is not officially one of the Guard; he's a mercenary for hire. I like the guy, he's Mary's uncle and he's been good to her, but he grew up in a family that was less than honorable, and well... that leaves a mark on a person here." She pursed her lips and then opened them again, but then she gave her head a little shake and turned back to her meal instead.

Danielle got the feeling that she wouldn't get more than that from Eva, so she decided to let it go for now. She'd eventually figure it out. She always did.

CHAPTER 7

Feeling tired, Danielle left the dining hall and drifted down the Great Hall toward the stairs. Before she reached the first step, Graeme joined her, making her smile. "Good evening, Graeme."

"Good evening, Lady Danielle." He moved next to her with his hands locked behind his back as he walked. "I wondered if you would care to take an evening stroll? It is fine weather out, and the moon is nearly full."

Danielle hesitated. She was a bit tired, but she didn't want to pass up the chance to walk with him. It wasn't often that he didn't have some duty or other. "All right, perhaps a short one? I don't want to fall asleep on you," she said, adding a giggle as she grinned up at him.

He looked at her curiously and then offered her his arm, but the look on his face told her that he wasn't sure she would take it. "Should you fall asleep, I will make sure you don't fall and hurt yourself."

Danielle's grin widened. "Thank you, Graeme. You are quite the gentleman, aren't you?" She took his arm and gave it a little squeeze, moving in close. She liked him very much and couldn't help but flirt a little. He was the opposite of Jay, the asshole at her law firm that she'd dated. Just the thought of him and Michele had her scowling.

"Is something wrong?" Graeme asked as they stepped out of the keep and into the courtyard. "You are frowning."

"Oh, sorry. No. I was just... thinking of something that happened back in my time," she replied, shaking her head. "That's so weird to say."

"Something upsetting?"

Danielle sighed. "In a way. I was a lawyer, someone who defended criminals and made sure they got a fair trial," she explained. "I made partner at my law firm?—"

"What does that mean? You got married?" He looked taken aback and nearly dropped her arm.

"What? No. No, I'm not married. It means that I was on equal footing with the rest of the lawyers at the firm, not a junior lawyer, I suppose that all means nothing to you," she laughed. "I'm not sure how to explain it, except that it made me one of the bosses. Does that make sense?"

He nodded. "Why did that upset you?" he questioned.

"Oh, that didn't upset me. No, it was... there was this jerk, well... I didn't know he was a jerk until later, but anyway, he was another boss. We..." Danielle paused, searching for the word that correlate with "dated" for him. "I guess you would say 'courted'?"

"You planned to marry this man?" He frowned.

"Maybe at first, but later, no. I broke up with him. Before I left, he tried to take one of my cases, and then I found out he was seeing—um, courting—my assistant. What upsets me was that now, they will get away with it."

"Him seeing this other woman upsets you? Did you love him?"

Danielle stopped walking and turned to him. She wanted to make sure he understood that her heart never belonged to Jay. "No, no. I never loved him; I promise. What upset me was that my assistant and I were friends. At least I thought we were, and she betrayed me. That is what upset me. I was going to fire her and have the other partners vote on his tenure with the company when I returned from Scotland."

"And now, because you are here, they will not see justice?"

Danielle smiled. "Exactly." She squeezed his arm, grateful that he understood. She tugged on his arm a little as she started walking again. "I'm sorry I let the thought of them ruin such a lovely evening stroll with you."

"It is not ruined; we are still enjoying the nice weather, and I enjoy hearing about your time in the future."

"I am so glad to hear you say that." Danielle smiled up at him. "You are a very kind man, Graeme." She pressed herself a tiny bit closer to him as they walked. "I enjoy spending time with you. Tell me about what you do here?"

"Oh. Well, my brother and I are not like the Guard. We are not part of the MacLeod Clan. We're MacMillans. There are just two of us left. We did not have a very big family to begin with, like the MacLeods. I did not get here until about six months ago, so I am starting at the bottom."

"What did you do before you got here?"

He sighed but shook his head. "I would rather not talk about that, if you do not mind? It is in the past, and something I would rather forget."

Danielle looked at him curiously but nodded. Between his words and Eva's, she was even more determined to figure out the mystery. "All right. So, what kind of things

do you do here?"

He swallowed and gave her a small smile. "A bit of this and that. Guard the doorway, of course, and polish the armor and daggers. I occasionally have tower watch." He shrugged.

"You don't sound as though you enjoy those things very much."

"I cannot say that I do. I would much rather be out on patrol with the rest of the Guard, or taking a turn on the wall, or any number of other things. There is not much call for me to use my weapons while guarding the doorway or polishing armor."

"I noticed you carry a very large sword." Danielle grinned.

"It is a claymore."

"A claymore? Are you skilled with it?" she asked, adding a bit of flirtation to her voice.

"Aye."

"Is it very sharp?" she asked playfully, biting her lip, and gazing up at him.

"Aye."

His one-word answers left her feeling as though he didn't understand that she was flirting. Maybe she was out of practice? She sighed.

"You are sighing at me; did I say something to upset you?" He frowned at her.

Danielle smiled ruefully. "No, you are fine. I think I am just tired. I am still getting

used to this time period, and I think all the exercise I am getting from walking everywhere is making me more tired than normal."

"Do you not walk in your time?"

"We do, just not as much. We have machines that can lift us up several floors, so we don't have to take the stairs, and cars to get around in when we aren't in buildings."

"Your world is very curious to me. Do many ladies work in your world? I know the ladies who came before you all claimed to have worked in their worlds. Is that normal?"

Danielle nodded, thinking of the other ladies. "Yes, it is quite normal in the twenty-first century for women to have professional careers beyond housekeeping and cooking. We are on fairly even footing with men in that regard, but it took us centuries to achieve it. And even in the twenty-first century, it is hard to compete because there are still some men who believe that women are not as intelligent or as worthy as they are."

"I have always felt women are far more intelligent than me. My sister was." He smiled. "She was strong-willed, determined, good with a bow, and could cook and take care of a horse better than some men I know."

"Do you mind me asking what happened to her?" Danielle asked.

"She... died. Our father was not a good man. He killed her."

"Oh, Graeme. I am so sorry to hear that. How could he do such a thing to his daughter?"

Graeme shook his head. "I do not know. He was an angry man." He looked up at the

stars.

Danielle followed his gaze and stood with him, taking in the deep, dark sky and the millions of stars above. She'd never seen a more beautiful night. Back in San Francisco, she barely saw any stars at night.

"You said you defended people as a lawyer?"

"Yes." She nodded and turned back to him.

"Were they worthy of your defense?"

"Not usually. Most of them were guilty as sin." Danielle pursed her lips. "Still, everyone deserves to be treated fairly, so I gave them the best defense I could." She sighed, thinking of Maria and Sarah, who didn't seem too pleased to have her there with them. Not that they'd been unkind, just... standoffish. "A couple of the other women aren't thrilled that I am a criminal defense attorney."

"Why?" Graeme asked curiously as he looked into her eyes. He reached out and gently tucked a loose hair behind her ear.

Danielle felt a slight thrill at his soft touch. "Because they were cops. Or as good as cops, I guess. They locked up the criminals, and sometimes, I got them out of jail because of a technical detail that violated their rights. We have laws in the twenty-first century that have to be followed, and if they aren't, some criminals go free."

"So, even though they did what they were accused of, they did not always go to the dungeon or get put to death?"

"Well, I wouldn't call prison a dungeon, and many states no longer have the death penalty, but yes."

"You were good at your job, then?"

Danielle smiled. "Very good," she shook her head, "but I was considering switching sides. I grew tired of defending guilty people who deserved to go to prison."

"I can understand that feeling." He nodded. "Do you think a person who has done bad things, who is a criminal, can change?"

Danielle shrugged. "I don't know, maybe? I never saw it with my clients, but I'm sure it's possible."

Graeme nodded silently, but he looked thoughtful. "I should get you back in so you can seek your bed."

Danielle turned with him, and they headed back to the doors. "Thank you for the lovely evening, Graeme, I have enjoyed it."

"It has been my pleasure, Lady Danielle." He smiled as he led her to the stone staircase. "I would like to walk you to your door, if you do not mind?"

"I think I would like that very much," Danielle answered, feeling a blush rise in her cheeks.

CHAPTER 8

Danielle sat in her small room. There wasn't much to do during the day at the castle. Despite the welcome she'd received from the Laird, she wasn't sure if she was a guest in the castle, or what. She wondered why they'd had someone guarding the magic door. Were they afraid the witch would bring a threat to their door? A spy? From what she recalled, the MacLeods and MacDonalds had a rivalry that reminded her of the Hatfields and McCoys. Did they think the witch would bring through a spy?

She didn't want to think about what would be done to her if they falsely accused her of such a thing. Did they even allow a solicitor to stand up for the wrongfully accused? She hadn't asked Maria about that when she'd spoken of her husband being not only the law but also the judge and jury.

Danielle had known since she was eleven that she wanted to be a lawyer and worked toward that. It was why she had worked to graduate high school by age sixteen. She hadn't seen a point in waiting around until later to start college, especially when school was so easy. The organization and use of logic thrilled her. She loved that she could read and read and soak in information, and then use that information to make sense of things that thrilled her. She loved it.

She loved everything about the law. It was why she had been able to defend her clients so passionately. She believed in the justice system and how it worked. Of course, there were things she didn't like, such as getting a wife beater off with probation, or a case thrown out because the arresting officer had failed to read the man his Miranda rights, but for the most part, she loved it.

So having to defend her career choice to the women here was depressing. She'd argued with Sarah over it just this morning. The interaction had left her frustrated and seeking the quiet of her room. That was several hours ago, and she was starving now. She'd skipped lunch because she didn't want to go down to the dining hall and get into another argument, so she'd stayed in her room.

She thought maybe she could sneak down to the kitchens and ask Heigl for a small snack before dinner. Maybe she could even request to have dinner in her room. With that in mind, she went to her door, but when she opened it, she ran into Eva, who stood on the other side with her fist raised as if to knock.

“Eva, hello. What's up?” Danielle asked.

Eva laughed. “What's up? I've not heard that in a while. I thought that if you didn't have plans for dinner, you might want to come to our quarters and join us,” Eva said.

“Really? That would be cool; thank you. I'm really hungry. I missed lunch. Breakfast was a good while ago, and I'm not sure I ate all that much,” Danielle said.

"I thought I'd missed you in the dining hall." She smiled.

"Did you cook dinner yourself?" Danielle asked.

"No, no. Heigl and her kitchen staff always see to dinner, but I often have it brought up to us in our quarters so we can eat in private with Mary and sometimes a few friends."

"I see." Danielle followed her down the hallway, up the stairs to the next floor, and down another hall.

Soon, they entered what looked like a small apartment with a sitting room and three

other doors, two of which were closed. A table made of strong wood sat off to the side of the room already set with a large bowl of piping hot stew and a platter of bread.

Danielle noticed three men already seated at the table, along with a little girl who bounced in her seat. It took her a moment to realize that one of the men was Graeme, and she was secretly thrilled that he was joining them. Then she recalled that he was the little girl's uncle. She figured the other man, who was quite a bit younger than him, must be his brother.

“This is my husband, Finlay, and our daughter, Mary,” Eva said.

Finlay stood and gave her a nod. "Welcome." He was tall and blond, with a trimmed beard and gray eyes.

“Hello, it's nice to meet you, Finlay. I'm Danielle.”

"Hi Lady Danielle," Mary said, waving at her.

"You, of course, already know Graeme,” Eva said as Mary got up and bounced around the room.

“Hi, Graeme,” Danielle said, blushing.

Graeme stood and moved toward her, taking her hands in his. "I am glad you joined us."

The way he looked into her eyes had butterflies taking off and fluttering up to her heart. "I am, too," she murmured.

"You look lovely today in that dress," he said, keeping his voice soft as Eva went to

stop Mary from bringing her books to the table.

"Thank you." Danielle blushed again.

"This is my brother, Danny," Graeme said, gesturing to the young man at the table.

Danielle looked at the young man, who shared Graeme's looks, including his vivid green eyes. His auburn hair hung to his shoulders. He was much thinner than Graeme, and he still looked very much like a gangly teenager. "Nice to meet you, Danny."

"And you, Lady Danielle," Danny said from his seat at the table.

"Here, Danielle. Why don't you take this seat?" Eva said as she gestured to the chair next to Graeme's.

"Thank you, Eva." She took her seat, and her stomach grumbled at the scent of the food. "Oh, goodness. This all smells so good, do excuse my ravenous stomach."

"Brought your appetite with you, did you, lass?" Graeme chuckled.

"It seems I did." Danielle felt her cheeks heat again.

"Mary, come take your seat next to your father."

"Aye, all right, geez." Mary skipped over to her seat.

Danielle giggled.

"Mary, love, why don't you say the blessing for us?" her father asked.

"Do I have to?"

"Aye. If you wish to eat the food, you do," Finlay replied.

"Ugh. Fine. Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ, our savior, Amen."

"Amen," Danielle murmured and then looked at Eva. "Are you all Catholic?" she asked as Finlay dished out the stew.

"The Catholic church is very prolific here. I wouldn't say we are particularly religious, but we are teaching Mary the prayers, and we attend services when we can."

"The church has been known to send witch hunters to Dunscaith, so it's best if we go along with their teachings so they have no reason to persecute anyone," Finlay answered.

"Dunscaith was built by a witch, did you know?" Mary asked.

"I did," Danielle replied, taking a bowl from Finlay.

"She's not like that mean one from the Wizard of Oz story Eva told me, though. She's a good witch like Glenda."

Danielle turned to Eva, her eyes wide. "You told her the story of Wizard of Oz?"

Eva rolled her eyes. "You try entertaining a five-year-old." She laughed.

"My favorite story is The Goonies," Mary said matter-of-factly as she licked her fingers.

Danielle laughed. "That is a good one," she agreed.

They began to eat, and the conversation moved on to lighter things. Danielle felt Graeme's eyes on her through most of the meal. It gave her a feeling of excitement, and she turned and smiled at him often. She was so curious to know more about him and his life, but she didn't want to ask him in front of his family, especially knowing that he wanted to forget his past. She understood part of that, considering what his father had done, but that wasn't his fault. She loved listening to the camaraderie among the three men at the table, and for the first time since she'd arrived in the past, she felt accepted.

“So, Danny, are you in school, or do you also help out the Guard here, too?” Danielle asked.

“Aye, I am training with them and hope to find my place with them,” Danny said sheepishly.

“That must be quite fun. I would love to see this training at some point,” Danielle said very interested in how the Guards conducted.

“Aye, sometimes it can be, when I'm not getting the blunt end from the other Guards,” Danny said as he dipped a piece of bread into his stew and stuffed it into his mouth.

Graeme shifted in his seat, and his breathing picked up as though he didn't like hearing that information.

She looked at Finlay, who wore a stern look after listening to this as well. “Is it some sort of trainee hazing?” Danielle asked. When she saw the rest exchange awkward looks, she knew something else was going on, but no one was willing to elaborate.

“Doubt it,” Danny said as he continued to eat while the others seemed very tense.

Graeme quickly changed the subject. "Lady Danielle, how have you been enjoying your stay here at Dunscaith?"

"I must say that I'm starting to enjoy being here now that I've gotten used to some of the things that are not quite as modern as they are in my time. I miss my shower and microwave, but this place has its advantages." Her eyes darted to Graeme and then down as her cheeks heated.

"I would give my left arm for a shower like we had back home," Eva agreed.

"What is a microwave?" Finlay asked.

"It is a machine that cooks food nearly instantly. Pizza, popcorn, Hot Pockets, burritos... oh golly, I'm going to miss burritos!" Danielle declared.

"Hot Pockets sound as though they might be nice in the winter months," Danny said.

"Indeed." Graeme smiled.

Danielle met his eyes and laughed. "No, no. It's a type of food, a folded thin bread around gooey cheese and meat with a sauce. They are very good."

"I seem to recall we had heated hand warmers, too. You know what I'm talking about, right, Danielle? Those little packets?"

"Oh yeah, those would come in handy here, I bet."

"We stay fairly warm in the castle." Eva grinned. "Especially cuddled up in front of the fire." Her eyes went to Finlay, and they shared a smile.

Suddenly, Graeme grabbed a hunk of bread, slammed it into his stew, and then ate it,

startling Danielle with the ferocity of his actions.

"Uncle Graeme," Mary laughed, "you're eating like a wild beast!"

Graeme chuckled and then roared, his hands curling into makeshift claws. "Aye, and this beast is hungry for little nieces!" He half-stood, a light sparkling in his eyes.

Mary shrieked, jumped up from her seat, and ran around the small sofa in front of the fireplace. "Don't get me, Uncle Graeme!"

"Rawr!" Graeme called out as he stalked her around the sofa. When he caught her, he picked her up, set her on the sofa, and tickled her until she cried out for him to stop.

Danielle thought the whole thing was adorable, and she loved seeing this side of him.

"All right, you two, that's enough," Eva called over. "Come back to the table and finish eating."

It was the best meal and evening Danielle had had since she could remember.

CHAPTER 9

Much to Danielle's surprise, the days passed rather quickly. There was breakfast down in the dining hall, and even though she'd argued with Sarah, they'd agreed to a comfortable truce of sorts and merely avoided the topic of law. Danielle didn't see Maria too often, as she usually dined with the Laird before they went to his office to do whatever Lairds and Ladies did. Eva often went with them, as she worked on some things for Maria. Other days, she left the castle to go to Carissa's cottage beyond the village.

Danielle had yet to make a trip there and often thought about asking if she could go, or if someone would take her, but the only one she wanted to go with was Graeme, and he was nearly always working.

She returned to her room that morning with a specific chore in mind. She'd torn the hem of one of her dresses, and Cara had given her a quick lesson on how to repair it, along with the tools to do it. Danielle had never sewn, but she looked forward to the task.

It took her fifteen frustrating minutes to thread the damn needle, and she'd poked herself at least thirty times but made progress. They weren't the neat little stitches Cara had shown her, but they weren't far off.

She was about halfway done when there was a heavy knock on the door. She glanced up, wondering who it could be. Dorine's knock was much lighter, and hardly anyone else came to her room. She set her sewing down and crossed the room to open the door, surprised to see Graeme on the other side.

“Graeme, good morning. What brings you to my room so early? Didn't you work the late shift?” she asked.

He looked quite nervous. It was obvious that he had something on his mind. He looked left and right as though checking to see if they were alone, and then, he quietly said, “May I come in just for a few moments, Lady Danielle?” he murmured. “There's something I've been wanting to say to you, lass.”

“Of course. Come in.” She opened the door wider to allow the broad-shouldered man to enter. “Why do you seem so nervous?” she asked.

Graeme dragged a hand through his hair and looked around her room. He paced the floor for a few minutes without saying a word.

Danielle had never seen him in such a state. Not that she knew him too well, despite trying for more than two weeks. She paused, her mind drifting for just a moment to realize that she had been in the past for just more than two weeks. It didn't seem possible, but then being in the period didn't seem possible either, and that had happened. Her eyes drifted back to Graeme, who had finally stopped pacing and stood staring at the floor.

“Graeme? Is everything all right?” Danielle asked, sensing his tension.

“Aye. No. Aye, it is, but... may we sit?” He looked over at the table and chairs.

“Of course.” Danielle picked up her mending and moved it to the bed. “What's going on?”

Graeme took her hand. “I have some things to tell you that I do not want you to hear from anyone else. I am hoping that I am not too late. I do not think I would like it if you had heard it from others first.”

"All right, what is it?" Danielle said, gently holding his hand. "Talk to me."

Graeme blew out a breath and then said, "I want to tell you about my past."

The way he said it had Danielle's stomach in knots. "Okay?"

"I told you about my father, and what kind of man he was."

"Yes." Danielle nodded.

"My father was a criminal. We were kicked off our land by other members of Clan MacMillan because of the things my father had done. My mother died shortly after she had Danny. My father grew meaner and angrier. We three kids were young, and I did what I could to look out for my brother and sister, but by the time I was thirteen, I was doing raids with my father. I didn't have a choice. If I didn't, my father would beat my sister and brother to get me to comply."

"Oh, Graeme." Danielle gasped.

"I'm not finished," he said softly.

"We spent years moving around Scotland, raiding farms, stealing from travelers... living in a camp with other bandits. My father was their leader. He gathered outsiders, angry men who thought like he did. They caroused and carried on at our camps, and my father expected me to be a part of it. It got to the point that I didn't know any other way."

Danielle swallowed hard, listening to his story. It was one she'd heard a million times before from kids who grew up in families that committed crimes. Of course, not one of them had acted ashamed of it. They were always very proud. Graeme didn't seem proud of it, though; he seemed sorrowful. "What did you do?"

Graeme shook his head. "I never hurt anyone who didn't deserve it, Danielle. I robbed people, but I never injured anyone I robbed, I swear it."

"Okay..." she murmured, studying him.

"May I continue?"

She nodded again.

"When my sister met Finlay, she ran off with him. My father went insane with anger that she had run off with a Guard. I was glad she had. At least I knew she was safe. I had hopes of sending Danny to her as soon as I could get him away from the camp, but after that, my father took to beating us even more often. When my sister and Finlay showed up at our camp two years later, I was so happy to see her. I thought it was my chance to get Danny away from my father. But they argued. Finlay grabbed Mary, and they took off on their horses, only my father pulled his bow, and ... my sister died."

"Oh, my God," Danielle murmured, her free hand going to her mouth. "When you told me... I don't know what I was thinking... I just... God, Graeme."

"Mary saw the whole thing. Finlay was devastated and challenged my father, and then avenged my sister. I wanted to leave right then, but my father's men... they wanted to go after Finlay for killing my father. I had to keep them from hurting him and Mary. I had to take over."

"You didn't..." Danielle gripped his hand hard.

