



Mae Meets The Highlander Niall (Scottish Highlander I Never Knew #2)

Author: *Rebecca Preston*

Category: Historical

Description: Transported across centuries by a mysterious fae magic, Mae finds herself on a run in the wild Scottish Highlands — and find the man that helped her escape.

When Mae Welles, a psychiatrist looking to reform from her past, finds herself thrust into the past, she encounters Niall, archer of Clan Donald. His good nature slowly wins her over as they host a stranger to the Clan.

But as ancient magic entwines their fates, Mae and Niall must confront the unwelcomed guest. Will they be able to endure their differences against those against them?

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CHAPTER 1

Mae's heart pounded with fear. This sound mixed with the pounding at her front door. She thought that she would get away with it, but she had been wrong.

So close to giving it all up, she just had to gamble and play with fate, and now it had caught up to her.

"Open the door, Mae! I know you're in there!" Billy shouted as he banged on the door. "Don't think you're gonna trick me. You're not as good as you think you are. Now open this damn door!"

His voice brought a chill to Mae as she remembered the many times he had shouted at her before. Only this time she wasn't going to stand by and try to attempt to stop or change him. Frantically, she packed a couple of bags with her most important belongings. Outside, the sounds of the city mixed with the sounds inside her apartment, all chaotic.

At thirty-three years old, Mae had decided to change her ways, and successfully completed all the courses and training to be a therapist. It was a change from her former profession as a con-artist. However, there were similarities between the two.

She had spent her teens and most of her twenties as a talented and mischievous schemer. The daughter of the infamous conman, Sam Welles, she inherited her father's knack for deception. Growing up in Los Angeles, Mae's loving single dad taught her everything he knew about conning people, with a Robin Hood twist. Tall and burly, with thick black hair, brown eyes, and an easy smile, Sam was a master of

his craft. But tragedy struck when, at the age of fifty-four, Sam passed away, leaving Mae to navigate her own path. She was devastated to have him out of her life and she dove head first into a dark place. She double downed on her schemes and plans until it swallowed her. Then miraculously she found a way out of it.

The pounding at the door continued, Mae's green eyes filled with determination. She couldn't stay knowing that Billy would eventually break through the door. She had left her life of deception behind, dedicating herself to helping others as a therapist. The weight of her past still haunted her, but she was determined to rise above it.

She grabbed a photo of her and her father and stuffed it into her bag. Memories of her father flooded her mind. Sam had always been her rock, teaching her the art of manipulation, but also instilling a sense of justice. Together, they targeted the wealthy degenerates of their hometown, Los Angeles, seeking to balance the scales of greed and corruption. Mae inherited his talents, but she also inherited his desire for a better world.

“I know you took it from me, you bitch!” Billy shouted.

It jolted Mae out of the memory flash and she continued to pack.

She wished that her father was there with her. Sam had always been there for her, showing her love in his own unconventional way. Her journey as a therapist had just begun, but her past as a con artist would always be a part of her.

Using cash that she had hoarded from doing her cons, Mae had enrolled in school to become a therapist. It was a field that intrigued her, as she had gained profound insights into human nature through her experiences as a con artist. In order to successfully manipulate someone, she had to delve deep into their psyche, understand their desires, fears, and vulnerabilities. She knew people inside out. Knowing someone's fears meant you could manipulate them into doing something they did not

want to do.

Becoming a therapist was a natural progression for Mae. Armed with her unique understanding of personalities and the complexities of human behavior, she saw the opportunity to help others navigate their own struggles. It was a chance to utilize her talents in a way that would heal rather than harm. This was her way of atoning for her sins and making a new life for herself.

The realization of her father's flawed legacy fueled Mae's determination to be a force for good. She vowed to honor his memory by dedicating herself to the well-being of others, to undo any harm she may have caused in the past. This transformation from a mischievous con artist to a compassionate therapist was her chance at redemption.

Amidst the chaos, Billy's voice pierced through the door, filled with anger and desperation. "Open the door, Mae! I know you're in there!"

His words echoed through the hallway, but Mae remained silent, refusing to engage in his demands. She had learned the hard way not to succumb to his manipulative tactics.

As she packed, Mae's hands trembled slightly, a mixture of fear and determination. She grabbed only the essentials, making sure to include her financials folder and her laptop. They held the key to her new life, her chance to start fresh and leave behind the mistakes of the past.

The weight of guilt settled upon Mae's shoulders. She knew this predicament was her own doing. Despite her resolve to leave the life of cons behind, she couldn't resist the allure of one last con. It had become an addiction, a tempting dance with danger that she had been unable to resist. Though her intention was never to hurt anyone through her cons, she found herself willing to make an exception for Billy. After enduring his abuse, she sought revenge and saw this con as a way to reclaim her power and put

him in his place so that he couldn't hurt his next victim.

Now, as Billy pounded on the door, demanding his money back, Mae's emotions were a whirlwind. Anger, fear, and a hint of satisfaction mingled within her. She knew she had hurt him, and he wanted his share of the spoils. But she also knew that this was her opportunity to break free from his grasp, to reclaim her life and move forward.

Mae's mind raced with questions as she wondered how Billy had managed to find her after all these years. But there was no time to dwell on the answer; her immediate priority was to escape his clutches. With a sense of urgency, she draped her cross-body bag over her shoulder and carefully made her way to a back window, her movements as silent as possible.

The cool night air greeted Mae as she stepped onto the fire escape, her heart pounding in her chest. She descended the metal ladder, each rung a calculated move toward freedom. With a sense of relief, she leaped from the last rung, landing on the unforgiving asphalt road below. But just as her feet hit the ground, the sound of her front door being violently breached echoed in her ears.

Billy's voice sliced through the night, filled with anger and accusation. "Mae, where are you? You conniving bitch! I'll get you!"

The words sent shivers down her spine, fueling her determination to escape his clutches once and for all.

With adrenaline coursing through her veins, Mae sprinted toward the nearest intersection. Every step took her farther away from the chaos and closer to the possibility of freedom. Her eyes scanned the streets, searching for any sign of a taxi. Desperation filled her voice as she extended her arm, desperately trying to flag one down.

A cab appeared on the horizon, its glowing sign a beacon of hope. Mae waved her hand frantically, her voice carrying a plea as she shouted at the driver. "Oh, come on! Can't you see my hand here?" Her heart sank as the cab whizzed past her, leaving her stranded on the sidewalk.

Mae's heart pounded in her chest as she heard Billy's voice, now filled with a chilling clarity. "I see you, Mae. I'll get you!" His words cut through the night air, fueling her panic.

She quickly turned to face the window, only to find Billy emerging onto the fire escape. Dread washed over her, knowing the strength and determination he possessed.

Fear gripped Mae as she realized the imminent danger. Without a second thought, she bolted, her feet carrying her out into the chaotic traffic. The blaring horns and screeching tires drowned out the sound of her racing heart. It was a desperate attempt to create distance between herself and Billy, to find any means of escape.

In a moment of sheer terror, Mae found herself frozen in the path of an oncoming cab. Her eyes squeezed shut, bracing for impact, convinced it was the end. But when she dared to open her eyes, a wave of relief washed over her. The cab had come to a sudden halt, its fender mere inches from colliding with her.

The cab driver looked at her with a kind smile, leaning out of the window. His Scottish accent added a touch of warmth to the air. "Need a ride, lass?" he offered, extending a lifeline of escape. Mae's gratitude overwhelmed her as she rushed to the cab, yanking the door open and sliding inside.

"Floor it," she urged, her voice tinged with urgency. The cab accelerated, its tires screeching against the pavement. As the distance between Mae and her pursuer grew, she couldn't help but glance over her shoulder. Billy had leapt from the fire escape

ladder, landing on the unforgiving asphalt. Relief flooded her being, the weight of narrowly escaping his clutches settling upon her.

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CHAPTER 2

Relieved to have escaped the immediate threat, Mae sank back into the seat, allowing the tension to drain from her body. The cab driver, who had a charming Scottish accent, broke the silence.

"Where to, lass?" he asked, his voice carrying a hint of curiosity.

Mae's voice trembled slightly as she responded, "Anywhere, just get me far away from here."

A warm smile graced the cab driver's face as he nodded in understanding. "Far away from here? Done," he assured her, his tone filled with reassurance.

Mae couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort in his presence, a glimmer of hope that she was finally on the path to safety.

Taking a moment to gather herself, Mae cast a curious glance toward the cab driver. His thick Scottish brogue and ethereal voice intrigued her. There was something about him, a gentle and friendly aura tinged with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

She couldn't resist her curiosity and decided to ask, "Where are you from?"

Meeting her gaze through the rearview mirror, the cab driver chuckled softly. "Oh, far away from here, lass. You wouldn't believe it," he replied cryptically.

His words left Mae intrigued yet wanting for more details. Her suspicion about his

Scottish origins was confirmed, adding another layer of mystery to the situation.

The Scottish cab driver broke the silence once again. "How are you doing, lass?" he asked with genuine concern.

Mae mustered a faint smile in response. "I'm doing better now," she replied softly, grateful for the reprieve from immediate danger.

As the cab journeyed through the city streets, Mae's mind swirled with thoughts of what to do about Billy. Going back home was no longer an option; it would only invite more trouble. Calling the police was out of the question too, as it would expose her con artist past. She knew that Billy would never relent, and she had to find a way to start anew.

Deep in her thoughts, her brow furrowed, she must have caught the cab driver's attention. His perceptive gaze met hers in the rearview mirror. "You seem distraught, lass. You ran out onto the road in such a way," he observed, his voice laced with empathy.

Mae sighed, realizing the gravity of her situation. "Yes, well, I was running from someone, and now that I think of it, I don't think I can ever go back," she confided, the weight of her words hanging in the air.

The cab driver nodded knowingly, his voice carrying a wisdom beyond his years. "Sometimes it is best to not go back to the old life and start a new one instead," he offered, his words resonating with an air of truth.

Mae found his perspective intriguing, though she couldn't help but find it somewhat peculiar. Nonetheless, she decided to let it go, recognizing the need to focus on the present and the uncertain path ahead.

The cab driver maintained his gaze through the rearview mirror, seemingly unfazed by Mae's sudden change in demeanor.

Undeterred, she mustered her street toughness and confronted him. "Hey, why do you keep looking at me? You don't want to mess with me, buster," she warned, her voice carrying a hint of her hardened exterior.

The cab driver, however, remained calm and composed. "I was merely doing you a favor, lass," he explained gently. "Seeing if we are being followed."

Mae's shoulders relaxed as his words sank in, and she turned to peer out of the rear window. "Oh, thank you. I didn't think to look. Well, is anyone following us?" she inquired, her eyes scanning the cars behind them.

The cab driver shook his head, his reassuring tone putting her at ease. "No, not that I can tell. All different cars. I think you are in the clear," he reassured her.

A wave of relief washed over Mae as she exhaled deeply. "Well, that's good news. Billy is an awful person. I should have never dated him. I don't know what I was thinking. Good men are hard to come by," she lamented, her voice tinged with regret.

The cab driver's smile remained steady; his eyes filled with understanding. "Well, you can relax and take a load off. I will continue to drive until you see a place you want to stop," he offered, his kindness radiating through his words.

Mae nodded appreciatively. "That's good. Get out of the city and take me to the outskirts of town, and by then, I will know where I want to go."

Sinking further into the plush back seat, Mae felt the weight of exhaustion settle upon her. Her eyelids grew heavier with each passing moment.

As they ventured farther from the city's heart, the landscape morphed into a tapestry of dimly lit streets and sleepy neighborhoods. The cab driver guided the vehicle with practiced ease, his hands steady upon the wheel, weaving through the labyrinth of deserted roads. Mae's gaze fixated on the passing scenery, catching glimpses of familiar landmarks and hidden corners that held fragments of memories.

The city of Los Angeles, with its shimmering facade and dreams whispered within its concrete walls, unfurled before her eyes. A patchwork of vibrant cultures, starlit boulevards, and whispered promises that lured dreamers from far and wide. Mae couldn't help but feel a bittersweet pang, a farewell to the life she once knew, as the city slowly retreated in the rearview mirror.

Seeking solace in the confines of the cab, Mae allowed herself to sink further into the plush back seat, the hum of the engine lulling her into a state of drowsiness. Fatigue began to wash over her, the weight of the day's events settling on her shoulders. With each passing mile, her eyelids grew heavier, until finally, she succumbed to the beckoning embrace of sleep.

As Mae drifted in the realm between consciousness and dreams, she sensed that the cab driver was maintaining a watchful eye over her, though his focus was unwavering on the road ahead. She noticed that the soft glow of streetlights bathed the interior of the vehicle, casting an ethereal aura upon his features. His weathered face held a sense of quiet wisdom, a testament to a life lived and stories untold.

Outside the window, the cityscape gradually transformed into a suburban tapestry, dotted with quaint houses and tree-lined streets. The cacophony of urban chaos faded, replaced by a serene quietude that enveloped them in a soothing embrace. It was a world removed from the tumultuous existence Mae had left behind; a sanctuary of calm amidst the storm.

With each passing minute, the rhythmic purr of the cab's engine melded

harmoniously with Mae's steady breathing, the cadence of their journey lulling her deeper into slumber. Her mind wandered through a haze of memories, the fragmented pieces of her past intermingling with hopes for a brighter future.

In the dimly lit interior of the cab, the cab driver's voice resonated with a whisper of guidance. "Rest now, lass," he murmured, his words a gentle reassurance. "You have escaped the clutches of darkness. Embrace the tranquility that awaits you in the unknown."

As the miles melted away, the cab driver steered them toward the outskirts of the city, where the night sky stretched out in an expanse of twinkling stars. The air carried a hint of crispness, a reminder of the limitless possibilities that awaited Mae beyond the familiar city limits.

A sense of anticipation stirred within Mae's slumbering mind, mingling with the remnants of fear and uncertainty. She knew that her escape marked the beginning of a new chapter, one in which she would redefine herself, leaving behind the shadows of her past. The cab driver, with his enigmatic presence, became a guiding light in this odyssey of self-discovery.

As the cab continued to carve its path through the night, Mae surrendered to the serenity of the moment, a respite from the chaos that had defined her recent existence. In the realm of dreams, she glimpsed fragments of her future, the possibilities shimmering like stars in the night sky.

And so, the cab pressed on, carrying Mae toward an uncertain destination, both physically and metaphorically. With each passing mile, she drew closer to a new beginning, leaving behind the remnants of a life she could no longer call her own. The road stretched out before them, a winding tapestry of possibilities, and Mae embarked upon this journey with a mix of trepidation and hope, eager to embrace the untold adventures that awaited her on the horizon.

CHAPTER 3

Mae's eyes slowly fluttered open; her vision greeted by the vivid hues of an expansive cerulean sky stretching above her. A gentle breeze rustled through the grassy field, carrying with it the scent of wildflowers and earth. She propped herself up on her elbows, taking in the panorama before her. The distant sounds of birds chirping and leaves whispering in the wind added to the serene atmosphere.

Confusion settled on her brows as she tried to recall how she ended up in this unfamiliar place. Her surroundings were a stark contrast to the bustling streets of Los Angeles she was accustomed to. The air felt fresher, untainted by the exhaust fumes and urban clamor that permeated her daily life. It was as if she had been transported to a different time and space. The air carried a hint of ocean breeze, but this wasn't the beaches of California.

Gathering her thoughts, Mae rose to her feet and surveyed her surroundings. The field stretched out in all directions, carpeted with vibrant green grass that swayed and danced in rhythm with the wind. The absence of any other human presence made her feel both isolated and curious about her unexpected predicament.

"Hello? Anyone there?" she said. "Where the heck am I?" she mumbled the last words to herself.

She turned around in a circle, realizing that she stood in the shadow of something. Her gaze fell upon the grandeur that loomed before her—a majestic castle perched atop a nearby hill.

“What the... what is that?” she said.

Its stone walls looked battered and rose into the sky, with low stone walls surrounding it. She suddenly remembered her phone in her pocket. She pulled it out and looked at it.

“Crap, no reception.”

Mae clutched her cell phone tightly, hoping against hope that she would find a signal in this unfamiliar terrain. Frustration gnawed at her as she tried in vain to make a call, but the lack of reception persisted. She pocketed the useless device, feeling disoriented and lost. With a determined stride, she began her journey toward the hill with the castle, the only building she could see from where she stood.

As she ventured closer, the imposing silhouette of the regal castle emerged large and looming on the hillside. Stone and timber melded together in what looked to be a formidable structure, its weathered exterior carrying the weight of history. The building's strategic placement probably afforded it a commanding view of a lake she could see in the distance on the edge of the hill, lending it an aura of both strength and mystery. Mae's steps quickened as she continued her approach, drawn to the building like a moth to a flame.

The details of the building came into focus as she drew nearer the bottom of the hill. Its walls were covered in intricate carvings and weathered markings that had to be deep in the wood to be seen from the bottom of the hill. Towering timber walls and sturdy stone towers seemed to guard its perimeters. She could just make out an iron gate that blocked access to the inner part of what had to be a courtyard surrounding the building. She could see people there, in the towers, but they were shadowed and too far away still to make out what they were doing or who they might be.

Mae's mind raced with questions; her curiosity piqued by the enigmatic sight before

her. How had she ended up here, far from the familiar comforts of Los Angeles? Was this some elaborate historical reenactment, or had she stumbled upon something more extraordinary? Maybe some rich person had a castle erected in the hills of Northern California. She'd heard of a few who'd had old Scottish and English castles brought to the States and rebuilt them here. Maybe that's what this was?

She continued moving toward the castle, her steps guided by a mix of trepidation and determination. Her past had honed her instincts for control and situational awareness, and now she yearned to regain that sense of command. The air crackled with an undercurrent of urgency, urging her to seek answers. She needed to find a way back to something familiar. She needed to find a phone. And what had happened to that cab driver? And her bag? Neither had been around when she'd woken up.

Mae's gaze shifted from the building to the surrounding landscape, taking in the expanse of farmland and what could only be described as moors that stretched into the distance. Moors? In California? She shook her head. An unsettled feeling filled her as she looked about. Nothing here was familiar. It didn't feel like California, but she had no idea where she could possibly be. It didn't make sense.

Her gaze took in several dark copses dotting the edges of the river, which added an air of mystique to the picturesque scene and confirmed her suspicion that she was nowhere near Los Angeles. She came upon a crossroad and saw a wooden sign post reading Ballygrant , which she thought might be the nearest town. She hesitated, contemplating taking the treacherous looking road toward the town, but something cautioned her against taking the risk.

She'd never heard of a town in California named Ballygrant, and she wondered what kind of place it was. Was she even in California anymore? Had she somehow ended up in Oregon, or maybe Nevada? Why couldn't she remember, she wondered.

Mae pressed on, seeking answers, and hopefully a phone.

She cautiously stepped onto the dirt road between a group of stone and thatch-roofed cottages that sprawled at the bottom of the hill. As she followed the dirt road toward the castle, the gazes of the people there fell upon her. She could sense their curiosity, their eyes lingering on her clothing that contrasted with the clothing they wore. It reminded her of something out of the show *Outlander*, which she'd seen a few times. The vibrant hues of blue and green plaid dresses and kilts, were very different from her jeans, boots, and sweater.

Was it possible she'd somehow been drugged and dropped in Scotland? The idea was absurd. Surely she'd have noticed a plane trip across the world, right? She laughed to herself. This had to be some sort of tv stage set or something. It couldn't be real.

The bustling little area seemed like one of those villages you'd see in period dramas, complete with everything you'd expect to see on the show to make it look authentic. A blacksmith hammered away at iron, his rhythmic strikes echoing through the air. Sheep grazed within small corrals, while others roamed freely across the hillside. Women, their arms burdened with heavy baskets filled with what she was sure had to be vegetables, moved purposefully along the road. And there, close to the edge of the road, about fifty yards from the lake she'd seen, a man diligently salted freshly caught fish on a wooden table.

Everyday life unfolded before Mae's eyes, a captivating tableau that both intrigued and bewildered her. She felt like an outsider in this tapestry of authenticity, yearning to make sense of her surroundings. She started looking for tv cameras but could find none. It was all so surreal, and she felt nervous as she looked around. Finally, Mae mustered the courage to break the silence as she approached a woman coming toward her on the road.

"Hello," Mae ventured, her voice filled with hope. "Can I use your phone? I need to make a phone call."

The woman with the basket halted in her tracks, her gaze fixed upon Mae. A moment of anticipation hung in the air, but the woman remained silent, her expression inscrutable.

Undeterred, Mae pressed on, hoping for some semblance of understanding. "Okay, well, can you at least tell me where I am?" she implored, feeling a touch of desperation.

The woman, as if possessed by an unseen force, scurried away without uttering a single word, leaving Mae with nothing but unanswered questions and a growing sense of isolation.

Confusion swirled in Mae's mind as she stood amidst the bustling little town, the inhabitants wrapped up in their own lives, unwilling to help her. Maybe they were actors afraid to break character? she wondered.

Mae's patience wore thin as the people continued to avert their gazes whenever her eyes met theirs. She couldn't help but feel a sense of alienation, as though she was an intruder in their world. Just as her frustration threatened to consume her, a drunken figure, swathed in a brown and green plaid kilt, stumbled toward her.

She took in the man's features—medium height, delicate features that bordered on femininity, and lustrous blond hair. His gray eyes, bloodshot most likely from the effects of whisky or some other form of alcohol, held a glint of hunger as they fixated upon her and sent a sliver of fear through her. The pungent aroma of alcohol emanated from him, wafting through the air before he even uttered a word. Mae braced herself, her streetwise instincts kicking in, preparing to confront this intoxicated man.

"Lass," he slurred, his words thick with an accent she was surprised to hear, "are you a woman o' pleasure, then?"

Mae recoiled in disgust at his proposition, her indignation simmering beneath the surface. "What the heck is that supposed to mean?" she retorted; her voice laced with scorn. Did he think she was a hooker? What the heck would give him that idea?

The drunken man leered at her; his intentions clear. "You ken what it means, girl. You be wearin' trousers, and yer hair is down. So, how much for yer time?"

Mae's eyes widened in anger at how this Scotsman was treating her. She was about to unleash her wrath upon him when another man intervened, stepping between them.

The newcomer exuded an air of authority and strength, his presence commanding attention. His rugged features and piercing gaze conveyed a sense of determination. He had arrived in the nick of time, rescuing Mae from the intoxicated intruder. Tension crackled in the air as the two men locked eyes, each sizing up the other.

Mae seized the opportunity to regain her composure, taking a step back from the drunken man and focusing her attention on her unexpected savior. She couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude mixed with curiosity.

The new man stood tall and lean, and she could see his muscles bulge in his linen shirt, which meant he was strong too. With his short, curly reddish blond hair and piercing blue eyes, he possessed a rugged charm that instantly captivated Mae.

This man, who also wore the vibrant blue and green plaid fabric over his linen shirt and a kilt to match, turned to the drunken man, and firmly stated, "Be gone, and donnae trouble the lass any further."

The intruder resisted, and said, "Mind yer business."

This prompted her savior to forcefully shove the drunk away, ensuring he understood the gravity of the situation. Once the drunk man had retreated with a few choice curse

words she couldn't really make out, the man who'd rescued her redirected his attention to Mae.

He offered her a warm smile and said, "I apologize for his behavior, lass. You shouldnae have had to endure such disrespect."

Grateful for his intervention, Mae expressed her gratitude, saying, "Thanks for steppin' in. That took some guts. Most guys would have just ignored what was going on."

The man, his brow furrowed in confusion, looked her over and she was sure he was just now noticing how differently she was dressed from him. He tilted his head slightly and asked, "What manner of speech is that you use? And why are you dressed so differently?"

Mae was filled with amusement as she replied, "Well, I could ask you the same question, though I know it's gotta be Scottish. Which would be odd if I didn't already know I couldn't be in California anymore. So where am I? And while I recognize that you are using a Scottish accent, I have to wonder why you're speakin' with such an old dialect of it? Are you filming a tv show? Is this some kind of set for Outlander ? Or some other movie?"

A flicker of what seemed like realization crossed the man's face. His grin was one of curiosity as he said, "You must be a traveler from a distant land, brought here by an enchantment, like Jennifer. Fate or maybe tis the fae playing tricks upon us of late, lass."

Mae's eyes widened, as she feared for the man's sanity. "What?" Nothing he'd just said made any sense to her.

The man's commanding voice pierced through the air, calling out to a young boy on

the road. "You there, Brodie, come here."

The boy, who had strawberry blond hair and brown eyes came over to join them. He looked to be about nine years old, and Mae wondered why he wasn't in school.

"Aye, sir? What do you need from me?"

"Run up to the fort on the hill and deliver a message to the Chief for me," he ordered. "Tell him Niall has come across another like Lady Jennifer. Ask him if he will meet us at the gate. Go on now, be quick about it, Brodie."

"Aye, sir." Brodie nodded and hurried off, leaving the man she now knew was Niall to turn his attention back to her.

She couldn't suppress the laughter that bubbled up within her, finding the situation utterly absurd. A Chief? Where the heck was she? She couldn't help but feel she was caught in some strange reenactment scenario.