"I kept them from hurting Finlay and Mary as they rode away. And then I kept them from harming anyone for three years after that. Until one day we were back in MacLeod territory. I was struggling to hold onto the leadership position of the

bandits. There was a man who had joined us shortly before my father died who wanted more violence, and many listened to him. I struggled to keep him from acting out. One winter day, we came across a farmer leaving Dunscaith, and a little girl stood up from the cart and demanded to be taken to her Uncle Graeme." He smiled for a moment.

"Mary?"

Graeme nodded. "She had it in her head that bandits were adventurers, and she wanted to be one. I think she was missing her mother and had somehow gotten the idea into her head."

"Is that how you ended up back here? You brought her home?" Danielle asked, hoping that was what happened.

"I wish I had." He hung his head. "The man I had trouble with demanded we hold her for ransom. I didn't want to, but I didn't want to leave the men with him either because he'd lead them to do worse things, so we took her back to camp with us. Finlay and Eva had gone out searching for her and run into another group of my men, and things escalated from there."

"Oh, no..."

"Aye. I won't go into details, but I killed the man who had given us so much trouble when he tried to kill Finlay, Eva, and Mary. Then I put a trustworthy—well, trustworthy for a bandit—in charge and ordered them to leave Scotland. Danny and I rode with them to the border and then returned here. We pledged ourselves to Laird MacLeod, and even though we've done so, many of the Guard do not trust us."

Danielle now realized that this was why he had asked her opinion about reformed criminals. He was thinking of his life. She was a little bit shocked. She hadn't

imagined this was what he was hiding in his past, and she had some reservations about this new information. She could only imagine what kind of horror his father was if he had beaten them to get them to do what he wanted and killed his daughter with an arrow. Graeme had been by his father's side when he'd done other horrible criminal acts. Still, her lawyer side came through as she said, "I'm glad you told me all of this. I hadn't heard about it in the castle, but I sensed that people were avoiding conversation when it came to you or your brother. I couldn't understand why because you have always been so kind to me. I am glad you told me, Graeme."

"So, you will still talk to me, and consider me your friend?" Graeme asked. He became even more nervous as he waited for her to answer.

"Of course. I meant what I said, Graeme. You have been very kind to me since I arrived, despite threatening to toss me over your shoulder." Danielle grinned. "We are still friends; don't worry. Besides, I rather enjoy our walks around the castle and grounds. You have made me feel more welcome than anyone else. I doubt that a hardened criminal would do such a thing for a newcomer who was an outsider."

"I am also an outsider to this clan and therefore know what it is like. I am glad that you do not feel threatened by me, lass." He smiled at her.

Danielle felt the knot of tension release from her stomach. This man was quickly becoming more than just a friend, and it made her feel good that he trusted her enough to tell her the truth about his past.

"Do you by chance know how to ride? It can come in handy in case of emergencies."

"Ride? As in horses?" she asked, her eyes widening.

"Yes, precisely."

“Uh, no. No way am I getting on one of those beasts,” she said scooting her chair away from him with a quick push of her feet.

He laughed and grabbed her arm, pulling her toward him playfully, but his strength and her momentum had her tumbling out of her seat and into him.

As her breasts pressed into his hard chest, Graeme held her for a moment and then set her back into her chair. "Sorry about that, lass. Don't know my strength sometimes." He quickly stood. "I... I should go."

"But—" Danielle protested, but he was out of the door and down the hall before she could get any more words out. She giggled thinking that maybe he was just as taken with her as she was with him. As she closed the door, she realized that she'd expected the men here to be like Jay, full of themselves as they plundered and pillaged and took from the women. Turns out that she'd been delightfully wrong.

CHAPTER 10

As the weeks passed, Danielle became more acclimated to her new environment. She and Graeme were regular walking companions around the grounds of the castle and Danielle found him increasingly fascinating.

During their time together, she noticed that Graeme had become lighter, and more open in his expression, and he seemed to smile more. She wondered if this was due to her presence, or simply because he had released his burden by telling her the truth about his life.

Over the past several days, Graeme had spent his free time teaching her to ride, even though she was nervous around horses. His first lesson entailed getting used to the animal and learning how to groom it, which Danielle found soothing. Next, was learning how to saddle the horse and put on the reins. That was more difficult because it involved putting her hands close to the horse's large teeth, something she dearly wished to avoid.

Today, he was teaching her to mount and ride around the courtyard. Nothing too difficult, or so he said. Danielle wasn't so sure. Danielle was very nervous as Graeme showed her where and how to position the horse. She watched him bring the horse forward and stop in the right spot, and then return to the stable, turning the horse around for her.

"All right, lass. Let me see you try it."

Taking a breath, Danielle gripped the reins and led the horse to the mounting block.

She got the horse into the right position, looked over at Graeme, and said, "Now what?"

"Now, put your right foot into the stirrup, swing your left over the back of the horse, and sit in the saddle."

"Easy for you to say," she grumbled and did as he told her, slipping her foot into the stirrup. "How am I supposed to get my leg over her?"

"Hold onto the saddle, press up on your right foot, then swing with the left."

Danielle gripped the saddle with the reins in her hand, pressed up on her right foot, and lifted her left leg up and over the animal. It wasn't pretty, but at least she was seated. She looked nervously at the ground. "What if I fall?"

"You are not going to fall, lass, just sit still in the saddle and rock with Maybelle as she moves," Graeme said. "It is quite easy once you get used to it."

"How do I get her to start walking again?"

"Give her a little kick with your heels and pull on the reins in my direction," Graeme said.

Danielle did as she was told, and the horse walked slowly toward Graeme.

"I did it. Look at me; I'm riding a horse!" Danielle said with a big smile. It was not something she thought she'd ever want to learn, but here she was, even enjoying it.

"Aye, you're doing very well, lass. Keep her at a nice, slow walk. Now, try turning her in the other direction. Tomorrow, we'll take her up to a trot, which is a little bit faster," Graeme said.

“What? I don't know, Graeme. I don't think I'm ready for that yet. Let's stay on walking for a month or so, and then eventually, I'll learn to trot.”

Graeme laughed. “We shall see.”

That evening, Graeme and Danielle again had dinner with Eva and Finlay in their quarters. Now that Danielle was comfortable, it was a very hearty and joyous meal.

Danielle liked talking with Eva about their old lives in America. She learned that Eva was from Chicago and had been a child advocate who was one college credit shy of becoming a child psychologist. Danielle knew she was very good with children, and that explained why. Eva spent parts of her days up in the nursery, reading to the children and teaching them to read and do math. She told stories and helped to keep them entertained. Other days, she helped Maria or one of the other women. Danielle had yet to find something to keep her occupied and wondered if Eva knew if Maria needed a hand.

“Do you think Maria would put me to good use? I need to do something worthwhile, but I don't know what to do that's needed,” Danielle asked Eva as they sat in front of the fire after the evening meal. Graeme and Finlay were still talking at the table, and Mary was playing on the floor with Danny.

"We all just help out where we're needed. Heigl is always looking for help in the kitchen, especially if you know how to bake or cook from scratch. Or, if you're good with kids, you could assist in the nursery?"

Danielle shook her head. "I don't know about cooking, but I can organize things, or help prep. I meant something more meaningful, though, you know?"

Eva nodded. "Not too keen on working with kids?" She grinned.

Danielle shrugged. "Older ones, maybe, like teens, but the younger ones? I'm afraid I couldn't handle them."

"All right, what interests you around here? Anything come to mind?"

"Language. I've heard some of the staff and men speaking in Gaelic, and I'd like to learn it. Maybe once I do, I can work on translations? I'm fluent in French, Spanish, and Chinese, so I pick up languages fairly easily. Do you think there is a call for that?"

"Possibly. We'll have to set you up with one of the scholars in the library, and maybe check in with Maria and the Laird to see if it's something they could use." Eva looked thoughtful. "Of course, I'm not so sure Chinese is called for here in Scotland." She giggled.

Danielle laughed, too. "What? I was hoping we could call China and get an order of Kung Pao chicken delivered!"

"If only we could! I miss Chinese dumplings."

"I used to go to Chinatown at least once a month for lunch. It was so good. I will miss that."

Eva smiled. "There are some advantages to being here, though." She looked over at Finlay and then down to Mary.

"True." Danielle's eyes lingered on Graeme. "And the food is pretty good. Heigl and her staff are amazing."

"Yes, they are." Eva nodded. "So, I've noticed that you and Graeme have spent quite a bit of time together. I've seen you out in the courtyard with him, walking in the

gardens and the castle grounds, and now he's teaching you to ride?" Eva said with a raised brow.

"You've noticed?" Danielle felt her cheeks heat, and then she sighed. "I guess anyone would notice, huh? I enjoy spending time with him. It's strange. He's not like any man back in our old life, you know what I mean?"

"I agree. I think it has something to do with the period and environment, you know? I mean, their priorities are different. We used to think that men in this time treated women as property, but these men don't. It's pretty equal around here. Everyone pitches in doing what needs to be done. Women are respected; our husbands listen to our opinions. Of course, there are things that we stay out of, such as fighting, but that's more by choice. We all know how to fight if we have to. And you'll even occasionally see Sarah or Maria training with the Guard."

Danielle nodded. "I noticed that Graeme is pretty respectful, much more so than some men I used to date."

Eva said, "He is a bit older than you at thirty-seven. Do you think it's his age that makes the difference?"

"No, I think you were right before. It's more of a priority thing. The age difference doesn't bother me. In fact, I kind of like it." Danielle smiled.

She looked at Graeme, happily drinking whisky and chatting with Finlay. She watched Mary jump up from the ground, charge full-speed at Graeme, and wrap her small arms around him with a joyous scream, and it made her grin. He smiled, picked her up, and threw her into the air, then caught her again and again. He had a way with children. She wondered how he would be with a child of his own. The thought had her smile deepening. Graeme would be a great father.

Over the next few days, Danielle noticed as she headed out to the stables how some of the Guard treated Danny. She'd seen them purposely trip him, knock into him, shove him, and scream at him... it was enough to drive anyone to the brink. Danny, of course, took it all in stride. Not that it made it right. She'd heard several of the Guard disrespecting Graeme, too, and that made her angry. She wanted to jump to their defense but knew she couldn't. Something told her that the protectiveness she felt would probably only make things worse if she acted on it, so Danielle told herself to keep her own counsel and her lips shut. If Graeme wanted her help, she was sure he'd ask for it.

Danielle took her time dressing for dinner. She was meeting Graeme in the dining hall, where there was to be music and dancing after dinner. It wasn't a big occasion, just a bit of merriment to while away an evening, and she looked forward to it. She made her way downstairs, entered the dining hall, and saw Graeme standing near one of the tables near some of the other Guards.

"Of course, we wouldn't trust you not to cheat, Graeme," a man said snidely as she approached.

The moment Danielle heard it, she stepped closer toward the tables where one of the Laird's cousins was indulging in drunkenly teasing Graeme. She picked up a goblet of wine at the table of drinks and sipped as she listened.

"Try it," Graeme said, his voice hard.

"Probably can't even hit the side of a barn at ten paces! All he's good for is threatenin' and thievin'!" the man continued. "Isn't that right, lads?"

Danielle saw Graeme tense, about to make a move toward the drunken man, but she intervened by tripping over her feet and spilling her goblet of wine on the cousin.

“Oops. Oh, I’m sorry. How clumsy of me,” she gasped.

“What the devil? Watch where you're going, lass,” he shouted as he stood and brushed the liquid from his thigh.

“I might be clumsy, but it's better than being an asshole,” Danielle said.

The man stared at her, trying to figure out what she meant.

"Don't worry. I'm sure whatever words you're trying to come up with will wait until you're smarter."

Danielle turned and walked away, casually looking toward Graeme and giving him a wink. A sideways grin came across his face, and he turned to follow her to a different table. They ate together and then enjoyed a few dances, with Graeme teaching her to do a Scottish Reel. She had so much fun that she didn't want the evening to end.

Still, as the music wound down and other couples headed off to bed, she realized she should probably seek hers. "Will you walk me to my room?" she asked, peering up at him with a smile.

"I'd be honored, lass." Graeme took her arm and led her out of the dining hall and up the staircase.

They arrived at her room much sooner than she would have liked. She enjoyed having her arm in his, and how close they were. It was hard to not act on her instincts and invite him in. She was afraid he would think she was too forward if she did so. Sighing, she looked up at him and said, "Thank you for walking with me. I have had a lovely evening."

"I have as well, lass. Sleep well."

Danielle nodded and went into her room. She gave him a little wave as she closed the door and then started preparing for bed. A few minutes later, she heard a knock on the door. She fixed her hair and opened it, hoping to find him standing on the other side. Quietly, she unlocked the door and peeked out. Graeme stood there with a hooded look in his eyes.

“Graeme, is everything alright?” she asked, opening the door wider to allow him to come in.

“No, it’s not.” He moved into the room and gently closed the door behind him. “I am a mess because of you.” With those words, he stepped forward and put his arms around her waist. He drew Danielle toward him, pressing her breasts against his chest. He lowered his mouth onto hers and kissed her greedily.

CHAPTER 11

Danielle was reeling from the kiss with Graeme. She had thought of little else since. She could not wrap her mind around the fact that it was not long ago that she was fighting with her ex-boyfriend Jay in her office, and now she was falling for a handsome Highlander. Never in her life did she think such a thing could happen, yet here she was thinking about the way his lips had pressed against hers.

There was a knock at the door, and she perked up, moving to the door with a dance in her step and hoping Graeme would be on the other side.

“Oh, Eva. Come in,” Danielle said.

“Actually, would you come with me? We've been summoned to Maria's chambers,” Eva replied nervously.

“All right, do you know what it's about?” Danielle asked as she closed the door to her room and walked alongside Eva down the corridor to the wing of the castle where the Laird and Lady lived.

“I honestly don't know, but it's unusual for Maria to send for me like she did. To be told to bring you is even stranger,” Eva said.

When they knocked on the door, Sarah answered it, which surprised Danielle a little until she noticed that all the women from her time were there. "What's going on?" she whispered.

Sarah shrugged, as they all moved toward the seats and waited.

“Ladies, thank you for joining me. I'm afraid I have asked you here for something ridiculous. Please have some tea,” Maria said, gesturing toward the tea that was being set on the table by one of the staff.

Danielle found the hot tea to be a favorite treat and helped herself.

"Maria, what's going on? Is there trouble?"

“No, nothing so dire. I've asked you all here to see if I happened to have lent one of you a scarf by mistake. Since so many of you have come through the door, I've been giving out my clothing without much thought, as many of you have as well, so I thought perhaps this scarf had been bundled up by mistake when I was preparing the clothes for one of you. I wouldn't care, except the scarf is rather special. Cameron bought it for me on one of his trips. It was a gift, which makes it extra special, and I don't want to lose it,” Maria said.

“It's possible. I'm sure we can all look through our things and see if we have it. What does it look like?” Cara asked.

“I have a small painting of it,” Maria said, unrolling a piece of parchment and showing it to them. "It's a white linen scarf with a bold green stripe around the edge."

“I'm sure it's a beautiful scarf, and your painting isn't bad, Maria,” Beth said. “You're getting quite good.”

“We will all look for it when we return to our rooms,” Edith commented.

Danielle looked at Beth, the cute strawberry blonde with wispy hair, freckles, and bright green eyes. She recalled that Beth was the mystery writer. She secretly

wondered if she would write *The Mystery of the Missing Scarf* and had to smother a giggle before she shared the thought with the others. She didn't think they'd find it quite as funny.

As women mingled and helped themselves to more tea, Danielle noticed Maria whispering to Delphine in the corner and looking worried. She knew enough about conspiracy and criminal activity to know there was something more to this scarf story. Because of that, she was intrigued. Maybe Beth really could write a story about the missing scarf and have it be something interesting. Danielle was certainly interested now in what was going on.

After the women were done with afternoon tea, they left Maria's sitting room. But Danielle was quick to catch up with Beth down the corridor.

"What was all of that about, do you think? Is it really just about a scarf?" Danielle asked, wanting to get her take on it.

"Uh hey, Danielle," Beth said. "Yeah, I'm sure it's just about the scarf. Why would it be anything else?"

"Beth, come on. I'm a criminal justice lawyer. I know when something's up. Let me help, please? I want to be of some use. I can't just sit in my room doing nothing."

Beth frowned and looked up and down the hall before sighing. "Fine, you can help. But we're trying to keep this quiet, okay? Maria's scarf isn't the only thing to have gone missing from the Keep."

"It's not?" Danielle's eyes widened. "What else is missing?"

"Heigl noticed that it started in the kitchens. Small things. Bits of food, milk, a freshly baked loaf of bread, and some of her shortbread."

"Well, her shortbread is amazing, I can understand someone sneaking off with it, but I get what you're saying."

"It's strange, though. Food isn't the only thing to be taken. The kitchen maids will be doing lunch prep, leave for a moment, and return to find that the items they were working with are gone. Some of them thought it was a ghost. Which is nonsense, of course, but you know how rumors start." She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, that changed when other things went missing. Supplies from the stables. Little things from storage, articles of clothing, both men's and women's, some blankets, and things of that nature. After a while, it adds up to something not so little."

"That is intriguing. And Maria thinks it's one of us? If one of us has the scarf, then it must be us stealing supplies. That doesn't make sense. Each of us is taken care of so well here. Why would we need any of those things?"

"No, you're right, that's not it. The scarf is missing, but Maria doesn't think one of us is doing the stealing. She just wants to make sure that she hasn't misplaced it before adding it to the list of things that have gone missing," Beth assured her.

"I see, now that makes sense. Very logical thinking. I do love a good mystery, and this seems to be rather intriguing. I'd love to help figure out what's going on," Danielle said.

"Thank you, I'll keep that in mind," Beth said. "Don't forget to check through your things. Maybe it got mixed up in the clothes Heigl brought you from Maria's room?"

"I will, though I don't remember seeing a scarf like that. I don't think I was given a scarf at all, but then again, Dorine might have folded it and put it somewhere when she took care of my clothes. She keeps the room so organized, I hardly have to do anything. I'll make sure to ask her if she's seen it, too, after I look."

Graeme had not stopped thinking about the kiss he shared with Danielle. When he closed his eyes, he still felt her lips pressed against his, and her bright blue eyes looking up at him. But it was a dangerous distraction to him right now in the dining hall, where the Laird had called a meeting of the Keep including all of the Guards except for those on the wall and in the towers.

“I’ve called you all to this meeting because something has been brought to my attention.”

The Laird stood on the raised section, watching everyone. Graeme wondered what had him looking as though he was barely hanging on to his anger.

“It has been called to my attention that over the past month, several items have gone missing. Food, clothing, and supplies disappearing in small amounts here and there but gone. I can only draw one conclusion, and that is that we have a thief among us. Either an outsider is getting in and out of the castle without the Guards noticing to take these things, which is unlikely, or it is someone among us,” Cameron said. His eyes traveled over the staff, the Guard, and every person in attendance.

“Is this happening during the day, at night, or both?” asked Kieran, the Guard Captain.

“Both. So, I must ask, does this mean that the Guard are not doing their job and protecting the Keep from outsiders? Someone is coming in and out unnoticed, and leaving with a bounty of goods, and they are not being stopped. This means they are slipping by you somehow, and there is a hole in our defenses. Or our thief is one of you,” Cameron said.

Just then, Graeme caught sight of Danielle walking into the dining hall. She looked thoughtful as she moved along the back wall to stand near the kitchen staff.

“If it is one of my Guards, they have no honor,” Kieran said.

“Who would do such a thing? We're all pledged to our Laird, and we all know if we need anything here, it is freely given,” added Bran, the tanist.

“Perhaps it is one of us who has a lot of experience being a thief!” Brody shouted, looking at Graeme.

Brody had been a thorn in Graeme's side since he'd arrived. He'd been pleased when Danielle dumped her wine on him, but now, Graeme saw that the man was only going to get worse. “Make sure you are right in your accusations before you toss them at me.”

“If not you, then who?” Brody said. “In truth, you are rather large to be slipping in and out unnoticed, but your brother Danny is slight and could do such a thing without notice. You taught him well, as did your murderous father, did he not?”

“Take that back,” Graeme said stepping toward him. Two men grabbed Graeme and held him back.

Graeme heard Danielle gasp and hoped she stayed out of it.

The Laird stepped between them. “That’s enough; both of you. No accusations shall be voiced until we know them to be fact. Now, go your ways, all of you, and find out who is using my Keep in such a way. You are dismissed,” he shouted.

Graeme had a feeling this was far from over. If Brody had his way, he'd pin the thefts on him and Danny, just to be rid of them. And he was not about to allow that to happen.

CHAPTER 12

Graeme tidied his small room in the lower quarters of the castle, but his thoughts were on the suspicions growing against him and his brother. There was a chance he would never shake the reputation he had created with his father, but it was also that reputation that had made him such a fierce warrior. Finlay had told the Laird of Graeme's skills with a sword, bow, and fists, which was one of the reasons the Laird agreed to allow him and Danny to join his forces.

"Move aside, Danny," a voice in the hall said.

Danny's room was next to Graeme's, so he heard it loud and clear. He stood and went to his door, looking out to see what was going on. Danny's room was smaller than his. It held only a small bed, a table, and a wardrobe.

Graeme stepped into the room, and anger flooded him as he saw Danny up against the wall with Brody's large hand on his chest.

"I didn't do anything," Danny said.

"What is the meaning of this, Brody? Take your hands off my brother."

"We have orders from the Captain to search any rooms we see fit for the missing items," Dougal, another Guard, said.

Brody picked up the blankets from Danny's bed and riffled through, flipping the quilt over. Then, he shoved the bed aside to look under it. From there, he moved to the

wardrobe to go through Danny's few belongings.