Niall's smile grew wide as he inquired, "What is it, lass?" He tilted his head, his gaze curious as he studied her. "What's so diverting? You seem to be quite amused by something, but I cannae fathom what that might be."

After composing herself, Mae finally responded, "I'll admit it, I'm amused, but also really confused. What's happening here? Am I part of some Renaissance faire or a silly tv show? Is this like that practical jokers show? I can't handle any more of this madness, right now, I need you to break character, please." Her amusement faded to worry with her words.

Niall's expression shifted, and he looked concerned. "I ken not what you mean, lass," he replied, sounding earnest. "I suppose you must be very confused with all of this. Lady Jen was as well, I believe. Perhaps I should explain a bit. You are on the isle of

Islay, in Scotland. This,” he swept his arm to encompass the hill with the castle as well as the grouping of homes around them, “is Fort Donald. But fear not, yer confusion shall be eased once you speak with Lady Jennifer. She shares in your peculiar circumstances, though perhaps your stories differ in origins. If you accompany me to the fort gate, I do believe that she will provide you with the answers you seek and can explain much better than I. She's the wife of our Chief, Cam MacDonald.”

Mae hesitated, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. She battled with her own inner turmoil, aware of the risks that awaited her. She had developed a keen sense of caution in her past life, always wary of potential tricks. Yet, the allure of finding a phone and unraveling the mysteries surrounding her compelled her to consider Niall's offer.

Contemplating her options, Mae weighed the potential dangers against her desperate need for answers. She couldn't deny the attraction she felt toward Niall, sensing a genuine kindness in his eyes. Perhaps this journey held more than just the promise of communication—it could hold the key to unlocking the truth of her predicament and that was very much worth the risk of going with him up the hill to the castle gate she could just make out from where she stood.

CHAPTER 4

As Mae and Niall approached Fort Donald, Mae couldn't help but feel a mixture of awe and nervousness at the sight, questioning the possibility of such a structure existing. It looked too authentic to be part of a tv or movie set. But how could it be here in and in use in the twenty-first century?

“What is your name, lass?” Niall asked as they walked.

Mae glanced at him as he matched his stride to hers. She was sure that he could have made the journey up the hill much faster with his longer, muscular legs. She had to admit he was an attractive man and she wanted to get to know him better, so she paused her steps, held out her hand and answered, “Dr. Mae Welles, though I’m not a medical doctor, I mean I am, but not that kind. Sorry, what I mean is I’m a psychiatrist.”

His brow furrowed again, but he gently took her small hand in his much larger one and held it. “Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I am Niall MacDonald, cousin to our Chief, Cam MacDonald. I’m a guardsman.”

“A guardsman? What does that mean?” Mae looked at him curiously as they began walking again.

“I and others protect these people and these lands.” He gestured to the land around them.

“Who do you protect them from?” Mae asked, hoping to figure out exactly what kind

of cosplay she'd dropped into.

Niall shrugged, and gave her a smile. "Any who wish to bring us harm, be it bandits, or waring clans, but I won't bore you with the details." His smile widened as they reached the massive wall. "Welcome to Fort Donald."

Passing beneath the open iron gate, Mae stepped into the courtyard, her eyes darting around to take in the surroundings. The interior of the protective walls revealed contrasting scenes. The courtyard unfolded before her, showcasing the diverse nature of the fort. There were stables with horses and other livestock on one side that spanned halfway toward the castle. There were stalls with vendors selling goods, and what looked like a guard building where various men walking around with bows and swords were entering and exiting. There were men who appeared to be guards like Niall on the walls and in the towers as well. Several of the inhabitants gazed at her with perplexed glances. She continued to scan the area and was amazed to see an old time blacksmith working a forge. He was hammering away at a piece of metal that rung through the courtyard every time the hammer dropped to the metal.

Mae's words tumbled out in wonder, her mind filled with amazement and disbelief at the site before her. "This... this is so unreal," she murmured. "It's like I'm dreaming, because every detail is just too perfect. How is this even possible?"

Niall regarded her, his blue eyes searching hers. They held nothing but kindness and what she thought might be empathy. "I ken it must be overwhelming for you, lass," he replied gently. "But rest assured, you are not alone in yer confusion of being in this place. Let us find Lady Jennifer, and she may shed some light on yer predicament."

With the weight of uncertainty pressing upon her, Mae paused her steps, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. "This place is all real. This isn't a tv set or some fake cosplay, is it?" Her heart began to race. "Be honest with me, Niall, I'm not dreaming,

right? You aren't a figment of my imagination?"

Niall flashed a warm smile, a hint of playfulness in his voice as he replied, "Shall I pinch you, lass, to assure you that you are indeed awake?" He chuckled.

Mae couldn't help but notice Niall's dashing smile and his captivating charm, let alone the laugh that had butterflies building in her stomach. Something about him gave her a warm feeling that she very much liked. She looked around again, curiosity getting the better of her, Mae turned her attention back to the matter at hand. "So, where can we find your Chief and his wife? Didn't you ask that kid to have him meet us here at the gate?" she inquired, her eyes scanning the courtyard in search of any signs of their arrival. And then a thought struck her before he could answer. "Is his wife allowed to speak freely?" Something about this place made her think of centuries past where women were supposed to be seen but not heard. Surely that wasn't the case though, right? She feared it might be.

Niall chuckled softly, his eyes lighting up with amusement once more. "Oh, she does much more than speak, lass," he replied, his voice filled with a hint of mischief. "Lady Jen is not only Cam's wife, she is also a fierce guardsman, and one o' our finest. Her spirit and skill are unmatched."

Mae's astonishment had to show on her face as she processed this new information. The realization that women played such prominent roles in this place challenged her preconceived notions. Maybe it really was all fake and was some sort of futuristic tv show that only looked like old world Scotland? One that made that women as tough, and skilled, and strong as the men. That would be just like Hollywood, she thought. She looked at Niall and how muscular he was, there was no way a woman could take him down. Were the other guardsmen weaker than he was? Was that how this Jennifer was unmatched? Or was it just that the storyline for the show was written that way? She pursed her lips as she contemplated her thoughts.

Lost in her thoughts, Mae found herself drawn to Niall's genuine nature and the hint of playfulness in his voice. It was a refreshing change from the guardedness she had grown accustomed to. It ignited a flicker of hope within her, a belief that there were good guys out there, even if they were dressed in re-enactment clothes.

“What has that pensive look upon your face, lass?” He asked, breaking through her reverie.

"Just curious as to how a woman could have skills that are unmatched by someone who is obviously very fit and skilled himself," she replied, her eyes raking over his frame.

Niall laughed. “Trust me when I say, Lady Jen has brought many of us to our knees with what she calls martial arts. We are learning a great deal from her. Though, you are right, in a general sense, men are stronger, but the way she fights is much different than what we are accustomed to, and what our enemies are accustomed to. It gives her an advantage.” He winked.

Martial arts? Mae was taken aback. That was a phrase that didn't belong here, coming from his mouth. What the hell is going on? she wondered.

Niall turned his gaze toward the arched stone doorway of the castle, drawing her attention in that direction too. A sense of anticipation filled the air, as she waited to see what was happening. Was it possible that the Chief was coming out to greet them as Niall had asked for him to do?

A moment later, a tall, dashing man, powerfully built, with thick, wavy auburn hair and bright blue eyes walked through the now open heavy wooden doors. A concerned look was etched upon his face, his brows furrowed with worry, and she wondered what had put that look there and who he was. Could he be this Chief that Niall had spoken of? Walking beside him was a woman of medium height, athletic and pretty,

with dark brown hair neatly braided and wound into a bun at the base of her neck. As she got closer, Mae noticed she had hazel eyes. Was this the Lady Jennifer that Niall has spoken of?

The woman's face reflected shock as she noticed Mae, scanning her outfit with surprise.

In a Scottish brogue that was similar to Niall's, the man said, "Another one? Can it truly be happening again?" He seemed astonished to see her and perhaps a bit worried.

Niall replied, "Chief, may I introduce Doctor Mae Welles? I cannae say for certain she comes from the same place as Lady Jennifer, but mayhap once the ladies speak, we shall have our answer."

"A doctor?" the Chief looked at her with even more curiosity than before.

"Not a medical doctor." Mae frowned. Maybe she shouldn't have added the doctor part to her introduction, but she was proud of the title. It was just hard explaining. "I'm a psychiatrist. You can just call me Mae."

The Chief looked at the woman by his side.

"I'll explain later," she murmured and then smiled at Mae.

"Very well, Lady Mae, tis a pleasure to welcome you to Islay, this is my Lady wife, Jennifer."

"Hi, Mae, I'm Jennifer MacDonald. Everyone calls me Lady Jennifer or Jen. You can just call me Jen though" She grinned.

Relieved to hear a familiar accent, Mae replied, "Hey, so I have no idea where I am or what's happening here. I woke up in a field down the hill and over that way," Mae pointed, "after being in a cab on my way out of LA. It just doesn't make any sense my being here."

Jennifer exchanged a glance with her husband before turning back to her. "Yeah, I get where you're coming from. I've been exactly in this same position and the explanation is pretty unbelievable, but I assure you it's all real. Why don't you come inside with me? I'm gonna bet you're starving, right? We can have lunch and I'll fill you in on what's happened."

Mae felt a sense of unease along with her frustration. Why couldn't she just tell her now? Was it something awful? Her stomach twisted at that thought. She shook her head. "I don't think I can eat anything. I need to know what's going on, right now. Please, just tell me."

Jennifer let out a sigh. "Alright, but I'm warning you, it's not going to be easy to believe."

"Nothing about this place is easy to believe and I'm seeing it with my own eyes. What is going on here, Jen?"

Jen blew out a breath, her hands on her hips. "Fine, like me, you've traveled back in time. We're in seventeenth century Scotland, on the Isle of Isley."

Mae fell silent. The absurdity of the situation overwhelmed her, and after a brief pause, laughter bubbled up from within her. "Oh, come on. That's your explanation? I've time traveled to seventeenth century Scotland? You've gotta be pulling my leg." She rolled her eyes as she let the laughter spill out of her. The idea was absurd.

Jennifer winced and shook her head no. Her gaze was filled with empathy as she

replied, "I'm not joking. It's real. These people, this place, it's all real. I know it sounds unbelievable, it sounded that way to me too when I got here. But it's the truth, Mae. We're in the seventeenth century."

Mae's laughter slowly subsided, replaced by astonishment and curiosity. She realized Jen wasn't kidding. "Wait, you're actually being serious," she said.

"Yes, absolutely, I wouldn't joke about this," she affirmed, her voice gentle. "I know it's a lot to process."

"Yeah," Mae nodded, "it really is."

"How about we go get something to eat now, and I'll tell you how I ended up here and what I know about how it happened."

Mae nodded. "Yeah, okay, I suppose I could eat now. Food and water would probably be a good idea." She smirked. "I have a feeling that after that, I might need something a little stronger to wrap my head around all of this."

Jen laughed as Mae had meant for her to do. "Come on, we'll head to the dining hall." She turned to her husband and added, "I'll take it from here, see you later?" She leaned in and kissed his cheek.

"We'll leave you to it, then, love." Cam smiled at her as he and Niall turned toward the guardhouse.

"Did Niall tell you where you were? I mean what this place is?"

Mae nodded. "He said this is Fort Donald, looks more like a castle to me though than a fort."

“I thought the same, and really it is a castle, Fort Donald is just the name.” Jen led her into the building and down a grand hallway with stone floors and walls full of tapestries and sconces filled with torches to light the way. She paused her steps and glanced toward the stairs.

“What is it?” Mae asked.

“I was trying to decide if we should eat in the hall or in my suite. You might be more comfortable there,” she said.

“Probably more comfortable than eating in the hall. Where would we sit?” she asked, looking around.

Jen laughed. “I meant the dining hall, it’s what they call it here. This is the grand hall, then up there to the right is the dining hall, on the left is the kitchens. The dining hall is also used for large gatherings and when Cam has to address local issues.” She turned toward the stairs. “Let’s go up. I’ll send someone to bring us a meal.”

“What, like a maid?” Mae joked.

Jen smiled. “Sort of. They are the staff who run the castle. Everyone is important around here and treated well, no one is treated like a servant really, more like assistants.”

They entered a room on the third floor and Mae was amazed. Brightly colored tapestries hung on the walls depicting scenes of battles, heroic tales, and the breathtaking landscapes of Scotland. She took in the room with its cushioned seating, the stone fireplace that looked massive, the table and chairs that sat under a window where the sun shone in, giving more light to the room. She turned as she heard Jen speaking to someone.

“Sally, would you mind very much bringing up a platter from lunch? I thought our guest might be a little more comfortable up here until she’s more acclimated to us.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to, Lady Jen.”

“Sally, you know you can just call me Jen.” Jen shook her head, but she was smiling wryly at the young woman.

Sally laughed. “I know, but you are married to the Chief now, and there are others about.” She glanced toward the hallway behind her.

“We’re friends, you don’t have to. Anyway, this is Mae. Mae, come over here and meet Sally. She saved my bacon when I first got here.”

Sally looked confused. “I didn’t save you any bacon?”

Mae and Jen both laughed.

“That’s just an expression from where we’re from. I meant you were a great help to me.”

“Oh, I see. Well, tis nice to meet you, Mae. If you need anything, which I’m sure you will, just let me know.” She grinned. “I’ll go see to that food.”

“Thanks, Sally.”

Once Sally was gone, Jen moved to a pitcher on a cabinet next to the table and chairs and poured two glasses, handing one to Mae. “It’s just water. It’s clean though, I make sure it gets boiled before anyone drinks it.”

Mae hadn’t even thought of anything like that and was glad Jen had. She took a drink

and then said, "Alright, Jen, I'm ready to hear everything. Lay it all out for me, I can take it. What's going on here? How did we get here?"

Jen directed her to two chairs and they both sat down. Mae was surprised at how comfortable it actually was when she sat. Jen began with how she had traveled to Memphis for her dad's funeral and how she'd met a strange man. From there her world had been turned upside down. Mae couldn't help but be astonished and wondered how in the world any of it could be true.

Surely she was on some kind of hidden camera tv show, right?

This couldn't be real.

CHAPTER 5

Mae took a deep breath and stared at the woman across from her. "So, let me get this straight," she began, her voice tinged with skepticism. "You're saying that somehow this man, sorry, this fae person, brought you back in time; brought me back in time? You actually believe that we've time traveled?"

Jen nodded. "I know it's hard to believe. Trust me, I felt the same way when I first arrived here. But you've seen this place, heard the people speak here, how can you deny that it's true? Have you seen even one car? An airplane in the sky? Anyone with a smart phone? Hell, we don't even have electricity here."

Mae sighed, her mind swirling with conflicting thoughts. She had always prided herself on being able to read people, on being adept at spotting deception and falsehoods. Yet, everything she had seen and heard since waking up in this strange place seemed genuine, devoid of any ulterior motives. She had to consider the possibility that Jen was telling the truth, no matter how fantastic and crazy it seemed.

"All right," Mae finally conceded, feeling a glimmer of acceptance. "I'll entertain the idea that we've somehow traveled back in time, for now, just so I don't go crazy. But why are we here? How did this happen to us?"

Jen shrugged. "As I said, a strange man asked me if I was ready for a challenge and a brand new life, and then I ended up here. I don't know how it happened or exactly why it was offered to me, but here I am."

"Who was this guy?"

“He never gave me his name, but he was an odd looking man with a Scottish accent. Did you meet anyone like that prior to coming here?”

Mae thought about it and realized her cab driver had sounded Scottish. “I didn’t get a good look at him, I was busy trying to get away from Billy, but I’d swear my cab driver was Scottish.”

Jen nodded. “Probably the same man, though I don’t think he’s Scottish actually. I’m pretty sure he was fae.”

Mae leaned back in her chair, contemplating the implications of Jennifer's words. "Well, it’s going to take me some time to get used to this. So, there’s no phone to use to call anyone to come get me? No way to go back to LA? I’m just stuck here?”

“No, there’s no phone. And nobody you know is alive yet, so I’m not sure who you’d call. However, you don’t have to stay here at Fort Donald. We aren’t going to hold you hostage or anything. But you’ve got a place here if you want it.” Jen smiled. “If you do want to go out, I would suggest a change of clothes though. Maybe if you go out there, see a bit of the area, you’ll find I’m telling the truth.”

“I guess changing my clothes would help me fit in a little better around here, huh?” Mae laughed. “Can’t say I’m looking forward to giving up my jeans for a dress.”

Jen giggled. “Yeah, I wasn’t either and I don’t always wear a dress, sometimes I wear pants to work with the guards. I’ve been training them to fight in MMA.”

“MMA? Niall mentioned you were teaching them martial arts, I didn’t know what to think.” She shook her head and gave her a rueful look.

Jen nodded. “Yeah. I do mixed martial arts. I was a competitive fighter before all of this. I might not be able to fight in the octagon, but I gotta say, I get plenty of

satisfaction in using my skills here.” Her grin widened.

Mae smiled. Jen’s face lit up when she talked about MMA. She asked her a few more questions about her life prior to being here and wondered how any of this could be a con. Jen seemed so genuine; they all did. Nobody was out of place, nobody broke character, there were no wires or battery operated equipment anywhere to be seen and she was looking for it.

“This isn’t an elaborate con, is it.” It wasn’t a question. She felt in her gut that it wasn’t.

“No, promise it’s not. It’s all real.”

Mae sighed. It was getting hard not to believe her.

Sally returned, knocking on the door. “I’ve brought your meal,” she called through the door.

Jen hopped up and opened the door wide. “Sorry, Sally, I should have just left the door open for you,” she said as Sally moved in with a heavy looking silver tray.

Sally set the tray down on the cabinet and then moved two covered dishes to the table. “I’ve brought you roast, potatoes, carrots, and baked bread. Did you want some ale to go with it?” she asked.

“Yes, that would probably be good,” Jen answered.

Mae couldn’t help but agree.

Jennifer gestured toward the table. “Come sit. I promise the food here is going to blow your mind.”

Mae pulled out a chair and settled herself at the table, her stomach grumbling at the scents wafting off the plate. “It smells delicious.” She took a bite and the rich flavors danced on her tongue. “Oh my God, this is so good.”

“I’ll leave you ladies to enjoy,” Sally said and left the room.

“That’s one of the best things of being here. The food is just amazing and flavorful. I think we’re so used to everything being processed and full of chemicals, and now there’s none of that to mess with the way it’s supposed to taste.” Jen took a bite of her roast, her eyelids fluttering closed as she chewed.

“I could get used to this,” Mae murmured.

As they ate, Jen began to tell her a little about the history of the area. She told her about the Highland clans, their customs and traditions, and the ever-present undercurrent of intrigue and danger that pervaded their lives.

Mae listened intently, her mind spinning at the craziness of it all. It was all so different from her life in Los Angeles. But was it real?

With every passing moment, Mae's doubts and uncertainties began to fade. The evidence was all around her—the ancient stones that formed the castle, the genuine sincerity in the eyes of those she had encountered so far, and the undeniable connection she felt with Jen and this mysterious place. She had somehow come on this crazy trip to the past and she knew it was going to be a challenge to navigate it all on her own. She was glad to have Jen here with her.

“So you said you were a psychiatrist?” Jen asked a few minutes later.

“I just finished getting my degree a few weeks ago. I was getting ready to set myself up as a therapist.” Mae sighed.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I know that took a lot of work. Um, about your title... I know you’re proud of it, but probably best not to use it here, at least not until they understand you aren’t a medical doctor, or they’ll come to you for all their ailments.” She smiled, but her eyes held empathy.

Mae nodded. “Yeah, I get that. And it’s not like I’m used to it. Besides, I’d rather they all just call me Mae. You know?”

Jen giggled. “They are very polite around here, and respectful. Especially the men.” Her cheeks flushed.

“You mean Cam... the Chief?” Mae teased.

Jen laughed again. “Yes, but the others too.”

They spoke a little more about how Jen and Cam got together and then Mae raised her glass. "Should we toast?"

“What should we toast to?” Jen asked, giggling.

“How about to the Highlands, and to you finding love here? And to whatever I have to face ahead?”

Jen grinned. “That’s a mouthful, but let’s. To the Highlands, to love, and to the future.”

A few minutes later, Sally returned and cleared away their meal. "Anything else you be needing, Lady Jen?" she asked.

“Yes, I forgot to ask, but has a room been prepared for Mae?”

“Aye, I saw to it meself,” Sally said with a smile. “Arranged some clothing for her as well. We’ve put her in the guest chamber on the second floor, the same one you used when you first arrived. And some of the other staff are filling a tub for her as we speak. I thought you might enjoy a bath, Miss.”

“I’m so glad you thought of it and did that, Sally, I don’t know what I would do without you,” Jen replied.

“Mae, you can call me Mae, Sally. Thank you, a bath would be great.” Mae was surprised at her thoughtfulness.

“Was there anything else?”

“No, thanks, Sally, I’ll take Mae to her room so she can relax.” Jen rose and waited for Mae to join her. “It’s not too far,” she said.

Jen led the way back into the hall and over to the stairs, then down a flight and through another two hallways that were lit with torches on the walls. That was going to take some getting used to. When Jen opened the wooden door to the room, Mae took in the cozy surroundings. A plush bed adorned with a thick, green, fabric bedspread stood against one wall, its inviting softness beckoning her to lie down. A hearth crackled nearby, providing warmth to the room and cast a gentle glow that illuminated everything. A wooden table and chairs sat by the window, offering a view of the distant lake, its shimmering waters reflected the golden hues of the sun.

Upon the bed lay a pile of clothing, several held those vibrant shades of blue and green. A tartan that had become all too familiar to her eyes now. Mae's gaze drifted to the tin tub situated in front of the crackling fire where a maid was dumping yet another bucket into it, filling it with steamy water.

Mae's mind raced with the realization that such meticulous attention to detail

wouldn't be undertaken unless she truly had traveled back in time to the seventeenth century. The weight of the truth began to settle upon her, her surroundings serving as a tangible reminder of the reality she now found herself in.

A moment of introspection washed over Mae as she contemplated the extent to which people here went to ensure her comfort and well-being. It was a stark contrast to the fast-paced, impersonal world she had left behind. "Thanks, Jen. I appreciate being treated so nicely here," Mae said.

"I was in your shoes remember? I know it's tough." She smiled. "I'll leave you to your bath and a nice rest, and then tomorrow I'll show you around the castle."

"Sounds like a plan." Mae smiled. "After that meal I'm about ready to pass out."

Jen laughed. "You'll probably sleep like the dead. I know I did when I first got here. I'll see you in the morning, okay?" She gave her a little wave and headed out the door.

Alone in the cozy chamber, Mae took a moment to survey her surroundings, meticulously inspecting every nook and cranny. She scrutinized the cracks between the sturdy stone walls, half-expecting to uncover hidden cameras or some modern trickery. Yet she found nothing but the authentic charm of the castle. "This can't really be happening," she whispered, caught between disbelief and a growing sense of intrigue.

Drawn to the window, Mae was captivated by the breathtaking sight of the sun casting a golden glow over the serene lake. The tranquil beauty of the landscape offered a momentary respite from the whirlwind of emotions swirling within her.

She turned toward the tub and realized she'd need to take her bath before the water grew too cold. As she undressed, she noticed a large square of cloth folded in half on

a low stool near the tub, and realized it must be her towel. She rubbed the material between her fingers and realized it was made of wool.

Slipping into the tub, Mae sank into the soothing hot water, allowing its warmth to seep into her tired muscles. She had to sit with her knees bent, as the tub wasn't that big, but it was deeper than she'd thought it would be. As she soaked, her mind drifted back to the strange events that had brought her to this place.

The flickering candlelight and remaining sunbeams cast dancing shadows on her bedroom walls, and the soft lapping of the water against her skin provided a soothing melody, making her relax further, despite her worry about her future and what being here in this time was going to mean for her.

When the bath water cooled, she scrubbed using the soap that had been left for her and climbed out, unsure of what to do next. She dried off and wrapped the fabric around her, moving toward the pile of clothes on the bed. She'd just picked up something that looked like a nightgown when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in?" she called, hoping it was Jen.

"Evening, Miss Mae," Sally said, popping her head between the door and frame, her eyes closed. "I donnae mean to disturb you, but if'n you were done with yer bath, I thought I might help you with yer clothes an' have the staff remove the tub?"

"That would be great, Sally, thank you, and it's just Mae."

Sally stepped in and moved to the clothes on the bed as others came in to remove the bathtub. "Here," she picked up the same nightgown Mae had held a moment earlier, "this is yer nightshift."

Mae took it and slipped it over her head, letting the fabric towel drop as the dress slid

down to cover her. “What about panties? Aren’t there any?”

Sally looked at her questioningly. “Unmentionables you mean?” Her cheeks turned pink. “We just wear the shift.”

That was going to take some getting used to, Mae thought with a yawn.

“Yer tired. Let me hang these up for you in the wardrobe, and I’ll come by and help you in the morning.” Sally made quick work of hanging the garments up and then turned to stoke the fire before leaving the room with a small wave.