“The Captain ordered this? Did he specifically say to search Danny's room, or did you decide to do it on your own?” Graeme glared at them. “My brother has done nothing wrong.”

Brody grew frustrated as he tossed things from the wardrobe and then shoved it aside to look behind it. “Where are they?” he muttered.

“You're not going to find anything because I didn't take anything!” Danny replied.

“Nothing here, Brody, but then only a fool would be dumb enough to hide items in his room.” Dougal shook his head.

“I know he did it. Take him,” Brody said.

“No, I have not stolen anything!” Danny cried out as Dougal grabbed his arms. “Where are you taking me?”

Graeme stepped up to Brody. “What are you doing with my brother? I demand to know.”

“The Captain has requested to see him after his room was searched. We are doing our duty. Do not get in the way, Graeme.”

“Then I shall come along,” Graeme said.

“You may follow us, but there is no guarantee the Captain and Laird will see you,” Dougal said.

Graeme didn't want to push it, so he simply nodded and allowed the men to do their

job. He nodded a reassurance to Danny, so as not to worry him. Graeme followed as they forcefully walked Danny out of his room and down the hall. Others were there, snickering and hurling words of hate toward his little brother that Graeme couldn't protect Danny from.

Graeme knew the damage was done. Being proven innocent wouldn't change the fact that everyone thought Danny was a thief in the castle. He grew angrier but restrained from acting on it, knowing it would only make things worse. He knew from his days as a bandit how quickly things spiraled out of control.

Moments later, Danny was pushed into the Laird's office, where he and Kieran awaited. An oak desk sat by the window, and parchments, maps, and books were strewn everywhere. Graeme followed his brother in without invitation.

“Graeme, you don’t need to be here,” Cameron said.

“With your permission, I would like to stay. My brother has done nothing wrong, and I wish to understand what has happened,” he said.

“Very well, but you will remain quiet and hold your temper in check,” Cameron said.

“I will, my Laird. Thank you.”

Graeme did as was told and stood silently in the back of the room while Cameron and Kieran grilled Danny. They asked him every possible question, from his whereabouts during a certain time to how often he left the castle grounds, which Graeme knew was rarely. He understood that they were deciding whether Danny had the chance to leave the grounds and sell any goods he had acquired. But Kieran kept a tight log of comings and goings of all his men, Danny included, and there were no gaps in the log. That proved he hadn’t had a chance to do what he was accused of.

Danny answered every question honestly and without hesitation.

Cameron looked at Kieran, and they conferred quietly for a moment before Kieran said, "Thank you, Danny. You may return to your quarters."

"But—" Brody began but shut his mouth at the look Kieran gave him.

"Come on, Danny. Let us return to your quarters and clean up the mess they made." Graeme glared at the two Guards and then led Danny back out to the Great Hall and down to their rooms.

A couple of days passed, and Graeme and Danny kept a low profile, did the work they were assigned, and nothing more. They ate their meals alone or with Finlay and Eva, and returned to their rooms. But this did not keep the situation from escalating, as Graeme had hoped.

Somehow, answering the Laird and the Captain's questions and having his room searched wasn't enough to prove Danny's innocence among the wagging tongues of the Keep. The Guard, staff, and residents loved gossip, Danny was the latest rumor, and they would talk about it until the thievery ended. Danny was watched constantly and even harassed, something Graeme would discover and stifle gently so he would not be charged with fighting. That would only get him thrown in the dungeon, where he would not be able to protect Danny. Because of that, he was quite careful.

"Graeme, there is talk that I might be locked up just to see if the thieving stops while I am in the dungeon. If I am being set up, it would be easy for someone to stop what they are doing just to make me look guilty. I'm nervous," Danny said as they ate their midday meal.

"They will not be doing such a thing. Not over my body. They will have to kill me before you are put in a dungeon," Graeme said angrily as he listened to the pain in his

brother's voice.

“But you are powerless to stop it. They all think I'm guilty. It is only a matter of time before they decide I'm guilty without proof.”

Graeme lifted his head and saw a familiar face, Danielle. She was in the doorway of the dining hall and made a direct line toward him. He was always happy to see her, but this business with his brother had distracted him from giving her the attention he wanted to. He was also frightened that her being associated with him and his brother would put a damper on her reputation, so even though it pained him, he'd steered clear of her. It seemed that she was seeking him out now.

“Hush with you now; we have company,” Graeme said to Danny.

“Hi, Graeme. Danny,” she said.

“Danielle, you are a beautiful sight always,” Danny said a little flirtatiously.

Graeme elbowed him, which made Danny laugh. At least he was laughing, Graeme thought.

“I've heard everything that's been going on, and I can't believe what they are saying. It's unfair,” Danielle said.

“It is unfair, but life is never fair, lass. I do not know what else can be done. They have searched my brother's person and his quarters, and they have questioned him. I think the only thing that can be done now is for me to take him far from here.”

“What? No. I don't want to leave. I will not let them push me out,” Danny said.

“Lower your voice, lad,” Graeme said. “This has been long overdue, even before this

mess. They have not given us a moment's peace since we joined them. Now, it will never stop. I'd rather take you to a quiet village where we aren't known, and where you don't have to deal with the daily cruelty and harassing words. What is the point?"

Danielle looked panic-stricken.

"Lass, are you all right?" Graeme asked.

Danielle nodded. "I understand you wanting to leave, but, Graeme, running isn't the answer. I have another suggestion if you'll listen to me," she said.

"Of course, lass. I'm listening," he said.

"What if we search for the real thief? Prove that Danny isn't behind the thefts."

Graeme and Danny exchanged a look. Catching the thief would prove Danny's innocence. Graeme thought it just might work.

CHAPTER 13

Danielle stared at Graeme and Danny, hoping she could talk them into her plan to find the thief. Graeme seemed to consider her idea, and Danny just looked depressed.

"What do you think?" she finally asked.

"Lass, I'm glad you are willing to help, but you don't owe me anything. You are a stranger here in this time, still learning how to get on. I do not want to burden you with our problems." Graeme frowned. "This could cause you trouble, or get you banned from Dunscaith where you are safe. Or worse, thrown into the dungeon with us for conspiring with us."

"What utter nonsense." Danielle rolled her eyes. "I'm helping because I know neither of you deserves this. Danny is innocent. The Laird would be a fool to lock either of you up for something you haven't done. It won't solve the problem. My idea will."

"It would be a fitting solution to this problem, lass, but I do not think it is worth the hassle. It will be hard to do it on our own, just the three of us, especially when Danny and I are being watched so closely. Do not trouble yourself with our troubles."

Danielle suspected Graeme might say such a thing and was ready to use her lawyer skills to defend her reasoning. She knew he had a good heart and was worried about her. He did not want her to go down with him, but he didn't know her past. She was ruthless when it came to justice, and no way in hell would she go down, especially not without a fight. That was a concrete ideal she held to.

Her old life had led up to this moment, and now she understood why she had been through so much. All the injustices she had dealt with had made her a good judge of character, and she knew in her heart that Graeme and Danny were products of their upbringing and were trying hard to shake that image. Though she had never seen a criminal rehabilitated, she knew they existed, and she knew she was looking at two of them.

“We don't have to do it alone. Others will stand by you. Your brother-in-law, for one. Eva, for another. Why don't we start there before we throw this idea out with the bathwater,” she said. “Please, Graeme? Please let us at least try.”

Graeme looked at Danny.

Danny said, “It's worth a try, is it not, Graeme? If things go badly, we can always leave. Let us see what Eva and Finlay have to say of Danielle's idea.”

“Fine. Let us go see Finlay and Eva,” Graeme grumbled.

Danielle smiled, sealing her victory. She stood, and together, they moved from the dining hall to the Great Hall. As they walked, people parted like the sea. Not just Guards gave them ill looks, but also various staff members.

The trio made its way up the stairs and through the corridors, getting dirty looks from everyone they came across. Some even turned and went back the way they came. Finally, they knocked on Eva and Finlay's door and were welcomed in.

“Come in,” Eva said. “What brings you by?”

“Uncles!” Mary shouted as she ran to Graeme and Danny and hugged them.

“Mary! How's my brave little adventurer?” Graeme said, patting her head.

“I am a fierce warrior!” she shouted as she pretended to brandish a sword.

“Aye, you are, just like your mama. Come show me how you battle, lass,” Danny said, picking her up and taking her to the corner of the sitting room to play.

“I have a lot to say if you want to hear my plans,” Danielle said, accepting a cup of tea from Eva.

“Yes, I am all ears,” Eva said.

“Is this plan of yours dangerous?” Finlay asked hesitantly.

“I hope not, because I will not allow it,” Graeme said protectively.

“Just hear me out,” Danielle said. Then she began to lay out her plan to clear Graeme and Danny’s name and the many ways they could go about it.

When Danielle finished, Eva handed her a refill of tea. “I think it's a good idea and worth attempting. We all know that Danny and Graeme aren't guilty, but something is happening within the castle walls. It could be something innocent, even misplaced items, but something is happening. I'm with Danielle on this.”

“I think we need to give it more thought, my love,” Finlay said. “I believe Graeme and Danny are innocent, but I do not like the idea of putting you and Danielle in danger by partaking in this. Let us men deal with this. We will find more people to back us.”

“I think you know me well enough to know that I'm not going to sit by while the men do all the work,” Eva said.

“Finlay is right. I have told Danielle as much. I do not want to put her in any danger

or mix her up in our problems. I cannot get her thrown out of the castle; she cannot be out there among the world that does not know where she comes from. Here she has Eva and the other ladies that came before her. If she gets involved with this, it could very well end with her thrown out.”

“That is for me to decide,” Danielle said, not liking him deciding what she could and couldn't do. He should know that better by now, but maybe he just didn't trust anyone. He couldn't even trust his father.

“I have another plan. I think Danny and I should leave the castle while there is still time. The longer this rumor drags on, the more out of control it becomes, the more people will start to believe it, and he will find himself in the dungeon. I will not put him through that. He and I can leave the castle and return to offering our mercenary services to other Lairds. We don't need to return to the criminal life, but now that we have had the training of Guards, maybe another Laird would be willing to take us on to protect his land. I think it is best that we go,” Graeme said.

“No. Don't go,” Mary said, having overheard everything. She ran to Graeme and wrapped herself around his leg. “I don't want you to go, uncles.”

“Mary,” Finlay said.

Graeme looked down at Mary, and his expression softened. Danielle saw Mary had his heart, and she knew he didn't want to leave her.

“It looks like Mary has made up your mind for you,” Finlay said with a smile.

“Staying here causes trouble for everyone, even her eventually. Your family.”

“I beg you to reconsider leaving. At least give this a go, and if we cannot find anything, then you can talk about leaving again,” Danielle said.

She was very nervous as she waited for him to say something. She could tell he was thinking about it as he walked to the window and looked out over the castle grounds. Then he turned and looked at Mary, who had tears in her eyes. He had to know that he couldn't leave her. Danielle understood that he wanted to get Danny as far away from this current danger as possible, but she prayed he would listen to her.

“All right, we will stay. How do we go about this? What kind of plan do you have to prove that my brother is innocent?”

“I have an idea, but I will need your help, Finlay,” Danielle said.

“What is it, lass?”

“The women who have come through the door have modern minds, and some have even dealt with investigating crimes. If I can convince them to take on this case with me and investigate it, would you put the proposition in front of the Laird in a formal fashion, Finlay? It must be you. Graeme and Danny need someone to step in as their support. The Laird thinks well of you,” Danielle said.

“Alright. Speak with Maria. If she has an interest in finding the thief, I will take it to the Laird,” Finlay said.

“Thank you. That is all I ask,” Danielle said.

Moments later, the three left Eva and Finlay's quarters with hope and a plan.

“Well, I guess I should get to my room so I can plan what to say to Maria,” Danielle said.

Graeme cleared his throat, “Danny, I will meet you in the Great Hall after I escort Lady Danielle to her door,” he said.

Danny grinned and brushed his shoulder sheepishly against Graeme, “Mmhmm. Walk her to her door,” he teased as he walked away.

“Thank you. I would love for you to walk me to my room,” Danielle said, smiling at him. She loved seeing him flustered by his brother's teasing, but she was happy to have a few minutes alone with him.

“It is the least I can do. You do so much for us, lass.”

Their walk was quiet. Danielle could think of nothing to say. She didn't want to talk about their plans or logistics. The only thing she could think of was how he had kissed her before. Her body responded to the memory, and the air was thick with chemistry as they walked.

Graeme looked at her heatedly. She wondered what he was thinking and felt herself blush.

“I have never asked your age, lass,” he said.

“I'm thirty,” she said.

“Aye? You look but twenty,” he said.

“In my time, people age much better. It is quite common for a person of thirty to look younger.”

“I am a number of years older than you,” he said.

Danielle nodded, remembering that Eva had told her his age. “Seven years.”

He looked at her inquisitively. “You have been asking about me and my age? I know

I have not told you.”

“Maybe,” she said, grinning.

They stopped in front of her door.

“Well, I should go in and begin figuring out what to say to Maria. No time to lose,” she said, shrugging as she tried to think of an excuse to linger in the hall.

“Aye, I suppose you should, but I think there might be enough time for this,” Graeme said as he moved in and placed his lips on her.

Danielle opened her mouth, allowing his tongue to explore hers. She released a soft moan and allowed her body to go limp against his strong chest. She felt every ripple of his hard abdomen and chest. He had the strong body of a warrior.

The kiss was deep and long. Finally, she pulled away, remembering that she had work to do.

“I should go inside,” she whispered.

“Aye, and I should check on my brother to make sure trouble has not found him.” Graeme nodded.

“I suppose you should.” She sighed.

Graeme tucked a loose hair behind her ear, and said, “Until later, lass.”

“Bye, Graeme.” She opened the door and stepped inside.

Inside, she leaned against the door and fanned herself with her hand because her body

was overheated.

“What I wouldn’t give for a cold shower in here,” she said.

CHAPTER 14

After Danielle had regained her stability from reeling from the kiss Graeme had placed on her lips, she got to work.

First, she poured a glass of water. She wanted to perk up since she had enjoyed a lot of tea with Eva in their chamber. She wished she had an energy drink or strong coffee to wake her up more.

She opened the drawer to the night table and found some parchment and a quill with ink, and then sat at the table to write out what she wanted to say to Maria. She knew that even though Maria was busy with castle duties, she always made time for the women of the castle to visit. Danielle just had to time it for when she was alone.

Danielle also wanted to talk to Sarah and see if she'd be willing to help. She had been a private investigator, so this was right up her alley. Daniell just needed to figure out how to ask, especially since they were both wary of her, and of Graeme and Danny.

She poked her head out into the hall to look for Dorine or one of the other housemaids. "Excuse me, could you possibly answer a question?" she asked of one of the maids who was heading down the hall with a basket of linens.

"Who? Me, my Lady?"

Danielle nodded. "Yes, please, if you would."

"Of course, my Lady. What can I do for you?"

"Would you happen to know where Lady Maria is right now?"

The tiny girl's eyes widened. "No, my Lady. I am usually down in the kitchens; I was just bringing up the linens for Dorine. Though I do know that Lady Maria takes tea in her quarters at half past the three o'clock hour if that helps?"

"It does. Thank you so much, ummmm..."

"Anna, my Lady."

"Thank you, Anna."

Anna scurried down the hall as Danielle returned to her room. She paced for a few minutes as she decided the best course of action was to speak with Sarah first. With that in mind, she left her room and went up to the next floor and down the corridor to knock on her door. She wasn't sure Sarah would be in her room, but she hoped to catch her there. Unfortunately, there was no answer. Sighing, Danielle turned to head back down the hallway to the stairs, where she ran into Maria.

"Oh, you are just the woman I wanted to see," Danielle said with a smile.

"What's up?" Maria asked. "I was heading to my room for tea; want to join me?"

"I'd love to. You know, I didn't know taking tea in the afternoon was a Scottish thing."

Maria shrugged. "I don't think it is, but I enjoy it, so Heigl indulges me."

Danielle nodded.

"So, what did you want to see me about?"

Danielle bit her lip and hedged. "You might want to sit with your tea first before I ask you."

"That bad, hmmm?" Maria smirked. "Okay, come on." She led the way to her room, opened the door, and said, "Heigl, you are a Godsend. Thank you."

"My pleasure, my Lady." Heigl had just finished arranging the tea. "I brought some of my shortbread, too. We'll be having it after dinner as well."

"Lovely. Thank you."

Heigl nodded and left Maria's quarters.

Danielle and Maria sat, and Maria poured them each a cup and sliced the shortbread, offering a piece to Danielle. "It's delicious," Danielle commented.

"It is," Maria agreed as she sipped her tea. "All right, what's on your mind?"

"Hear me out before you say anything, okay?"

"Sure." Maria nodded.

"Right. So, we know there is a thief at the castle, and apparently, the Guard, your husband, and the Captain of the Guard think the thief is Danny or Graeme. I know they are innocent, so I'd like permission and hopefully your cooperation to find the real thief and prove Danny isn't stealing these things."

Maria sipped her tea, silently taking in what Danielle had to say. It made Danielle nervous as she waited for the other woman to say something.

"What do you think?" Danielle finally added.

"Well, considering your background and the fact that you've worked with any number of criminals, I supposed you'd know a guilty one. You are aware of their past, right? They harassed our villagers and farmers for months. You know that, don't you?"

"I do. Graeme told me a great deal about his past. I also know that he tried to keep Danny out of it as much as possible, but his father would beat the shit out of the two of them if they didn't do as he asked."

"I didn't know about that part, but I know their father died nearly four years ago, so my first statement still stands. As bandits, Graeme and Danny were part of the group that harassed our people. Graeme especially. So yes, a grudge still stands."

"I know Graeme did his best to keep the others from harming anyone, and he didn't like what he was doing to people, but there were some complications within his—what do you call a group of bandits? A gang?—whatever. Anyway, there was a man who pushed for more violence, and Graeme couldn't abandon them to that kind of leadership."

"I know. Eva told us about that."

"Then you know Graeme set them up with a new leader and made them leave Scotland before returning to offer to help guard the Keep and the people."

"Yeah, I know. You have to understand, though, it's slow progress here, getting people to change their ways. Graeme and Danny are on our side now, but months ago, they weren't. You have no idea what they put our Guard through. So, to have them here is causing a bit of friction. They don't trust them, and frankly, I don't really, either."

Danielle sighed. "Look, I get it. You're a cop. They were involved in criminal activities, and that rankles you. I understand. It doesn't change the fact that they aren't

behind these thefts."

"Maybe as a defense attorney, you just think all criminals are innocent?" Maria suggested.

"No. Ninety percent of the people I defended were one thousand percent guilty. It was still my job to represent them to the best of my ability. And I was very, very good at my job." Danielle sighed. "This isn't me being emotionally involved. I know you think it is because I have a thing for Graeme. But it's not that I want him or Danny to be innocent, it's that I know they are."

"Okay, tell me how you know. What makes you so sure they aren't behind this?"

" Danny's room was searched. Your husband and the Captain questioned him, and I am told he answered honestly and without hesitation. If I am not mistaken, that came directly from your husband."

"Yes, I am aware he said that." Maria nodded, looking more thoughtful.

"Danny was questioned about when or if he left the castle grounds. He hasn't unless he was on patrol. All of Graeme's free time lately is spent teaching me to ride."

"I've seen him." Maria smiled.

"So, if Danny isn't hoarding the things in his room, the castle has been searched, and the items aren't stashed anywhere on the grounds, he can't be the thief. It has to be someone who can slip by people unnoticed, so we know it's not Graeme because there is no way that man can 'slip' anywhere. On top of that, the two of them have the Guard, the staff, and every person in this place watching them, and the thefts are still happening."

"All very valid points, and I have to agree with you."

"You do?"

"Yes. I'm in."

"You are?" Danielle gasped in surprise.

"Yes. You'll have to clear it with Cameron first. He gets a bit touchy when I put myself in danger, so if you can convince him that conducting an investigation is worth it, I will help."

"Awesome! Finlay will talk to him if that's all right. I know he'll probably have more luck than I will."

Maria grinned. "Hey, look at you, figuring out how things work here." She laughed. "That's a good idea. Finlay knows Graeme and Danny best, and having him present the idea of us investigating is the best option. Sarah would probably be an asset as well; have you spoken to her?"

"No, I went to talk to her, but she wasn't in her room."

"Don't worry about it. If Cam says yes, I'll talk to her for us."

"Great. Thanks, Maria."

"Don't thank me yet: Cam still has to agree."

Danielle left Maria's a few minutes later and headed to Eva and Finlay's room. She knocked on the door, and when Eva opened it, she couldn't stop the grin that spread across her lips.

"Let me guess, Maria said yes?"

Danielle nodded. "She said we have to talk to the Laird first, but yes, she's in as long as he agrees."

"Finlay!" Eva called out.

Finlay came out of one of the back rooms and said, "What is it?"

"Maria said she's in if the Laird agrees. Will you speak with him?"

Finlay nodded. "Aye, after dinner. I do not like the fact that some of the Guard have been harassing Danny, and Graeme, to a lesser extent. It's not right. We are all on the same side."

"I don't either. But Maria explained that Danny, Graeme, and their bandit buddies were harassing and robbing people around here for months before they came here, so I can't blame the Guardsmen if they're a bit peeved to have to work alongside them now."

"Aye, it is complicated."

"It still doesn't give them the right to accuse them without proof."

Later that evening, Finlay stood in front of the Laird and put the proposition before him.

"If Danny is scapegoated for someone else's crimes, the real thief will never be caught, and the thefts will continue," Finlay said.

"That is true, I am just not sure if this investigation will turn up any thief," Cameron

said. "I will agree to it, as long as it is not spoken of publicly. Let Danielle, Sarah, and Maria question the staff who have noticed things going missing and look about the areas most likely for the thief to use. Putting yourself on the line to defend Graeme and Danny will not be received well if they are the thieves, Finlay. Are you sure you wish to risk your neck?"