As Mae climbed into bed, she couldn’t help wishing that she was back in her own room in LA.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning, Mae woke up, her eyes gradually adjusting to the soft morning light filtering through the window. For a moment, she clung to the hope that her time travel experience had been nothing more than a vivid dream. However, a cursory look around showed that she was indeed still in the confines of her room in the castle.

Throwing off the covers, Mae swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her bare feet resting on the woven rushes of the mat that sat upon the stone floor by her bed. The remnants of dreams still clung to her mind, mingling with the reality of her extraordinary circumstances.

Gazing out the window, Mae's eyes fixated on the breathtaking vista before her. The lake stretched out like a shimmering mirror, reflecting the sky's hues of blue and gray. Drawing herself away from the mesmerizing view, Mae realized she needed to figure out how to do things in this time and place. It wasn't like she could just turn on a faucet and water came out so she could shower. The bath the night before had to have taken a lot of preparation just to have it, which meant she probably wasn't going to have one every night. So, what to do then? She noticed in the corner of the room was a large urn like pitcher and a bowl seated in its own wooden fixture. Hanging on the side was a small cloth and on the bottom shelf sat a pot.

Walking over to it, she recalled seeing something like it in one of those period dramas. Hefting the pitcher, Mae poured water into the large, ceramic, decorative bowl. She splashed the cool water against her face, blinking, she noticed a small bar of the same soap she'd used in the bath the night before in a small dish on the wooden base next to the bowl. She scrubbed her face and then splashed some more water on

to rinse it off. She used the small cloth to pat her face dry.

As she finished washing her face, Mae turned to the wardrobe where Sally had hung the clothing that she'd brought her the day before. She'd said she'd come by to help her, but Mae was determined to figure things out.

As a soft knock reverberated through the room, and Mae's heart skipped a beat. She recalled dreaming about the handsome Scotsman who'd rescued her, Niall. She half wondered if maybe he'd come to check on her. With a quick glance down at her practically see-through nightshift, she hastily wrapped a blanket around herself as she approached the door.

With a touch of anticipation, Mae turned the doorknob, revealing Jen standing on the other side. "Good morning," she offered.

Jen smiled. "Good morning to you too, may I come in?"

Mae opened the door wider. "Of course, sorry."

"I thought you might need some help with the dress," Jen remarked, her smile widening.

Mae laughed. "I was just getting ready to try it on my own. Sally mentioned she'd come and help, but I didn't want to wait."

"There are several layers, but you'll get it pretty quickly, I think. This is the chemise, or shift, pretty similar to what you wore to bed." She handed Mae the first layer.

"No bra?"

"Corset, it comes next, but don't worry, it's not tight like they wear in later centuries.

You'll be able to move and breath fine." Jen laughed.

Mae switched out the shifts and then put on the corset and was surprised to find that it wasn't too bad. "What's next?"

"This is the first outer layer; it goes on almost like a long jacket."

Once Mae had put on that layer, Jen handed her a pair of wool stockings, an underskirt, and then a plaid skirt to put on. "God, all these layers? Can't I go back to my jeans?"

"All that's left is the plaid. It can be worn in a lot of different ways, but generally when it's fairly nice we just drape it about our shoulders and pin it with a brooch, making it like a cloak."

"Do I have to wear it?" Mae asked, eyeing it.

"It's actually good to have it with you, it gets drafty in the castle and if you're outside and wind kicks up, you'll easily get cold."

Mae nodded and settled the fabric around her shoulders and Jen added the brooch to hold it in place. "Okay, how do I look?"

"Come see for yourself." Jen grinned as she dragged her over to the full mirror next to the wardrobe.

Gazing at her reflection, Mae marveled at the transformation that had taken place. The traditional Scottish dress made her look almost as though she was actually from Scotland with her green eyes and auburn hair. "How do I wear my hair? Do I just leave it down?"

“I’ll braid it for you.” Jen grabbed a brush and ran it through Mae’s hair. Within a couple minutes she had a thick plait that fell over her shoulder and fell just past her breasts. “Now you really look the part.”

Mae marveled at her transformation. She smiled. “Thanks. Do I just wear my own boots?”

“For now, they’ll be fine. Good thing you weren’t wearing sneakers, those wouldn’t have fit in here.” Jen laughed. “Come on, get your shoes and we’ll go on a tour and have some breakfast.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Mae did as Jen asked and slipped on her black boots which laced up and had a slight heel to them.

Walking side by side, Mae said, “You know I half thought I’d wake up back home in my apartment. Figured all of this was just some really vivid dream. I was kind of surprised to find myself still here.”

Jen laughed. “Yeah, I did the same after that first night, probably for a few nights after getting here. It’s really surreal being here, but you get used to it. It’s actually almost relaxing. Like a lot of the things that stressed me out back home without realizing it, I just don’t feel that here.”

As they descended the stone staircase, the tantalizing scents of freshly baked bread, sizzling bacon, and brewing coffee intermingled, making Mae’s stomach rumble and her mouth water.

"Oh, that smells so good."

“I’ll show you the kitchens and then we can go to the dining hall and eat.” Jen led her into the rooms on the left of the grand hallway.

Mae stepped into the bustling kitchens, her senses instantly overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, and smells that enveloped her. The room was a hive of activity, alive with the crackling blaze of the hearth and the enticing aroma of herbs and spices that hung in the air. Following Jennifer's lead, Mae found herself at the center of attention as she was introduced to the busy kitchen staff.

"Good morning everyone, I wanted to introduce you to our esteemed guest, Miss Mae Welles," Jennifer said, her voice warm and pleasant, "she will be staying with us for the foreseeable future. Please, treat her with the same kindness and hospitality that you have shown me."

The kitchen staff each welcomed her with a smile and a polite, "Good morning, Miss," before returning to their work.

"Welcome, Miss Mae, I'm Mira. If you be needing any sustenance through the day, you just come and see me."

"Mira is also very good at making poultices and seeing to any injuries we might end up with," Jen added.

"I'd best get back to work. This food willnae make it to the dining hall in time if'n I donnae." Mira grinned and went back to work.

Mae was fascinated by how well they all worked together. And there was so much food being made. "It looks like you're about to feed an army," she murmured.

Jen laughed. "We kind of are. There's about a hundred or so people who live here or at least live nearby and work here. Our staff feeds whoever happens to be here for the meal, so we always have plenty. At least, we do now." Her voice faltered for a moment and then she shook her head and smiled. "Nevermind about that, let's go to the dining hall. The staff will be bringing everything to the tables for us."

Mae followed Jen across the halls to the largest dining room she'd ever encountered. There were long wooden tables everywhere, a huge hearth spanned the center part of one wall, and toward the far side of the room was a raised area with more long tables. Jen led her to those and a moment later the staff scurried in setting dishes, platters and bowls on the tables.

Jen picked up her bowl and ladled a scoop of what looked like oatmeal into it. "Mira makes the best porridge, I recommend adding just a little bit of honey to sweeten it, but you're going to love it."

Mae followed her example and filled a bowl, then also added eggs, bacon, and homemade bread and jam to a plate. She sat down next to Jen and a moment later, one of the staff set a cup full of coffee next to her plate.

"It's strong, so don't expect to taste Starbucks coffee." Jen picked up her spoon and dipped it into her porridge.

"I've always preferred it strong and black anyway." Mae lifted the cup and took a whiff of the coffee, it smelled good. She took a sip and let the flavor coat her tongue. Jen wasn't wrong. It was strong, but after a moment the flavor settled, and the aftertaste was good. She smiled. "I like it."

"Try the porridge."

Mae took her first spoonful of porridge, savoring the creamy texture and the gentle sweetness of the honey that lingered on her tongue. "Oh, wow, this is great."

As she enjoyed her breakfast, Mae looked around at the activity in the room. She watched as groups of guardsmen came in and settled at tables, loudly partaking of the food that was on offer. Cam and a few others joined her and Jen at what Jen called the high table. It was almost a festive atmosphere. She finished her porridge and

turned to her eggs and bacon, devouring them like a starving lion. The food here was so full of flavor, she almost couldn't get enough. The bread too was the most flavorful she'd ever had.

As she sat looking over the room, Mae's eyes landed upon a familiar figure sitting by himself at a table, not joining in with the others. She found it a bit odd and wondered if he'd like some company. She turned to Jen who was watching her with a smile. "Um, would you mind if I went over and sat with Niall for a bit?"

Jen's smile widened to a full grin. "Not at all, I think he'd welcome your company." She winked.

Picking up a bowl and filling it with more of the delicious porridge, and a couple slices of the homemade bread, because she couldn't get enough of it, she carried her bowl and plate over toward his table. He noticed her before she made it all the way there and his eyes lit up as he smiled.

"Good morrow, lass," Niall greeted her, his voice as warm and inviting. "How did you rest?"

Mae's heart skipped a beat at the lilt in his voice. Something about it set her insides quivering and she smiled. "I slept pretty well, considering I've traveled nearly five hundred years into the past." She laughed.

He laughed in response. "I cannae even imagine doing such a thing, lass. You are a brave woman, you are."

Mae shook her head. "I don't think bravery had much to do with it. I was just trying to get away from someone and the next thing I know, I'm in a cab, I fell asleep, and woke up here."

“Still yer handling it better than I probably would’ve,” he replied with a wink.

“Thank you.” Mae felt her cheeks heat at the look in his eyes.

Niall leaned forward; his eyes fixed on Mae. "Tell me, lass," he began, "what is yer background? I know you said you were some kind of doctor, but what did you do afore you found yerself here in the Highlands?"

“Yes, a psychiatrist,” she said. What I mean by that is I'm a therapist. But I suppose you don't know what that is either, do you?"

Niall's brows furrowed slightly, and he looked uncertain. “Cannae say that I do.”

Mae smiled. “A therapist is a professional person who helps other people work out their problems or troubles with their life and guides them to a better path in life. That’s a simplistic answer, but that is what I was hoping to do. I had just finished my schooling and I was getting ready to set up a business to start helping people.”

“So you help people?” Niall smiled, but there was still something in his gaze that she was unsure of.

“Yes. That’s what I want... or wanted to do.” She sighed.

“And you said you were trying to get away from someone? What happened, if’n you donnae mind me askin’, lass?”

Taking a deep breath, Mae explained what she could without talking about her conning Billy. “There was a man I was involved with. He wasn’t a good man; I had thought I’d gotten away from him. I’d moved homes you see. But he found me, and he attempted to break into my home while I was there. So I packed a bag and went out the fire escape—” she paused, realizing he wouldn’t know what that was, “that’s

a staircase that goes out a window and down the side of the building.”

Niall nodded, but looked almost angry on her behalf.

“Anyway, just as I landed below, I heard him break through my door, so I ran and found a cab... a vehicle?” She shook her head, not worrying about the details, maybe Jen had explained about cars and such, she didn’t know. “And I told the driver, who had a Scottish accent, to get me out of town and the next thing I knew, I was waking up here, in a field not far from this castle.”

"If that scoundrel were here, I would give him a proper teachin'," Niall stated firmly, his voice tinged with anger. His protective nature shone through, a stark contrast to the menacing presence of Mae's past.

Mae appreciated his unwavering support and the sense of security he exuded. It was a stark contrast to the world she had left behind. She promised herself she’d keep this new connection between them safe, and far from the misdeeds of her past. “Thank you.”

Niall patted her hand and took a bite of his bread. He looked thoughtful for a moment and then his eyes lit up. “Aye, so Dub Sith brought you to us as he did our Lady Jen,” he said. “It had to be he who brought you, tis the only explanation that makes sense.”

Niall's charming smile and flirtatious banter caused her heart to flutter, yet she couldn't help but wonder about the mention of this Dub Sith again. Was he really a fae who had somehow brought her to this time and place? Before she could inquire further, a commotion erupted in the distance, catching their attention.

A man, visibly intoxicated, stumbled into a nearby table, causing it to wobble precariously. Niall's face contorted in annoyance as he stared at the man. Mae looked over at him, he seemed young, maybe twenty-four or twenty-five. He had the golden

curly locks of Adonis and bright blue eyes, but the words coming out of his mouth were nasty.

“Who is that?” she murmured, trying not to draw the man’s attention.

“Brian Campbell. The Laird’s youngest brother.”

“So Cam’s brother? Oh wait, no, you said Campbell... Is Cam not the Laird? Isn’t that what the leaders are called here?” She seemed to recall that from watching various historical shows back home.

Niall winced and then looked around. “Nae, Cam is the Chief of our clan, but we MacDonalds nae longer own our land. It twas given to the Campbells. That’s why that wee brat is here. To report on us to the Laird. He’s got himself a bit o’ book learning and thinks he’s a know-it-all, but he has no common sense, that one.”

Just as Mae was about to delve deeper into the conversation with Niall, a voice called out to him from the doorway to the Great Hall. He turned toward the source, his expression a mixture of regret and obligation. With a dashing smile and a farewell that stirred something within Mae, he bid her goodbye and walked away, leaving her to process their brief encounter.

Mae sat there for a moment, her heart fluttering with excitement and longing. The memory of Niall's charm lingered in the air, and she couldn't help but feel a magnetic pull toward him. Yet, with his departure, reality settled back in, and she redirected her attention to drinking her coffee.

When she finished, Mae wandered out fo the castle and surveyed the courtyard. In one corner, a group of men huddled together, deftly tying intricate knots in fishing nets, their hands moving with practiced precision. She walked around the side of the castle and noticed toward the back, off what had to be the kitchens, scullery maids

plucked fresh herbs from the garden. She continued around the building, seeing an iron gate that had a path which led down the hill, in the direction of the lake, but she didn't follow it. Instead, she returned to the front of the courtyard to watch the activities. It was all so strange to her.

The sights and sounds that enveloped her were captivating, vivid and alive. But there was a part of Mae that couldn't fully reconcile the notion of being transported through time. It seemed too fantastical, too surreal to be true. As she watched the courtyard come alive with purposeful motion, she couldn't help but question whether this was all a figment of her imagination or an extraordinary twist of fate.

Time became a blur for Mae as she found herself immersed in the enchanting world of seventeenth century Scotland. Over the next several days, every time Mae opened her eyes, her heart would briefly cling to the hope that she would find herself back in the comfort of the twenty-first century. But as reality settled in, the stone walls of her bedchamber and the echoes of the castle corridors reminded her that she had been transported to a different era.

During those first few days, it seemed as if they had begun to blend together, Mae's interactions with the castle's inhabitants provided moments of solace and companionship. She turned to Jen for advice, and found comfort in their shared experiences. Yet, it was Niall who occupied most of Mae's thoughts. The sound of his voice, rich with the lilt of Scottish dialect, grounded her and made her feel more at home than she ever had felt in the twenty-first century.

Their encounters had now become the highlight of Mae's days, the moments she eagerly anticipated. Each interaction with Niall brought a warmth to her cheeks and a flutter in her chest. They were developing an easy friendship and perhaps the beginnings of something more. At least she hoped that was the case.

Niall's genuine interest in her well-being and his unwavering belief that Dub Sith

bringing her to this time and place were a blessing, made her feel accepted in a way she'd never felt before.

“Tell me more about this Dub Sith, who is he?” Mae asked.

She and Niall were walking outside of the castle grounds, down among the small village at the bottom of the hill. Nobody paid them much mind, just went about their various tasks as she and Naill strolled among them.

“Ah, now there be a tale, lass. Twas in 1598 prior to the battle of Trai-Gruinard here in Islay that Dub Sith first appeared. Tis said he first offered his services to Sir Lachlan Mor MacLean, who was a superstitious man, but MacLean refused Dub Sith. Now Dub Sith, is not a normal man, not like I am or any of my brothers. As I told you before, he is fae. A magical being; a black elf of the fae. In refusing his help, MacLean became an enemy to Dub Sith.”

“A black elf?” she questioned, wondering if that meant he was evil, or if it was just that his skin was dark. She wasn't sure and didn't want to offend anyone, so she waited for Niall to tell her what that meant.

“Aye, one o' the fae who prefers the shadows and darkness because they can blend into it. Days such as this, with the sun shining, they tend to stick to shadows if they make an appearance at all.”

Mae was fascinated. “So they use the darkness for camouflage, that's why they are called black elves?”

Niall's eyebrow quirked and he looked at her with confusion. “Explain camouflage, lass?”

“Oh... like a disguise, it hides them. In my time, camouflage is the word we use for

that. Our soldiers often use camo, which is short for camouflage, to blend into the scenery and hide from our enemies.”

“Aye that is a good strategy,” Niall replied looking thoughtful.

Mae smiled. “So how did that guy refusing Dub Sith, lead to him bringing me here?” She figured there had to be some sort of connection.

“Aye, good question, lass. At some point during the battle, Dub Sith approached my ancestor, Sir James Macdonald and offered him his services, since MacLean refused him. Sir James agreed to his help. Once the battle was finished, Dub Sith said he would bless Sir James and his family. We believe he’s doing that by bringing you ladies here.”

Mae wasn’t sure exactly how it was a blessing for them that she was brought to the seventeenth century, but she liked the thought that someone might think of her as a blessing. “Well, that’s an interesting theory, though I’m not sure how I am a blessing to anyone.”

Niall reached for her hand and smiled. “Knowing you is a blessing indeed, lass.”

Mae felt her cheeks warm. “Thanks, I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone think anything like that about me. It’s kind of nice.”

She found that she really was starting to like Niall and loved when he flirted with her, but he never crossed any lines, nor did he make any moves on her. It was a little disconcerting because she didn’t know if he actually liked her or if he was just being nice.

CHAPTER 7

As Mae entered the great hall a few nights later, her eyes widened in awe at the spectacle before her. The dining hall was decked out with tables laden with food, the fire roared in the large hearth and a group of the guardsmen had taken up instruments and were playing as others danced with several of the women who lived or worked in the castle. Mae couldn't be sure who actually lived here and who lived down in the small village, but she recognized many faces from her exploring her surroundings.

Despite the festivity surrounding her, a twinge of bitterness crept into Mae's heart. The weight of her displacement and the longing for the familiar tugged at her, coaxing her to seek solace in the amber depths of the whisky poured generously into her cup.

She drank, each sip carrying with it a blend of defiance and resignation. The burn of the alcohol mingled with the maelstrom of emotions swirling within her, momentarily numbing the sharp edges of her reality. Mae allowed herself the liberty of indulgence, surrendering to the allure of the whisky's potent embrace.

The strains of the melodic string quartet filled the air, their music weaving through the hall like whispers of forgotten tales. Traditional Scottish melodies danced through the space, igniting a sense of nostalgia and melancholy within Mae. The enchanting harmonies intertwined with her thoughts, stirring both longing and acceptance within her conflicted soul.

As the night wore on and the revelry of the supper echoed through the dining hall into the great hall outside the doors, the mirth and merriment took hold of everyone

except her. Mae decided to drop herself into a chair next to the crackling flames dancing in the hearth.

Amidst the merry chaos, a figure stumbled toward Mae, his steps unsteady, and his speech slurred. It was Brian Campbell, the notorious nuisance when inebriated, his words dripping with a heavy Scottish brogue.

“What are you doing here, lass?” he said, raking his gaze over her with interest.

Mae turned her back to him, hoping that would make him go away because she had no interest in the man and didn’t want to encourage him. It didn’t matter because he persisted.

“You’ll be a witch, then? No one just appears in this area without intention,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes, growing annoyed, but she knew that he was right about that. In her past she did nothing without intention because that’s what a con-artist did. Could he see right through her? Frowning, she shook her head. That was a ridiculous thought. She’d given up that life and had worked hard to better herself. Hadn’t she?

Brian's inquiries grew more intrusive, as he said, “That’s it, you’ve come and put a spell upon the MacDonalds, havenae you? What is it you want here? The MacDonalds have nothing, is it really the Campbells you be after?” He gave her a lecherous look.

With his unwelcome advances, she chose a path of self-preservation, her lips parting to spin a tale for him. If he wanted a witch, she’d give him one. “A witch? I suppose you could call me that, though I didn’t come for you, nor the MacDonalds. And I suggest, if you don’t back off, I’ll find a way to curse you and all your descendants.”

Yet, as the words left her lips, a pang of guilt coursed through Mae's chest. She felt

the ghostly presence of her former self, the con artist who had mastered the art of deception. Doubt gnawed at her conscience, casting shadows upon her newfound desire to live an authentic life, free from the tangles of deceit.

A terrified look crossed his face for a moment, and then he backed off muttering, “Stupid cow.”

Inwardly chastising herself, Mae vowed to resist the allure of her past. She sought redemption within the depths of her being, determined to break free from the shackles of her former self. Her heart trembled with uncertainty, a reminder that the journey toward self-discovery held both triumphs and pitfalls, forcing her to confront the shadows lurking within.

The exchange with Brian left Mae with a lingering unease, a reminder of the thin line she tread between truth and falsehood. She yearned for genuine connections, untainted by the remnants of her past. The weight of her actions settled upon her shoulders, urging her to find strength in vulnerability and to be honest in her future dealings.

In a serendipitous turn of events, Niall, having obviously observed the uncomfortable exchange, stepped forward with an air of chivalry and grace. His eyes met Mae's issuing a silent invitation for her to join him. Grateful, Mae nodded and smiled at him.

Coming closer, Niall asked Mae for a dance, his voice laced with a hint of mischief. “Would you be likin’ ta dance with me, lass?”

Mae’s heart fluttered in anticipation. “Yes, thank you,” she said as she put her hand into his. “Though I’m not sure I know the steps. Is it complicated?”

"Nae, lass, tis an easy step you’ll pick up quick.” He smiled and led her over to where

others were dancing and showed her the steps.

Together, they glided onto the open floor, surrounded by the swirling melodies of the musicians. The rhythm of their feet merged harmoniously with the lively tunes, their bodies moving in perfect synchronicity. It was as though they were made for each other, which made Mae's heart soar higher.

The dance they engaged in was a spirited Scottish reel, a traditional seventeenth century dance. Each step, each twirl, spoke volumes of their connection, the chemistry between them palpable to any who cared to watch them, but Mae wasn't paying attention to anyone but Niall who merely laughed with her when she made a misstep. She was breathless as he whirled her around the floor, feeling the connection between them growing stronger as their bodies moved to the music. .

The worries that had plagued her mind earlier in the evening faded into insignificance as she surrendered to the intoxicating rhythm of the dance. It was a blissful escape, a respite from thinking about being trapped in the seventeenth century.

As the music reached its crescendo, Mae and Niall found themselves locked in a final, exuberant twirl, her spirit soaring to new heights. The applause that erupted from the rest of the dancers and she and Niall stood staring into each other's eyes. It was as though a magic spell was woven over them and she couldn't keep the massive grin from her face as she tried to catch her breath.

With flushed cheeks and a radiant smile, Mae and Niall stood with their hands lingering upon one another. In that moment, Mae knew that her life would never be the same.

CHAPTER 8

Later that evening, as the great hall gradually emptied, the atmosphere transformed into a more intimate setting. Mae and Niall sat close to each other at a table, the remnants of the evening's revelry scattered around them. Mae, unable to contain her curiosity any longer, leaned closer to Niall and asked, "So what is the situation with Brian? Why does everyone tolerate him?" The idea that these warriors put up with a guy like him bothered her and she needed to know why.

With a weary expression and a subtle roll of his eyes, Niall explained, "You've nae heard the tale of how we lost our ancestral land then?"

"You started to tell me about it, but I don't think we finished the conversation, we were interrupted."

"It's best I start from there then. When we lost our land, taken from us by the King of England, it was given over to the Campbells. The Donalds have lived and worked this land for centuries, but because we sided against the king, in favor of Scottish rule, it was taken out from under us. The Campbells allow us to continue to live here, as long as we pay the taxes they levy upon us."

Mae frowned. It didn't seem right to her that the king was allowed to just take land that belonged to the Donald Clan. "How can the king do that? Is that even legal?"

Niall chuckled darkly. It was a rumbling sound that made her stomach flip. "The king can do whatever he wants. Scotland is under English rule, and as the ruler, he can take and distribute the land as he sees fit, whether we Donalds like it or not. I suppose

we're lucky he didn't have us all executed or locked in prison."

"But to give your land to your worst rivals? That's just cruel." Mae frowned.

"I donnae recall saying the king was a fair and just man, lass," Niall said, his eyes twinkling.

Mae laughed and shook her head. "I suppose you didn't. So how does Brian fit? I know you said he was sent here by the Laird, but he's an idiot, why him?"

"Aye, he is, lass, and as to why? I havenae idea why the Laird would trust one such as him, but at least we know how to deal with the likes of him." He winked. "He may be a spy, but we donnae let him know much. An' it tis safer to let him be, rather than instigate any action with him, which would get back to the Laird who would retaliate."

"I suppose that makes sense. Better the devil you know, than one you don't." Mae nodded as she thought about the situation.

"Aye, lass. Tis true your words." A smile lit his face, and he looks a little mischievous as he added, "It is also my opinion that the Laird wanted to be rid of his obnoxious behavior and sending him here gets him out of the Laird's way." He chuckled.

Mae laughed too. "Yes, I can definitely see that as being a plus for the Laird." After a moment she sighed. "But, he's such an ass. What if something happens? What if he starts shit?"

Niall shook his head. "That cannae happen, lass. T'would not be good for the Donald Clan. The Laird looks merciful by allowing us to stay on this land, if something happened to his representative, he would be justified in kicking us off of this land and

at best, we'd be homeless, at worst, the king would see to our executions as I mentioned before."

The mere idea of it sent a shiver of fear down Mae's back. "That can't happen."

"Nae, lass. It cannae."

His serious gaze met hers and she felt the depths of his devotion to his clan, his family. It was something she'd never had in her life. She had no experience in having such a close tight knit family, but she could feel it as though it was a tangible thing with him. It made her long to be a part of it.

CHAPTER 9

As the days unfolded over the next week, Mae found herself observing the havoc that Brian wreaked upon the fort and its inhabitants. It seemed that he possessed an insatiable appetite for their ale and whisky, draining their reserves without a hint of remorse. With each passing night, his drunken escapades grew more brazen, leaving a trail of broken objects in his wake.

One evening, Mae crossed paths with Brian in the main hall, where he clumsily swayed, his eyes glazed with intoxication. In a slurred voice, he addressed her with an air of false sophistication. "Ah, lass, you're a bonnie sight," he mumbled, but the look on his face was lecherous and lustful.

Mae, masking her revulsion with a practiced smile, responded with measured politeness. "Thank you," she replied, her tone betraying an underlying hint of sarcasm. Then she walked away, returning to Niall's side in the dining hall.

As the night progressed, Brian's behavior grew more audacious. He shamelessly propositioned the female staff members who were attempting to clear tables, his words dripping with lascivious intent as he fondled them and tried to get them to sit in his lap. Mae clenched her fists, her patience waning with each passing moment. "Naill, this is beyond appalling. Someone needs to stop him."

She watched one of the younger maidens shove his hands away and then proceeded to accidentally let one of the tankards of ale spill partially on him. It made her smile, but she didn't like how the young girl exclaimed apologies as he berated her.

She was tired of watching this man get away with treating women and staff like they were less than nothing anymore. Nobody deserved that. They weren't slaves, which thankfully wasn't taking place here — she would have raised holy heckfire if it was — and didn't deserve to be treated that way.

“I can try to have a word—” Niall started, but as he spoke, Brian got up and stormed out of the dining hall. “Maybe I won't have to though.”

Mae sighed. “I doubt this will be the end of it. He's getting worse.”

As Mae made her way to the stairs later that evening, a voice caught her attention. Niall wasn't with her, he had been called over to speak to the Chief, so she was on her own. She moved toward the kitchens to see none other than Brian Campbell. He had a young girl, one of the scullery maids pinned against the counter, blocking her in.

Brian, clearly fueled by liquid courage and more drunk than he'd been that evening thus far, leaned into the young woman who couldn't have been more than fifteen, and gave her a lecherous grin. "Why don't you leave this dreary life and come join me in my chambers, lass? I'll show you a taste of luxury you've never known," he slurred, his voice brimming with arrogance.

Mae, her fiery spirit unwilling to tolerate such behavior, stepped forward with resolve, grabbed Brian's arm and pulled him away from the girl. "Look you disgusting pig, you need to leave this girl alone. She clearly doesn't want shit to do with you and she's just trying to do her job. She doesn't need you propositioning her and trying to get your drunk rocks off," Mae fumed. “You are a guest here, but that doesn't grant you the right to treat any of these woman as your property or playthings. They aren't here for your amusement.”

Brian, clearly taken aback by Mae's boldness, glared at her with indignation and

disdain, his lip curling up in a cruel manner. "And who are you to lecture me, lass? A stranger to our country? Not even a lowly Donald. You are nothing, no one of importance," he spat, his slurred words laced with an infuriating arrogance.

Undeterred, Mae met his gaze head-on. She was filled with anger and defiance as she stared at him. "It doesn't matter who I am. Common decency and respect for others should always be retained," she retorted, as she kept her back ram-rod straight, not wanting to back down from the man.

The confrontation drew the attention of the other kitchen staff, who watched the exchange with awe.

"Have you ever heard the like," one of the women whispered, her eyes wide.

"She's going to get us into trouble with the Campbells," another fretted.

In that moment, Niall stepped through the doorway, joining Mae and standing by her side. "You heard the lass. Show some respect for these women, or face the consequences," he warned, his tone carried the weight of authority.

Brian was obviously frustrated by the united front before him as he staggered backward, a glimmer of recognition crossing his drunken stupor. His jaw worked for a moment as though he was going to verbally spar with them, but then thought better of it. He ducked his head and retreated to his room for the rest of the evening.

Mae couldn't help but feel good about the confrontation, especially as the echoes of their confrontation lingered in the air. With Niall backing her up, it showed the women on staff that they didn't have to put up with that kind of behavior and it led to a feeling of power among them. As though they had the right to protect themselves and the fort from one such as Brian.

In the days that followed, word spread through the staff that Brian was to be given the bare minimum of hospitality and they had the authority to deny him their attention and indulgence. The Donalds weren't going to allow this man to continue to take what didn't belong to him or the Campbells.

Of course there were a few who supported Brian and his behavior, but Mae used her skills of manipulation to sew discord between him and those who were on his side. A well placed rumor, a word in someone's ear of some hearsay, and she was able to undermine him at every turn. She wasn't blatant about it, but went about it subtly so it wouldn't be traced back to her. One moonlit evening, as the sound of music and laughter filled the great hall, Mae and Niall escaped to the courtyard to view the stars and Mae hoped that he might kiss her. They'd gotten much closer over the last few weeks, and she was drawn to him more than she'd ever been drawn to anyone.

As they stood, staring out over the loch, Niall wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "You are unlike any lass I've ever known." He smiled and tucked a stray hair that was blowing against her cheek in the slight breeze, behind her ear. "Remind me not to get on your bad side, you can be quite devious." He grinned, taking the sting out of his words.

Mae shrugged, but a smile touched her lips. "Only when it is necessary to save others from someone like him."

Niall's thumb still caressed her cheek. "I admire the way you handle yourself and especially how you handle the Campbell problem."

Mae felt her heart sore, something it did often in his presence, though it was reaching new heights now. She knew, if Jen were to see her or anyone were for that matter, at that moment, her cheeks would be flushed and she'd look star struck, but she didn't care. She really liked Niall.

“Niall...” she began as she stared up at him. “Will you kiss me?” She held her breath as a slow roguish grin stole over his lips.

“Absolutely, lass, I’ve merely been awaiting an invitation to do just that,” he murmured, his lips moving closer to hers.

A moment later, his soft and firm lips were on hers, stealing her breath from her as she melted into him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he pulled her more firmly to his chest as he deepened the kiss.

Later that evening, in half a daze, Mae wandered the halls back to her room. As she passed by one of the bed chambers, she paused, overhearing two of the staff discussing Brian.

“He tried to tell me that his family is wealthy and the Donalds were nothing but baffle-headed buffoons who should be locked in Newgate for going against the king. That the Campbells owned all of us and as a Campbell he could do what he wanted.”

“And I suppose he be wantin’ you to join him in his chambers,” the other replied.

“Aye, and I skedaddled right on out of there quick as rabbit. He was drunk off his socks, so he didn’t catch me. You be careful goin’ anywhere near that one.”

“Aye, I have been. Been worrying about Claire, he’s cornered her thrice now. Mae stepped in that once, but twice more he’s gotten her away from others and attempted to have his way with her. She’s managed to slip away, but he’s been persistent.”

Mae could hear them moving toward the door and she didn’t want to be caught eavesdropping, so she continued down the hall, but she decided it was time to take action against Brian Campbell. This couldn’t continue any longer. Claire was practically a child and shouldn’t have to be abused in such a way. She wasn’t going

to allow it.

The next morning, she approached Niall, her voice filled with determination. "Niall, we cannot let this continue. Brian is terrorizing the young women on staff, and berating anyone who gets in his way. We need to do something."

Niall looked serious as he considered my words. "Aye, lass, I must agree. But we must be cautious. The Campbells have long held power over our lands, and any misstep could lead to disastrous consequences."

Mae nodded. She knew with everything he and Jen had explained to her that the Campbells could choose to kick them off the land at any given time, but what Brian was doing wasn't right. "We need to find a way to stop him without it affecting the Donalds."

"Exactly, lass."

Later that day, Niall came to Mae with the idea of visiting Cam and seeking his counsel. Mae thought it a brilliant idea and was anxious to speak to the man in charge as well about the situation.

"Niall, Lady Mae, do join me," Cam directed them to a couple of chairs. "I understand you have some concerns?" he asked, looking at Mae.

"I do, sir. It's about Brian Campbell. He's making life difficult for many of the young women on staff here, and he is creating destruction and spouting abuse at every turn. Something needs to be done about him." Mae went on to tell Cam about what she'd overheard, and what she'd witnessed.

Cam was clearly displeased. "I have seen him acting belligerent and destroying things in his drunken stupors, but I wasnae aware of his aggression toward the females on

staff.” His jaw ticked and he looked pensive for a moment. “Being a Campbell and having been sent by the Laird, I cannae kick him out of Fort Donald, so if you have any suggestions, I would be open to hearing them, lass.”

“Perhaps having someone shadow him, stop him before he goes too far?”

Niall was already shaking his head. “That is already being done, lass, but it seems young Donovan was a poor choice for the task. Brian has found ways to rid himself of Donovan at nearly every turn.”

"That is true, I am afraid that Donovan does not have the cunning he needs to keep an eye upon Brian. It needs to be someone with better skills in subterfuge. I can only think of one who might be able to handle the task." Cam stared right at Niall, his brow raised as if suggesting a particular person that Mae was unaware of.

"Surely there's someone else who can handle the task. I've already been pulled in so many directions, dealing with the bandit uprising on the high road and—" Niall started to protest.

“You brought this to me, Niall, you are aware of the situation and have the necessary skills to keep Brian from harassing our family. I trust you to handle this with discretion and keep the peace with the Campbells.”

Reluctantly, Niall nodded.

“There is one other thing,” Cam added. “I think there is more going on with Brian than his behavior. I believe there may be something nefarious taking place as well. I’d like for you to attempt to discover what that plot is.”

Mae glanced over at Niall, who seemed stunned by Cam’s words. “I would like to help, keep an eye upon him, I mean. Perhaps with me being a woman, I’ll be less

noticed by him?" She paused and then added, "I mean, he'll probably notice me, but only as someone he might bed, not as someone spying upon him. I don't think he has much respect for women, nor thinks us capable of anything but housework."

"You could be right about that, lass. Aye, you have my permission." Cam smiled.

"Any idea what you think he may be planning, Chief?" Niall asked.

Cam's smile fell from his face, and he shook his head. "No, which is why I'd like you both to be extra vigilant."

"Aye, we will at that," Niall agreed.

As they walked out of Cam's office chambers, and down the stairs, Mae was glad to have a plan in place. Now all they had to do was track down where Brian was at that moment, and discover whatever it was he was actually up to.

"We should keep this to ourselves, lass. A word in the wrong ear might tip Brian off that we are on to his plan."

"Whatever that might be," Mae murmured. "But I agree. We should only discuss it between us and Cam. Though I do trust Jen as well."

"Aye, aye, if you have need of her counsel, then do seek it out. She can be trusted. Though, not to any others."

Mae smiled. "Deal."

"I donnae understand, lass, are you wanting to play cards?" Niall looked at her curiously. "I am afraid I donnae have a deck on me."

Mae giggled. “No. It’s just a way of saying I agree to your terms.”

“I see, how curious. I look forward to learning more of your unique turns of phrase.”
He smiled and took her arm. “Come, let us go see if we can lay our gazes upon Brian.”

CHAPTER 10

The sun rose over Fort Donald, casting its golden rays upon the ancient stone walls as Mae awoke in her bedchamber alone. She stretched and got out of the surprisingly comfortable bed. She was supposed to meet Niall for breakfast and that brought a smile to her face. She was becoming increasingly acclimated to being here in this time and space. It still took some getting used to though, she thought as she put on her dress for the day.

Never in a million years would she have even considered she would be living in such a way and actually enjoying it. Niall helped with that though. She greatly admired him. Not just his muscular build and easy smile, but also his attitude, knowledge and skills. She was easily falling for him, and she couldn't bring herself to squash those feelings for him.

The only downside to being here was Brian Campbell. The man was slime. However, she couldn't just deal with him as she would have in her past. That would have consisted of getting with him and then taking him for everything she could and tossing him to the wolves. That wouldn't work here. Not because she wasn't capable, but because she now had more respect for herself and for the Donalds as well. She knew what might happen if anything were to happen to Brian.

It would be blamed upon the Donald Clan and that was unacceptable. They were good people. That being said, she still needed to come up with a way to get Brian to leave. She wasn't really sure Cam's thought that Brian might be planning something awful, was possible. Brian wasn't really all that bright. If there was some sort of plot against the Donald Clan, he surely wasn't the mastermind behind it.

She made her way down to the dining hall and noticed Niall seated at the same table as Brian. A sinking feeling stirred in her chest. She hated that she now had to share her time with Niall with Brian. It nearly turned her stomach to eat at the same table as him, but still, she was determined to do it.

“Good morning, Niall,” she murmured as she took a seat next to him.

“Lass, tis a pleasure to see you this morn.” Niall handed her a plate full of biscuits, and then filled a bowl of porridge for her. “Would you like honey?”

“Please.”

“Didnae offer me any of that,” Brian sulked.

Niall sighed. “You didnae like the porridge, you said just yesterday. Told young Leah that you wouldnae touch the foul stuff.”

“I need some ale,” Brian muttered. “Where’s the ale?”

Niall shook his head. “Tis a bit early for ale, have some tea. It will soothe that wee headache you said you had.”

“I donnae want any blasted tea!” Brian slammed his fist down on the table, then slid his arm into the plates and cutlery, swiping everything in his wake to the floor, and upon the guards passing by.

Mae’s eyes widened as the men turned on Brian, ready to read him the riot act, from what Mae could see. They looked ready to beat Brian to a pulp, but before they could, Niall jumped up and got between them.

“T’was an accident, he didnae mean to strike you with his breakfast, merely blowing

off some steam. Perhaps give him some space and seek a place to sit on the other side of the dining hall?"

The guardsmen stared at Niall for a moment and Mae was afraid they weren't going to listen but much to her surprise, the one closest to Niall nodded.

"Aye, sir, after we clean ourselves up, we shall do jest that." The man looked at the others with him, and tilted his head back toward the door. "Let's go."

With that, the men turned and left the room, leaving Mae with her jaw hanging down. Niall took his seat next to her again, breathing hard, as though he'd thought it might come to blows. Now he was full of unspent adrenaline. "Perhaps, Brian, you might be more aware of your surroundings."

"Why?" he said, his voice dripping with disdain. "They're nothing but savages, anyway."

Mae's fingers clenched into fists. She wanted nothing more than to teach this asshole a lesson he wouldn't forget, but she knew that would just bring more trouble their way, so she held fast to her seat.

Throughout the day, as she tailed Brian and Niall, she continued to witness near altercations as Brian became increasingly drunk and disorderly. He'd take to ordering her to get him more whisky and ale, which she'd done once, but refused every other time. She had half a mind to piss in it, just to see if he noticed the difference, but she was too much of a lady to do it. Funny that. She had never thought of herself as one prior to being here. Not that she didn't consider herself a woman, of course she did, but in the twenty-first century when women could do practically everything a guy could, it was just different. Women didn't stop themselves from doing things because it wouldn't be lady-like, but here, in this time, it just felt wrong somehow.

It seemed the seventeenth century was growing on her. It made her softer in a way, more apt to choose a better path. Her gaze slid to Niall who was once again stepping in to diffuse another Brian made situation. He was very good at the diplomacy, getting to the altercation just before it escalated and caused trouble for the Donalds. She loved how skilled he was at it, but also held some sympathy for him that he had to do it in the first place, knowing how much he actually hated Brian and would rather just join the others and beat him with in an inch of his life.

It took a lot of self-discipline to hold himself back like that. It was something else to admire about him. His restraint in handling Brian. There were numerous times that Mae would have happily strangled the man, were she in his shoes.

As she continued to keep an eye on Brian and the situations he was causing, she began to wonder if maybe there might be a way to get him to go. If she might be able to use some of her skills from her past life to manipulate him into leaving. It was a chance that could backfire and harm the Donalds though, so she decided to bide her time. She'd wait for an opening that she could use that wouldn't reflect badly on the Donalds.

The only problem was, she hated waiting.

CHAPTER 11

Mae was becoming increasingly frustrated. Every moment of their days was spent hounding Brian's drunken steps. She barely got a moment to herself, let alone with Niall. Just the simple, singular thought of Niall brought a smile to her lips.

At first, it was easy to keep to the background with Niall. As they watched Brian, they would chat and share various things about their lives, getting to know one another. Mae would tell him about some of the things from her time, which fascinated Niall, and she'd listen as he told her some of his daring escapades as a guard, or of his childhood. She kept back the part of her life that was criminal. She was ashamed to share that with him, but as her feelings for him grew, and the closer they got, she knew she'd have to tell him at some point.

Unfortunately, it seemed Brian had come to expect Niall and her to be around, and he started seeking them out. If they were at breakfast, Brian would take the seat across from them, even if he'd been at another table all together. He'd get up and move to join them. Always with a lecherous smile Mae's way, which she completely ignored.

If they found a quiet spot in the courtyard to observe him and his behavior, under the guise of doing something else like brushing horses, or doing menial chores, Brian would find a way to join them. Not that he helped in doing said chores. He was too busy being utterly obnoxious to anyone and everyone, but especially to them. It was as though he was trying to get a rise out of Niall.

However, Niall took it all in stride. He didn't let Brian's words or behavior affect him. Mae knew it took a great deal of will power for Niall not to slug him over half

the crap he spewed. It made her admire him even more.

Over the next few weeks, she and Niall tried to get more creative in their observation spots. Sneaking around, attempting to avoid Brian's gaze until Niall was needed to disrupt his destructive behavior. But it seemed to have become a game to Brian. He had this need to find them no matter where they were or what they were engaged in, and it was frustrating Mae to no end.

"I wish he would leave us alone," she muttered as they watched him from one of the towers.

Brian was standing in the courtyard, scanning the surrounding area, searching. She knew without a single doubt that he was looking for them.

"I know, love, but what can we do?" Niall sighed and pulled her close to him. "Tis my job to keep a close watch on him, which means I have to be within sight of him."

"I know. I just miss having time alone with you, that's all." Her lips quirked in a small smile.

Niall leaned forward and she knew he was about to kiss her. She closed her eyes, anticipating the feel of his lips upon hers. She lived for these stolen kisses these days and couldn't wait for this one. She pushed up on her toes slightly, wanting to make it happen faster.

"There you are," Brian slurred, coming up the stone tower steps.

Inwardly, Mae screamed as she dropped her heels back to the ground. Niall took a step back, releasing her waist. She turned to stare daggers at the disheveled man who'd joined them. He smelled of alcohol and body odor that was pungent. His hair hung limp and greasy, though his clothes were clean enough. She cringed, but did her

best to keep her disgust from her face.

“Brian, what brings you up here?” Niall asked.

Mae could tell he was just as annoyed as she was, but he was doing his best not to show it either. Pissing Brian off to the point that he reported back to the Laird that the Donalds were unhospitable, just wasn’t acceptable.

“Saw you up here, thought the view must be amazing. The Donalds donnae deserve such a view as this,” he replied, looking out of the window toward the loch.

As she endured another disrupted rendezvous with Niall, Mae couldn’t help but wish that Brian Campbell would drop off the edge of the Earth and disappear for good.

CHAPTER 12

As the evening sun cast its warm glow upon the dining hall, Mae found herself seated at the high table, savoring the delights of the supper spread before her. The air was filled with laughter, lively chatter, and the clinking of goblets, creating a jovial atmosphere within the ancient walls of the fortress.

Jen gracefully slid into her regular seat beside Cam, which also happened to be beside Mae, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. "Can you get over all this food?" she murmured, sharing a smile with Mae.

"There's so much of it," Mae murmured back. "Are we celebrating something? Is that why you asked me to join you this evening?"

Jen shook her head, her smile growing. "Not really a celebration, just par for the course here. And no, I asked you to join me because we've not had a chance to catch up in weeks. I wanted to know how you're coping with being here."

Mae took a moment to collect her thoughts, her gaze drifting momentarily to Niall, who sat across the hall at the same table as Brian, the poor man.

With a genuine smile, Mae confessed, "Gotta admit, while it's been difficult to process actually being here and not back home, I'm enjoying it. If anything, this is definitely an adventure. I mean, how many people can say they traveled through time and got to live in a castle with handsome Highlanders?"

Jen looked from her to Niall and said, "Any particular Highlander you have in

mind?”

“It’s that obvious, huh?” Mae laughed.

“To me it is,” Jen replied. “Cam informed me you and Niall have been keeping an eye upon our problem child. That you volunteered to help him.” She smiled brightly. “I don’t think you would do that for just anyone, am I right?”

Mae felt her cheeks heat. “Yep, you’re right. There aren’t many people who could make me put up with the problem child. Have to say Niall is one who can.”

The two women shared a moment of laughter. Mae's heart swelled at their comradery. It was something she hadn’t had back home. She was grateful for Jen's friendship and the shared experience they had being here. A sense of comfort settled upon her as they raised their goblets, toasting the unforeseen twists of fate that had brought them to this time and place.

As the evening carried on, Mae's gaze frequently wandered toward Niall, her heart full of anticipation. She wondered if he too harbored deeper feelings for her. She wondered if their connection was as deep as she thought it might be. When he turned his head and his gaze met hers, he smiled and gave her a wink. It sent a small thrill through her. She hoped that she’d get to spend some more time with him after the meal and before it was time to go to bed.

It was odd being here, having an elaborate meal such as this and then an hour or two before heading to bed in the same building. It was almost like living in a hotel of sorts. She didn’t have to cook or clean, well not really, just the minimal cleaning up of her own space, but there wasn’t the kind of clutter one normally had in a space one lived in. At least not in the twenty-first century. People had so much stuff. Here it was the bare minimum. A few dresses, a wash basin, some bedding. That was about it. It was simple and easy and most of all, stress free.

Jen yawned and set her napkin upon the table. "I think I'm going to call it a night."

Mae turned and looked at her as she stood. "Already?"

Jen nodded. "Yeah, I'm training tomorrow, and I want to get a good night's sleep so I can kick a few butts." She laughed.

Mae laughed with her. "Okay, well, good night. I think I'm going to stay up for a bit."

Jen's grin grew. "Maybe see if you can sneak off with a certain Highlander and make-out?"

Laughing again, Mae nodded. "That is the hope."

"Good luck." Jen winked and then turned to her husband, putting her hands on his shoulders as she leaned down to whisper in his ear.

A moment later, Cam stood and bid us all good night as he took Jen's hand and the walked out of the room together. As she watched them go, planning to leave the dining hall herself and entice Niall to follow, Brian, in his intoxicated state, stumbled over and plopped himself beside her. The smell of alcohol wafted from him, clouding the air with an unpleasant tang.

Mae's mind raced as she desperately searched the room for a glimpse of Niall, but to her dismay, he was nowhere to be seen. Somehow, she had missed him leaving. She wondered why he hadn't gained her attention beforehand. There were only a few times in the past where he'd left her on her own to keep an eye upon Brian, but he always made sure she was in a position to do so without feeling vulnerable. Panic clenched her heart, knowing that without Niall's protective presence, Brian's unpredictable behavior could take a perilous turn.

Slurring his words, Brian scoffed, “Lass, your lies and tales of being a witch who traversed time are the ramblings of a madwoman.” He let out a boisterous laughter.

Mae swallowed down her first response. She’d never told him personally about traveling through time, he had to have picked that up when he was eavesdropping upon her and Niall’s conversations. The part about her being a witch, well that was her own fault. She’d claimed that in one of their first encounters. It seemed the thought of her being one no longer deterred him, unfortunately.

“So you don’t believe me? Then what do you believe?” she asked, trying to keep her temper from flaring as she surreptitiously looked for Niall. She fully expected a crass or hypocritical response, but much to her surprise, he shared a strange story from his past.

“Me?” He blinked, giving her an odd look. “I believe in—” he started and then looked around, a little confused for a moment, but then in a hushed tone, said, “when I was a wee lad, I encountered a ghostly presence that left a mark on my soul.”

Mae arched a brow at his response. That was totally unexpected. Brian believed in ghosts? And that one cursed him in some way? Perhaps that ghost turned him into the asshole he was, but she doubted it. She was pretty sure he’d always been an asshole.

Then a glimmer of an idea began to form in her mind. Brian believed in the supernatural, perhaps she could use that to get him to go away. He didn’t believe she was a witch though, or at least, he wasn’t afraid of her, if he did believe. Maybe she could come up with a way to use this ghost who cursed him though and that would get him to go. She’d need to ask him some more questions about what he’d seen before she could come up with a proper plan.

However, before she could delve deeper into the revelations Brian had shared, her attention was abruptly yanked away by the sight of him slumping forward, his head

making a thud as it landed heavily on the table. His eyes fluttered shut as he succumbed to the blissful oblivion of drunken sleep.