"I know they are innocent, my Laird, so aye, I am willing," Finlay replied.

Then it is settled. I will have my wife report to me on the progress, and we'll see how this plays out. Remember, we want to keep this investigation quiet. I do not want to hear talk of it among the staff or Guard. You know they will not take the ladies usurping their duties lightly," the Laird said.

"You are right, my Laird. We will keep it from being discovered," Finlay said with a nod and then left. He walked quickly back to his quarters, where Eva, Danielle, and Graeme waited.

"Well? What's the verdict?" Eva said. "Don't hold us in suspense, Finlay!"

Finlay smiled. "The Laird has granted permission to proceed with the investigation as long as it is kept quiet. He understands that after speaking to and questioning the staff, rumors will prevail, and people will talk. Tongues always wag, but let us not inflate it by making it official."

"That is great news," Danielle said, hopping up from her seat with enthusiasm.

"Just remember to keep things quiet," Finlay said.

"I can do that. I was a lawyer; keeping secrets was part of the job," Danielle said.

"So that's it, Danny and I shall stay until we see the results of this process," Graeme

said, looking at Danielle.

“Yes, that was the agreement, and I expect you to hold to it,” Danielle said, wagging her finger playfully at Graeme.

“Then I shall, lass.”

“Well then, I guess I should inform Maria so we can get started. The longer we wait, the colder the case gets.” Danielle clapped her hands and looked ready to go.

"I am sure it can wait until tomorrow, Danielle."

"I suppose you're right. It is kind of late, isn't it." She sighed. "Well, thank you both for your help."

"It was my pleasure," Finlay replied. He was glad that Eva wasn't interested in participating. She needed to take it easy with the baby coming, and he feared she would get it into her head to be a part of it.

"I should probably go, I'm sure you want to seek your beds. Thanks again." Danielle turned for the door.

“I shall escort you to your room, lass,” Graeme said.

“Thank you. That would be nice,” Danielle replied.

Finlay exchanged a look with Eva, knowing that Graeme and Danielle were becoming quite close. It was obvious to anyone who watched them.

When Danielle and Graeme arrived at her door, she puckered her lips, but Graeme didn't kiss her. Instead, he stood stiffly by her side.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you kissing me?"

"I'm sorry, lass. I was thinking of Danny and this investigation of yours. I do not wish to see you in any danger."

"Graeme, this is what I do, or rather what I did , back in the future. I dug into things, found and questioned witnesses, and inspected evidence. I know what I'm doing, Graeme, and it feels good to be doing it here for you and Danny. I know he's innocent."

Graeme pulled her into his arms. "I still worry." He smiled.

Danielle laid her hand on his chest and looked into his bright green eyes. "I'll be fine."

"Okay, lass." He leaned down and placed his lips against hers in a soft caress that turned just a little heated before he broke it off. "I'd better go," he said softly.

Danielle sighed and watched him stride down the hallway. One of these days, she wasn't going to let him leave, and that was a promise.

CHAPTER 15

Over the next few days, Danielle worked quite well alongside Maria and Sarah. She was glad they had started to loosen up and warm up to her. It helped that Danielle knew her skills and how to collect evidence. In her time, if a case didn't have all the evidence, it would be thrown out of court, so she knew how important it was in dealing with this situation.

Everything had to be just so, or it would not work. She knew the Laird was a hardass, just as any judge she had worked with in San Francisco, and he wanted the evidence of the thief to be solid if they were not caught red-handed.

But there was more to this case than any of her San Francisco cases. This was the most important case of her career because of Graeme. She was falling hard for the man.

Danielle could tell that Maria was throwing herself deep into the case. She saw just how good of a detective the woman must have been in New York City. She was even losing some of the softness she had exhibited with her Lady MacLeod persona and regaining a bit of her hardness from being a New York City cop, something Danielle thought was quite intriguing. Her New York accent was even coming through more.

Their initial investigations were turning up nothing. It seemed that nobody had seen anyone during the thefts. All the areas where the stealing had occurred could be easily accessed by anyone without much notice except for the case of Maria's scarf. But she could have somehow dropped it while wearing it around the castle, and it was stolen then.

As they questioned each staff member, it reminded Danielle of being in an interrogation room with one lightbulb swinging overhead to intimidate, while others watched behind the glass mirror. It was hilarious to picture each time a staff member was questioned.

But there was no squirming other than the general nervousness of being questioned by the three ladies. Danielle, Sarah, and Maria even took turns in a kind of good cop, bad cop, observer scenario that didn't rile up anyone they questioned. All the staff members and Guards that they questioned seemed calm and normal, but Danielle didn't rule any of them out. It was easy for a criminal to pretend to be a victim.

“What do you think of all this?” Maria asked Danielle and Sarah as they walked down the Great Hall, ready to start a new day of investigating.

“I'm still thinking about it. What do you think? So far, every place seems to be cold, and not a lead,” Danielle said.

"True, but we can't give up. We're missing something," Sarah said.

“I agree. But you're right, Danielle. It's been very cold so far, though I must say I have had more fun doing this the past couple of days with you two than I have had in a long time. I'm glad we're doing this.”

“Me, too. I'm not a total waste of space, and I hope one day, you can see that,” Danielle said.

Maria stopped and looked at Danielle. “I need to apologize, Danielle. It was unfair to blame you for shit like that. Especially since you had already gone through so much once you realized that you had indeed traveled through time. That's not an easy thing to deal with; I know. Sometimes, my old attitude gets the best of me. I know you're a good person. You haven't said a shady thing about anyone. And it's nice of you to

defend Danny and give him a chance. He's so young; just a kid, especially here. He's not like the punkass gangbangers we had to deal with. I don't think he's the thief, but like I said, the bandits caused us trouble, so there are grudges.”

“I know,” Danielle said. She was happy that Maria didn't hate her because of her career in her previous life. “Thank you for giving me a chance.”

"Awww, you two are going to make me cry." Sarah grinned as she slung her arms around their shoulders. "Let's go find us some clues."

The three started to walk again.

“Can I ask about the magic of the castle? The legend of Scáthach... is there more to it other than she built the castle and the door we came through?” Danielle asked.

“Yes, there is a good deal of mystical stuff involving her. You know that Dunscaith is also called the Castle of Shadows, right?” Maria said.

“I was thinking just last night about that. I recall reading that in the brochure about this place. Do you think that could be the reason for the thefts? As a lawyer, I would never say that magic is an explanation for the crime, but we wouldn't be standing here if magic wasn't real here, you know?” Danielle said.

“True, and it seems that these thefts are being pulled off by someone who can be unseen and unheard. That's hardly the description of a big man like Graeme or even Danny, who is quite tall for his age and pretty noticeable,” Maria said.

“A ghost, witch, or someone as small as a child would be the only way all these things could go unnoticed,” Danielle said.

"That's an interesting poi—" Sarah began.

"My Lady, I was just coming to fetch you! Heigl said I should," an out-of-breath Anna said as she hurried down the hall toward them.

"What's wrong, Anna?" Maria said.

"I have just been in the larder and noticed a great deal missing. I remembered what you said when we spoke, so I went to Heigl, and she said to come tell you straight away. Heigl had me lock it up first and told me to give you the key."

Danielle, Sarah, and Maria exchanged a look of excitement because, unlike the other acts of thievery, this one seemed was still a hot lead. They all smiled.

"Then let us go straight away, Anna," Maria said.

Moments later, they were in a section of the castle that Danielle recognized only because it was in one of the hallways where she'd been when she first arrived. She hadn't realized it was connected to the kitchens as well.

"Heigl had me put two bags of grain over here just yesterday. They were small, but I remember because it was for the bread. Then over here, we had a chunk of lard wrapped in cloth. And over here, some goat cheese. It is all gone. I asked some of the kitchen maids if they had taken it for the meal, and no one had. I do not know where it could have gone, my Lady," the scullery maid said.

"You did very well in coming to me, Anna, thank you. We'll have a look around if you will step aside," Maria said.

Danielle grabbed a candle from the shelf, lit it with a nearby torch, and walked around to examine the areas where the items had been. Maria used a magnifying glass to look for stray hair or fingerprints.

“Is the door always locked from the outside?” Sarah asked Anna.

“No, my Lady, at least not usually. We've only started lockin' it because of the thefts. Heigl has us unlock it to enter and lock it to close after we leave now. We have all been vigilant about it after learning of the thefts. The key is quite accessible in the kitchen, though, and it could easily be taken if none of us were aware.”

“What is back here?” Danielle said as she moved to the back of the room with the candle, noticing a very narrow corridor.

“More of the same, my Lady. It goes back deeper and farther down. We store items that need to be colder back there,” Anna said.

Danielle held the candle higher and walked through the corridor. It turned left and then right, went down a few steps, and then left again, with storage shelves along the way. The items were much sparser, and she wondered if the maid had noticed anything missing from the area. Anna had only noticed the most recent items were missing because she had put them in the day before.

“Anna? What is this?” Danielle asked.

Within a moment Anna, Sarah, and Maria were at Danielle's side.

“That is a wellhead, my Lady. Very old indeed and not used anymore. It was done long ago, dug very deep to bring fresh water into the castle, but it ran into a natural tunnel in the rock where seawater ran, so it was no use. Some time ago, a bucket was lowered to bring in salt water for brining, but there's not much else it can be used for anymore, so we don't pay it no mind,” Anna said. “It's not very deep, and it's covered with the wooden cover, as you see. Sometimes, I hear the water rushing, but we never open it.”

"We had some flooding a while back. Did this area flood, Anna?"

"Aye, it did, my Lady, but not much. Just a little bit of water. Nothing was ruined because we do not keep a lot back here, and there are the steps, you see."

Maria nodded. "When you hear the water rushing, is it with the tides?"

"Yes, my Lady, I believe so it seems to match up with them."

"Excellent; thank you for that. I'm going to write down everything that went missing. Come with me," Maria said, leading her back to the main room, where there was enough light to write.

"What are you thinking?" Sarah asked, looking at Danielle.

"I'm not sure yet," Danielle answered as they stayed a moment to look at the wellhead. "I need to think it over some more."

Sarah nodded. "We should head back."

They rejoined Maria as she looked around the larder, but whoever had come and gone did so as though they were a ghost. The stone floor made it hard to see footprints, and there were no traces of fingerprints. They must be dealing with a master criminal.

Danielle just believed that Graeme and Danny were too large to not be seen going into such a place and walking around with bags of grain and lard wrapped in cloth.

Once they were done looking around, Maria, Sarah, and Danielle retired to Maria's quarters and added this information to a log they kept. They discussed it over a glass of wine before calling it a day, but all three were quite excited.

Danielle's thoughts on this case continued as she lay in her bed that night. She couldn't stop thinking about the wellhead and the tide coming in and out. She got out of bed and looked out the window. She had not explored the cliffs or the shoreline of the castle except for during the tour back in her time. Even then, it was brought to ruin and difficult to navigate. Perhaps she should check the area at some point and see if she could find any answers.

She moved back to her bed and fell asleep to the light noise of the ocean crashing against rocks and her mind busy with thoughts of the wellhead.

CHAPTER 16

The days passed, and Danielle, Sarah, and Maria found that the case was growing cold, as often as it did in their lives in modern times. Danielle grew impatient. She wanted terribly to help Graeme and fix things for him.

It was part of her profession; she was used to fixing things, and not being able to fix this weighed on her. She missed technology. There were surveillance cameras for buildings, streets, and almost everything else in the city that made it easy to track anyone. Fingerprints, mugshots, and case files were filled with information about individuals with a criminal past, all of it available at the click of a mouse. She didn't have any of that here, just her wits and the skills and intelligence of Maria and Sarah. She was grateful for that, at least.

Her heart was set on helping Graeme, and it scared her that she cared so much for him. She had never had to defend someone she cared deeply for.

After the larder theft came another one, this one from the storage on the castle grounds where the wool was kept for spinning into tartans, cloths, and dresses. Two bolts of wool were missing.

Upon hearing this, Brody made it his business to say something to Graeme as she and Graeme crossed the courtyard. Brody put his foot out, blocking them from moving forward and then he stepped in front of Graeme.

“What do you want?” Graeme said.

“Have you heard the news?”

“I have not, but you are going to inform me of it, I am sure.”

“There are reports that bolts of wool are missing. You don't know anything about that, do you?”

“Why would I know anything about bolts of wool?”

“You or your brother, and you know why,” Brody said snidely.

“Why would I want a bolt of cloth? To make you a dress?” Graeme said.

The other Guards who stood nearby laughed, making fun of the bully, which only made him angrier.

“Perhaps you stole it so to sell it. You are planning an escape with your brother; we all know it. You are selling off things that you steal from our Laird to fund your adventure. We are on to you and your brother.”

Danielle wanted to jump in and defend him and Danny, but she knew saying anything would just make the man worse.

“I have no plans to go anywhere; I am just trying to do my job for the Laird, same as you. So stop speaking ill of me and my brother, because I will not stand for it anymore,” Graeme said getting in his face.

“What's all this?” Cameron said, stepping out of the Keep and into the sunlight.

Brody backed away from her and Graeme and was quick to correct himself. “Nothing at all, my Laird. We were just helping each other out, were we not, Graeme?”

Danielle squeezed his hand, urging him to tell the Laird that Brody was harassing him, but Graeme gave her a look that told her doing so would only make things worse. She sighed.

"Aye, my Laird. Brody was just telling me I was needed back on duty soon and reminding me that I promised to help him in the armory."

Danielle thought the Laird looked suspicious.

However, he merely said, "Carry on, then."

With that, Graeme and Danielle walked away. She was glad for the intervention, only because otherwise, Graeme might have made pulp of Brody's face. She was impressed at how well he'd controlled his temper and how quick he'd come up with a reason for the exchange.

Danielle and Graeme continued walking to the Keep and entered the Great Hall. "Thank you for walking with me this morning," she said with a smile.

Graeme nodded and smiled back. "One of the best parts of the day, lass."

"Look, there's Finlay and Mary. Who is that he's talking with?"

Graeme followed her gaze and noticed who she was talking about. "Niall."

"— asked the Laird for permission to find the thief. So, you do not think it is Danny or Graeme, even though they're former bandits?" Niall asked.

"Aye, is there something wrong with that? There is nothing against me speaking up for my brother-in-law now, is there?"

“No, I suppose not. But I must tell you that in speaking up for them, if they are proven guilty, it will not look well upon you and yours.”

“Well, I do not have to worry about that now, do I? They will not be proven guilty because they are not guilty. I know this,” Finlay said.

“Are you so sure? You above anyone else have seen firsthand how awful the bloodline is of that family. What his father did to your wife. That kind of blood is bad and will always be bad,” Niall said.

“I will thank you not to speak of Mary's mother and her family in such a way, especially in front of her, Niall. Besides, no one should be punished for the crimes of their father. Men change, you know. I certainly have; I am sure you have as well. Even our Laird has changed over the past several years,” Finlay said.

“Aye. But not Graeme. Graeme is a horrible bastard,” Niall said, and then shouted, “Ow!”

He looked down to see that Mary had bitten him quite hard on the hand. “No! My Uncle Graeme is good!” she shouted.

Finlay laughed a hardy laugh. “Mary, you know better than to bite people. Come here,” he said, still laughing.

Niall had his hand to his chest and gave Finlay and Mary a dirty look before walking off in the opposite direction.

Danielle wanted to cheer, but she had swallowed her laugh so they wouldn't draw Niall's attention. Once Niall was gone, they approached Finlay, who picked up Mary and swirled her around. She laughed and giggled.

“Oh, look. If it isn't your bastard uncle,” Finlay said, still chuckling.

“Uncle Graeme,” Mary shouted, wiggling in her father's arms until he put her down. She dashed toward him, giving him a big hug.

“Hello, Danielle. You two should have seen her just now. Niall was giving me the once-over, and she would not have it.”

“Aye, I heard from the hallway,” Graeme said.

“Ah, caught all of it, did you?” Finlay said.

“I heard what was said.” Graeme sounded angry, but Danielle knew it wasn't at Finlay. “Are you sure about this? You should not have to deal with the pressure that is being put on Danny and me. You do not need to support me any longer if anyone asks. Make yourself scarce in the situation. There is too much at stake, Finlay. You, your family, Danielle, Sarah, Maria; you are all putting yourselves at risk. Tongues are wagging all over the castle, and it is only getting worse. No doubt the Laird will punish me greatly if people start to speak ill of his wife.”

“Thank you for thinking of me and my family, Graeme, but I gave you my word to support you, and that is what I am going to do. Besides, I like having you here. Mary would be devastated if you were to leave now. And I will not let you slip off to some village where you can have all the freedom you want. No, you are stuck here in this cold castle with the rest of us,” Finlay said with a grin.

“I have slept in worse places.” Graeme smiled.

“That you have,” Finlay agreed.

Graeme sighed. “I suppose I should get to work. I do not wish to prove myself a liar,”

he said, turning to Danielle.

"Will I see you later?" she asked.

"Aye, as soon as I finish my shift." He squeezed her hand and turned to Finlay and Mary again. "I will see you two later as well."

"Bye, Uncle Graeme!"

Danielle watched him stride down the hall.

"Well, if you will excuse us, I have to get Mary upstairs. Eva is waiting on us, I am sure."

Danielle turned to him and smiled. "Thank you for defending him," she said softly.

"No need to thank me, lass. I care about him as much as you do." Finlay winked at her, picked Mary up, and headed for the stairs.

After getting a basket from Heigl, Danielle headed into the herb garden. There were a few kitchen maids who tended to the garden and saw to drying the herbs and such wandering near Danielle. They were not paying attention to her, at least not until she plucked some lavender and jasmine and put it in her basket.

"You will just be helping yourself then, my Lady?" one of the maids said in a rather snotty tone.

"I'm sorry? I didn't know I couldn't pick some of these herbs. No one mentioned that I couldn't. Should I check in with someone before picking this?" she asked.

"No, you lot take what you want, don't you?" the maid said, despite two of the others

quietly hushing her.

Danielle didn't like her tone and accusations. She turned squarely to the woman. "Excuse me? What do you mean by that? My lot?"

"I have seen you wandering the castle with that bandit! He is a known dangerous criminal who has done dark deeds in his past. What kind of woman would spend time in the company of a man like that? Perhaps someone who is herself a thief?" the nasty little maid accused.

Danielle wanted to rip into the woman, put her in her place with a long string of curse words and a well-thought-out clever, intelligent put-down. But then she remembered she was a guest in the castle. She did not want to put any strain on Maria, and especially not on the Laird, who had already been kind enough to let her stay there and entertain her investigation with Maria and Sarah. She could not rock the boat, so she bit her tongue as much as she could.

"You are laying accusations based on assumptions. Rumors only, instead of seeking justice. Justice will be known, and you will eat your words," Danielle replied then turned on her heel, feeling very smug as she walked away.

"What did all that mean?" one of the other maids asked.

"I don't know the fancy wording of them folk," the nasty maid said.

Danielle rolled her eyes, realizing that her words had meant all but nothing to them. It was probably just as well, considering that she did not want to get into trouble. However, the confrontation meant that rumors were growing so strong that maids she did not know were so bold as to throw accusations. This was not good at all.

If these women were bold enough to approach her in the garden, what was next?

What about when the men were deep in their cups during supper? They would not be able to hold their tongues. If this was the news of the castle, then it was the excitement that was on everybody's tongue.

She considered it the same as she would a trending topic on social media in her time. Once people grabbed hold of it, they would not let go for days. This was the same, only there was nothing new to distract them from letting go. This would be the rumor mill until the thief was caught, or worse, Graeme and Danny were put in the dungeon or persecuted without evidence. She needed the investigation to move faster, and the only way that could happen would be for more things to be stolen so that Maria, Sarah, and she could investigate. It was a double-edged sword.

“Beth,” Danielle said as she entered the castle and saw the other woman.

“Oh, hi, Danielle. I was just looking for you,” Beth said.

“You were?” Danielle was surprised but felt reassured that the women who had come before her through the portal were still supportive and not thinking ill of her the way the maids in the garden did.

“Yes, I wanted to see if I could make myself useful. If you need my help, I'm here for you. I know you, Sarah, and Maria are investigating, so if you need to, I don't know, bounce ideas off me, you can,” Beth said excitedly.

“Thank you; that's so kind. I'm excited to hear you say that. I have a few ideas bouncing around in my head, but... I have a question.”

"Sure, what's up?"

"Do you think the other women are as supportive of this or do they think I'm a fool for putting my weight behind Graeme and Danny?"

“No, not at all. We've all spoken of it at one point. It's hard to escape it when it's the talk of the castle. But none of the women have had anything bad to say. They think it is great that you are trying to help them. Besides, there's something you don't know,” she said.

"Oh?"

"Well, we don't like to mention it right when a new woman arrives. It's kind of weird, but have you ever wondered why all of us married?"

Danielle frowned. "Well, I wondered if you were forced into it, but I'm pretty sure that's not the case."

Beth laughed. "No, no. We weren't forced. However, we all married the man who found us as we came through the doorway. Well, all of us except for Maria. Cameron didn't find her, Bran did, but he led her straight to Cameron and well... instant connection."

"What are you saying?"

"Don't tell me you haven't felt it. An instant connection to Graeme? We've all seen you having dinner with him, walking with him, and spending time with him. Don't think we haven't noticed." She grinned.

Danielle blushed. "Well, yeah, I feel it. So, you're saying that all of you except for Maria fell in love with the first man you met here?"

Beth nodded. "Pretty much. And we think it's Scáthach's doing. That she brings us through because we are meant to be here for a couple of reasons. One of them being the men we fall for."