The one time she sought to unravel the enigmatic layers of Brian's past, he had been rendered incapable of further conversation by his own inebriation. She couldn't help but feel vexed by the untimely interruption, her desire for answers stymied by the cruel whims of fate.

Sighing in resignation, Mae's gaze lingered upon the slumbering form of Brian. She observed the disheveled strands of his hair, tumbled across his forehead, and the faint lines of weariness etched upon his face. In this vulnerable state, he appeared more human than ever before, stripped of the boisterous mask he wore with such vigor. It almost made her feel sorry for him.

Almost.

CHAPTER 13

Mae woke early to take a leisurely stroll across the castle grounds, soaking in the breathtaking view of the sunrise. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of dew-kissed grass and blooming wildflowers. Birds welcomed the day with their melodious songs, their tunes dancing in harmony with the awakening nature.

There was a hum of activity as the castle staff went about their morning duties. They'd been up and at it for a few hours it seemed, from all of the activity. Mae observed them, each going about their tasks with purpose and determination. A pang of yearning tugged at her heart as she realized she didn't have any real work to occupy her time. She longed for a sense of purpose to fill her days. Well, a purpose that didn't involve babysitting Brian's stupid drunken behavior.

She thought back to her life before coming here and all of the plans she'd made. How hard she'd worked to get her degree and become a licensed therapist. And it was all just gone now. All that work she'd put in. All the plans she put into motion to start her life fresh. Gone with a single cab ride into the past.

Lost in her thoughts, Mae continued her walk, the dirt pathway leading her to a small garden nestled within the castle's outer walls. A sense of tranquility washed over her, offering a brief respite from her inner turmoil as she gazed upon the blooms.

Just as she was about to retreat from the garden, she heard Niall calling to her. His tall figure emerged from the kitchen doorway. A smile lit up his face, his eyes reflecting the warmth of the rising sun.

"Mae," he greeted her, a charming lilt to his words. "I see you've discovered our wee flower garden."

Mae turned to face him, her heart fluttering at the sight of him. "Niall," she replied, "I didn't expect to see you here."

He approached her, his footsteps light yet purposeful. "Did you not, lass? He looked left and right, as though making sure they were alone, and then leaned in and said, "I was hoping for some alone time with you without prying eyes. When I noticed you out here, I thought I'd best join you."

Mae felt her cheeks heat at the look he was giving her. "I'm glad you did. I must confess I was feeling a bit at odds before you came out here."

Niall reached out to gently cup her cheek. "You've been feeling under the weather?"

"No, not that, just not, well... useful, I guess. I feel like I've lost my purpose. Back home I was supposed to be starting this brand new life. I was going to be a therapist and help people, but now... well."

Niall wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Lass, you have been very useful. You have brought me joy every day since you've come here. I know tis nae the same as it twas in your world and you're struggling to find your place here, but trust me when I say you are helping people. You are not just helping me, but all of the Donald clan with this Campbell problem."

Her eyes welled up with emotion as her heart felt full to bursting. "Thank you, Niall," she whispered. "You always seem to know exactly what to say."

He leaned in, his lips brushing against hers in a tender caress. "Tis easy with you, lass."

A moment later, a voice called out, "Niall, Cam is looking for you," from the doorway of the kitchens. Niall sighed. "I must go. Shall I see you later?"

Mae nodded and watched him return. She followed him at a slower pace, deciding that she wanted to make herself useful in more than just helping with the Campbell problem. Mae entered the kitchens, the savory aromas of breakfast wafting through the air. She rolled up her sleeves, ready to lend a hand. Mira was overseeing the staff who were all busy at various stations around the room.

Mae approached her with a friendly smile. "Morning, Mira! Mind if I lend a hand in here?"

Mira glanced at Mae, her worn apron stained with flour. "Aye, Miss, you can chop some of these vegetables. Mind you, they're to be finely sliced."

Mae grabbed a knife and a cutting board, focusing on the task at hand. As she chopped the vibrant vegetables, she marveled at their freshness. "Mira, what are these?"

"Neeps, Miss." Mira looked at the vegetable Mae was holding up.

"It looks almost like turnip," Mae said softly, turning it over in her hands.

"Oh, aye, Lady Jen says that's the name she knows them by. Called them turnips, she did."

"The ones we had back home had purple tops to them, they weren't all white. I wonder what other differences I'll find here." She smiled over her shoulder at Mira. "Is this all of the vegetables?" she asked, glancing at the basket of peas, beans, turnips and cabbage.

“Aye, tis all that grows in our garden. The soil isnae good for much else. We sometimes can get exotic vegetables from travelers, but nae often.”

“Exotic?” Mae asked as she chopped.

“Oh, aye, carrots, leeks, parsnips and artichokes. Oh, the delicious smells and flavors we’ll have when we have those.” Mira closed her eyes, and a small smile touched her lips.

Mae shook her head as she thought about how readily available all of those were in her world. Mira would be in heaven, she thought with amusement, but she didn’t share. While many here knew that she and Jen had come from a different time and place, they didn’t really understand it and often thought they were witches, so it was sometimes best not to bring it up.

“Mind you, twill be a bit before we get a traveler willing to part with such treasure for a decent price.”

Curious about how the money worked here, Mae asked, “What do these travelers ask for a bunch of carrots?”

“Carrots they ask a right fortune, an’ they get it too. A whole Scottish merk, though, I’m sure seeing as you’re new to us, you’d know that as thirteen shillings four pence. Could pay nine days of wages with that,” Mira said with a sigh. “But oh the joy everyone has when we do manage to come across them makes it worth it.”

Mae paused in her chopping and looked over at Mira. “Nine days of wages? For carrots?” Now she really didn’t want to share how easily and readily available they were in the twenty-first century.

“Tis a king’s ransom, I agree,” Mira said.

As they continued to work, Mae couldn't help but admire how amazing everything smelled and tasted with such few ingredients to work with here. While she chopped the turnips and cabbage, another woman shelled peas and snapped the ends off of green beans. Mira got to work making dough for the bread and then putting it into one of the stone ovens. Over the fire a large pot simmered putting off a mouthwatering scent.

Mae had always taken food for granted. After today, she wouldn't any more. The work these women put into making meals for the near hundred people of the castle was nothing short of miraculous and they did it twice a day, for the morning and evening meal. Lunch wasn't really a full meal, but they did have a light repast of cheese, bread and meats available for those who wanted it. Mae doubted there would be enough time in the day for the women to cook a mid-day meal like they did for breakfast and dinner.

Later in the afternoon, after chopping all the vegetables for the evening meal, Mae made her way to the stables, the scent of hay and horses filling the air. She stepped inside, her eyes adjusting to the dim light that filtered through the small wooden windows in the various stalls.

She was looking for Niall and had been told she could find him grooming his horse. He had her back to her when she approached, as he stroked the reddish brown coat of his horse with a brush. "Hey, Niall, there you are." She couldn't stop the smile that grew on her lips as he turned to look at her.

"Good afternoon, lass," he greeted, a broad grin on his face.

"Looks like you're keeping busy with your horse." She reached a hand out and stroked the beast's neck.

Niall chuckled. "Aye, he's a fine creature and needs a great deal of attention and care.

I was happy to have a moment to see to him.” Niall looked around the stables and then lowered his voice to a husky whisper, “The problem child as you’ve dubbed him, is having a wee sparing match with a few of the others so I could have a break from watching him. Which also means, now that you’re here, we’ve got a wee moment alone.”.

Mae's smile brightened, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. "Finally," she replied. "I was hoping to steal some time with you." Her eyes strayed to the giant horse sticking its nose between them and her grin grew teasing. “Though I don’t think we’re as alone as we think. This beast still wants our attention.” She ran her hand over the sleek softness of its coat.

Niall leaned against the stall door, his gaze locked on Mae. “Aye, Captain does like his attention, but he’s had enough for now.” He set the brush down and grabbed a feed bag that was full of oats and put it in front of the horse. “Now he’ll be occupied, and I can have you all to myself.” He winked as he turned back to her.

Mae stepped forward a bit, entering his personal space. “I like the sound of that. Especially coming from you.”

“Is that so, lass?” His grin turned roguish as he reached for her, pulling her into his chest. He leaned down and kissed her, stealing her breath away for a few moments.

Mae was breathing hard, and her toes curled as she stared up at him. “You make me feel like I’m on a great adventure every time we’re together.”

Niall's smile widened as he drew his hand up to gently touch Mae's cheek. "A grand adventure, indeed," he murmured. "And you, lass, make me feel as though every day is magical." He kissed her again, but the moment was shattered a few minutes later by the one person they both despised.

Brian sauntered toward them, his voice dripping with arrogance. "Well, well, what do we have here, then? The lovebirds enjoying a moment of privacy?" he sneered, his eyes fixated on Mae. "Don't you worry, lass. I'll make sure to give you both some entertainment."

Niall's jaw clenched, his fists tightening at his sides. "Brian, mind your manners," he warned through gritted teeth. "I'll nae be treated as your lackey."

Brian laughed cruelly, his words laced with disdain. "Trying to play the noble knight, are you, Niall? We all know your intentions toward the lass are no different than mine—just a quick tumble in the hay."

The air grew tense and Mae felt her temper rise, her eyes blazing with determination. "You have no right to speak about Niall that way," she retorted. "His intentions and mine are no business of yours. And as for your intentions toward me, well, in your dreams maybe."

Niall's anger flared too, because his voice was low and seething with fury as he stepped in front of Mae, blocking her from Brian's view. "You know nothing of my intentions, Brian. Nothing about me, and nothing about Mae. Your words hold no weight here. I suggest you leave before you truly provoke me."

Brian's laughter echoed through the stables, his mockery cutting through the air. "Oh, the mighty guardsman, showing off for the wee little lassie. Just remember, you're not the only one who desires her. And unlike you, I am nae afraid to take what I want."

Mae stepped forward, her voice firm and resolute. "If you think for one moment that you can do what you want when it comes to me, then you are sadly mistaken." Her fingers clenched into fists, ready to fight him should he even attempt to come near her. The idea that he desired her gave her the icks and sent a shiver of disgust down her back.

Tension crackled between the three of them. Mae glanced at Niall and met his steely gaze. He looked how she felt. Angry and ready to throttle the disgusting toad of a man before them.

Brian on the other hand, laughed. "I like a bit of spirit in my women. You'll do fine." With that, he sauntered off, out of the stables.

Mae was seething. The gall of that man. "I can't stand that creep," she muttered.

"I'm sorry you have to be around him, lass. He shouldnae speak to you in such a manner."

Mae flipped her gaze up to him and her anger gentled as she stared at him. "You aren't to blame Niall, though I think it might be best if we spend less time together." She put a hand on his arm and stared up at him. "Not because I don't want to, but because it's your duty to watch him and me being with you just makes him worse." She frowned, wishing there was a way that they could be together, but not seeing a way.

"I understand, lass, I do. I fear for your safety when he is near. I donnae trust the bastard, nor myself when he says such things." His hands clenched at his sides and a look of ire crossed his face for a moment and then gentled as he stared down at her. Slowly his shoulders relaxed, and his fingers unfurled from their clench, and he raised his hand to her cheek. "I care about you, lass. I donnae know what I would do if'n he hurt you."

Mae felt a well of emotion building in her chest, ready to burst forth at his words. "I care about you too."

"We'll find a way to handle him and then we can be together when we want. For now, perhaps you'd best return to the safety of the castle. Donnae be alone where he

might corner you. Not that I shall be giving him a chance to do so, but t'would be safer for you to be indoors."

Mae covered his hand on her cheek with her own as she nodded. "Okay, but I'm not as fragile as you might think. I know how to take care of myself from the likes of him, you don't have to worry." She smiled as she drew his hand down and intertwined her fingers with his for a moment. "We'll find a way," she murmured, feeling the growing affection she had for him and knew he was worth whatever risks they would face.

CHAPTER 14

Mae returned to the castle feeling a little despondent about their trouble with Brian. He was getting in the way of everything, and she wanted him gone, but from everything she'd been told, it was impossible to make him leave. And from their most recent conversation, it didn't look as though he was going to leave of his own accord. She plopped down at one of the long tables in the dining hall, her expression sullen. A pout graced her lips as she sank into her own thoughts, a maelstrom of emotions swirling within her.

Her mind wandered to her growing affection for Niall, feelings that extended beyond friendship and into love. It bothered her a bit that she was falling for him when she was supposed to be looking for a way back to her time. It wasn't like she could do a long distance relationship through time and space. She shouldn't be so consumed by him, but her heart said otherwise.

She glanced around the dining hall which was busy for it being mid-afternoon. There were guardsmen having tankards of ale and enjoying platters of meats and cheese. She supposed they were off duty at least for a while. They seemed to have various shifts where some kept watch all night and others early mornings, and still others during the day. When they weren't pulling guard duty, they were training or off grounds hunting down bandits. Their laughter and chatter reached her ears, but it felt distant, as if a veil separated her from them.

Her thoughts returned to her predicament. She wanted to find a way back to her home, but her heart ached. She was torn between her desire to be with Niall and her thought of returning to her own time. She didn't even know if it was possible to do

so. And if she did, what then? She'd been here for weeks, nearly two months now. Had someone filed a missing person report on her? Did anyone other than Billy even know she was missing? Lord knew that he wouldn't report it. If he had caught up to her... she shut that thought down as unhelpful.

Sighing deeply, Mae ran a hand through her hair, frustration etched upon her features. "What am I doing?" she wondered aloud, her voice filled with exasperation. "Thinking about this isn't helpful. I should be doing something." The question was what? She half started to rise, thinking maybe she could go talk to Jen, but as she put her hands on the table, she was surprised by the presence of an unexpected visitor. Across from her sat the cab driver— Dub Sith— the very same man who had transported her through time. Clad in a peculiarly woven kilt, he wore a mischievous smile on his dark face.

"Good day, lass," he said, his voice almost melodic with a hint of Scottish accent. It was different from Niall's or any of the others here though.

Her eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at the familiar face before her. "What in the world?" she exclaimed, her voice laced with astonishment. "How... How did you... Why are you here?"

Dub Sith chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Ah, lass, you must know that it tis within my power to do such things, as I am sure you're aware by now of who I am," he replied.

Mae nodded. "Yes, you're Dub Sith, I'm told you are Fae."

His grin grew. "Aye, that I am."

"Why did you come to see me? I mean why now? Are you here to take me home?" Mae leaned in, half afraid that he might say yes, and half afraid that he wouldn't.

“Nae, lass, I brought you here for a reason.” His face was serious as he stared at me.

Patiently, Mae licked her lips as she attempted to question the man. “Can you tell me your reason?”

“Of course, lass. You should know of them. The man who was after you in your time, I saw what would happen if I left you there. He would have killed you. As I didnae have my bow with me to put the bastard down, I decided to remove you from your time so that you might live a full life here.”

Mae was seriously confused, but also grateful to the small little man who seemed to have only good intentions for her. She wasn’t sure why though. “But why? Why would you go to such lengths for me?” she inquired, feeling a bit vulnerable.

Dub Sith leaned back a bit upon the bench and crossed his arms over his chest, his expression filled with wisdom. “There was nothing but misery and pain for you in your time. Here, you will, I think, find a purpose and love greater than any you could imagine. You are destined for better things, lass.”

Mae stared at him, absorbing his words. He wasn’t wrong. She’d had a lifetime of misery in her world and had only succeeded in bettering herself by the skin of her teeth. And if what he’d said was true—and she had no reason to doubt this magical man—she’d been about to die. “You believe in destiny?” she asked, full of curiosity.

He nodded, a knowing smile gracing his lips. “Aye, lass. Destiny is a tricky thing along with the Fates. T’was the Fates who put me in your path that day, and t’was the Fates who had me bring you to this time and place. We’ve all got a part to play, and if you listen to that inner voice, which I know you have, you will feel that I am right.” His eyes twinkled. “Are you upset about being here? Even after meeting Niall?”

Mae blinked. “No, if what you say is true about what would have happened, then I

can't be too upset. I suppose that means I can't go back," she said her thoughts out loud. It almost gave her permission to fully admit to her feelings for Niall. "And yes, Niall is wonderful. I would have regretted not meeting him if you hadn't brought me here."

Dub Sith's smile was knowing. "And were I to take you back, your previous destiny would be full-filled, and you'd be killed. You would also die knowing that you left behind the love of your life, though I don't think you quite realize that yet."

She drew in a sharp breath at his words. Was Niall the love of her life? Her growing feelings for him told her this fae man was not lying.

"I cannae lie, lass, tis against nature for me."

"Thank—" she began to say.

But he held up his hand and quickly injected, "Do not say those words, lass. To thank a fae means you owe them and to owe a fae a favor..." he shook his head, "tis not a good idea."

"I see," Mae said, but didn't really. She tried to think of another way to tell him thank you and settled upon saying, "Then I shall say I am grateful for your freely shared words of wisdom."

"Aye, lass, that will do." He gave a single nod and began to rise. "Now, go and enjoy your life, lass. T'will be an adventure, I should think."

"But...wait!" she started, halting him.

He looked at her curiously. "What is it, lass? What other knowledge can I give you, other than what I've already shared?"

“It isn’t knowledge exactly that need. Just...” her shoulders shrank as she admitted, “I can’t fully enjoy my time with Niall when Brian Campbell is always present causing the Donalds trouble. He’s a constant disruption, not only to the Donalds, but also to the women here and he’s a thorn in my side.”

Dub Sith furrowed his brows, his gaze thoughtful. After a moment of contemplation, he abruptly stood up from the table, a determined expression on his face. "Not to worry, lass, I shall speak to you again later," he said, his hand raised and his fingers about to make a snap.

Mae's eyes widened, and she instinctively jumped up to stop him. "Wait!" she called, hoping to get some help with Brian.

“We’ll speak later,” he said and then completed his snap and disappeared.

Frustration filled her as his form faded from existence. She still didn’t know what to do about Brian.

“Lass, do you know who that was?” Ewan MacDonald asked, joining her as she stared that space Dub Sith had just been in. He looked pale, his eyes wide and slightly frightened. “That was Dub Sith, one o’ the dark Fae.”

Mae nodded. “Yes, I am aware.”

“What did he want? What was he doing here?”

“He’s the one who brought me here, he was... checking on me, I guess.”

Ewan turned his gaze to Mae. “You’ve been touched by the fae, tis a blessing he gave you then. He is one o’ the ancient ones.” With that, he left her and wandered out of the dining hall.

CHAPTER 15

N early two weeks had gone by with minimal time spent with Niall and Mae was becoming more and more frustrated. Brian continued his pattern of behavior, sexually harassing the various women and girls in the castle, at least until Niall put a stop to it. The problem was every time Niall shut him down, Brian got worse and found a way around him.

Mae knew Niall was at his wits end. He was looking extremely stressed, with dark circles under his eyes and a closed off demeanor. The only time he seemed to brighten was when Mae managed to greet him for a brief moment before Brian showed his ugly face. She knew this couldn't continue for much longer.

Brian continued to seek her out along with the other women, too, which only served to frustrate Mae more. Niall too, for that matter, since he was the one keeping Brian in check. She watched him doing so with the other women, but there was a bit of extra force when he protected her from the vile man. Unfortunately, that only seemed to make Brian more determined to accost her.

“What’s the matter? Why aren’t you enjoying the day with Niall?” Jen asked, taking a seat next to her at the morning meal.

Mae twisted her spoon in her porridge and sighed. “Because Brian the asshole is making our lives miserable.”

Jen arched a brow. “How so?”

“He won’t leave me alone and any moment Niall and I find to have to ourselves, he somehow manages to interrupt. We haven’t gotten to be alone in ages and I think Niall is about to lose his mind. He’s really stressed out, you can see it on his face.” She frowned as she looked across the room to where he sat across the table from Brian.

Jen followed her gaze and nodded. “Hmm, yeah, I see what you mean. I wish Cam would let me kick his ass. Maybe if he got a good ass whopping, he’d stop all this shit.”

Mae couldn’t have agreed more. “Absolutely. However, I do see Cam’s predicament. I mean the guy is a Campbell and kicking his ass could bring about consequences we won’t like. It wouldn’t be good if the clan lost this stronghold because we couldn’t control our tempers with their representative.”

Jen nodded. “A lot of truth in that, but damn I wish I could just punch him in his smarmy face.”

Mae giggled. “Yeah, me too.”

Jen glanced at her and grinned. “How about you come join today’s training session? I’ve got beginner lessons happening, and maybe it will help relieve some of the frustration you’re feeling?”

“Sounds like a good plan. I am supposed to help in the kitchens this afternoon, when is this training?”

“In about an hour. I’ll have you back in the kitchens before you know it.” Jen winked. “By the way, I’m glad you’ve found something to keep you busy around here. I know being here is different than being back in our world and isn’t exactly how you saw your life playing out, but?—”

“No, it’s okay. You’re right it isn’t, but after talking to Dub Sith, well, it seems I probably would have died if I’d stayed. He sort of implied that if I were to go back, that is what’s in store for me. Better to be here and live than go back and die.”

Jen looked solemn. “He said you would have died? How?”

Mae realized she hadn’t exactly told Jen the truth about what had been going on prior to her coming here. Maybe now was the time to come clean, she thought. “When I got in his cab, my ex-boyfriend was chasing me.”

“Right, you mentioned something about that, I think.”

“What I didn’t tell you was that I sort of took some stuff from him and he was angry about it. Really angry. Like murderous about it.” Mae pressed her lips together and closed her eyes. “He was a really abusive guy and I’d gotten away from him for a few years, long enough to go to school and get my degree, but he’d found me and that was why he was chasing me.”

“Wow. I’m sorry you went through that,” Jen replied.

“I was after a better life, and I guess I’ve found that here, so being here it’s good. I can start fresh without worrying about Billy getting a hold of me. And finding Niall, well, if we can ever manage to get some time together, I think we could really work. He’s a good man.”

Jen smiled. “That he is. And you do know that it’s not exactly taboo to spend time with him away from prying eyes. I mean, when I got here, I was under the impression that people in the past were inclined to puritanical views about relationships, but it’s a bit more laid back than that. Don’t go getting pregnant or anything without a ring on your finger, but pretty much everything else is on the table.”

Mae blinked. “Seriously?”

Jen grinned. “The staff will gossip if they catch you, but that’s about it. Haven’t you heard the girls tittering about Lorne and Elspet?”

“Elspet? She’s a teenager!” Mae gasped.

“She’s seventeen, and yes and in our world that’s a bit young, but here, she’s marriageable age. Most women marry by the age of nineteen in this world. And Lorne is twenty, so not too big of an age difference really in the grand scheme of things.”

“They must think I’m an old maid then.” Mae chuckled.

“Me too when I got here,” Jen said with a laugh. “I’ll let you finish your meal. Come find me in the courtyard when you’re done.”

“I’ll see you later.”

Mae watched her leave and then allowed her eyes to rest upon Niall’s hunched shoulders once more. She missed him, missed his conversation, missed the way he smiled at her, missed the way he held her and kissed her. She wished once again that things could be easy, and Brian would go back to the rock he’d crawled out from under.

Niall turned and glanced her direction and then after a surreptitious glance at Brian, smiled at her and raised his hand in greeting. She smiled and waved back at him, wishing she could join him, but she wouldn’t. Not with Brian there.

Their brief connection was broken when Brian grabbed one of the girls clearing the table and Niall had to jump up to help her get away from Brian’s grasping hands.

Sighing, Mae finished her food and took her used dishes to the kitchen. She'd gotten into the habit of clearing her own things so the others wouldn't have to.

"You're a wee bit early to be helping in here today," Mira said, greeting her.

"Oh, hi, Mira. Good morning. No, I'm just clearing my plate. I'll be back later this afternoon. Am I on vegetable chopping duty again?" she asked with a grin.

"I thought I might have you help me with the baking today, if'n you're up to it?"

The idea of learning to bake bread here actually thrilled her and she nodded. "That would be great. I'm looking forward to it."

"Come a wee bit early then, we've a lot to do."

"I will," Mae agreed, and then headed upstairs to add a pair of pants under her skirts so she could train with Jen.

After a long day of first working out with Jen, where she learned a lot of basic martial art moves, and then a quick wash—Lord how she missed her shower back home—she'd gone to the kitchens and Mira taught her how to grind the grain for the flour, then how to add the yeast and boiled water to get it to rise and lighten. Once that was done, it could be baked. They'd done probably thirty loaves by the time they were finished, but Mae didn't count them to be sure. She was tired and her arms ached from both her workout and the kneading.

Instead of joining the others in the dining room for dinner, she decided to take her meal up to her room and then get an early night of sleep. The others in the kitchen had made a delicious smelling beef stew to go with all of the bread she and Mira had made. There was also shortbread, which Mira had done between making the bread. The woman was a very skilled baker with the arms of a strong man from all the bread

kneading and heavy flour bags she lifted daily.

Sinking into her chair, Mae ate her meal and then quietly slipped downstairs to return her plate and utensils. Sally stopped her on the way back upstairs and after a brief conversation, said she'd have a bath delivered to her. Mae couldn't help but be grateful. A bath sounded like heaven.

She wasn't wrong. The bath was just what she'd needed. The maids had returned a short while ago, cleared away the bath and stoked the fire for her. She was just about to climb into her bed when there was another knock on her door. She didn't bother asking who it was, assuming it was Sally, come to do her hair or chat, so she just opened it. But it wasn't Sally. Instead, Niall stood on the other side of her door, wearing a grin.

He dragged his gaze over her in her nightgown and she felt her cheeks heat. She wasn't really embarrassed, she'd worn less on the beach back home, but somehow, he made her feel as though she were wearing sexy lingerie instead of a floor-length white, cotton shift that came all the way up to her collar bone.

"Lass, aren't you a sight for sore eyes. I've missed you greatly," he murmured, looking at her hungrily.

Mae swallowed hard and let a grin spread over her lips. "I've missed you too." Her gaze strayed past him, almost afraid she'd find Brian lingering in the hallway behind him. "Where is your charge?"

"I left him in a drunken stupor in his bed," he answered, his smile growing. "I thought it might be the perfect chance to steal some time with you."

"I'm glad you did, would you like to come in?"

He hesitated. “But you’re dressed for bed.”

Mae laughed. “All the more reason you should come in, instead of us lingering in the doorway, don’t you think?”

Chuckling, he nodded and followed her into the small room which only grew smaller with him in it, and closed the door behind him. “You do not mind me being here when you’re dressed as such?”

Mae arched a brow. “Are you uncomfortable around me while I’m dressed like this?”

“Uncomfortable? No. Enamored, yes,” he said, his voice low and husky as he drew her into his arms. He raised a hand and brushed some of her hair from her cheek, tucking it behind her ear gently. “I missed seeing you at dinner. Did you eat?”

Mae nodded. “I ate up here. I needed a quiet evening.”

“I donnae blame you, lass, though I must admit seeing your smiling face during dinner is one of the highlights of my day.” He cupped her cheek. “I regret not getting more time with you.”

Mae leaned her cheek deeper into his hand, enjoying the intimate caress. Her eyes fluttered closed as she breathed in the scent of him. “I regret that too,” she murmured.

He leaned in and kissed her, and Mae felt her world turn topsy-turvy. A few moments later, he broke the kiss and sighed, leaning his forehead against hers.

“He’s driving me mad,” he practically growled, “especially when he acts the vulgar fool toward you.”

A smile ghosted over Mae’s lips. “He’s just jealous of you. He knows he can’t get

with me, and you can.”

“That may be so, lass, but it does nothing to alleviate the hatred I feel toward him when he does it.” He shook his head, which felt strange because he still had his forehead pressed to hers.

It was as though they were in a little bubble of existence, connected to each other at every possible point they could, dressed as they were. Mae felt her heart swell as she whispered, “This isn’t just a fling, is it?”

“Not for me, love, you?”

“Not for me either,” she whispered back. “I’m falling in love with you, Niall.”

“And I with you, love. I think that may be why I get so angry when he acts indelicately around you. It hurts my soul to not be able to defend your honor around him.”

Mae drew her hand from his waist up to his chest and put it over his heart. “You are a good man, Niall, and I love that you want to defend my honor, but know, he can’t touch me.”

Niall’s fingers twisted in her hair, tilting her head as he kissed her again with more passion than she’d ever felt in her life. He made her feel precious and fragile, yet strong and capable in his arms. It was unlike any feeling she’d ever had before. She never wanted to let him go, it was a scary thought, but one she wanted to hold onto forever.

“I should go,” he said, breathing hard when he broke the kiss a few minutes later. “Let you sleep.”

Mae really wanted to beg him to stay, but knew he wouldn't, not yet. Despite what Jen had said about the rules being more lax than she'd originally imagined this time period would be, Niall was a gentleman. She had a feeling he wanted to court her properly before he subjected her and their relationship to the rumors of the staff. "Stay a moment more?" she asked, hopeful.

He smiled. "Only a moment. I fear if I donnae leave soon, the staff I passed in the hall on my way here will be having us at the center of their attention for the next month."

Mae giggled. Gossips were the same in the twenty-first century; that hadn't changed. "Probably so, though if they're going to gossip anyway, we should maybe give them something more to talk about." She grinned and pulled his lips back to hers.

CHAPTER 16

As Niall bid his farewell and left Mae's room, promising to return, she closed the door behind him and leaned against it, her heart pounding in her chest. A soft sigh escaped her lips, and a contented smile graced her face. She'd enjoyed every minute of that encounter and hoped they could make a nightly routine of it.

She could still feel the lingering touch of his lips against hers, the warmth of his embrace enveloping her in affection. The butterflies in her stomach fluttered with an intensity she had never experienced before with any other man. Niall was special, intoxicating and she wanted to get lost in his touch.

Her fingertips grazed her lips, still tingling from their fervent kisses. The memory of his fingers in her hair, skimming down her back, and touching her cheek, sent shivers of pleasure down her spine, igniting a fire within her that refused to be extinguished. Mae found herself craving the strength of his arms around her, and the warmth of his gaze upon her.

Mae straightened herself and stepped away from the door. She couldn't deny the depth of her feelings for Niall. Her heart had been claimed and was now owned by a handsome Scottish Highlander. Never in a million years would she have imagined that to be possible. As she climbed into bed, her thoughts still on Niall, she blew out the candle and fell asleep, dreaming of the man who'd stolen her heart.

The next morning, Mae woke with smile on her lips. Her dreams had been almost erotic in nature, and she couldn't wait to see Niall again, however, when she got to the dining hall, she was disappointed to see Brian was there with him. Her shoulders

sank, as she gazed at him with longing. She filled her plate and sank down at another table across the room where she could still see him. Every time he looked up, they shared a secret smile that filled her heart with love.

She decided she needed to take action and looked around the dining hall for someone who could help. Her gaze landed on Sally and waved to get her attention. Sally waved back and came over to join her.

“Miss Mae, you’re looking spritely this mornin’,” she said with a smile. “Did you have a need of me?”

“I have a favor to ask, Sally, and I’m hoping you can do it,” Mae said in a hushed tone.

“Whatever it tis, Miss Mae, I’ll be happy to help.”

“Can you bring me paper and ink? I want to write a note for Niall, and then I’m hoping you’ll deliver it for me? Discreetly, of course, I don’t want that Campbell man to notice it.”

A broad smile lit across her face. “I knew it. I knew you and Niall were getting cozy. Of course, I will help. Willnae take me a jot to get what you need.” With that Sally rushed off.

Mae fidgeted with her food, eating a few bites as she waited for Sally to return. A wave of relief passed over her when she saw Sally returning with a piece of parchment, a quill and bottle of ink. “Thanks, Sally, you’re a gem. I’ll have this ready in a moment.”

“I’ll finish clearing the dishes an’ be right back,” she replied, wandering off.

Mae thought for a moment and then decided to keep the note short and sweet.

N~ meet me in the same place as last night. I'll wait for you. ~ M

She wanted to put a heart on it, but then if anyone happened to get a hold of the message it would look more like an assignation, which of course it was, but she didn't want anyone else to know that. She waited until the ink dried and then folded the parchment until it fit in the palm of her hand. Looking up, she caught Sally's gaze and gave her a nod to let her know she was ready.

"Are you finished writing down the recipe, Miss Mae?" she asked, coming over to her.

"Reci—oh, yes. I put it in my pocket. Thank you, Sally." Mae's gaze went to the people walking by her table and realized Sally was trying to distract them for what Mae had really been up to.

"I'll jest return these to the study then." She reached for the ink, quill, and left over parchment, but as she did so, Mae slipped the folded paper into her hand. "I'll get this to him in a moment, let me take care of this first," she whispered under her breath.

"Thank you for their use, I appreciate it."

"My pleasure, Miss." Sally scurried away.

A few minutes later, she returned and headed over to Niall's table. She was careful to stay on his side of the table away from Brian. Mae couldn't make out what she was saying but after a moment, she was lifting the plates and walking away with them. Mae's gaze went from Sally to Niall, and she saw the flash of folded parchment as he slipped the note into the pouch that hung from his kilt. He hadn't read it, and she knew he wouldn't until he was well away from Brian.

As Brian was distracted by a passing woman, Niall slid his gaze to her and he smiled, giving her a wink. It told her that he knew the message was from her. She grinned back and feeling light in her step, picked up her dishes and headed for the kitchen. She couldn't wait to see him later.

That night and every night after for the next couple of weeks, , Niall's evening knock upon her door caused her heart to quicken with anticipation. She couldn't help the sheer joy she felt every time she opened that door to allow him in.

"You never fail to make my heart race, love," Niall confessed, his eyes sparkling with desire and admiration as he pulled her into his arms.

Mae's cheeks flushed, her breath catching in her throat as she allowed herself to be swept away by the powerful magnetism that drew them together.

With each passing night, their encounters grew more intimate, more honest, and more laden with unspoken desire. Their conversations flowed effortlessly, punctuated by stolen glances and lingering touches and passionate kisses that left them both breathless and wanting more.

The sexual tension between them became a palpable presence, filling the room with an intoxicating energy. Their gazes lingered a little longer, their touches grew bolder, and their kisses more passionate as their stolen moments turned to hours. Yet they never went beyond that, much to Mae's frustration. She wanted him and she knew he wanted her just as much. She wasn't sure what they were waiting for, but she knew when they did finally take that step it would be magical.

Mae wandered the herb garden, collecting the various things Mira had tasked her with gathering for the day's meals. Her mind wasn't on her task though, it was on Niall and the intimate evening they'd spent the night before. When she closed her eyes, she could feel his hands on her, taste his kisses on her lips once more. Her cheeks heated

at the thought of them taking things a step further.

Breathing hard, she shook her head and returned to her task. A few minutes later, as she reached for another herb, a dark shadow fell across the basket, disrupting her tranquility. Expecting to find Niall's familiar figure, Mae looked up, only to be met with the unwelcome sight of Brian looming over her, a lecherous grin upon his face. A wave of annoyance washed over her, turning her expression into a scowl.

She was filled with disgust as Brian's eyes shamelessly darted to the swell of her breasts in the Scottish attire she wore. Mae's heart raced with anger and indignation, and she swiftly rose to her feet, refusing to allow herself to be objectified in such a manner.

Turning on her heels, ready to retreat to the kitchens, Mae was met with an obstacle she hadn't anticipated. Brian had moved to block her escape, his demeanor oozing with arrogance. A surge of frustration coursed through her veins, but she kept her composure, determined not to let him get the best of her.

With a steely resolve, Mae locked eyes with Brian, her voice firm and unwavering.

"Move aside, Brian," she demanded, her tone laced with an undeniable authority. Though her heart pounded with unease, she refused to let fear cloud her judgment or grant him the satisfaction of seeing her as vulnerable.

Brian's lips curled into a condescending smirk as he leaned closer, his breath reeking of whisky.

"Why the hurry, lass? Can't handle a wee bit of attention?" he taunted, his words dripping with what she was sure he thought was sex appeal.

Mae's jaw clenched, her fist tightening around the handle of the basket she carried, as

she fought the urge to give in to her anger and lash out at him.

Drawing upon her inner strength, Mae met Brian's gaze with unwavering determination.

"I have no interest in your attention, Brian," she retorted, her voice carrying a steely resolve. "Step aside or suffer the consequences."

A flicker of surprise flashed across Brian's face, momentarily breaking through his cocksure facade. He took a step back, catching her fiery gaze'. She stared daggers at him, wishing him dead.

Brian's eyes narrowed with suspicion as he confronted Mae. "Why donnae you visit me anymore, Mae?" Brian's voice dripped with the frustration of a thwarted playboy. His question was laced with a desperate need for validation, a confirmation that he still held some power over her.

The idea that he'd ever thought he held power over her was laughable though. Mae's icy gaze met his, her voice laced with the underlying disdain she felt toward him. "I have never visited you , Brian. It was always Niall." Her words cut through the tension, leaving no room for doubt.

As she attempted to step past him, Brian's towering figure loomed once more, blocking her path. His face contorted with anger, his voice growing sharper. "You cannae just dismiss me like that, lass. I am a Campbell, and I willnae be ignored!"

A fiery surge of anger coursed through Mae's veins, her patience wearing thin. She squared her shoulders, refusing to be intimidated. "Let me make this as clear as possible. I can and will dismiss you, Brian. I have no interest in you, nor will I ever. Step aside and leave me the hell alone."

Brian's eyes were full of his wounded pride. His voice trembled with a hint of desperation. "You're making a mistake, Mae. I am a Campbell, that buffoon you fancy is nothing but the dregs of society. You are acting very inhospitably toward me and I donnae care for it. Continue and I may just have to take my displeasure of the Donalds treatment of me to the Laird."

Mae's temper flared, her voice sharp and cutting. "You are under the mistaken assumption that I am a Donald. I'm not. I'm a Welles and a guest here, same as you. I don't have to be hospitable toward you, you ungracious disgusting pig. So leave me the fuck alone." Seething, she gave him a final glare and stomped past him, leaving him gapping in shock at her words.

CHAPTER 17

For the remainder of the day, Mae felt a lightness in her step and a joy in her heart. She'd finally stood up to Brian and put him in his place. She'd caught glimpses of him and Niall throughout the day, but it wasn't until Niall joined her earlier than usual that she'd found out what effect her confrontation had had upon Brian.

"You're in a jovial mood," she said as Niall entered her bedroom and pulled her into his arms.

"Aye, that I am, lass. I'm not sure what happened this morning, but when I finally tracked Brian down this morn, he acted like a whipped pup. He was sullen and subdued and it was a pleasure to behold. He didn't cause any trouble, and stuck to getting himself good and soused."

A grin spread across Mae's face. "I'm glad to hear my words stuck with him for the day. Let's hope it lasts longer."

"Your words?" Niall pulled back and looked down at her with concern. "Did he hurt you, love?"

"No." She put a calming touch on his forearm. "He approached me and tried to put the moves on me, but I shut him down hard." She knew from previous conversations that he would understand her vernacular as they'd previously had a discussion about various euphemisms popular in the twenty-first century. They'd spent hours laughing about some of them.

Niall's brow furrowed. "Tell me what he did."

Mae explained what had taken place and when she got to the part where Brian had insinuated that she should have sex with him as a duty of being hospitable, she saw his hands clench into fists.

"I'll kill him," he muttered.

She shook her head and smiled. "No need. As I said, I put him in his place. What was the term you used before...? I gave him a good dressing down."

"I'm glad to hear it. Though the idea that you or any of our people need to lay with him—" He abruptly stopped speaking and took a few deep breaths to calm himself.

"I know, but you don't have to worry. You should have seen his face when I was done. He was completely shocked that I didn't back down. That I spoke to him as I did. I left him with his jaw gaping like a loudmouth bass." She giggled as she recalled the look upon Brian's face.

"It doesnae sit well with me, love, but you handled it and I admire you for it. I just wish you didnae have to do so."

They spent a few more minutes discussing how Brian behaved afterward, and ended up in laughter, holding on to each other, which turned to something more affectionate and then to passion.

Mae loved how easy they were with each other, and she wanted more. She wanted the intimacy of making love with him. She tugged on his linen shirt, sliding her hands up underneath, stroking his solid chest. A moment later, the shirt was gone, and he was bare chested.

“Love, if we donnae stop...” Niall began, huskily between fevered kisses.

“Don’t care, don’t stop,” Mae said hungrily.

“You’re sure,” he questioned, pulling back for a moment to stare into her eyes.

“Yes, Niall, make love to me, stay the night, just don’t freaking stop touching me, kissing me, holding me,” she replied, planting kisses on his lips, jaw and neck.

He gripped her nightgown and pulled it up and over her head, leaving her in nothing but her panties, which were scanty, and his eyes widened and then his pupils dilated, and he practically growled as he dragged them down her legs and buried his face between her legs.

Mae fell back on the bed and her eyes rolled back as she gripped his head, loving the feel of him pleasuring her. His tongue was magic as it danced over her skin and delved between her folds. She screamed with pleasure as he drove her over the peak to the abyss of pleasure. She was breathing heavy, her eyelids half closed as she watched him draw his hand across his mouth and lick his lips.

“Never tasted anything as sweet as you, love,” he said as he removed his kilt and draped it over the wooden chair.

He stood proud for a moment and Mae couldn’t help but admire his physique. He joined her a moment later and kissed her, his tongue tangling with hers as he caressed her body. She wanted his hands everywhere. He’d lit a fire within her, and she wanted to feel it burn hot and bright between them.

“You want this, love?” he murmured against her skin as his lips skimmed her jaw.

“So badly, Niall. I want you so much it hurts,” she replied.

His lips captured hers in another hot kiss, and he sank his dick into her. Mae arched her back at the feel of him entering her, filling her to capacity. He was incredibly large and thick, and she felt herself mold around him. As he began to move, it dawned on her that this was what making love with the right person was supposed to feel like. There was an astonishing connection between the two of them that she could feel growing stronger with them in such an intimate act. She'd never felt anything like it and knew she never would with anyone else but him.

“Oh, yes, Niall, just like that...” she gasped as he moved at the perfect rhythm, driving her crazy with his touch and kisses.

Soon they were both sailing over the edge and into bliss as they came, each other's names on their lips. Mae held onto him tightly, her chest heaving from their activities. She could feel him still within her, still hard, but not as much as before. He too was panting and had buried his face in the curve of her neck.

He drew up a bit a moment later to stare down into her eyes, a roguish smile upon his lips. “I trust I didnae hurt you, love.”

She shook her head. “That was amazing, Niall, better than I could have ever imagined.” Her brow furrowed as she gazed up at him. “Did you not?”

“Oh, aye, I did, love. Give me a moment though and I shall be ready for another tumble.”

“Another... you mean you're able to—” she paused and felt her cheeks heat. Her previous partners had never had that kind of stamina and had almost always fallen asleep directly after finishing. The idea that he could go more than once thrilled her and a grin crossed her lips.

“Donnae tell me that men of your time cannae do so?” He arched a brow.

Mae giggled. “Not in my experience.”

He shook his head. “Weaklings,” he murmured and then he was kissing her again and moving within her, driving her to distraction once more.

She fell asleep hours later wrapped in his arms, completely exhausted.

CHAPTER 18

Feeling chilled and hearing vague voices, Mae woke up to discover Niall was gone and in the distance there was someone shouting. A glance around her room told her that he'd dressed and left her to sleep. That wasn't worrying though, she knew he had a job to do, and he'd have to leave in the morning to make sure Brian stayed out of trouble. The worrying part was she now recognized the voices and they were coming from outside.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up, feeling the coolness of the stone floor against her bare feet as she pulled the blanket around her. Resolute, she made her way toward the chamber window, her mind filled with questions about what was going on. It was still early, barely past dawn, so why Niall was shouting outside loud enough for her to hear him was very troubling. She was several stories up, so for her to hear his voice so clearly, had her concerned.

As she gazed out of the window, there, on a perilous edge of the castles ramparts, stood Brian, apparently still inebriated from the previous night's excessive drinking. He swayed precariously, his slurred voice echoing through the air as he sang in a drunken stupor. Mae's heart sank, realizing the danger he was putting himself and Niall in.

There were other guards there as well, but Niall was the one closest to Brian trying to talk him down from his death defying stance upon the wall. The others seemed to be speculating and taking bets on what was about to happen. Mae shook her head, knowing she couldn't just stand there and watch. She had to do something.

Without hesitation, Mae swiftly dressed, the urgency of the situation pushing her to act. She stepped out of her chamber, the corridor still quiet and dimly lit with the sconces upon the wall, their flickering candlelight waning as the candles were at their ends. She hurried down the stairs and out to the courtyard. She looked around trying to figure out how to get up to where Brian and Niall were and noticed a staircase that led up to the wall which was about three stories high. She stepped out onto the wall itself, which was somewhat wide, at least wide enough for two people to walk upon. The ramparts were the fortification part of the wall on the outer facing side where the guards could launch arrows from down upon whatever threat they were facing. It was that upon which Brian was precariously balanced. It was a much more dangerous position than merely being on the wall itself which the guards patrolled daily. The inner side of the wall, the part facing the courtyard, had a boundary that came up waist-high, but it was more level than the ramparts of the other side.

As she made her way toward the gathered guards, her heart pounding in her chest, the sound of her footsteps reverberated against the ancient stone beneath her feet. She tried to keep her composure, even as doubts gnawed at her, wondering if she was too late to aid in the precarious situation unfolding before her.

"You're goin' a fall, you need to come down," Niall was trying to cajole him to do as he asked and get off the ramparts.

Brian steadfastly ignored him as he belted out another round of lyrics to a song Mae didn't know. He tilted to the side and lifted one of his feet, his arms swaying as he attempted to balance on one foot. Mae's heart nearly stopped in her chest as she imagined him falling to his death. It was one thing to wish for him to go away, quite another to watch him die from his own stupidity.

As she stepped forward, she heard a couple of the guards muttering.

"This wouldnae have happened if'n you hadn't left him to his own devices."

“This is on your head, Niall, if he brings the Laird down upon us because the daft fool fell to his death.”

“How could you let him drink all night?” another accused.

Niall didn’t answer back, he was too busy trying to get Brian down. That didn’t stop Mae from speaking out, though. She wasn’t going to stand by and let them blame Niall for this.

“You aren’t helping and when Niall left him last night, he was passed out drunk in his bed. Did you expect Niall to sleep next to him?” she said with exasperation. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She rolled her eyes and pushed past them to reach Niall’s side.

“Mornin’, love, though not quite the mornin’ I had in mind when I woke.” He glanced at her, a small smile touching his lips for half a moment before his serious look returned. “As you can see, we’ve a wee problem.”

“Yep, I can see that.” She stared up at the spoiled brat on the ramparts who was causing them all this trouble. “Let me see if I can talk him down.”

“If you think you can, love, I am happy to let you try. He willnae listen to reason.”

Mae patted Niall’s arm and shared a look with him before straightening her shoulders and assessing the situation. She approached Brian slowly, and tried to keep her voice gentle and soothing. “Brian, can you hear me? I’m here to help you get down off the ledge there. Don’t you want to come down and join us on this nice wide wall?”

“No, they all hate me,” he muttered, waving his arm about to encompass the other guards.

“He’s a Campbell, of course we do,” one of the guards spit.

There was a round of chuckles from the others.

Mae turned and glared at them. “Shut your mouths. If you can’t be helpful, leave,” she said vehemently.

A few listened and with shrugs left her and Niall with just a couple others to keep watch on the situation.

Mae turned back to Brian. “I understand that you feel the Donald clan hasn’t been very welcoming to you, Brian. Why don’t you come down and we can talk about why you feel that way.”

“Didnae wanna come here, but nobody cares what I want,” Brian slurred as he stared out over the ramparts and down the hill toward the small village at the base.

“I know it wasn’t your choice to come here and you’ve made the best of your situation, enjoying the Donalds drinks and accommodations. Perhaps if you come down, Niall will find you another nice bottle of whisky?”

“If there’s any left,” Niall muttered under his breath, but Mae heard him.

She flashed her eyes to him, giving him a stern look.

“Sorry, love,” he added. “Of course, I’m sure there’s one around here somewhere. Come down, Brian, and we’ll go find it.”

Brian shook his head as he wobbled on the wall. “Donnae wanna.”

“Please, Brian? I don’t want to see you fall,” Mae pleaded, not because she really cared about him, but his death would only bring trouble down upon the Donalds and she didn’t want that to happen.

Brian paused and narrowed his watery eyes upon her. "Give us a wee kiss, lass, and I'll do whatever you say," he slurred, his words laced with drunken confidence. "You want to help me down? Help me with your lips."

Disgust filled her as she stared at the drunken man. She wouldn't kiss him if he were the last man on earth. She squinted at him in response to his inappropriate request. She shook her head firmly, her voice carrying the disdain she felt for him. "Absolutely not, Brian. This is not the time nor place for such nonsense. Your safety and well-being are what matter right now."

The onlookers, including Niall and the other men, couldn't help but chuckle at Mae's refusal. It was a moment of levity amidst the tension of the situation, and Brian's ego was swiftly deflated. His face reddened, a mix of anger and humiliation overcoming his drunken demeanor.

Anger flashed in Brian's eyes as he struggled to regain his composure. His intoxicated state amplified his frustration, and he clenched his fists, his voice tinged with indignation. "Who do you think you are, rejectin' me like that? I am a Campbell, and you should be grateful for the attention I'm givin' you!"

Mae remained unfazed by Brian's outburst. He was acting like an entitled petulant child. She maintained her calm demeanor as she met his gaze. "Your last name doesn't entitle you to disrespect or mistreat others and especially not me. I won't tolerate such behavior, and neither should anyone else." She could see that he was finally noticing the predicament he was in, being on the ramparts as he was. "Are you ready to come down now?" she asked, arching a brow.

The few guards that remained stepped forward, ready to intervene if Brian's anger escalated further. They didn't interfere, but stood closer, ready to pull her to safety should she need it.

Brian crossed his arms, acting like the defiant spoilt child he was as his lip stuck out in a pout.

"Enough, Brian! You've caused enough trouble this morning. It's time to come down from there before you hurt yerself," Niall demanded, his voice firm with authority. It was one of those no nonsense, quiet, fatherly demands that brooked no argument. The kind that sent kids into a fear of panic that they were about to get the everloving shit beaten out of them if they didn't comply.