"Wow." Danielle didn't know what to think about a matchmaking witch who brought women through time to be matched with sexy Highlanders.

"I know. Don't think too hard about it, though, it gets... well, I'm not trying to turn you off falling for Graeme. I think you are here to save him. We all do. If you hadn't come through the doorway, Graeme and Danny would have been accused and probably sent to the dungeons, or they would have been banned from Dunscaith, and that would have affected Mary and Finlay; even Eva. But with you here, a defense lawyer, well... now they have a chance at proving their innocence. You see?"

"You've thought a lot about this, haven't you?" Danielle arched her brow and smiled.

"Well, I tend to put things together pretty quickly. Writer's brain and all that. Always looking for how things connect. The most logical path is usually the correct one, even though I like to throw a red herring in there every now and then."

Danielle laughed. "Okay, good point, but this isn't you throwing in a red herring, is it?"

"No, not at all. Like I said, we all are on your side. And I meant it when I said if you want to bounce ideas off of me, just let me know."

"Thanks, I will," Danielle said, giving her a quick hug as they parted ways.

Hearing Beth's reassurance and ideas behind her presence in this period was just what Danielle needed to hear after her run-in in the garden. The fact that the women and their families were behind her was a better position than having the staff members against her. The ladies had higher positions within the castle as the wives of many of the Guards, and they pulled more weight than the maids, particularly Maria. Though she knew how quickly the fire could spread from the rumors the mob created, especially the lower members of the household. That's what witch hunts were made

of.

CHAPTER 17

Danielle walked into the dining hall, and it was buzzing. She felt more comfortable than ever in being here, like this was where she belonged. She remembered the first time she had walked in, so nervous and not understanding what was going on. To her surprise, not only was she used to it, but she enjoyed it. She felt like this was home.

The roaring fire in the massive fireplace, the heat from it, and the smell of wood burning with peat moss was a heady scent to her now. The roasted meats and sweet pies filled the air with their aroma. The sloshing of whisky, ale, and wine made the floor slightly wet in some places. It was joyful chaos, and she soaked up every bit of it as she walked around the room and sat next to Eva.

This had become her regular seat on nights when they all ate together. Sitting next to Maria that first night was simply because she had just arrived. From then on, she had grown close to Eva and chose to sit next to her at these meals. Other nights, she enjoyed dining with Graeme, or up in Eva and Finlay's quarters like she was part of their family.

Danielle kept one eye on Graeme, who sat at the table they often shared, away from the rest of the Guard. He was across from Danny, quietly eating and chatting with him. She knew Graeme was trying to keep a low profile, and she admired him for that. It was something she always told her clients to do after she won their case and they were released: Keep a low profile, don't do anything to get arrested again. It was just what Graeme and Danny were doing so as not to rile up any more conspiracies.

She could see that many within the dining hall were giving them side-eye looks. She

also knew Graeme and Danny were used to it because the thievery had been going on for a while, and the animosity toward them had grown. She hated that she wasn't seated with them, but on certain nights, the Laird himself requested she sit at the high table.

The meal had been served more than an hour before, and most everyone was sitting around drinking and eating the leftover bits. Some were deep in their cups; others were dancing to the music. Danielle was standing next to the table by Eva, listening to Delphine speak about a way to make the dresses and corsets a bit more modern.

“Where is it?” a loud drunken shout echoed across the dining hall. Shouting was normal, especially during the drunken hour, but this one was tinged with a bit of anger, and it made Danielle look in that direction.

She saw Brody, who was more than a little drunk, stand and pat his chest and then his hips along his kilt, pushing his fingers into the small pouches that hung from it. “My lucky coin. It’s not here,” he shouted as he staggered next to his table.

“Sit down, you fool,” a Guard Danielle recognized as Dougal said with a laugh and gave him a push.

Brody fell onto his back on the floor. Loud laughter filled the air, including Danielle as she watched.

This was not a typical evening in the dining hall. Usually, when the men got that drunk, they were sent to their quarters to sleep it off, so she assumed the man would be dragged to his room at some point. But Brody stood back up, swaying just a little. He would not give up so easily, and that made her nervous.

“I tell you; it is not here. I demand to know where it is!” Brody seethed.

“Perhaps you should check your crack,” another Guard that Danielle didn't know said.

Another round of boisterous laughter filled the air, and this only made Brody angrier.

Danielle's eyes strayed to Graeme and Danny. She noticed that Danny was laughing heartily and enjoying himself loud enough that it got Brody's attention. In a flash, Danielle saw Brody turn an angry stare toward him, and she knew what was coming.

“You. Thief. You have my lucky coin. I demand you give it back to me now, Danny,” Brody demanded.

In one instant, the situation turned from a joke to something serious. The same men who did not believe Brody was missing a coin suddenly believed him and now put the blame squarely on Danny with their eyes. It was the most unfair thing to watch, and Danielle was seething. She started to walk toward them but felt Eva grab her arm. Eva shook her head for Danielle not to do anything.

“That's right, you little bastard. What have you done with my lucky coin? We all know that you are the thief of this castle. The thief of Dunscaith, we call you. Now give it up,” Brody demanded as he stepped toward Danny.

The same Guards who had pushed him over and made fun of him did nothing to stop him now.

Graeme stood up and said, “Stop it, Brody. Leave him alone.”

Graeme was on the other side of the very long table. It would take longer for him to walk around it than for Brody to get to Danny. Danielle saw this, and it stressed her even more.

“Oh, of course, you stick up for your brother; you two are in on it! He has my coin, and I will prove it.” Brody charged at Danny, grabbed him by the shirt, and picked him up off the bench. “I will turn you upside-down and shake my coin out of you!”

Graeme was over the table in an instant, sending plates skittering to the floor, and pulling Brody off Danny. He separated them and looked down upon Brody fiercely. It was a look that shook Danielle. She saw the fierce warrior everyone spoke of; something she had not seen. But she didn't see a murderer; she saw a man protecting his family, and his honor. Her body flushed red-hot.

“If you put another hand on him, you will lose those hands,” Graeme said.

“Enough! Separate these two!” Kieran shouted as he left the high table and moved toward them, commanding some of his Guard to get between Graeme and Brody.

Danielle looked down the table where the Laird stood with Maria. His arms were crossed over his broad chest as he fixed a steely look on the group. She assumed that he'd told Kieran to interfere. This wasn't good, and it wasn't going to be good for their investigation. He was seething, and it wouldn't surprise Danielle if Graeme and Danny were exiled. It was clear that their presence was causing chaos, and that was the last thing the Laird wanted among his men. He needed them for more important things, fighting together instead of among each other.

But what did he expect Graeme to do when his brother was attacked? There was nothing Graeme could do but what he'd done, and Danielle had never been more scared of what the future held, or more turned on by watching him in action.

“You and your brother, retire to your rooms,” Kieran ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Graeme said, grabbing Danny's arm and moving him toward the entrance of the dining hall. But Graeme turned and scanned the tables, looking for where

Danielle was and locking eyes with her.

She nodded reassuringly, wanting to shout that she was on his side, but she couldn't.

“Take Brody to the room above the stables to sleep off this drunkenness,” Kieran demanded, turning to Brody. “If you empty your belly on the horses, you'll be cleanin' it up! You are not allowed to attack your Kinsman. None of you; do you hear me? I do not care what your reasons are. Only the Laird may decide what is what concerning any sort of thievery, not you. Now go! Get him out of my sight!”

Two men took Brody by the arms and marched him to the stables. Danielle didn't envy the horses having to sleep with him above their heads.

The rest of the men backed down and returned to their cups, not saying another word about the incident. Danielle was relieved to know that the Captain had declared such a decree, but she did not know how long it would last. She wanted to see Graeme and hoped he would come to her room the next day.

She did not have to wait that long.

After retiring to her room, she sat by the window with the candle lit, letting anyone who might be looking toward her window know that she was still awake.

A few moments later, Graeme knocked on the door.

“It's late, are you okay?” she asked. “Come in.”

“I know. I should not be here; I should be watching over my brother. But I figured he is safe now that almost all the men are too inebriated to harass him. So, I had to take my chance to do this...”

With those words, he kissed her—hard.

“Graeme...” she whispered. Her lips trembled under his kiss.

Graeme pressed his mouth to hers once more.

He kissed her harder still, and she could not handle it anymore. “I want you, Graeme. Please take me to bed,” she whispered against his mouth.

He picked her up into his arms, carried her to her bed, and laid her down it, pressing his body onto hers. Graeme's heavy and hard body pushed her deep into the mattress, and she let out a soft moan.

Danielle kissed him with a fury she had never known. Her hands moved over his strong jaw, and then down his neck and over his broad shoulders, down to his muscular arm. Danielle's body came alive. His kiss was hungry and deep.

Graeme's strong hands greedily moved down her body and then back up. His tongue brushed against hers. He touched her softly and gently along her curves. Her mind raced as his hand found the mounds of her breasts and rubbed over them.

“That feels so good,” she whispered. “Please touch me more.”

“Lass, you do not know what you are doing to me,” he groaned.

Danielle moaned at his touch, and she desperately wanted him to be inside of her. She couldn't hold back anymore. She tugged and pulled at the laces of her dress. “Help me out of this,” she said.

Graeme rose from the bed and pulled her up as well. Together, they undid the dress, taking it off her, and then her corset as well, setting her breasts free.

“You are beautiful, lass,” he said.

She moaned as he pulled her to him and kissed her, her nipples hardening against his chest.

"Lie down, love," Graeme said and then removed his clothing before joining her. He touched her hard nipple and then licked it softly.

She groaned wildly and moved her body up and down, arching her back toward him.

Graeme sucked on the tip of her nipple and twirled his tongue around it. Danielle felt every inch of her body tingle. The increasing wetness between her thighs made her wild.

She placed her hand against his hard stomach, feeling the ripples of his six-pack. She marveled at his body. He was so sculpted.

“My God, you are like a Greek statue. So beautiful,” she said as her fingers moved down his chest and stomach.

“Lass, you drive me crazy with your touch,” he groaned.

His lean abs were chiseled, and his broad shoulders were marked with scars from his past.

She traced over them with her hands as Graeme’s long fingers slid over her skin. Then, he moved back to her lips and kissed her again. Her hand moved on his back, feeling up and down his strong torso.

“Mmm, you are beautiful,” he said as he looked at her. Then, his hand moved over her center and massaged it.

She shouted and moved wildly under his hand, crying out in ecstasy. "I want you. Please, please . I need you. I want you inside me."

She reached down and grabbed his throbbing cock, rubbing it up and down, stroking it, feeling how hard he was for her.

He groaned loudly. "What are you doing to me, lass?" he said.

His cock was like steel in her hand, hard and smooth, and she couldn't wait to have him inside of her.

"Enough. I want you now, Graeme," she said.

"Are you sure you want me inside you, lass?" he asked.

"Yes, please. I'm begging you," she moaned.

Graeme kissed her hard and then lined up his cock with her center, and with one sure stroke, thrust into her until he was fully seated. Danielle groaned at how good he felt, and how full he made her feel. She arched her back at the pleasure of having him fill her.

Danielle gasped. "Graeme, you feel so good."

His movements were slow and deliberate, in and out of her in a steady rhythm. She rocked with him, matching his strokes. He covered her mouth with his, claiming her, and she knew she was his.

"Mine," he whispered against her lips.

"Yes, all yours," she murmured as she wrapped her legs around him.

He ran his fingers down her torso and then back up to squeeze her breast. Together, they explored every inch of each other as he moved inside of her.

He began to move faster and faster until he was pounding against her, their skin slapping together as they moved. Wonderment filled her as the exquisite sensation mounted, and her orgasm hit. She shouted in ecstasy as he thrust into her harder, causing the orgasm to shudder through her longer.

She became like a liquid into the mattress. He moved faster in and out of her wet warmth, building her orgasm again. When he finally found his release, Danielle tumbled over the cliff with him, shouting his name.

CHAPTER 18

Danny was in the armory, polishing the blades. It was a chore often left to the newest recruits and one he didn't mind doing. He was mostly left to his devices except for the Guards, who came in to grab equipment for various tasks.

The armory held all the weapons that weren't used unless there was training or a battle. Every Guard already carried a sword, daggers, and the like, but these were additional supplies in case of emergency, or if a Guard didn't want to risk his blade being damaged in practice. The armory also held numerous wooden swords and sparing devices that were used nearly daily.

He had been good at keeping a low profile, as Graeme had told him to do. He had even stayed away from the dining hall since the last incident. He'd taken his meals with Eva, Finlay, and Mary most nights. When they were busy, he ate alone in his room. He did not want to cause another incident that forced the Captain or the Laird to intervene.

When he finished his task, he headed outside to the Guard's office to speak to Kieran, the Captain of the Guard. He had just walked into the courtyard when a voice stopped him.

"There you are. I have been looking for you, thief."

Danny looked up to see Brody coming toward him, but he was not alone. He had two other guardsmen with him, and Danny knew this meant they were looking for trouble. He stopped walking and stood straighter. He would not run, even though he probably

should since he was supposed to be staying out of trouble.

“I haven't been hiding. I've been doing my job, so you must not have looked very hard.”

“Watch your smart mouth before I wipe it off your face!”

“What do you want, Brody? I am on duty. Make this quick,” Danny said.

“Oh, we will make it quick all right, lad,” Brody said as he and his friends surrounded Danny.

Danny sized up the situation and then put his hand on the sword at his hip. He did not want to use it, as he had no wish to kill anyone. That would definitely get him sent to the dungeon or exiled from Dunscaith, which meant Graeme would be exiled as well, and he could not have that happen. Too much was at stake.

So he stepped forward, his chin high.

“Let's have at it then. What do you have to say to me?” Danny said.

“The same as I said to you before. Where is my lucky coin? I know you have it. Hand it over. Everyone knows you are the thief,” Brody said putting his hand on Danny's chest and pushing him backward. Danny stepped backward and planted his feet so he would not fall. But then one of Brody's friends pushed him from the side and then the other did the same, keeping him off-balance, and soon, they were pushing him around like it was a game.

“Leave me alone, Brody, or you will regret it,” Danny said.

“Oh, the little lad is angry. What are you going to do? Your brother is not here to

protect you,” Brody teased.

Danny's blood boiled. He could not contain himself any longer. He was tired of being called a thief when he was not, nor was his brother. But everyone had a brink, and this was it for him.

He made a fist, drew back his right arm, and punched Brody square in the jaw. Brody stumbled backward, a look of shock crossing his face as though he did not think Danny could pack such a punch, but Danny had learned early on how to fight, thanks to Graeme.

“Get him!” Brody said. The other two Guards tried to seize Danny by the arms, but Danny was quick and spun out of their grasp. A full-on brawl broke out, with Danny swinging when he could and ducking when necessary.

“Graeme, it's your brother!” Bran said, coming into the dining hall.

Graeme leaped to his feet and followed Bran out of the Keep and into the courtyard. As soon as Graeme saw what was happening, his blood boiled.

“Stop, all of you!” Bran shouted. But no one was listening.

Graeme was not a man of words. He recognized Brody and knew what this was about. He jumped into the fray and grabbed Brody, pulling him off Danny and punching him in the face. Brody fell unconscious to the ground.

“You come after my brother, you come after me,” Graeme said.

Dougal, one of the others who had hassled Danny, came at Graeme, and Graeme bloodied his nose, took. Then the second Guard, Niall, came at him, and Graeme kicked his feet out from under him, knocking him to the ground.

“Is this all you've got? Coming for a young lad? He is not the thief! You have been told before, and yet here you are. If you come for him, you come for me,” Graeme repeated.

“Stop this! Graeme!” Kieran shouted, coming into the courtyard.

Graeme turned to him and saw Bran coming over with him. Bran must have gone to alert the Captain and brought him over to stop the fight.

“What is the meaning of this? I told you to let it lie. I do not want fighting among you, but here you are, disobeying my orders,” Kieran said exasperatedly.

“I obeyed those orders, but these men did not. They went after Danny. Am I supposed to just let them beat him to a pulp?”

“No, I suppose not. But you and your brother are causing quite a stir, and many problems are coming from it. Look at this.” He pointed to the three Guards on the ground. Now I have three Guards, injured by my own men.”

"And look at Danny!" Graeme said pointing to his brother, who stood nursing a fat lip and two quickly blackening eyes.

“I know you were defending him, but this cannot happen anymore. Guards,” Kieran called.

More Guards appeared on all sides, and Graeme's heart jumped in his chest. Surely, they weren't summoned for him and Danny? Somehow, he knew that was exactly what was happening.

“Take Graeme and Danny to the dungeon,” Kieran said. "Put them in the same cell. They are not to be harmed. This is not a punishment. Feed them well and provide

them with clean water, but do not put them anywhere near the other prisoners.”

“What? Why? What is the meaning of this?” Danny protested.

Graeme did not protest. He'd seen this coming and was surprised it had taken this long. A part of him was almost relieved, because at least this way, it had been done, and they could move on.

“Sorry, lad, but I need to sort this out with the Laird. I cannot have you two loose until I know what is to be done. You two cause too much trouble.” Keiran sighed. “Take the others to the infirmary, and then down to the dungeon as well. I will not have this kind of fighting.”

“Aye, sir!” a couple of other Guards said, grabbing Dougal, Niall, and the slowly awakening Brody and starting toward the Keep.

“Keep them well away from Graeme and Danny!”

“Let's go, then,” Graeme said.

Graeme and Danny were escorted into the Keep, but the Guards' grips on their arms were not harsh. He knew they were just doing their duty. By this time, many of the staff had gathered to watch. News had already traveled through the castle, reaching Danielle and Finlay, who appeared just as they reached the midway point of the Great Hall.

“What is the meaning of this?” Finlay said to the Guards.

Kieran must have come in behind them because he answered, “Oh, here we are. Must you have words about everything, Finlay?”

“Indeed, I must. These are innocent men; why are you arresting them?” Finlay said.

“Graeme?” Danielle whispered softly.

Graeme saw the pain in her eyes. This was exactly what he did not want to happen. He did not want to disappoint her, and he did not like the idea of her seeing him being treated this way. He wished she was not there to witness such a thing. It broke his heart to see the look of sadness on her face.

“I am not arresting them, I am simply locking them up until this thievery business is sorted. They will be together away from everyone else down there and I promise they will be treated well. Once they are in the cell, I will speak with the Laird straightaway about the situation. It has gone on long enough, and something needs to be done,” Kieran said. “So leave it be, Finlay.”

“That is not in my nature, Kieran, as you well know. I will go speak to the Laird myself,” Finlay said, moving past them and toward the stairs.

Graeme sighed. At least they were not under arrest. He saw Kieran's point, but it did not make the situation any better.

Danielle could not believe her eyes. She knew that it was a possibility that Graeme and Danny would be arrested at some point because it had long been the rumor, but watching it happen made her heart sink. She thought about all the criminals she'd seen escorted from the courtroom to jail after the preliminary hearing. This was just like that. Being put into jail before the trial, simply to hold the person before any evidence was heard. It was unfair, and seeing it happen to Danny and Graeme broke her heart.

It was at this moment that she realized that she was in love with Graeme. She knew that he was innocent and so was Danny, but then why had the Captain gone to such

extremes as to put them in the dungeon if he did not think they were causing problems?

She heard Kieran's answer to Finlay's question and relaxed a bit. They weren't being arrested, but they were still heading down to the cold dungeons to keep from being attacked. It was like blaming the victims!

Her sadness was overtaken by rage as the Guard continued to usher Graeme and Danny through the door that led to the basement levels of the castle. She marched down the rest of the hallway and up the stairs, knowing she had to figure out who the actual thief was so she could help the man who held her heart. The man she loved.

CHAPTER 19

Danielle could not sleep at all that night. She could not stop thinking about Graeme and Danny sitting in a cell in the dark dungeon. She had never been down there but could imagine how filthy something of that nature would be in the time she was in. At least in her modern times, the jail was usually well-maintained, with clean food and a toilet. The dungeon of an old castle had to be filthy and terrifying, with rats everywhere. It made her so mad that she got out of bed and paced her room, and then tried to calm herself enough to return to bed, where she lay restless.

Finally, she must have dozed off because she did not wake up until she heard a knock at the door. She jumped out of bed, hoping it was news of Graeme. Perhaps Eva had heard something.

She opened the door, not to Eva but to Anna, the scullery maid who had shown them the theft in the larder.

“Anna, what is it?” Danielle said wrapping a blanket around her, for she hadn’t had time to get dressed.

“My Lady, you must come and see. The items I placed in the larder last night after supper are gone. Heigl thought I should alert you and Lady Maria,” Anna said.

Danielle wasn't shocked. If things had gone missing in the middle of the night while Graeme and Danny were in the dungeon, that proved they were not the culprits. A smile grew across her face.

“I am very glad that you came to me, Anna. Please come in while I dress.”

"Aye, my Lady." Anna scurried into the room.

“Have a seat, and I'll try to be quick,” Danielle said, turning toward her wardrobe and dropping the blanket on the bed.

“Once I'm dressed, we will call upon Lady Maria. If she cannot come with us, I will still go with you to the larder. I want you to show me what happened and what is missing,” Danielle said as she laced her corset and pulled on a dress, adjusting it so it hung correctly.

Minutes later, Danielle and Anna headed toward Maria and the Laird's rooms, but Maria must have already been awake because she was coming out of her door when they approached.

“Danielle? Anna? What is it? What’s happened?” Maria asked.

“Anna has just informed me that items she set in the larder last night are no longer there. I think we should take a look,” Danielle said.

“Anna, are you sure?” Maria said.

“Aye, my Lady. We had made a fresh batch of cheese and put it in the first room of the larder, and the entire wheel is missing. None of the others have taken it. I did not get done with it until very late last night, and when I entered the larder this morning to gather things to serve for breakfast, it was gone,” Anna said.