Reluctantly, Brian seemed to comprehend the seriousness of the situation he was in. He took a few unsteady steps back from the ledge, his anger visibly draining as his shoulders shrank and his head hung down. When Niall offered him a hand to jump down to the safety of the walkway, Brian took it and clambered down to stand next to them. He appeared cowed, like he finally realized how reckless he'd been and was now embarrassed by his actions.

Mae could only hope it was a lesson that would stick with him as they headed back down the full safety of the courtyard.

CHAPTER 19

The remainder of the day, Mae spent helping in the kitchens. Many of the female staff approached her and thanked her for putting Brian in his place after hearing about the morning events. Brian didn't make an appearance until late in the afternoon, and that was only so he could eat and get more whisky, though Mae had heard that he'd gone down to the stables and spoken with someone. Niall hadn't been with him at the time, as he had been in a meeting with Cam.

Mae was anxious to hear what that was about.

After dinner, Mae returned to her room and waited for Niall to join her. She dressed for bed and was seated there reading from a tome she'd gotten from the library upstairs. It was mostly just a historical accounting of the Donald clan, but she was learning more about the area and the people she was now living with. She'd finished the second chapter by the time a knock sounded upon her door.

Closing the book, Mae went to answer it with a smile. She opened the door to see Niall standing there with a covered plate. "What's that?"

He gave her a mischievous look and uncovered it. "Shortbread. I swiped the last of it from the kitchen."

Mae giggled. "Don't let Mira find out, she was probably saving that for someone."

He chuckled and set the plate down on the table while she closed the door and locked it. A moment later she was swept up into his arms and he was kissing her.

“I missed you today,” he murmured against her lips.

“I missed you too.” Mae kissed him back, savoring the feeling of his lips upon hers. “Tell me about your day,” she said as she led him to the bed.

Niall sat and as he pulled off his boots, said, “It was a fairly nice day, Brian didn’t cause any trouble once he made his reappearance. I even managed to get in a training session with Jen. Then I had a meeting with Cam about what happened this morning.”

Mae’s lips twisted into a grimace. “He didn’t blame you for that, did he?”

Shaking his head, Niall pulled his shirt off. “Nae, with as much whisky as Brian had been drinking, something like that was bound to happen. Cam knows I put Brian to bed and expected him to be passed out for the rest of the night.”

Mae reached for him. “I’m glad he’s got your back. Some of those other guardsmen seemed to be blaming you. I didn’t like it.” Her tone was fierce.

“Aye, nor did I, love. I’ve had a word with our Captain about it. Despite being associated with the Donalds, there are those who think catering to the Campbells is going to brighten their own future should we lose this place. What they donnae seem to realize is that they’re painted with the same black mark we are because their families tied themselves to ours.”

Mae frowned. “There are always those brown-nosers who think they can kiss the authority’s ass and come out smelling like roses.”

Niall chuckled. “Another of your twenty-first century sayings?”

Mae giggled. “Yep, pretty much, though I’m not sure it originated in my time, but we still say it, well some of us do. Others just call them kiss-asses.”

They spent the rest of the night talking and making love and then fell asleep in each other's arms.

The next few days and nights continued in the same vein, with Brian acting very subdued and keeping mostly to himself. It left Mae suspicious. She didn't trust that Brian had actually turned over a new leaf. She had the distinct feeling that he was biding his time and waiting for something. She hated when she was proved right.

Five days after the morning incident on the wall and ramparts with Brian, a rider approached the gate, which because it was early in the morning, was closed. Mae had woken early along with Niall, and they'd gone up to the wall to watch the sunrise together and enjoy some tea and biscuits together away from most everyone else. It was then that their attention was drawn to the guards in the tower.

"Campbell approaching!" one of the tower guards bellowed, his words echoing through the stone walls. "Open the gates!"

"A Campbell?" Mae questioned. "Why is another Campbell here?"

"I donnae know, love, but I think we're about to find out." Niall looked worried as he picked up their crockery and the two of them headed back down to the courtyard.

"Who is it?" she asked as they got closer and saw a man in a blue and green tartan plaid kilt coming through the gates. "Do you know him?"

Niall's expression was a serious mask of frustration. His lips thinned and pressed together for a moment as he stared at the man upon the horse. "I do. He's Sir Kellan Campbell," he replied. "His being here now, does not bode well for us."

Mae glanced at him from the side of her eye. "Why is that?"

“Because generally Sir Kellan only comes when tis time to collect our taxes. We paid them a few months ago. For him to come now... it cannae be good news for us. The Laird would not have sent him if he didnae foresee a problem here.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing?” she said, hopeful. “Perhaps he’s here to collect Brian?”

“Nae, I donnae see that as likely, love.”

They watched as Sir Kellan dismounted from his horse with a graceful ease of a man who often rode. Mae studied the man and immediately thought he was probably an asshole. One of those entitled jerks who always thought they were better than her. They were the kind of men she used to enjoy conning back when she did that sort of thing. They often deserved it. She took in his dark blond hair and the well-trimmed beard, which framed his face, he was well put together. Not someone like Niall who was rough around the edges, but someone polished and posh. As he scanned the courtyard, his pale blue eyes held a glacial chill that made Mae shiver.

Finally, Sir Kellan’s gaze settling upon Niall and Mae. It was direct and chilling, as though he had found his target. His lips curled into a barely perceptible smirk, a condescending glint flickering in his eyes.

“Why is he focused on you and me? We’re not high ranking members of the Donald clan...” Mae said under her breath so only Niall could hear her.

“It tis almost as if he were specifically looking for us,” Niall agreed.

His words had Mae standing taller. If this man was about to come at her, she’d not back down. He was going to get as good as he gave.

Before Sir Kellan could even take a step toward them, the castle doors opened and Cam, with Jen at his side, glided regally down the steps. Nearly everyone in the

courtyard were frozen, watching the scene unfold.

“Sir Kellan, welcome to Fort Donald, though I must say that I am surprised to see you.”

Sir Kellan tilted his head in acknowledgement, his chin still high in arrogance as he looked away from Niall and Mae. “Ah, Chief MacDonald. I was not surprised that you were not here to greet me, as I arrived. Typical of you Donalds.”

“As I said, had I known you were coming, I would have been prepared to meet you at the gate. As it stands, my wife has had the staff preparing your room as we speak. You do recall my wife, Lady Jennifer, do you not?” Cam challenged.

“I vaguely recall meeting you,” he replied with disdain. “This is not a social call, however.”

“I was sure that it wasnae.”

Mae had to swallow back a laugh at that retort.

Narrowing his eyes, Sir Kellan said, “It has come to the Laird’s attention that his cousin’s life was nearly taken the other day by one of your duplicitous guardsmen.”

Cam’s posture straightened and he seemed to grow a bit taller and broader in the shoulder in his anger. “That is a lie. We’ve been nothing but hospitable to the man. Not one man here would harm him.”

Sir Kellan sneered. “Be that as it may, I’ve been sent to keep watch over him to make sure one of your lot do not harm him any further.” His gaze traveled back over the crowd and landed on Niall and Mae. “And it was my understanding that not only did one of your guards attempt to harm him, a woman of yours humiliated him as well.”

Mae, unable to contain her shock and indignation, erupted with a loud exclamation. "That's a damn lie," she exclaimed, her voice cutting through the air with undeniable force. The sudden outburst drew the attention of everyone present, causing Mae to blush, but she stood firm.

In that moment, Mae's mind raced, realizing the extent of Brian's treachery. She connected the dots and understood that his uncharacteristic silence had been a ploy, as he quietly sent a letter to Laird Campbell, lying about what occurred, probably in the hopes of the Donalds being kicked off their land. The realization sent a surge of anger and frustration coursing through her veins.

Niall's fists clenched at his sides, but he didn't move forward. "That bastard," he muttered.

Mae started toward Sir Kellan, but Niall grabbed her arm and held her back. She glanced at him, wondering why, but he shook his head, telling her not to physically confront the man. Frustrated, she stepped backward to stand next to him once again.

Sir Kellan's eyes flickered with a sense of smug satisfaction as he observed them. "I am merely here make sure no further abuse is given toward our man," he stated coolly, his words cloaked in a veil of detachment. "It's up to you to handle the consequences of your guard and woman's actions," he said, looking at Cam.

"I've already spoken to my guard, and I think it is perhaps you who are under a mistaken impression. As to the woman, she is a guest here, and not obliged to sully her person with advances from anyone she does not wish to associate with."

Cam's words caused a flicker of confusion to cross Sir Kellan's face for a moment, but then it was gone, replaced with what Mae considered a resting dick face, it was the same as resting bitch face, but on a guy. He flicked his icy gaze toward her, as though daring her to say something else. Mae just stared him down, glaring at him

with her own version of the look, though she added a bit more attitude to hers.

“It is still early, I would imagine you havenae dined yet, Sir Kellan. I am sure you would like nothing more than to wash away the dirt from your journey and have a nice repast sent to your room?” Jen suggested, keeping her tone diplomatic.

Jen was a better woman than Mae, because she would have taken him down a few pegs and shoved his attitude where the sun didn’t shine, but either way, it got Sir Kellan to look away first. That made a satisfied smile curve her lips. Now she just needed to track Brian down and kick his ass for bringing this jerk here and trying to destroy the Donalds.

As Sir Kellan, Cam and Jen entered the castle, followed by a few of Sir Kellan’s men, Mae turned to Niall. “Where is he?” she seethed.

She didn’t even have to tell him who she was talking about. “Why do you want to know, love?”

“Because I’m going to wring his scrawny little neck.”

Niall chuckled. “Cannae have that, love. As much as I would love to see it. Come, let’s go see what Sir Kellan has decided to do.”

They trailed after the man, watching as Jen led him up the stairs to one of the guest quarters. “Looks as though he’s going to do as Jen suggested.”

“Aye, it does seem that way.” He sighed.

“Do you expect Brian to show his face today?”

Niall shrugged. “Probably so. Especially with Sir Kellan here. He’ll think he’s done

something to cause us grief and he'll want to see it for himself."

Mae sighed. "I wonder what he actually told the Laird about what happened."

"Definitely wasnae the truth."

The next afternoon, Mae got the chance to find out. Brian had gotten beyond drunk again, which wasn't unusual, and was back to his typical lecherous self the night before. The good thing about that though, was that Sir Kellan had gotten to witness it firsthand. Mae had watched him as he had watched Niall diffuse multiple situations between Brian and various woman as well as guards Brian thought he could antagonize.

She found Sir Kellan in the courtyard, grooming his horse as he kept an eye upon Brian and Niall. Marching over she decided to set the record straight, but she decided to start with being cordial, since she didn't want to enrage the man, not yet at least.

"Good afternoon, Sir Kellan. I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I'm Lady Mae Welles, a guest of Chief MacDonald and the one, I am sure, Brian spoke of in his letter to the Laird."

Sir Kellan set down the grooming brush and dusted off his hands. "Lady Welles, tis a pleasure to meet you formally. I cannae say whether or not you are the woman in question he spoke of?—"

"Oh, I assure I am. I'd like to tell you exactly what happened and why I did what I did."

A curious expression crossed his face, and he gave a slight nod. "Very well, do continued."

“As you witnessed last evening, Brian likes his whisky a bit more than polite society would care for.”

“That is a nice way of speaking of it, however, I can agree with that.” He nodded.

“That was not a rare occasion, Sir Kellan, but a nightly, near daily occurrence. On the morning in question, Brian had passed out from too much drink, woken and found another bottle of whisky. In his drunken state, he climbed not only the wall, but the ramparts.”

Sir Kellan looked taken aback at Mae’s words, his jaw dropped slightly, and he looked as if he were about to object, but Mae pressed on.

Niall, good man that he is, attempted to talk him down, but Brian was too busy singing a drunken song about Bonnie and George Campbell to listen to him, so I tried to get his attention and get him to come down.” Mae frowned.

“Bonnie and George?” Sir Kellan frowned and then he smiled. “Lass, the song tis Bonnie George Campbell, about an ancestor of ours.”

“Oh, well that’s beside the point. He was on the ramparts and leaning, attempting to balance on one leg, not listening to Niall, who was only worried for his well-being. When I tried to help, Brian had the nerve to say he’d come down if I kissed him and I said absolutely not.”

Sighing, Sir Kellan nodded. “What happened after you told him no?”

Mae pursed her lips and admitted, “The guards laughed, which I suppose did leave Brian humiliated, but it was his own undoing. He got angry and came down, but then looked embarrassed as he finally sobered enough to realize he could have fallen to his death if he hadn’t gotten down.”

“I see. Well, in that case, Lady Welles, I appreciate you saving young Brian’s life and for saving him from his own stupidity.”

Mae was slightly off kilter at being thanked. She hadn’t expected him to so easily accept her word, but she replied, “You’re welcome.”

His lips quirked up in a smile for half a second. “I think perhaps it is time for me to return home. Not that the Donalds’ hospitality hasnae been very accommodating, but I donnae think I am needed here as I first imagined.”

“Too bad you can’t take Brian with you,” Mae said under her breath.

Sir Kellan turned his head back toward her and arched a brow. “What was that, Lady Welles?”

Mae felt her cheeks heat. “I was merely wishing you a safe journey, Sir Kellan. Shall I have Mira pack a lunch for you?”

Again, his lips twitched as though he was trying not to smile. “That would do nicely, thank you.”

Mae had a feeling he had actually heard her original words, but had chosen to ignore them. She gave him a nod and returned to the castle to speak to Mira, happy that Sir Kellan was leaving without any trouble being brought down on the heads of the Donalds.

CHAPTER 20

“What do you mean you are leaving?” Brian demanded as he stood in the grand hallway with Sir Kellan. “You are supposed to make sure none of these fools try to murder me!” he said belligerently.

Mae and Niall stood in a shadowed doorway watching the scene.

“It seems you overstated your case in your letters to the Laird. You were on the ramparts in a drunken state, and they saved you from your own stupidity. As to your humiliation by Lady Welles, you brought that upon yourself as well. Tis not my job to save you from you. I suggest you stop attempting to climb to the bottle of the whisky bottle and do the job the Laird sent you here to do.”

“But—” Brian pouted, looking like an angry toddler ready to lay down on the ground and pitch a tantrum because they didn’t get their way.

“Goodbye, Brian.” Sir Kellan gave Cam a nod and then strode out the door with his men following behind him.

Mae never did learn their names, and she supposed it didn’t matter who they were as it had no effect on her life, nor the Donalds. Dismissing the thought, she watched Brian storm out the door after Sir Kellan, still demanding to be heard.

“He’s going to be a brat about this, isn’t he.” It was a statement of fact, not a question she needed answered.

“Aye,” Niall agreed. “I’d best go follow him, make sure he nae trampled by the horses.”

Mae reluctantly let go of his hand after giving it a squeeze of encouragement. Much to her dismay, she was right about Brian. Over the next several days, Brian’s behavior grew worse and worse. He went through multiple bottles of whisky, to the point where the staff began hiding it from him, and harassed the women of the castle with renewed vigor.

Had this taken place in Mae’s time, she’d have had him up on sexual assault charges and put in jail, or maybe one of the women would have defended herself with a weapon, causing him to die. She often dreamed of dragging him along in Dub Sith’s taxi back to the Twenty-first century and exposing him to some women’s lib. It seemed here that most of women just put up with his manhandling of them until one of the men stepped in to stop it.

So far he’d limited himself to grabbing, groping, and vile kissing, always being stopped before he could do much more, but Mae feared that one of these days he was going to find someone and corner them long enough to force them into sex. She’d done her best to inform the women in the kitchen to try and steer clear of him, but also how to defend themselves against him, should he try something. Most of them listened and began going about the castle in pairs.

Mae hadn’t imagined that she would be the one he’d corner.

She had left the dining hall a week after Sir Kellan had returned home, and going up to her room for the evening when he accosted her. Nearly everyone was still in the dining hall, enjoying an evening of music and festivities, so the hallway on the second floor was quiet and deserted. She hadn’t heard Brian on the stone stairs behind her, so as she hit the landing for the second floor, she wasn’t prepared for him to rush her.

He'd grabbed her arms and dragged her into the dim lighting of the stone hallway, pushed her up against the wall and held her there as he began to attempt to capture her lips. Mae screamed, struggling in his grasp.

“Shut up and let me kiss you,” he muttered; his breath smelled of whisky and onions.

“Get off of me!” she cried out as his fingers dug harder into her arms.

“Mae!” Niall’s voice traveled up the stairs.

“I’m here!” she called back, then looked at Brian whose watery gaze was on her lips.

He attempted to lean in and kiss her again, but she turned her head. “Stop moving,” he muttered.

“Stop touching me,” Mae demanded, yanking on her arms trying to free them.

“Niall, stop, you cannae beat him,” another voice joined in, but Mae couldn’t see who it was, and she didn’t know all of the guards well enough to know them by the sound of their voice.

“I’m nae going to beat him. I’m going to kill him,” Niall’s angry voice reverberated off the walls.

Mae knew she couldn’t let him get to Brian. It would bring the whole Campbell clan down on their heads. She needed to do something. So she decided to do the one thing she knew would cause Brian to let her go. She brought her knee up and rammed it hard into his cock.

Brian’s jaw dropped, his eyes began to water, and he let go of her arms to grab his crotch as he fell to the floor, crying out in pain.

“I told you to let me go. I’m not a Donald. You don’t get to mess with me. You don’t get to touch me, kiss me, nor grope me. You don’t get to have me. Ever. And if you try that again, you’re going to find a lot more than my knee in your nether region.”

Niall, who was being held back by two of the other guards, started to laugh. “Well done, love. Remind me not to—what was that angry term you used before?” His brow furrowed.

Mae smiled. “Piss me off?”

He grinned. “Aye. Remind me not to piss you off.” He glanced at the two guard that Mae now recognized as Lachlan and Rowan. “Once he’s recovered his senses, help him back to the dining hall. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

“Aye,” Rowan replied, still chuckling.

Niall wrapped an arm around Mae and escorted her up to her room. “Are you really all right, love? He didnae harm you, did he?”

Mae shrugged. “I’m probably going to have some massive bruises on my arms, but other than that, no.”

“I should have beat the bloody hell out of him at the very least,” Niall growled. “You’re mine.”

Mae smiled, liking the way he said she was his. “I am, am I?”

He narrowed his gaze at her, his lips going flat. “You’d better be.”

Her grin grew. “I am, just as you’re mine.”

A wide smile crossed his lips. "That I am, love." He leaned down and kissed her.

Mae wrapped her arms around his neck and held tight to him for the next few minutes, wishing he could stay with her. Unfortunately, he broke the kiss before she was ready.

"I'd best get back down there before he causes more trouble." He dragged a hand through his hair in frustration. "You'll be all right on your own up here?"

Nodding, Mae said, "I'll lock the door. I'm sure I'll be fine. You'll come up later?"

"Will you wait up for me?" he countered.

"I can't promise I won't fall asleep, but if you knock, I'll answer." She smiled at him.

"Aye, that will do." He winked and took a step toward the door.

Mae had a hold of his hand and didn't let go. She tugged on him until he turned back toward her with a curious look. Smiling, she moved back to him, stood on her toes and kissed his lips. "Don't be too long," she murmured and then let go of his hand and opened the door for him.

"I'll be as quick as I can, love," he said and then he was out the door and down the hall calling over his shoulder, "close the door and lock it, love!"

Mae did as he asked and flopped down on the bed. She had been imagining a quiet evening in her room to rid herself of the headache she'd been feeling, but as she sat there, she realized it was already gone.

Her thoughts drifted over the encounter with Brian, and she realized she was going to need a bit more protection than just her knee. Next time he might be ready for that

kind of an attack. She would need something nice and sharp to deter him from her the next time. A dagger perhaps? She'd have to discuss it with Niall when he returned. With that decided, she changed into her nightgown and settled on the bed with the book she'd been reading to wait for him to come back to her.

CHAPTER 21

Mae turned the page and squinted in the candlelight to see the words. Her eyes were getting tired, but she was determined to stay awake. Just as she was about to give up, there was a popping sound and then a dark chuckle from the corner of the room. Startled, she looked up and the shadow in the corner moved forward into the candlelight.

“How did you get in here?” she asked, staring at Dub Sith.

His laughter grew and his eyes sparkled and danced in the candlelight. “I’m Fae. Locks donnae stop me from going where I want.”

Mae tugged the blanket up over her chest. “I see. Well would you mind letting me put on my robe?”

He waved his hand and then turned his back. Once he was facing the wall, Mae stood and pulled on the dressing gown and belted it at her waist. She wondered what he was doing here, why he’d come to see her in the middle of the night while she was all alone.

“Tisn’t what you think, dear girl. I’m not here to harm you. Merely to commend you for your actions earlier.”

Mae frowned. “You saw that?”

“Oh, aye, that I did. Might I turn around now? I donnae fancy speaking to the wall.”

“Yes.” Mae nodded, but didn’t know why she bothered. It wasn’t like he could see her nodding. Then she paused and considered the thought for a moment, maybe he could. Who knew what he could see or couldn’t see? He wasn’t human. For all she knew he had eyes in the back of his head.

He laughed. “I donnae have eyes in the back of my head, though I have an awareness of the things going on around me. So while I didnae see you nodding, I knew that you were,” he answered her thoughts.

Mae blinked at him. She’d have to be careful of what she was thinking then, when he was around. There were certain things that were just meant to be private.

Smiling, Dub Sith laughed again. “Oh you are a joy. I promise I willnae read your thoughts if they are not directed at me.”

Mae nodded. “All right, that sounds acceptable.”

“I’m glad you think so.” He snapped his fingers, and another log was added to the fire, and it began to crackle and burn more brightly. Another snap brought two comfortable chairs from thin air and set before the fire as her room enlarged itself to accommodate them. “Shall we?” He directed her to the chairs.

Mae took a seat and before she knew it, a glass of her favorite wine, Oyster Bay Pinot Noir, was in her hand in a crystal goblet. “How did— nevermind. Th—” she started and then recalled she wasn’t supposed to thank him. She smiled tightly. “This is very nice.” She took a sip and savored it.

“I thought you might enjoy a taste from home.” He smiled.

“You are right.” She turned a mischievous grin his way. “Can you bring me some other things from my time?”

“Nae, lass. This one thing is all. Wouldnae do for things from your time to be found in this one.”

“Well damn.” Mae giggled. She’d known it was a long shot and hadn’t really expected him to do it.

“Curiously though, what is it you would want to bring here?” he asked, arching a black brow.

“Oh, off the top of my head, a real modern bathroom, a battery operated cassette player with a million batteries and cassettes. I’ve had time to think about this, you see. Couldn’t be too modern, because it would need internet service or electricity, but something run on batteries, that could work here.” She grinned over at him. “And the bathroom, well that’s just common sense.”

He chuckled again and then snapped his fingers, allowing music to filter into the room. It took Mae a moment to realize it was a rock radio station from her time. Her eyes widened as the guitar riff hit her ears. And then she started worrying that others might hear it.

“It’s only you that can hear it, dear girl. I’ve adjusted time and space here while we speak.”

“I see. You’ve chosen a good station. I enjoy this music and I’ve missed it,” she said, choosing her words carefully to keep from saying what she shouldn’t.

He gave her a nod and they sat sipping upon the Pinot Noir. “You’ve dealt well with being here, I’m impressed.”

“It could be better,” she said, thinking of the troublemaker causing problems for them.

“Hmmm, perhaps there is something I can do to help with the situation,” Dub Sith said, observing her over the rim of his goblet. “Tell me what has you troubled.”

“It’s Brian. He’s caused trouble here for long enough. A week or so ago, he got so drunk he climbed up on the ramparts and nearly fell to his death. We finally got him down and he wrote to the Laird telling him that the Donald tried to kill him. He’s only trying to stir up trouble here.”

He took a sip of his drink and gestured for her to go on.

“You saw the aftermath of what he attempted to do this evening, but it wasn’t a random occurrence. He’s tried that on multiple occasions with many of the women here. He needs to leave, but he won’t.”

“So what you’re saying is he needs to be made to leave.”

Mae frowned. “We can’t make him leave, he’s here under orders from the Laird. He has to decide to leave on his own.”

Dub Sith nodded, looking thoughtful as he stared into the fire. “Perhaps there is a way we can arrange for that to happen.”

“Does it involve me kneeing him in the groin again? Because that was fun.” Mae giggled as she sipped her wine.

Chuckling, he answered, “Nae, dear girl, I think we can do better than that. What is he afraid of?”

The question threw Mae at first. How was she supposed to know the answer to that? But then, it occurred to her that she did know what Brian was afraid of. He’d told her in one of their earlier conversations. Brian was afraid of ghosts. At least she was

pretty sure he was afraid, as that was what he'd implied. Hesitantly, she told Dub Sith her thoughts, though she now knew he probably didn't need her to voice them.

"Nae, but it is nice to hear such a voice as yours, dear girl. And I do believe we can work with that." Dub Sith leaned forward and told her what his plan for Brian was.

Mae couldn't help but be appreciative of his help and really wanted to thank him, but she held her tongue. "I look forward to watching what you've planned play out." She raised her glass and swallowed the final sip of her Pinot Noir. When she did, the goblet disappeared from her hand.