Danielle looked at Maria. “You know what this means, don't you?”

“That it could not be Graeme or Danny since they are locked up in the dungeon,”

Maria said.

“Exactly. Anna, please show us,” Danielle said.

They followed the excited scullery maid down the corridor and out to the kitchen areas on the first floor, where she unlocked the larder with the master key.

They stepped inside. Anna put her hand on a shelf beside the door. “I put the wheel right here. You can still see the outline.”

“Yes, I can. And this was late? How late? Was most of the castle asleep?” Maria asked.

“Yes, ma'am. After supper, I was cleaning the dishes and waiting for the cheese to set. The fire I had set had gone down and had to be redone. That's how long. The castle was very quiet as I wrapped the cheese in cloth once it was done and set it in here. When I headed to bed in the staff quarters, almost all were asleep. When I returned this morning, the first thing I did was prep for today's breakfast, and I saw it was gone.”

Danielle walked around the larder, going through the snug maze to the back where the wellhead was. “Did you notice anything else missing, Anna?”

“No, but I have not had too much of a look around. I will do that now. I noticed the cheese immediately, and I went straight to Heigl, who sent me to wake you,” she said.

As Danielle looked closer at the wellhead, she smelled the very pungent scent of cheese. “Do you store cheese in this back room as well?”

“No, never. Always in the front room, because it is dryer. This back room is too damp

for it.”

Maria entered the back room, and Danielle looked at her intently.

“Where is the Laird? I must speak with him.”

“Cameron is outside in the courtyard by now, I would think, but?—”

Before Maria finished her sentence, Danielle had moved past her and through the larder, up the stairs, and out into the kitchen.

“Danielle? Wait!” Maria shouted after her.

Danielle nearly ran down the Great Hall and out into the courtyard, finding Cameron and making a beeline for him.

“The scullery maid just informed me of another theft last night. Food stolen from the larder. That means Graeme and Danny are innocent,” Danielle blurted out as soon as she saw him, not stopping to take in the scene around her beforehand.

“What is all this?” Cameron said turning toward her.

“I said there was another theft last night, which means Graeme and Danny are innocent. Will you not consider letting them go?” Danielle said.

Cameron looked past Danielle at Maria. She had finally caught up with Danielle.

“It's true, Cameron. I have just come from there. Anna put a wheel of cheese into the larder late last night, and it was gone this morning. She had the key with her all night,” Maria said.

Danielle was relieved to hear Maria support her and tell her husband what had happened.

“You are sure of this?” Cameron asked.

“Yes, I asked Anna about the key and where it was during the night. She assured me that she'd had it, as she'd forgotten to hang it up before going off to bed,” Maria said.

“That means that Graeme and Danny are innocent. Will you let them go?” Danielle said again.

It was then that she noticed Brody standing nearby, ready to put in his two cents. She wondered how he'd gotten out of going to the dungeons.

“Perhaps it was you, lass, who stole the goods.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because you are working with Graeme and Danny. The thefts began after you arrived, so that would make sense. In doing so, you would clear their names by stealing something in the night when they are in the dungeon. It all looks a bit fishy to me,” he said.

“And how do you suppose I managed to enter the locked larder? The scullery maid has said she had the key on her the whole time, having worked late and then being the first in there this morning. Do you think I can walk through walls now?” Danielle said.

“Aye, all of you can. Is that not how you arrived here? What's to stop you from walking into that larder?” Brody stepped up to get in her face.

“That is enough ,” Cameron said. “You will not speak ill of the women here. Have you forgotten that my wife is one of them? Speak ill of her, and you speak ill of your Laird.”

“Apologies, my Laird,” Brody said, stepping back against the wall and away from Danielle.

“I will think about this, but for now, Graeme and Danny will stay in the dungeon until I lay eyes on the real thief,” Cameron said and then walked off.

“What? But you have evidence. This does not make any sense and is also quite unfair,” Danielle shouted after him.

Maria moved to Danielle's side and turned her away from Cameron's retreating form. “Danielle, please calm down. You don’t want to arouse more suspicion or tip anyone off.”

“What do you mean?” Danielle asked.

“I was trying to stop you before you left the larder to tell you to not be so brash. All you did by announcing that there was a theft last night was alert the thief that we are on to them. Our thief could be someone here in the courtyard,” Maria whispered.

Danielle looked around with a suspicious eye for the first time. “You're right; I wasn't thinking. I’m sorry I just let my temper get the best of me.”

“I understand. You're reacting with your heart and not your head; trust me, I know. Come on, let’s get some breakfast and discuss this new piece of the puzzle,” Maria said.

Danielle nodded, and they went inside together. "Hey, how come Brody wasn't also

locked up?"

"He was held in the infirmary last night. I guess after that, they let him return to his station on the wall this morning. Kieran can't afford to have all his men locked up down there. And remember, Graeme and Danny aren't in trouble. They haven't been arrested."

"They're still in the dungeon, where it's cold and uncomfortable." Danielle frowned.

" They've slept in worse places; I promise. They'll be fine."

Despite Maria's words, Danielle felt it was unfair to hold them down there when everyone knew they were innocent.

CHAPTER 20

Danielle found herself pacing her room again after hardly eating anything at supper that night. Her stomach was too full of knots. It was infuriating that she had evidence of Graeme and Danny's innocence, and yet it was not enough for the stubborn Laird to let the men return to their rooms. Maria said it was more for their protection than anything, but that didn't make her feel any better.

"I have to do something," she whispered. "But what? What would a private investigator do if I hired him?"

A light bulb went off in her head. Why hadn't she thought of this before? Quickly, she got dressed again, wrapped a heavy shawl around her shoulders, and left her chambers.

She went to the kitchen to search for Anna, hoping she had not yet gone to bed.

"There you are. I've been looking for you," Danielle said.

"Me? How can I help you, my Lady?" Anna said with wide eyes.

"I need you to do something for me. I want to go into the larder and stay there tonight. It is the only way I can find out who is stealing the food."

"That sounds very dangerous, my Lady. We do not know who is doing this. They could murder you," Anna said.

“I have been around worse criminals. It's a chance I'm willing to take for justice to be served,” Danielle said.

“And the Laird has said you could do this?” Anna said.

“Not exactly. He is aware of our investigation, but he doesn't know I am doing this. I would like to keep that a secret,” Danielle said.

Anna took a step back as though Danielle had just told her the most shocking gossip possible. “Oh, no, my Lady, I cannot be going against the Laird. I will be thrown from the castle. I cannot do it.”

“Please. I am begging you. It will set Graeme... and Danny free if I can find out who is doing this,” Danielle said.

“I do want them to be free,” Anna said softly. A blush touched her cheeks.

“If things go wrong, I will say that I took the key from the wall, and you will not be implicated. It will all be on me,” Danielle said.

“I understand. But I worry about your safety, my Lady. I do not want you to get hurt. What will you do when the thief shows up?” Anna asked.

“Good point. Let me think. I guess I should take a kitchen knife in with me, just in case, and I need some way to alert you that something is going on.”

“How about this, my Lady?” Anna said picking up a small bell. “Heigl uses it to call me when I'm in the larder. If I can hear it in there, then surely, I can hear it out here.”

“That will do. Hopefully, it will be loud enough.”

“I will stay nearby, my Lady. I could not in good conscience allow something to happen to you. I will stay here and come to you if I hear the bell.”

“Maybe you shouldn't, Anna. This is my fight, and I will not have harm come to you.”

“I want to do it. I will do it. There's not much you can do to stop me,” Anna said.

Danielle admired the girl's courage. "All right, just be careful."

“Here is a lantern. Take it with you,” she said.

“Thank you, Anna,” Danielle said.

She watched as Anna gathered a pitcher of water, a chamber pot, and the kitchen knife, and headed to the larder, setting them by the door. Danielle was impressed with all the readiness this young girl was taking. Then, Anna unlocked the larder and took the items inside. “These should set you for the night. Let me grab you a blanket,” she added, walking up the steps and back toward the kitchen.

Danielle stepped inside and set up her little camp. She put the pitcher of water and the lantern on a shelf. Then put the chamber pot in the corner far away from any food supplies. She staked out where she would be sitting, it would have to be in the front room so that the bell could be heard. When Anna reappeared with the blanket, Danielle folded it and placed it on the ground so she could sit on it.

“All right, that should set me for the night. I'm obviously surrounded by food if I should get hungry, but I'm so nervous, I doubt I could eat.”

“Do not forget to use the bell, my Lady, and I will come for you.”

“You must lock the door from the outside. I cannot have the thief opening an unlocked door, or they will know that something is amiss,” Danielle said.

“I understand, my Lady. Good luck to you.”

“Thank you, and thank you for helping me as well. You are doing the right thing, even though it feels wrong,” Danielle said to the young girl.

With that, Anna locked Danielle inside the larder and then, Danielle supposed, headed to the kitchen to set herself up for the night.

Danielle sat on the blanket with the knife to her right side and the bell to her left. She knew she would have to ring it vigorously to get Anna's attention. She hoped to God she would not have to use the knife, but it was good to have for protection. Then she sat and waited, and waited, and waited.

Many hours went, by and nothing happened. She heard no sounds except for a mouse scurrying past the outside door. Danielle paced to keep warm and keep blood moving through her veins so she could stay awake. She found herself back in the back room and looking at the wellhead. It still smelled of the pungent cheese, and she thought that it was strange since the milk cheese had been missing from the larder for quite some time. She grabbed the lantern and inspected the wellhead, pushing her face closer to it. The smell was vastly stronger in that area.

She took the cover off the wellhead to inspect it in the lantern light. White gleams of wax caught her attention along the rock wall that led down the deep well. The scent of pungent cheese mixed with the saltwater air from outside and hit her with a gush from the wind rushing at the wellhead. She realized that the wax was not wax at all, but the white milk of the cheese. She scraped it off the wall, and brought it to her nose, realizing that it was indeed the pungent cheese.

“Unbelievable. The thief took the cheese out this way, but how? It’s such a small space,” Danielle said to herself, looking at the well. It was just big enough for a child to get through. Unless the thief had been very clever and had worked with more than one person. Perhaps if someone stood where Danielle was with a rope and bucket, they could load supplies and then lower them to someone down below. That had to be it, because it was not big enough for a man to get through, especially not Graeme or Danny.

This would have to have been done during low tide, when the tide was out of the tunnel, and one could walk through without drowning. She began to grow excited about this new information. She ran to the front room and began to ring the bell.

CHAPTER 21

Danielle rang the bell loudly by the door of the larder and heard Anna's footsteps running down the stairs and toward the door. She did not want to alarm the girl, so she shouted through the door.

"There's no one in here, Anna. It's just me, I just have something to tell you," Danielle said.

"Oh, my Lady, my heart is in my throat I was so fearful for you. Hold on," Anna said. She slipped the key in the lock and rattled the door open. She stood looking at Danielle with wide eyes looking.

"The thief has not come in, but I have discovered something that cannot wait. I want you to take a message to Lady Eva. Do you know where her rooms are?"

"Indeed, I do," Anna said.

"If only I had something to write on, I'd be better able to explain," Danielle said, looking around.

"There is parchment in the kitchen, and ink, too. Should I fetch that?"

"Yes, thank you. I do not want to leave the larder in case the thief shows up. I'll write the message, and you can take it to Eva."

Anna scurried away to the kitchen to fetch the items. Danielle didn't want to wake

Eva in the middle of the night, but it couldn't be helped. If Eva could go to the Laird and convince him that this information was vital, Graeme and Danny would not have to spend another moment in the dungeon. She knew that if it were the other way around, she would not want someone to sit on evidence.

“Here you are.” Anna placed the items on a small table outside the larder door. Danielle was quick to write the message to Eva. It was simple enough.

Eva,

I am so sorry to wake you, but this is urgent. I have found that the wellhead in the larder is used to get in and out of the castle when the tide is out. The thief is not someone here in the castle. Also, the thief must be rather small, even smaller than Danny, so neither he nor Graeme is the thief. Can you get this information to the Laird as soon as possible so they can be released?

Thanks,

Danielle

“Done,” Danielle blew on the parchment and waved it in the air for a minute to dry. Then, she rolled it up and gave it to Anna.

“Take it to her now but lock me back up in the larder before you go.”

“But, my Lady, what if the thief gets in while you are locked in here, and I am away and can't hear the bell?”

“It will be okay. I'll make do and hold them off with the knife until you arrive. Just let me know when you return.”

"Aye, my Lady." Anna waited until Danielle was back in the larder and then shut the door. Danielle heard the key turn in the lock.

She paced inside the larder, excited for this new information. This had to be enough to set Graeme and Danny free. The Guards who harassed them would have to stop, because there was proof now that they weren't behind it. So, there would be no more accusations and harassment.

Eva was fast asleep next to Finlay when someone pounded at their door. Finlay hopped out of bed and grabbed his sword, customary for a warrior like him always thinking about a clan invading.

"You might want to cover yourself, Fin." Eva smiled at the sight of him. "We don't know who is at the door, and I'd rather not give the staff a show."

Finlay grinned at her, grabbed his kilt, and pulled it on as someone pounded on the door again.

Eva wrapped a blanket around her and followed him to the sitting room where she found a sleepy Mary coming out of her room. She wrapped her against her leg while Finlay cautiously opened the door, and then let his guard down, so Eva knew it wasn't a threat.

"Anna, it is late, what are you doing above stairs at this hour?"

"I have a message from Lady Danielle for Lady Eva," she said handing the parchment over.

"It must be important. I will take it," Eva said, holding her hand out for the missive.

"Where is Lady Danielle? Why didn't she come here herself?"

“She is... doing some work in the kitchen.” Anna said hesitantly. Then, she gave a very quick curtsy and hurried away.

“What is so important that Danielle had to interrupt our sleep?” Finlay asked as Eva read the parchment.

“I must go to the larder immediately,” Eva said, handing Finlay the parchment to read as she dashed into their room to get dressed. “Mary, darling, you can go on back to bed,” she added, popping her head back through the doorway.

“Surely this can wait until sunrise, Eva. The Laird will not like you disturbing him in the night for such a thing.” Finlay frowned.

Eva turned to him. “I have to try, Fin. Danielle found a security breach in the castle. I think the Laird would want to know such information straight away.”

“He will not like having his sleep disturbed by you ladies, though,” Finlay said.

Eva made quick work of getting dressed and then turned her back to her husband so he could tie up her laces. “I do not want to anger him any more than he already is,” he said.

She turned to him look him in the eye. “If it were me in the dungeon, would you not want to spare me even one more second in there? Wouldn't you try to get me out of there as quickly as possible?” she asked.

“Aye, lass, I would. Go then.”

“That is why I love you, Fin. You've learned to see things my way,” she teased, kissing him and heading for the door.

“Aye, don’t push me too hard, lass, or I shall give you a spanking when you return,” he teased her back.

A few moments later, Eva knocked on Maria and Cameron's door.

“What’s going on?” Cameron said as he saw Eva in the hallway poised to knock again.

“I have urgent information, my Laird,” Eva said.

“Come in,” he said.

"Who is it?" Maria said, coming out of their bed chambers wrapped in a dressing gown. "Oh, Eva. What's going on?"

“It's Danielle. She has discovered that whoever has been stealing from the castle has been doing so through the wellhead in the larder,” Eva said.

“The wellhead? That's impossible. It is a very narrow passage and has been closed off for years. A failed attempt at building a well centuries ago. No one could get through there. This is what you have woken me for?” The Laird sounded irritated.

“Yes, I have, because it is proof that Graeme and Danny are not the thieves. Neither could not fit through such an opening. Danielle says she has proof if you will just—” Eva said.

“No, this has been enough of a rude awakening. We will speak about this matter tomorrow. Good night, lass,” Cameron said, ushering Eva into the hallway.

Eva threw Maria one last pleading look before Cameron closed the door.

Annoyed, Eva marched away and headed to the kitchen to tell Danielle. She was curious about what kept Danielle occupied inside. She entered the kitchen and found Anna sitting next to the fireplace.

“Where is Lady Danielle?” Eva asked as she looked around the kitchen.

“Um...” Anna nervously jumped to her feet.

“Anna, what is going on here? Where is Danielle?”

Anna sighed. “She told me not to say what she is doing, my Lady.”

“You can tell me; I am safe,” Eva said.

Anna led Eva to the larder and unlocked the door. Danielle stood, expecting it to reveal the thief, but she seemed relieved to find Eva and Anna instead.

“What the hell? What are you doing in there, Danielle?”

“I’m on a stakeout; what does it look like? I’m obviously the only one who’s going to take this seriously. There’s only one way to catch the thief, and that is red-handed. Since the Laird won’t accept any other evidence, I have no choice. Were you able to speak with him about the new information?”

“Wow. You’ve got a lot of guts, girl, going up against this person,” Eva said. “Good for you. I spoke to the Laird and told him the information you wrote on the parchment. It wasn’t enough, at least not for tonight. He said he’ll address it in the morning. No point in doing it now. He’s stubborn and won’t accept anything but the thief being caught red-handed.”

“That’s what I thought. Well, thanks for coming down, but I need you to leave,”

Danielle said. "The thief will not come in here if we're standing about like we're having a party in here."

"I'll stay with you," Eva said.

"Absolutely not, Eva. I won't put you and the baby in danger; Finlay would have my head. Please, go back to bed. I'll keep you posted and send Anna for you if I need you, okay?" Danielle said.

Eva sighed. "Fine. But I don't like not helping."

"You've already done plenty. Not many would take on waking the Laird in the middle of the night. That was quite dangerous enough." Danielle laughed.

Eva embraced her in a parting hug, then returned to her chambers. She hoped Danielle would be all right and knew she wouldn't sleep well until she heard from her that either the thief had been caught, or that it was morning, and she was out of the larder.

"Are you sure you want to stay in here, my Lady?" Anna asked, holding the door.

"Yes, Anna. Go ahead."

Sighing, Anna locked Danielle in the larder again.

Danielle felt she had no choice but to wait until sunrise, when the tide would be low and the tunnel to the wellhead would be accessible. So she waited and waited.

She wished she had a watch to know the time, or a window to at least see the sunrise.

Danielle found her head falling forward, and soon, she nodded off to sleep. She

snapped awake a few moments later and stood up to get the blood flowing and help her wake up. She should have had some strong tea before doing this but didn't want to deal with an active bladder, even though Anna had left her a chamber pot in case she needed it.

A sound came from the back of the larder, and Danielle stopped walking. The noise was echoing from the wellhead. She got behind it, waiting with the knife in her hand. Her breath caught in her throat. Whoever was coming had to be small, but who could it be? Was a bucket being hoisted into the well?

The wooden cover flipped open, and much to Danielle's surprise, out crawled a skinny, wiry girl with a mop of dark hair. She was pale and wore a long, dirty tunic that hung past her knees. A leather bag was strapped across her chest, and Maria's scarf was tied around her neck.

"What's this?" Danielle said.

"Ah!" the girl screamed and pulled a knife from her bag. Danielle realized she was holding her knife, too, and slowly set it on the floor.

"I won't hurt you. You're the one stealing from the larder?" Danielle asked.

The girl screamed again in response. Danielle quickly closed the wooden cover and sat on it to block her escape.

"There's no way out. You can talk to me. It's alright, child," Danielle said.

"Aaagh!" the girl screamed again and ran from Danielle, toward the front room of the larder. Danielle pulled the bell from her pocket and rang it loudly.

"Call the Guards!" Danielle said as loudly as she could, so Anna knew not to open the

door. "Don't open the door! Call the Guards. Anna? Can you hear me? I need you to call the Guards!"

"My Lady! Are you all right? Is the thief in there?" Anna called through the wooden door.

"I'm fine, Anna. Yes, she's here, call the Guards quickly!"

"Aye, my Lady! I'll be right back with them!"

The young thief stood sobbing halfway between the wellhead where Danielle sat and the locked door. Danielle felt bad for the girl, but she had to keep her from getting away. She wanted Graeme and Danny released from the dungeon as soon as possible, and this was the only way that would happen.

CHAPTER 22

A nna threw open the door when the Guards arrived.

"What is this?" one of them asked.

The young thief took one look at them and began to cry harder. The knife dropped from her hands, and she trembled. Danielle didn't like to see her so scared. The criminals she'd seen in court weren't children, but she knew that she now lived in harsh times and that the poor were very, very poor.

"Please, I beg mercy. Do not hurt me," the child pleaded.

Danielle rose from her seat on the wellhead and moved toward her, squatting to her level. "What is your name?" Danielle asked.

"Maddie," the girl said timidly as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"We're not going to hurt you. You're obviously hungry. But you stealing things around here has caused great trouble, and innocent people have been blamed for your actions."

"I didn't mean any harm," she sobbed.

"I know, sweetie. I know. We're going to go talk to the Laird, and he will listen. Come with me now," Danielle said, putting her hand out. "We will escort you to the Laird."

The girl timidly put her hand in Danielle's, and together with the Guards, they walked out to the Great Hall. It seemed though the Laird had been awakened by someone and had already come down the stairs for his breakfast in the dining hall.

“The thief has been caught,” the Guard said to the Laird, who sat at the high table talking to his tanist, Bran. They looked at Danielle and the child walking in.

“What? This child? Surely, that cannot be,” Cameron said, walking around the table toward the child.

“It's true, my Laird. It is just as I said in my missive to Eva. I saw her come up the well in the larder at low tide. It is how she has been able to get in and out unnoticed into the larder while it is locked and take food and supplies. It is obvious that she is a child in need, not a common criminal looking to cause ill will toward the castle,” Danielle said. “She's just hungry.”

Maddie cried hard. She seemed terrified of her surroundings and of being punished.

“Please do not lock me away, Laird MacLeod. Many others rely on me. If I do not get back to them, they will have nothing. They will starve,” she said.

“Who will starve, child?” Cameron asked, squatting to her level.

“The orphans I look after. There is a group of us. I am the oldest, so it falls to me to provide for them. It's just us, and we're hungry. We have no one to look after us, so we must feed ourselves.”

“So, you steal from my Keep?” Cameron asked.

Maddie looked at him defiantly. “And why should we not? Your lot is up here in the castle, as fancy as can be with plenty to eat. All while we starve! It is not right, not

fitting,” Maddie spurted with anger in her trembling voice.

“I see.” Cameron nodded sagely. “So, you have come to take revenge on me,” Cameron said playfully.

The Guards restrained a laugh.

Danielle didn't see the humor when it came down to a child starving.

“Aye. Revenge for letting us go hungry,” Maddie said, stamping her foot.

Danielle admired her gumption.

“The child is obviously mad. Put her away with the rest of her group. They are foul and will grow up to continue to be thieves or worse,” Brody said from behind some of the other Guards.

A murmur of agreement moved through the men he called friends.

Danielle was beside herself with anger. How could they say such things? They were just children. She couldn't hold her tongue any longer.

“And how would that look? Everyone outside the clan for miles around will say that Clan MacLeod at Dunscaith Castle put children in dungeons simply for being hungry. It's shameful. Is that how you want others to view the clan? Allowing the local needy to starve until they are desperate enough to steal from their Laird? That you put them away in dark dungeons. It will be told again and again until it becomes a story passed down among the generations to be remembered forever that Cameron MacLeod jailed children.”

“Enough, lass. You and your wagging tongue,” Cameron said, annoyed. “As to your

point, I do not allow my people to starve. I had no knowledge of this group of orphaned children who have been starved to the point of thievery. However, it is still thievery, and that cannot go unaddressed.”

“And what of Graeme and Danny sitting in the dungeon? Here is your thief, though she's not what you were expecting, it is proof that it wasn't the brothers. Will you not set them free now?”

The Laird stared at her quietly. Then he turned his gaze to Bran. “Go down to the dungeon and release Graeme and Danny.”

“As you say,” Bran said and walked out of the dining hall.

“You, child. How many of these children are you looking after?” Cameron asked.

“There are this many of us.” Maddie held up her hands to show six fingers.

“And where do you stay?” he asked.

“An old hut in the woods on the other side of the village. Hardly a roof on it,” she said.

“My Laird,” Bran said as he walked in with Graeme and Danny in tow.

Danielle's heart leaped at the sight of Graeme. She was glad that he looked just as well as when she last saw him. A few days in the dungeon had done nothing to him, except perhaps made him very angry, she thought. Danny looked the same. They stood there honorably.

“Graeme, Danny, I owe you an apology,” the Laird said, “for keeping you in the dungeon, but we did not wish to see you further attacked and hassled while the search

for the thief continued. It seems we were looking in the wrong places, though, as she is naught but a wee child.”

“Her?” Graeme said, looking shocked.

“Indeed,” Bran answered.

“Graeme, Danny, why don't you get yourself a good hot meal and a wash. Then you can take this child and Danielle to the hut in the woods and collect the other children. I'd like you to bring all of the orphans to me.” Cameron turned to Heigl. "Let's get this child bathed, fed, and properly clothed,” the Laird said.

“Why do you want to be bringing my friends here? Are we to go to the dungeons? I will not have it! We will run away, and you will never find us!” Maddie warned.

“Ye have a stout heart, lass, but no you need not be worrying of such a thing. I am only going to help you. Will you take this kind woman and lead her to your friends?” Cameron said, gesturing toward Danielle.

Maddie was quiet for a moment, studying him to see if he meant his words, and then finally said, “Aye.”

“Good, go on with Heigl now. Do as I say, all of you,” Cameron said.

Everyone dispersed.

Danielle ran to Graeme and gave him a hug. “I'm so glad you're free. I hated thinking of you down there in the cold dungeons.”

“I believe it is you I have to thank for having us released? Or am I wrong?” he said, smiling.

“I'm the one who discovered the child in the larder, yes. Caught her red-handed as I knew that was what was needed. I'm just glad you're out of there,” she said.

“Thank you, lass. Now let me go and wash the smell of the dungeon off me,” he said and winked at her playfully.

Danielle let him go. She wanted to blurt out I love you, but she knew it was not the right time, so she let him slip through her embrace and he walked away.

When Maddie returned to the dining hall, Danielle took her by the hand and sat her at a table. "Heigl, will you fix Maddie a plate?"

"Aye, my Lady."

“You shall have plenty to eat from now on, Maddie. I shall see to it myself if I have to.”

“And what of the others? Are they to starve while I am here feasting?” she spat out the words with so much spite.

“I can see you've got a strong sense of justice. I admire that. I'm the same way. Your friends will not starve, I promise. Once we have our party together, we'll go and fetch them. Then they shall eat just like you are now. But for now, I need you to get your strength, so will you eat when Heigl brings your plate?” Danielle asked.

Maddie thought about it, then finally nodded.

A few moments later, Danielle was astonished to see Heigl carrying a tray piled with food and drink. Maria was next to her carrying another plate. They walked over to Danielle and Maddie.

"Here you are, lass. Eat up now," Heigl said, setting down the tray.

Maddie's eyes widened at all the food before her. "All of this for me?"

"And you'd best eat every bit of it, too," Heigl answered before walking away.

Maddie began to dig in.

"Good work, Danielle. I'm proud of you for keeping up the investigation. I'm only a little jealous I wasn't there at your side solving the case with you." Maria winked. "Sarah's going to be jealous, too." She laughed.

"As crazy as things are around here, I have a feeling we might be able to work on another case in the future." Danielle laughed.

"You've got that right," Maria said. "Things are always strange around here." Then her eyes turned to Maddie, seeing her cherished scarf around the child's neck. "My name is Maria. I am glad to meet you, Maddie."

Maddie looked at Maria and then back at the food she was eating. "Hello."

"That scarf you're wearing; my husband gave it to me, and I love it very much. Can I make you a trade?" Maria asked.

"What sort a' trade, my Lady?" Maddie said suspiciously.

"I know Heigl is making shortbread in the kitchen right now. I will trade you as much shortbread as you want to eat for that scarf, and I'll give you a different scarf to keep as long as you want," Maria said.

Maddie looked up at the ceiling as though deep in thought.

Danielle enjoyed watching this strong child. It did make her sad that the poor child had to be older and wiser beyond her years.

“Alright, then,” Maddie said, handing the scarf to Maria.

“Thank you so much, Maddie. Please, finish your breakfast, okay?” Maria said.

Maddie looked at the food and began eating once again.

“I’m going to go fetch that shortbread and bring it to you,” Maria said getting up from the table and leaving for the kitchen.

Danielle felt a sense of calm. Not only had she set her love free, but she was also going to get this child and the group of orphans some help. That was no small feat in a time and land where she was a foreigner. It made her feel good to have been some use here. She only hoped this wouldn't be the last time she was made useful.

CHAPTER 23

Danielle walked alongside Graeme with Maddie holding her hand on the other side. Although she was a tough twelve-year-old, she was still a child, and Danielle was happy to have gained her trust even just a little.

Danny walked behind them with two other Guards keeping watch for trouble. They walked along the shoreline, over a few rocks, and into the forest.

“You clean up nice,” Danielle said playfully to Graeme.

“Thank you, lass,” he said, looking at her. “Thank you for everything. You are unlike any woman I have ever met.”

“And you are like no other man I have met.” Danielle smiled, feeling her cheeks heat.

“Danielle,” Graeme stopped moving and pulled her to a stop next to him, “I love you. I love you with complete madness. I can’t control it.”

“You do?”

“I do, lass. You are my everything,” he said.

“I love you too, Graeme.”

He kissed her on the lips, a quick kiss.

“Yuck, ew, stop it,” Maddie said.

They turned to the child, who they’d forgotten was there as they shared their feelings and burst into laughter.

“Right. Mayhap we should be discussing this when we return to the castle, then,” Graeme said.

“Yes, let’s do that. But I’m glad you told me now because I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold it in,” Danielle said.

“I am the same, lass,” he said.

Finally, they came across a small hut. It was rundown and mostly in ruin, with only half of the roof standing. As they approached, the children scurried inside, afraid of the new arrivals.

“It’s me, Maddie. Don’t be afraid now,” Maddie said, breaking free of Danielle's hand and dashing toward the house.

Danielle looked at Graeme, happy he was at her side. Now that Maddie had gone to her friends, she could speak a bit more privately.

“I’ve thought about you every day since I arrived here, and I couldn’t stand the thought of you down there in the dungeon. A part of me wanted to break you loose so we could run off to the mainland,” she said.

“You would do such a thing for me?” he asked.

“Yes. It is crazy, right?”

“I am honored to hear such words from you, lass,” he said with a grin.

“Now, let's see what we have here,” Danielle said as they approached the hut.

“Where have you been, Maddie? We’ve been worried! You should have been back well before now. Who are these people?” a young girl said. She had pale blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and a soft voice, definitely softer than Maddie’s.

Danielle assumed she was about ten years old, and that made her heart sink lower. Around her were five children, all dirty and very thin.

“I got caught getting into the castle. But do not worry yourself, Maeve, they are going to help us. Come get your things, all of you. We are going to the castle for a hot meal and to speak with the Laird,” Maddie announced.

The children looked apprehensively at Danielle.

“It's true. I'm Lady Danielle, and I promise no harm will come to any of you. Please, come with us, and I will make sure you are well taken care of,” she said.

A young boy of about nine walked up to Maeve and tapped her on the shoulder. He pointed at the Guards, and then at himself, and shook his head.

“This is my brother. He doesn't speak, and he doesn't trust anyone. Not since we watched our parents taken by death. It changed him good,” Maeve said.

Danielle tried not to be upset by this information, but it haunted her already. “What is his name?”

“Colin.”

Danielle walked to Colin and dropped to his level. “Hello, Colin, I’m Danielle. Those Guards over there are here to protect all of us as we walk back to the castle. They’re not here to hurt you, I promise. Will you come with me to the castle?” she said, holding her hand out to him.

He looked at Maeve, who nodded. He put his hand in Danielle’s.

“Good. Graeme, will you and Danny help the children carry what they want to bring with them? Let’s get out of this cold hut and back to the warmth of the castle,” Danielle said.

Graeme, Danny, and the other Guards helped the children carry the items, which were not much. Then, they made their walk back to the castle.

Along the walk, Danielle looped her free arm in Graeme’s, just wanting to feel his nearness. She held Colin’s hand as they walked as well, following his sister and Maeve, who led the way with the other children. Her heart felt full. She had the man she loved on her arm, she had brought justice to the castle, and she was helping these children.

When they arrived, the news of what had happened had already spread through the Keep. How Danielle had discovered the small girl coming through the wellhead and that Graeme and Danny had been set free. The entire place was buzzing with the news.

So, when they arrived, everyone on the grounds turned to look at them. There was lots of whispering and looks of sadness and despair as they watched the malnourished children make their way through the courtyard to the castle entrance.

Eva and Finlay were waiting as they stepped through the door.

“Danielle, you found the thief,” Eva said, giving her a hug.

“Yes, and I am grateful to have Graeme and Danny out of the dungeon. I'm also glad to put my skills from my old life to use in this new one.”

“Oh, and who do we have here?” Eva said looking at the group of children.

“These children are the reason Maddie was stealing from the castle. She's in charge of taking care of the group. It is a lot to rest on the shoulders of such a brave girl,” Danielle said, patting Maddie on the head.

A tear slid down Eva's cheek. “I will adopt the lot of them if that's what it takes for the clan to help them.”

“Now hold on there, lass,” Findlay protested. “Let us see what the Laird has to say before you take on such a responsibility. You and your big heart.”

“Oh hush, Fin. You know you'd do it, too.” She shook her head at him and smiled. “Come on, I'll help you, Danielle,” Eva said, helping to walk the children deeper inside the Keep.

Moments later, they stood before the Laird. All the children were trembling in fear except for Maddie, who had already been in this situation and was much more comfortable after they had treated her so well.

“This is all of you, then?” Cameron asked.

“It is. These are the children I look after, and you promised that no harm would come to them,” Maddie said.

“I will keep my word. Tell me how you lot have come to live in the hut and how you

managed to steal from the Keep?”

“The same as most. My parents left me in the village and disappeared when I was just a wee lass. They never came back for me. I was taken in by a kind man. He was like a father. He was a thief, though. Didn't steal nothin' that would be missed, just bits and bobs here an' there that we could use. Taught me how so I wouldn't starve. But he died last year after running from a Guard. Heard he was caught in the inn's larder. He dropped dead durin' the chase. I don't know why, though. After that, I almost starved to death. I had to move from the room we had and found the hut in the woods. Then these others showed up, havin' lost their parents. We were all hungry. I did some thieving as much as I could. But when I found the cave and found it came inside the castle straight into the larder... I was so happy, and we've been eating every day since. Sometimes, I could put on a cloak and walk right into the courtyard and into that storehouse and take some cloth so we didn't freeze in the night.” Maddie was very expressive as she told her tale.

Everyone who had gathered in the dining hall to listen to Maddie's stories was enthralled. Each of the children was either abandoned or their parents had been killed. They were offered no charity from the villagers or the church, and there was no hope for any of them. Maddie took it upon herself to do what she could.

Danielle watched Brody and his friends, who had cried out for Maddie to be thrown into the dungeon. Shame crossed their faces as they listened to the horrible stories. At least now, she knew the children would be treated with kindness instead of persecution as they told stories that showed they had no other choice. It was either steal or starve to death.

“These are quite the harrowing stories, indeed. Maddie, I believe you have been through more rough times than some of my warriors. I will make a deal with you,” Cameron said.

“A deal?” Maddie said confused.

“I offer you and the other children a place here in the castle. You will be given food, living quarters, and schooling, and eventually, you can work in a position where you will learn a trade. Everyone earns their keep around here. I offer this to you if you will show us the tunnel that leads into the wellhead. It is dangerous for us to be exposed, and you will be doing us a favor. What do you say to that?”

“I say I agree, but no one try to harm these children while I am showin’ you, or I will stab anyone who hurts them,” Maddie warned.

Cameron restrained a laugh, but others could not, and a wave of quiet laughter filled the hall.

“I like this one already,” Graeme whispered to Danielle.

“It is a deal, then,” Cameron said making it official by extending his hand to Maddie.

She shook it vigorously.

Afterward, the children were taken to the nursery, where there were appropriate rooms for them. They would have proper clothing and plenty of food and drink at mealtimes. They would also be able to learn to read and write along with the other children of the Keep.

Graeme walked Danielle to her room and kissed her lightly.

“Won’t you come in?” she said, rubbing her hands seductively up and down his chest.

He groaned. “You drive me mad, lass. I want to come in, yes, but I cannot.”

“Why not?” she pouted.

“I must go to Danny's room. I do not wish to leave him to sleep on his own. At least tonight. I need to make sure the others will take the Laird's word and not enact some revenge on my brother. If I come in with you, I will not be able to take my mind off the fact that he might be in danger.”

“That makes sense. I do understand, and I don't blame you for wanting to keep him safe,” she said. “But before you go...”

Danielle pressed her body against his and kissed him deep and long, until she felt as though she would become a puddle on the floor. Then, she stopped.

“Goodnight then,” she said.

Graeme grunted. “You drive me mad, lass.”

Danielle grinned at him as he reluctantly took his leave.

She entered her room and took off her dress, taking a deep breath of salty ocean air as it came through the window. She felt such a weight lift off her shoulders, and she realized it had been there since she arrived through the door. A tension had hung over her head, waiting to see how things would play out, but now that the worst of it was finished, she could relax. She could make this place her home and be happy about it.

She laid down and slept deeper than she had in ages.

CHAPTER 24

The next evening, there was a grand supper in the dining hall. The castle was buzzing with the news of all that had happened. Everyone was in good spirits. Earlier that day, Maddie did as promised, showing the tunnel entrance at low tide. The Laird now had to figure out a way to guard it or close it off.

The celebratory supper was also to welcome the children and feel the relief that the thieving mystery had been solved. All was set right again at the Keep.

The fire roared in the hearth in the dining hall. Tin cups and plates clattered while people ate heaping helpings of roasted meats, roasted fish, and vegetables. The mead flowed freely, and stringed instruments played in the corner. It was a lively affair as always, and everyone was in good spirits.

The children had been bathed and given new clothing. Their hair had been cut and washed appropriately. They ate heartily and played in the corner of the dining hall with Mary and the other children, running back and forth, jumping and dancing to the music.

Danielle made eye contact with Maria, who sat in the middle of the high table with the Laird, and raised her glass to her, nodding. Maria raised her glass back and smiled, and Danielle knew Maria and the Laird appreciated that all had been brought to justice and the children were saved in the process. She also knew that Maria had gained respect for her.

The Laird stood and raised his tankard. As he did so, a hush came over the clan, and

the music stopped. They all quieted to hear his words.

“I want to say that these children here are a reminder that there are many among our clan who do not have the wealth we take for granted. Many others in our territory are in hardship, and my wife, Lady Maria, is starting a way to help ensure that children are not starving on our lands.”

The hall cheered and applauded.

Then the Laird continued, “But my words are not all good tidings. I want to address something very disappointing among my Guard. We are all guilty of it, even myself. Before we discovered the true thief among us, we were quick to judge those who had newly pledged their fealty. We blamed Graeme and Danny MacMillan simply because of their past. Who here among us has not done something unsavory, and yet managed to change for the better? We all have. We were wrong to treat them unjustly. My sincerest apologies to you both. And on that note, I forbid any more harassment of Graeme and Danny based on their past. They are Guards, just like many of you, and they will be treated with the same respect. Anyone caught mistreating or harassing them based on their past will be brought to me immediately. Is that understood?”

There were groans of agreement. Danielle watched as their detractors were shamed into silence. Even Brody, who was convinced Danny had stolen his lucky coin, lowered his eyes in shame.

“Now, let us eat, drink, and be MacLeods!” Cameron shouted.

“MacLeod!” the hall roared.

Danielle and Graeme grinned at each other.

“There, you see? You have lived to see those who mistreated you to be wrought with humiliation,” she whispered.

“It is satisfying I must say,” he said, “but do you know what would satisfy me more?” he growled huskily in her ear.

Danielle flushed, knowing exactly what he meant.

“Now?” she said.

He did not answer with words. He simply grabbed her hand and led her out of the hall and toward her chamber.

The two madly groped and kissed outside of Danielle’s bedroom. They could not get enough of each other.

“I love you so much,” Danielle said.

“I love you, lass,” Graeme said as he opened the door to her chamber, and they moved inside.

Then he stopped and stepped back.

“I cannot imagine my life without ye, lass. I know I have nothing. I know I used to be a criminal with a dark past. But you are everything to me.”

“I don’t care about your past, Graeme. I know you now. You are a good person with a good heart who cares for his family. My heart is yours,” she said.

“Then would you consider being my wife, Danielle?” he asked.

Danielle gasped. “Yes!” she shouted, then jumped into his arms.

“You make me very happy with that answer, lass.” He lifted her in his arms and kissed her.

Danielle was spinning. She knew it was insane, but it also felt more right than anything in her life. She could not believe that not too long ago, she was deep in her career. She was betrayed by her ex-boyfriend and her assistant, and so much more. She had been unhappy with her position as a criminal lawyer and felt unsatisfied. Now, she was living a different life.

She had never been happier.

“Kiss me,” she moaned.

“Yes, my soon-to-be wife,” he replied.

He kissed her deeply.

“My God, lass. How can you be real?” He greedily took in the sight of her as she undressed.

She smiled. “Now you,” she said.

He disrobed until he stood naked before her.

“Take me to bed, soon-to-be husband,” she said.

Graeme moved to her and picked her up in his arms. He laid her gently on the bed and pressed his strong body on top of hers. He moved his hand between her thighs and stroked her center. His kisses moved over her skin and onto her breast. Danielle

moaned, arching her back toward him. Her hands twisted the sheet underneath her as she was flooded with need.

“Yes. Yes, I love you, Graeme,” Danielle whimpered louder and louder.

He kissed down her body, moving down until his face was between her legs, with his scruffy beard scratching at her inner thighs.

“Oh, Graeme,” she moaned.

His tongue pressed against her wet core and flicked there, making her wild.

“Yes! Oh!” she cried louder, feeling her orgasm building.

Graeme moved his tongue faster with gentle amounts of pressure. Danielle shouted in release, so loud that she knew the whole castle must have heard her. She was glad for the celebrations going on in the dining hall to drown out her pleased screams.

Danielle looked at her handsome Scot as she still shuddered in his arms, waiting for him to fill her with his throbbing cock.

“You are so beautiful, lass,” he said.

His thick Scottish accent was so sexy to her.

He moved up her body and set himself between her thighs as he slid into her. They moaned in unison.

He covered her mouth with his, kissing her deeply.

He moved slowly and sensually, drawing out the pleasure of each stroke.

Danielle opened her thighs wider, wanting to feel all of him. She clung to his back, digging her hands into him.

She licked his chest, allowing her tongue to move over his hard ridges.

“My Danielle, you are mine. My wife-to-be,” he whispered groaning wildly.

His words moved deep inside, reaching her soul. She loved hearing him call her his wife-to-be; it was all so right. Nothing to be feared.

He continued to move in and out of her slowly, but as their pleasure built, he moved faster and faster. She felt the sensation of another orgasm building and was ready to explode. And then, she tumbled over the edge, crashing into a cloud of ecstasy. She looked into his startling green eyes, lost in them as he made love to her.

He moved faster, swaying his pelvis back and forth until he, too, found release. He groaned as she came once again on the tail of his, shattering in his arms.

He collapsed on top of her, pressing her into the mattress.

“I love you,” he whispered to her.

“And I, you, my strong warrior,” she said.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:37 am

Three months had passed since all the excitement at the castle, and things were getting better and returning to some sense of normalcy. At least that is what Danielle was told. She could not believe that this sense of normalcy meant she had acclimated very well to living in a different time.

She could no longer imagine what her life would be like in modern times in San Francisco. If she had the opportunity to return, she wouldn't take it. She was quite happy in her new life, and she was deeply, madly in love. Not only had she found someone unlike anyone she had met, but she had also gained a sense of peace, something she had looked for in her own time and could not find.

She thought that her career as a young, ruthless lawyer making partner at such a young age would be satisfying enough, but she learned very quickly that she was wrong. After using logic and organization for so long, she found that allowing herself to give in to wild abandon and embracing a simple way of life was what she had needed the entire time.

She walked the castle grounds, looking up at the massive building. It was magical, and she thought that if she looked hard enough, she could almost see the magic like an aura surrounding it.

The salty air brushed through her hair. Seagulls flew overhead, making loud calls. Villagers did their work, carrying baskets of fish here and there.

Then, she noticed something. It was the stone wall she had sat on while on vacation, when Marcus approached her. This time, it was complete and looked like it had recently been built. She sat on it, thinking about when she'd sat there before on

vacation. It was a very surreal moment that made her heart beat very fast.

Three months had passed since the uproar about the thieving, and Danny and Graeme's stay in the dungeon.

Much had changed in that time. Those who had harassed the brothers no longer did and had even acquired a grudging respect for them and for Danielle and Graeme. Some had even apologized for their behavior, and for accusing them of being the thieves, especially after they'd rescued the orphans and found the tunnel to the wellhead.

With their wedding approaching, and Danielle having a close friendship with Maria and Eva, the Laird had granted Graeme an apology for his stay in the dungeon by promoting him. He was no longer a lowly mercenary doing menial tasks like guarding the magic door in the castle. He was now a full Guard in charge of training the new men.

Who better to train than a man who could take down three Guards in the courtyard with just his fists? He had demonstrated that when his brother was attacked. Who better to train them than a warrior with a fierce reputation before he even arrived at the castle? He was a good marksman with a bow and skilled with his sword.

Danny was able to continue his training without harassment, and a lead Guard position awaited him as an apology from the Laird for being falsely accused and put in the dungeon. He had a bright future ahead.

Maddie, Maeve, Colin, and the other children had been fostered by the clan, and Mary was delighted to have even more children to play with. They were learning trades to earn their keep in the castle when they weren't in the nursery learning to read and write. They were, of course, still given time to be children and play. They were no longer malnourished and seemed to be quite happy. Colin had even begun to

Speak again after being silent for so long.

Eva spent a lot of time with them, as a sort of part-time foster mother. She was always around them anyway, since Mary enjoyed playing with them on the castle grounds.

"I see you have your hands full," Danielle said to Eva, who was playing tag with the children.

"Yes, but I love it."

"I know the feeling." Danielle agreed.

"And now? Will you learn the native tongue and do the translating as you wanted?" Eva asked.

"Yes, I think I will. After the wedding of course." Danielle winked.

"I can't wait. The whole castle is buzzing about it," Eva said.

"Are you happy, my Lady?" Maddie said, running over to them.

"Good afternoon, Maddie. Yes, I'm very happy. But are you?" Danielle asked.

"I am happy. My friends have food to eat. We're learning to read and write and trades to earn our keep around here, and then we play," Maddie said.

"Yes, you are. I'm happy for you. Play is very important. I want you to enjoy being a child and playing as much as possible. It is time to let go. We're here to take care of all of you," Danielle said.

Maddie looked at Eva.

“It’s true, Maddie. You can be a child again. Even if it is hard at first, you have done your job being the grownup when no one else would. Let us take care of you now,” Eva said.

Maddie hugged Eva tightly and then dashed away as quick as she had come.

Eva’s eyes watered.

“I see how much you care for them,” Danielle said.

“I do. As if they were my own. I watch them daily and will give them any guidance they need. It’s what I’m meant to do, I think,” Eva said, her hand going to her barely visible baby bump. "And when this one comes, they'll have all these siblings to help look after them." She grinned.

Danielle gave Eva a hug, and together, they watched the children play. Danielle wondered if she and Graeme would be blessed with children. The thought made her giddy.

Then, a day came that Danielle never thought would happen in her time. She was getting married.

The castle celebrated the nuptials with a ceremony outside and a grand feast in the dining hall with lots of dancing.

“I would like to make a toast,” the Laird said as he sat at the high table.

A hush fell over the crowd.

“To Danielle MacMillan, wife of Graeme, for setting this man right!” the Laird said.

The crowd cheered.

“And to Graeme, for training my Guards to become the fiercest warriors any clan has ever faced!”

“Hoorah!” they shouted.

“And to you both: May you be as happy as I have been with my lovely wife. These women bring us joy. To Graeme and Danielle!”

“To Graeme and Danielle!” all shouted in unison.

Graeme and Danielle raised their cups to the room and drank. Then they kissed deeply, causing the crowd to shout even more.

Later that night after a splendid feast and good amounts of dancing, the now-married couple went upstairs. They had been given larger living quarters that contained two bedrooms and a sitting room on the same floor as Eva and Finlay.

Graeme carried Danielle over the threshold and set her on the bed.

“I love you, Wife.”

“And I, you, Husband,” she said.

“Danielle MacMillan,” he said.

“I like the sound of that.”

“I don’t know where I would be without you, lass,” he said.

“Yes, you owe me much. You can start by making love to me until the sun rises,” she teased.

“Hmm, that is a great debt to pay. I guess if I have no choice...” he teased back.

He kissed her soundly.

Danielle received his kiss, feeling the centuries slipping away. This was her home. This was her beginning, her past, and her future.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:37 am

At midnight, Audrina James finally laid her head down, gratefully onto her pillow. It had been another grueling day in Trauma One, it was always the worst when the nursing staff and doctors of the trauma ward lost a child.

Audrina looked at the ceiling where she had taped pictures of stars, lush green fields, exotic ancient castles and the forests of her ancestral homeland, vowing to herself that she would visit Claran Castle in Scotland someday.

Audrina had put the pictures up so that she could clear her mind of the gruesome scenes that she faced in the E.R.

day after day, night after night.

They'd worked hard to save the boy from the ravages of a car crash, but Donald Nightingale, of sunny northern California, flatlined at eleven-thirty, after half a day's worth of surgeries, blood transfusions and plasma bags.

Audrina didn't cry much anymore after working in the trauma center.

But there were a few patients who tugged at her heartstrings.

Donald would be one of them.

"Look at the pictures. Look at the pictures,"

Audrina chanted to herself.

She used them as a platform to spring her mind into more pleasant thoughts before she drifted off to sleep.

Audrina had been fascinated with the stories and lore of her ancestry when her grandfather used to sit her on his knee and recount tales of his youth, roaming the Highlands of Scotland.

That was before a potato famine reached his homeland and forced his family to immigrate to the United States.

Audrina would spend hours, daydreaming as she roamed the redwoods behind the house, pretending the tall trees were the ancient forests of Scotland.

She knew now that Scotland was much greener, and the forests were made of tall oaks, and rowan trees, beech and pine and ash.

But she had promised herself she would visit and discover it for herself someday.

That was all a couple of decades ago, when Audrina had been just seven.

After high school, she had gone on to nursing school, and now was faced with the ever-increasing violence of the San Francisco Community Hospital that came through the doors.

The timing had just never felt right.

There was always one more case to oversee, or one more patient to look after and successfully care for until they walked out the door of their own volition, and not in a body bag or stretcher.

Audrina certainly had the money saved for the trip, but she always felt there was

something holding her back.

Some small fear she had that there was something Grandfather neglected to tell her about the ancient folklore.

Audrina never quite made the jump to buy the plane ticket or book the hotels.

She'd never really been sure why, but as she laid there, thinking about all of the never did's that young Donald was never going to experience, she thought, "Why am I holding back? I have no solid reason, no proof that there is anything in Scotland I should be afraid of."

"I'm going to request the time off tomorrow and start booking tickets after my trip to the museum,"

she vowed out loud.

There was no one to hear her proclamation, she realized. There wasn't anyone in her life that she could tell really.

"I guess that makes it kind of sad, maybe even a little pathetic. Sure, I have my co-workers, but they would all say, "Finally, you are taking a vacation,"

when I tell them,"

Audrina thought.

Audrina had become a trauma nurse after Mom had suffered the same fate as little Donald.

She winced as the memories of that day entered her mind.

It had been much like Donald's parents rushing into the hospital.

The only difference between her grandfather being informed, and Mrs.

Nightingale's heart-wrenching screams, had been significantly different, but as equally as devastating.

That's when Grandfather had taken her in.

She didn't know who her dad was, and it never occurred to her to go looking for him.

She knew that she was loved when Grandfather took her, a scared little girl, home that night.

He had cared for her and she didn't need anyone else.

Anyone, that was, except her mom, but she wasn't coming back.

When Grandfather had passed away she was twenty-one, she was left with no one.

She hadn't even bothered getting a pet.

Audrina was never home because she worked so much. She'd always felt like it was her duty to save people because, well, she couldn't save her mom back then.

Audrina tried to roll over onto her side.

She was disgusted with herself that she was caught up in her own head and wallowing in self-pity.

Her vow was just that and she was sticking to it.

She realized, as she flipped back onto her back, that she had never been able to fall asleep unless she was looking up at her pictures.

Grandfather had printed them for her the week that Mom had passed.

He wanted her to have something to think about, other than the sadness of losing her mom.

As Audrina's eyes began to flutter closed, and she emptied her mind save for thoughts of faraway lands and lost familial ties, something, perhaps the moonlight, sparkled in the pictures above her.

A small light that glowed in the tower of the castle, appeared to be brighter in the picture.

But she squinted at it, and then chalked it up to fatigue and weary eyes.

Her lashes batted against her cheeks one last time, and she fell into a deep, sound sleep.

Candles surrounded her in a circle, haloing the circular room with an ethereal glow.

Long thin tapers of white sheep's fat burned low and lit the gloom of the dark tower.

She'd been locked in there for so long, she had lost track of time.

There was a straw mattress, in a splintered bed of Ashwood.

The thin blanket cast across it, was worn and frayed at the edges.

A small wooden chair, equally as uncomfortable, sat at the base of the bed.

It wobbled on three legs, having relinquished one of the legs long ago, for the usage of a handle for a torch.

The torch, had long ago burnt to ash, and was scattered and lost amongst the dust and dirt that caked the cold stone floor.

She rocked back on her heels and murmured a soft prayer to the Gods, the Spirits, anyone who would listen.

The tower was a prison, a tortuous place that seeped into the soul like the smoky blackness of a demon, coming from the bowels of hell to inhabit and ingest the goodness of the person's humanity.

There were bones in the ashes and they cried out to her.

Begging her to release them of their captivity.

She couldn't help them that night.

They would remain tethered there until the angels came for them on the day of reckoning.

Thunder clapped outside the castle and lit up the tiny room in an intense light that threw the stark furnishings of the room into harsh contrast.

The candles flickered, and she feared they would blow out.

Cotswold Castle had many frivolities, protection from the elements in the prison tower, was not one of them.

Rain lashed against the stone tower and sprayed into the room in droves of unending

dampness.

It rained often in Scotland.

She hadn't been dry since she was thrown into that room.

The water collected in puddles at the base of the windows.

She sat in the middle of the room in an attempt to keep herself and her activities dry.

She knelt over a carnelian kilt pin.

It glowed in the candlelight like fire.

She reached out her hand and touched it as she murmured.

The contact sent a spiral of heat through her fingertips, and she jerked her hand back.

How could the stone set in silver be warm to the touch? There was no fire there.

The brooch had not been warmed against constant contact with her skin, as she had been shivering since she arrived there.

The cold was such that it seeped not only into her bones, but into her very soul.

There was no possible way the stone could be warm.

Her eyes fixated on the glowing center of the gem as she continued to murmur, "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, through spans of time, I cannot rest.

Seek thee my kin, and pardon my sin, that I may reincarnate, and new life begin.

And with this pin I shall be returned to my love, cast through the ages, by touch of mine blood, and light from sun up above.”

The kilt pin glowed ever-brighter in a hue of burnt orange that lit up not only the room, but blazed like the dawning of the early morning’s sun, sending spirals of light from the tower window.

She heard shouts from below and quickly loosened the stone nearest the door, about halfway up the wall.

She hid the pin behind the stone, where someone had hollowed out the stone behind that, and replace the stone so that it looked seamless.

She prayed that someone would find it someday, and that she might rise up, released from the ashes of the debris of bodies from that hellish place.

She heard footsteps on the stairs and boots clunked up the stone steps.

She hurriedly pushed the stone back in place and managed to take one step back, as the door was thrown open and she screamed in terror as...”

Audrina woke, sitting bolt upright in bed.

“What the hell?”

she muttered as she glanced up at the pictures. “What the heck was that?”

she wondered to herself as she let her tired body fall back against the pillows. She stared at her pictures and then pushed herself back up to a sitting position.

She used her hands and pushed to stand up, so that her upturned face was almost nose

to nose with the picture of the castle. Audrina stared at the tiny light in the tower.

It had faded over the years, but she could have sworn last night it glowed brightly. So brightly it almost lit up the room.

And then...and then, that dream.

What a strange dream.

Who was that woman in the dream? What happened to her? She must have died there.

Audrina could feel the drive of her trauma nurse training kick in.

She had to save her.

But how? That's silly.

The woman...me...that was centuries ago when she cast the spell.

And what kind of a spell was that anyway? Audrina's mind began to fog over, the dream becoming misty around the edges, as reality and the present day slowly seeped back into her mind.

She looked around the modern-day bedroom and laughed at the absurdity of her mind's vehemence that the dream was somehow a reality way back when.

She climbed off the bed and hit the shower, enjoying the feel of the warm jets hitting her body as the ache from the previous day's strenuous shift was washed away.

She combed out her dark red hair and swiftly braided it down her back as she stared into her own brown eyes in the reflection of the foggy mirror.

She wiped away the condensation and flashes entered her mind.

The reflection of a woman in the puddles on the floor as the lightening lit up the room.

Did she have brown eyes like my own? Audrina wondered.

She shrugged and finished her braid and then donned her typical casual wear of jeans, an oversized tee-shirt and a ball cap.

The ensemble fit well on her athletic frame, and it was just what she needed to walk down to San Francisco's Museum of Natural History.

Audrina enjoyed the casual wear on a rare day off, and she was equally as pleased that the museum was hosting an exhibit on loan from Scotland.

She figured she could kill two birds with one stone.

She could get her walk in and surround herself in ancient artifacts that made her yearn for a time and place that she had not yet discovered.

She pulled her ballcap low over her eyes as she walked out the front door, not minding in the least that she had been accused on more than one occasion of being a tomboy.

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When Audrina reached the museum, she purchased her ticket and queued to get in line to be let into the exhibits.

She was about ten minutes early and so she began to read the pamphlet that was handed out at the ticket booth.

She had been to the museum so many times, she was only interested in the exhibit on loan from the Scottish Museum of Ancient History, but she figured she might peruse a few more on her way out.

She read about the various artifacts that were on display, quite impressed with the vast array of items that have been amassed.

As she flipped the cover open, she paused, staring down at the pamphlet stupidly and didn't really register what she was seeing and reading on the pamphlet.

As she stared down at the glossy photo, the memory of the dream from last night was a bit hazy, but there was no mistaking the kilt pin from the dream.

The one that the woman, that she, had cursed.

Or maybe the woman in the dream, she, had placed a spell on it.

But there it was, shining back up at her from the brochure.

Audrina blinked rapidly in the sun, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, and this was another pin that was excavated from some site in Scotland, and it just looked

similar.

But as she continued to read, the weighted feeling in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

“The Cotswold Pin, a rare and expensive carnelian-gem set pin, was discovered last year in the ruins of Cotswold Castle’s eastern most tower.

Archeologists and Historians know very little about the pin, except that it was discovered hidden behind a loose stone near the doorway to the tower, where a mason was reinforcing the towers infrastructure.

Cotswold Castle is host of a long and bloody history in the Scottish culture and it is well known that Lord Cotswold, imprisoned many native Scotsmen, in his long and cruel English reign over the Scottish people.

It is speculated that the pin was hidden by one of the prisoners.

Most likely in the event of their impending death and the desire for such a rare gem to not fall into the hands of the English.

It is known that Lord Cotswold’s reign was filled with such terrors and atrocities against the Scottish people, such as imprisonment, torture, and rape.

He often invoked the First Rights, also known as Prima, against many young Scottish Brides.

It was well known that many of the ones he impregnated he had accused of, tried, and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently sentenced to death.

It is no wonder that whoever was bequeathed such a rare treasure as this gem-inlaid kilt pin, would have wanted it hidden from such an atrocious and vindictive lord and

ruler. ”

Audrina’s hands trembled, and the pamphlet shook as she read and re-read the description under the brooch.

“ How can this possibly be? How is it that I dreamt of this very kilt pin, only last night? I have no memory of such a pin, even from the countless hours spent with Grandfather pouring over history and ancestry books,”

she wondered.

She only realized that the line had started to move, and people were entering the museum, when someone shouted, “Are you going to stand there all day?”

She jumped and shouted, “Sorry!”

over her shoulder as she hastened to the door.

She followed the map of the museum to the new acquisitions and the new exhibit that was on display and it took her a full ten minutes to push through the throngs of people who were gathered around the ancient claymores and thread-bare tartans.

She looked for a case, a glass case, figuring, if the museum was going to display rare and beautiful jewelry and gems, they would have it resting on a bed of velvet and enclosed in a high-security, alarm activated case such as the ones she had seen countless other relics, and objet d’art displayed in before.

She found the very case she was looking for and made a beeline for it.

She waited at the back of the line and tapped her foot restlessly, as she waited for the older couple who were fawning over the brooches and tartans and listing off their family tree and origins, dating themselves back to the days of yore and their own

ancestors.

Just when her patience couldn't possibly take any more waiting, the line moved ahead, and she was able to press in, face to face with the kilt pin.

Audrina found it extraordinary that, even after centuries sitting behind a stone, even though it was unexposed to the elements, it was still in pristine condition, as if it had never survived centuries of time passing by.

She was sure that it was probably dusty when the mason found it, possibly even the gem was scratched or worn and thus had to be restored, but the pin was pristine.

The burnt orange gem sat at the apex of a silver hill.

The silver had been bent and molded onto a swirling pattern to resemble the crest of the hill, so the gem was the representation of the sun.

From what Audrina knew of Celtic mythology, the sun symbol was more widely used in the sun cross symbols, which were indicative of Christianity's introduction to the Celtic peoples.

But this sun was a literal representation of the sun, suggesting that whoever designed and forged the pin, was still a practicing pagan, possibly giving the pin druidic or witchcraft origins.

On the outset of the circular pin, the silver swirled into a Celtic knot which was wavy around the edges, like a river.

Audrina knew this because as Grandfather and she had investigated the Claran, or MacClaran name, it was discovered that the Claran's were one of the older tribes of Scotland, but those particular tribes were ancient, nomadic druids who traveled the waters from the Isle of Eire, also known as Ireland.

The modern day Claran's were to be found inhabiting the areas on the River Clare and the name Claran literally meant, "One who lives near the River Clare."

So, Audrina knew her ancestors had been an ancient people of magics and mystery, and the warring tribes had caused them to take root in Scotland as one of the founding tribes, and they had taken their name and origins with them.

The evidence was right there in the pin that resembled the pagan magics and the river beds from whence her people came.

The tribes, like the rivers on the pin, were split between Ireland and Scotland.

Audrina felt her excitement at having found such a connection to her ancestors, begin to grow.

She stared with her face almost pressed to the glass, willing the pin to do something, anything to give her a sign that she belonged there, with it.

She felt like, somewhere deep in her soul, that the pin belonged to her, but she knew this was silly, because it belonged to the museum in Scotland.

It didn't change the connection she imagined she could feel through the glass.

As she stood there, she again realized the grumblings of the crowd around her as she had allowed herself to be lost in her thoughts.

She was about to exit the line and circle back around, when the crowd was jostled and parted by the streak of a black clothed and masked figure, who shoved them aside.

When the intruder got to Audrina, he shoved her so hard, she knocked into the glass and it smashed as the sirens from the museum began to wail.

Audrina cut the back of her hand on the glass as she tried to stop her fall, but with the rest of the crowd, she tumbled to the floor.

Audrina looked up, just in time to see the masked figure reach into the case and grab something.

A flash of orange and silver registered in her mind, and she clawed her way back up and ran after the thief, as he dashed outside the museum with what she could only proclaim as “her” kilt pin.

Audrina chased after him as the wail of sirens from the museum’s security, and the automatically notified police screeched in her ear.

As athletic as she was, it didn’t take her long to catch up to the thief, and she tackled him, expertly maneuvering him into a judo hold from her years of training with Mr.

Tanaka at his Japanese dojo.

Audrina had needed an outlet for her rage and frustration for losing everyone she had ever loved.

And she had miraculously stumbled upon it in the classes offered at the dojo and Mr.

Tanaka’s ever-patient and serene temperament.

The thief was quickly apprehended at Audrina’s capable hands, just as the police showed up and began to cross the sunny court-yard.

“Hey lady, are you nuts?”

one of the officer called.

“You don’t chase after a criminal! What were you thinking!”

he shouted.

Audrina didn’t answer him, but reached out her shaking hand toward the pin that had fallen to the ground in the take-down of the thief, and as her bloodied fingers from the cut on the glass closed around the pin, the sun shone brightly through a cloud cover, landing directly on the pin, the blood and her hand, and then suddenly, there was a black and gray mist, and Audrina was falling, falling, falling.