"Tis time for me to go," he murmured, finishing off his own drink and then snapping his fingers, returning the room to normal.

Sadly, that meant the music was gone as well. "Will you come back and do this again?" She'd greatly enjoyed his company as much as the wine and music.

"Perhaps one day, if the Fates wish it," he said with a wink and then he was gone.

Before she could even register that he was gone, there was a knock on the door. Startled, she moved toward it, ready to just yank it open, but stopped herself just in time. "Who is it?"

"Niall, love."

Smiling, she opened the door. "Hi, you just missed Dub Sith."

Niall frowned. "You've been entertaining the Fae in your room?"

Mae shrugged. "Didn't really have a choice. He just showed up. Apparently, locks don't stop him from going where he wants."

“That tis disturbing.”

“Not as disturbing as knowing he can hear my thoughts.”

Niall paled at that. “Nae, you’re right, that tis more disturbing, indeed.”

“He promised not to listen to what wasn’t directed at him though, so I suppose I’ll just have to hold him at his word.”

“Aye, Fae cannae lie, so if that is what he said, then it is true.”

“Good to remember.” She took his hand and led him deeper into the room.

“Why did he come to see you?” Niall asked, not sounding upset, only curious.

Mae explained everything that happened while Dub Sith was there. “He’s going to help with our Brian problem.”

“We’ll get to that in a moment. How did he get the music to play in your room for you? Did he bring a group of musicians here? Where did they all fit?”

Mae explained the concept of recordings and radio stations and how music is listened to in the twenty-first century. “So it was just a radio station from the city I lived in.”

“In California?”

Smiling, Mae nodded. “Exactly. He said he adjusted time and space.”

Niall shook his head. “That is beyond my comprehension, love. Adjusting time and space? I cannae even begin to imagine the power it would take to do such a thing.”

“Considering he brought me here, I’m going to guess it wasn’t too hard for him.”

Niall laughed. “You’re probably right. So what is this plan of yours?”

“I’m not sure exactly how it will play out, so I don’t want to say too much, but we’re going to scare him and make him want to leave.”

Furrowing his brow, Niall looked at her curiously. “An’ how do you expect to scare him? Drop some wee spiders in his bed?”

Mae giggled. “No, but that would be good too. I seem to recall Brian telling me that he is afraid of ghosts.”

“Is he, now? And Dub Sith has a way of makin’ the ghosties appear, does he?”

Mae just smiled and teased, “You’ll just have to wait and see.” She moved to sit in his lap. “You’re not afraid of ghosts and goblins are you, Niall?” she continued in her teasing tone.

“Ghosts, no, goblins are a whole ‘nother matter all-together.” He fake shivered. “Those things are awful.”

Mae laughed. “I bet you could take them.”

“Well, they are just wee little buggers so probably so, but they’ve got a vicious set of teeth on ‘em.”

They spent the rest of the evening discussing the various myths and legends of Scotland and the Fae as well as what her plan actually entailed, and then made love into the wee hours of the morning. When Mae woke, wrapped in his arms shortly before sunrise, she would swear it was one of the best nights she’d spent so far in this

world, and she really hoped there would be more to come in the future. As it was, it was time to rise and start setting her plans into motion.

CHAPTER 22

“Wake up, buttercup,” Mae whispered in Niall’s ear, “it’s time to go set things in motion.”

Niall groaned. “Didnae we jest fall asleep?” he murmured. “An’ did you call me buttercup?”

Giggling, Mae leaned in and kissed his lips. “I did and we did, but the sun’s about to rise and we’ve got things to do.”

She hopped from the bed and went to the wash station, pouring water into the bowl. She spent a few minutes washing up and then got dressed as Niall laid lazily in the bed watching her with one muscled arm behind his head, his eyes in half-slits and an appreciative grin on his lips.

“I donnae understand where you have all this energy from this morn, love. Did I nae wear you out in the wee hours making you squeal and squirm beneath me?”

Mae’s laughter was joyous. “You did, but we are this close—” she held up her thumb and forefinger to show a half inch, “to being rid of Brian and I want to get started.”

Chuckling, he climbed from the bed and Mae couldn’t help but stop and watch him, her mouthwatering at the sight of him. She paused in her task of brushing her hair mid-stroke as he dressed. Once he was fully clothed, she returned to running the bristles through her hair and then quickly braided it.

“You’re going to speak to the others, right?”

“Of course, love, I will tell them what we’re planning and make sure they are all aware to go along with it. I will go and see the Chief first to inform him of our plan. I’m sure he’ll have a few suggestions as he knows the history of this castle far better than I.”

“Excellent. And I will talk with those in the kitchens, see if I can get a few tales from them as well.”

“Might we partake in the morning meal before we go about this? I find I’m not quite ready to let you go away from me quite yet,” Niall said, pulling her into his arms.

Mae felt her cheeks heat at the look in his eyes. “Yes, we can have breakfast first. I don’t want to part ways yet either.” She smiled and then pressed a kiss to his lips. Taking his hand, she opened the door and damn near dragged him down the stairs as she hurried them to the dining hall.

Niall chuckled. “Love, you are going to trip and drag me down these stone steps with you.”

She tossed him a smile over her shoulder. “Never gonna happen. I’m as graceful as a swan.” She winked and landed the last step with a hop. “See?”

They reached the dining hall just as the staff began delivering the food. There were only a few people there before them, and Brian, thankfully, wasn’t one of them. They managed to enjoy the entire meal without him. Once they finished, Mae gave him a kiss and went to speak to Mira, Sally and the others, while Niall headed for Cam’s office.

The dining hall was filled with the aroma of freshly cooked food, platters brimming

with steaming delicacies and succulent fish. Mira had changed the menu to a more festive one, once she heard what Mae and Niall were planning. As Mae entered, she saw that the long wooden tables were adorned with an array of dishes, enticing the inhabitants with their appetizing presentation. The hearth in the center of the hall crackled with life, casting a warm and inviting glow that illuminated the room.

The dinner was accompanied by the merry music of several talented guardsmen who had taken up their instruments after eating earlier than the rest of them. The atmosphere in the castle was festive and almost magical to Mae's eyes. There was an anticipation in the air, as though everyone knew something amazing was about to happen.

Cam tapped upon his glass, calling for everyone's attention and the music faded. "Niall," he called from the high-table, "now that we've eaten, perhaps you will regale us with a spirited story? It is nearly Samhain, after all."

Niall looked about the room and then gave a slight nod. "Very well." He rose and moved to stand before the hearth where all could see and hear him. "As many of you know, Fort Donald is nae the first structure to stand upon this land and overlook the loch. Nae. The first to build here were a crew of Vikings, in the year 759 AD. From their base here on the loch, they would raid the various towns and countrysides, but it twas also here that they died. Twas said that they encountered a witch who laid a curse upon them when they robbed her of her worldly goods."

Mae looked around the room to see everyone enthralled with the tale. Her gaze landed upon Brian who sat, his mouth slightly agape as he listened. Niall really was a very good story-teller, his voice was strong and had a way of weaving his words in such a way that it drew you in.

"Now the leader of this band of Vikings didnae believe in curses, however, as he drew his last breath, he warned others to beware, though the remainder of his words

were lost as he died. Soon, others of the band fell victim to the curse, one died from eating a poisonous plant that was disguised as an herb, another from an attack from a rival group of raiders. One by one, the Vikings died, leaving only one, who set their fort aflame in the hopes of breaking the curse the witch had laid upon them and the land.”

Mae could see Brian looking around, beads of sweat upon his brow.

“It is said that those men still haunt this land on the days shortly before Samhain, warning others not to befall the witch’s curse. I have seen them a time or two myself. Roaming the halls here at Fort Donald in the wee hours of the night.”

Brian’s eyes widened at Niall’s words and a look of fright crossed his face.

“I have been told that anyone who crosses their path, will be marked by the same witch’s curse that took them from this world and banished them into the underworld where they will forever stay, except upon the weeks leading up to Samhain so that they might be a warning to others. So beware my friends of the Viking ghosts or you may find yourself marked by a witch’s curse as well.”

Brian’s gaze darted around the hall, as if searching for an escape from the haunting tales that seemed to penetrate his very being. Mae knew that the seed of doubt had been planted, and its roots would only deepen with time. If he weren’t such an asshole, she wouldn’t take such pleasure in conning him in such a way, but he had brought it upon himself, and it wasn’t as though they were going to hurt him really. Just scare him into leaving.

In the midst of the hushed whispers and gasps of the audience, Mae’s gaze locked with Brian’s for a fleeting moment. It was a silent exchange, but in that instant, Mae could see a glimmer of vulnerability in his eyes, and she did her best to keep a serious face.

Her smile remained hidden, a secret delight to share with Niall later over how his tale had affected Brian. Mae was pleased with the turn of events, as she saw Brian squirming under the weight of his own fears. She couldn't wait for Dub Sith to do his part of their plan. Though that could take a few days for it all to come to fruition.

In the flickering light of the hearth, Mae allowed herself a moment of quiet triumph. She understood the importance of patience and subtlety, knowing that their plan would unfold in due course, but damn was she impatient to get on with it. As the evening wore on, Mae remained vigilant, her resolve unwavering as she continued to watch Brian squirm, a silent reminder of their cunning plot.

Over the next few days, she and Niall, and nearly everyone else too, watched Brian move about the castle grounds with an air of unease. Whispers carried through the corridors and lingered in the air, reaching his ears wherever he went. The guardsmen and staff who were all in on the plan, made sure to speak in hushed tones about Niall's chilling ghost story, purposely ensuring that Brian overheard their conversations. False rumors spread like wildfire, each more outlandish than the next, tales of apparitions wandering the halls at night and objects mysteriously shifting on their own. Fires lighting themselves and chains rattling in empty rooms.

Mae kept track of Brian as he passed various members of the staff engaged in animated discussions, their voices would dip lower into hushed tones as he approached, their gazes lingering on him with a mixture of curiosity and mischief. They exchanged knowing glances, sharing secrets, and fueling the atmosphere of fear that encircled him.

Mae was thrilled to see the once confident and arrogant Brian constantly glancing over his shoulder, his nerves clearly on edge. Every creak of a floorboard, every flicker of candlelight seemed to spook him further. Mae almost felt sorry for him since what they were doing was kind of mean, but then she'd recall everything he'd put them all through, especially the women and she strengthen her resolve to keep

things going.

The stories of apparitions and inexplicable occurrences seemed to haunt Brian's thoughts. He had confided to Niall that these Viking ghosts were now invading his dreams and woke him in the middle of the night, leaving him drenched in cold sweat. Mae had been excited to hear that their plan was really working.

A few nights later, as she followed Brian and Niall to Brian's rooms after another festive evening in the dining hall, Brian jumped and began question every shadow, every shifting shape in the dimly lit corridors. It was all Mae could do to contain her laughter. It seemed that paranoia had taken hold of him, casting a dark cloud over his every waking moment.

A few more days passed, and Mae walked the grounds to take a respite from the constant trickery as she waited for Niall. It felt like she had gone back to her old ways, but to fair, it felt necessary. Samhain was quickly approaching and if Brian hadn't left by then, well, they had something big planned. She half hoped he wouldn't leave just to see it pulled off.

The nice thing about Brian being so afraid, he tended to keep to himself a lot, still drinking quite a bit, but for the most part, kept himself out of trouble. That made Niall's life a little easier, and it meant more time with Mae, since others were more than happy to take on babysitting duty when they could offer up their own little tidbits of seeing ghosts in the castle.

"There you are, love. I thought we might go for a ride, see a bit of the countryside before it gets too cold to do so anymore this year."

Mae brightened. "I'd like that, though I'm going to warn you, I've never actually ridden a horse before."

Niall's jaw dropped. "Never?"

"Not even ever." She laughed. "Not really a big call for horse riding back home, at least, not in Los Angeles. Maybe in Texas or Nebraska, maybe Montana and a few other places, but in general, no. People don't really travel by horse."

"Well, today you can ride with me, but once winter's gone, I'll teach you to ride."

"I guess that would be a good idea considering it's the most viable mode of transportation here."

They spent the afternoon riding over the moors and around the loch, enjoying a picnic of cheese and sliced meat as well as some shortbread Mira had put in the satchel she'd made for Niall. Mae found herself falling in love with the scenery and wanting never to leave. It was strange, considering where she'd come from, but everything here—aside from the trouble with Brian—was so calm and relaxing. She could see, once he was gone, what life would be like on a daily basis, and she found she enjoyed it.

"You may want to have Sally send up a bath for you, love. You'll be sore tomorrow from riding for so long."

"I'm sore now," Mae said with a laugh. "I'll ask her, though, I'm sure it will help."

"I'll even come and scrub your back for you," he said huskily, kissing her neck.

Mae smiled. "You just wanna see me naked," she teased.

"And what a sight that is," he growled in her ear, before planting a kiss upon her cheek. "I'll see you inside."

After speaking to Sally about a bath, Mae ventured through the dimly lit corridors toward her room. Within the hour she was soaking in the warm water in front of the fire and Niall was seated next to her. It was cozy and relaxing and just the perfect way to wind down the evening. He'd asked Sally to deliver dinner to the room and they'd dined alone, just enjoying the night together.

The following day, Niall was back on babysitting duty. Brian was getting bolder though, the stories weren't doing quite enough to keep him cowed, and Samhain was still a couple of days away. She needed to do something to up the ante, but she wasn't sure what. This is until after dinner that evening when she noticed Brian watching her from his drunken stupor next to the fire.

Catching Niall's eye, she gestured for him to join her for a moment so she could share her newly created plan to scare the pants off of Brian. Niall met her by the dining hall doors, and she told him what she was thinking. Niall chuckled softly, keeping his back to Brian so he wouldn't hear or see what they were discussing.

Mae put a hand to her head and said a little louder, "I just need to go lie down for a while. Stay here and enjoy the evening with your friends. I'll be fine."

"If you're sure, love. Cam did request my attention, so I'll see what he needs, and be up later."

Mae nodded, her gaze drifting to Brian who was attentively listening to their conversation. She turned to the door then looked over her shoulder at Niall with a small smile before heading into the hall. She kept her walk fairly slowly to see if Brian took the bait. By the time she reached the stairs, he was several paces behind her. She climbed the stairs to her room knowing that Niall wasn't too far behind Brian. Neither of them wanted him to actually accost her, so they were prepared for that, should he try something.

Upon reaching her room, Mae stepped inside, leaving the door slightly ajar. She waited a beat or two and then swiftly retreated from the room with a piercing scream that reverberated through the halls.

Brian, who had been lingering a few doors down, rushed toward her, his voice laden with concern, asked, “What tis it?”

Mae made her eyes wide and feigned terror. She pointed back toward her room, gasping for breath, she said, in a trembling voice, “Something... something’s in there... it was shadowy and dark, and I swear... Brian... I’m so scared! I swear it said... beware the witch...” she stared at him with fake fright, keeping her voice breathy and added a terrified trill to it.

Brian's face paled, his expression a mixture of fear and disbelief as he backed away from her. Niall came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder making Brian jump and scream a little.

“What’s wrong?” Niall asked glancing from Mae to Brian with concern.

Brian pointed toward Mae’s room, his hand shaking. He hastily said, “I... I cannae... I have to go.” He rushed backwards a few more steps, then spun around and hightailed it back down the stairs.

Mae watched him disappear, her smile growing wider. She began to giggle as Niall wrapped his arms around her, pulling her to his chest, muffling the sound.

In the aftermath of Mae's trick upon Brian, the castle buzzed with whispers of the supernatural event that Brian had claimed unfolded. The staff continued to share hushed conversations about the various ghosties they’d seen, their voices filled with both awe and trepidation. However, the tale of the shadowy figure seen in Mae's room spread like wildfire, fueling the already rampant rumors of ghostly activity that

haunted the castle.

Mae reveled in the success of her con as the castle became a stage for their carefully crafted performance. Each new encounter, each new sighting of the ghosts, further cemented Brian's belief in the otherworldly presence that surrounded him. The web of deception had clearly tightened its grip, ensnaring him in a realm of fear and uncertainty and Mae had a feeling it wouldn't take much more to push him over the edge.

CHAPTER 23

Over the last few days before Samhain, Mae and Niall, observing Brian's escalating descent into paranoia, continued to push the boundaries of the ruse. They crafted increasingly elaborate encounters, strategically timed to amplify his distress. Doors creaked open on their own, gusts of wind whispered eerie melodies, and faint whispers echoed through the corridors, ensuring that Brian remained perpetually on edge.

The castle walls seemed to absorb the mounting tension, their ancient stones seemingly conspiring with Mae and Niall to fuel the illusion. The Donald clan, fully committed to the performance, became adept at maintaining the facade, exchanging knowing glances and suppressing laughter as they witnessed Brian's unraveling. The once-impervious Campbell spy had become a puppet in their carefully orchestrated production, tormented by the very shadows that danced upon the castle's walls.

But Brian's demeanor also meant he became unhinged in other aspects. On the night before Samhain, an extremely drunk Brian followed Mae once again toward her bed chamber.

Mae didn't think the ruse would work again as it had before, so she merely went into her room and locked the door. The plan she'd worked out with Dub Sith was to happen on Samhain, so it was too early to pull that off, she'd have to come up with something else, and quickly if he tried to come to her room.

Mae stood in the middle of her room wondering what she could do to scare him again, but without anyone to help create the distraction, she was at a loss. Before she

could even grab the fire poker, Brian was banging on her door.

“You owe me favors,” Brian slurred with each pound of his fist enunciating the words. “I want you an’ I plan to have you?—”

Mae yanked the door open, staring daggers at the drunken slob in front of her. “I don’t owe you anything, you asshole—” she started but then she felt a cold chill race up her back and noticed her room growing darker and darker behind her. She swallowed hard and watched as Brian’s face paled and his eyes widened in absolute terror. The next thing she knew the darkness was creeping around her, over her head as though about to swallow her.

Brian let out a horrified shriek, his bravado shattered in an instant as he began to back away.

Reacting swiftly, Mae instinctively stepped back into the darkness and felt the solid body that was there, but she wasn’t afraid. It was there to protect her, she could feel it. Niall, approached from down the hall.

Mae flashed her gaze to him, and he pulled his sword as he charged forward. She held her breath as she waited to see what would happen next. She hadn’t expected Niall to grab her arm and pull her into the hall and push her behind him.

"Nae harm will come to you, love, I will defend you," Niall declared, his voice laced with determination as he brandished his sword. His stance was resolute, ready to defend against any perceived threat, even if it existed solely in the realm of the supernatural.

Mae stood behind him, her heart racing as she watched everything playing out before them.

The shadowy specter seemed to waver, its ethereal form pulsating as if caught between the world of the living and the realm of the departed. The air crackled with an eerie energy, as if the very fabric of reality trembled in the face of this supernatural encounter. The castle walls seemed to shake and undulate, awaiting the outcome of this confrontation.

Niall stepped forward and made a stand. “Viking, you may not mark her... what are your true intentions here?”

The figure remained unmoving, its purposes shrouded in mystery, as if taunting Niall to take the first move.

Brian whimpered and covered his head and he cowered on the hallway floor.

With a final defiant glare, Niall slowly stepped forward, his grip tightening on the hilt of his sword. He charged the figure and ran into the bedroom, then slammed the door. The moment hung in suspended animation, the clash between mortal and apparition impending. Mae, her voice steady despite the fear coursing through her veins, whispered words of encouragement, urging, “Be careful!”

Brian, however, went even lower and slid against the wall. Then he was crawling, moving past her and then regained his feet and scurried away in sheer terror, his face pale and his limbs trembling. He shouted all the way down the halls until his voice was heard no more.

Suddenly the door reopened, and Niall began to laugh softly. Mae too started giggling and their amusement echoed through the corridor, intermingling with the fading echoes of Brian's panicked footsteps and screams of terror. The shadowy figure transformed before their eyes, revealing itself to be Dub Sith, the mischievous Fae.

Dub Sith, now fully in his human-like appearance, turned to Mae, his eyes filled with

a mix of mischief and genuine concern. He inquired, “My dear girl, does this make up for my initial secrecy surrounding the destination I’ve brought you to?” A playful smile playing at the corners of his lips.

Mae, her surprise giving way to a warm smile, nodded affirmatively. “You had already done that, Dub Sith, though I have to say I was a bit surprised to have you appear today, I thought we were waiting for Halloween, I mean Samhain for the big scare,” she replied.

“I was keeping an eye upon the situation and after speaking with Niall earlier, I thought perhaps I had better be prepared if the opportunity arose.”

Niall, chuckling, clapped a hand on Dub Sith's shoulder. “I won’t say I am grateful for your assistance, but...” he trailed off, giving Dub a wide grin, expressing his approval of their collaborative effort.

Dub Sith’s smile widened to show sharp pointy teeth that Mae had not really noticed before, but his eyes twinkled merrily so she knew he wasn’t a threat to her and Niall. “I greatly enjoyed that. I shall keep an eye out for further pranks we can pull upon this unsuspecting Cambell spy.” He winked and then with a wave, popped out of existence.

Mae shook her head and just smiled and she and Niall returned to her room for the night.

By morning, it turned out that Brian's nerves had finally reached their breaking point. He hastily departed from the castle, his face drained of color and several of his belongings left behind in his haste. The atmosphere among the Donald clan was filled with a relief and amusement, as they watched Brian retreat in defeat on horseback racing from the castle gates and down the path on the hill.

The weight of victory hung in the air as Mae locked eyes with Niall. She felt a distinct sense of accomplishment and triumph that they'd managed to rid the castle of Brian the troublemaker.

A smile played at the corners of her lips as she closed the distance between her and Niall, her heart bursting with a surge of affection and admiration. Leaning in, she pressed her lips to his, a kiss that celebrated their shared victory and the bond they had forged amidst the trials and tribulations of their journey.

As their lips parted, Mae could taste the sweetness of triumph and the tang of the Scottish air on her tongue. She gazed into Niall's eyes, their depths mirroring the vastness of the Highland landscape that surrounded them. In that fleeting moment, time seemed to stand still, and the world faded away, leaving only the two of them and the magnitude of their shared victory.

"Well done, the two of you," Lachlan said, coming toward them with a grin. "Everyone is glad to see the back of him."

"I'm just glad it worked," Mae replied, tucking herself into the side of Niall's body as he wrapped an arm around her.

"With Brian gone, the Chief would like to see you both, he sent me to fetch you," Lachlan added.

"Where is he?" Niall asked. "I would have thought he would be out here watching Brian hightail it off of Donald lands."

"Aye, he's in his office chamber, he's mentioned something about tying up loose ends."

Cam's summons to his chambers drew Mae and Niall's attention, and they hurried to

see what it was he needed from them. Mae was slightly concerned that he might be thinking of sending her back home somehow, which she suddenly found herself balking at. She didn't want to leave.

"Niall," she began, worriedly, "you don't think Cam is going to send me back to my time, do you?"

Niall paused his steps and pulled her into his arms. "Nae, love. That isnae possible unless Dub Sith wants it to happen and from my talk with him, I know that isnae what he wants. He brought you here to me and here you'll stay, unless you donnae want to stay here with me?"

"Oh, I do want to, that's why I was suddenly worried." Mae smiled. "But if Cam can't send me back, and that's not why he wants to see us, then I'm wondering what other loose ends he means."

"We'd best find out then," Niall said as he knocked upon the door.

"Enter," Cam called. "Ah, good, I was hoping you'd join me," he said when they entered. "I wanted to congratulate you on ridding us of Brian. However, in his haste to be gone from here, it seems he's left a great deal of his belongings behind."

"Did he?" Mae snickered.

Cam's lips twitched in a grin. "Aye, and I need to send someone to deliver them and perhaps make sure we are still in good standing with the Campbells, especially after the letters I am quite sure Brian had been sending to the Laird. I donnae want to suddenly find that we should be preparing for war, or have our taxes raised because he couldnae handle being here."

Niall asked, "Would you like Lady Mae and I to make this delivery?"

Cam's grin widened. "Aye, that would do nicely, and it will give you a chance to show Lady Mae more of what we have to offer here in Scotland. I imagine she will enjoy seeing a larger town and do some shopping while you're there."

Mae's eyes lit up at that. She hadn't imagined there would be a town large enough to shop, but then her face fell, she didn't have money. "I would enjoy that Chief Cam, but I'm afraid I don't have any money."

Cam pulled two small bags from his desk drawer and tossed them to each of them. "This is for you, for your efforts in ridding us of the Campbell spy. Tis but a token, Mae, but it should buy you a new dress or two and perhaps some fabric for a new cloak. Winter is coming and you'll need something warm."

"Thank you so much," Mae said, feeling grateful as she tucked the bag into her skirt pocket.

"We'll leave in the morning at first light," Niall said, tying his bag to his kilt, "Did you have further need of us?"

Cam shook his head. "Enjoy the rest of your day. I'll see you when you return."

The next morning, Mae and Niall rode side by side in one of Fort Donald's wagons pulled by a team of two horses, the sound of their laughter filled the air as they shared tales from their pasts. Mae couldn't get over the beauty of the landscape as it unfolded before them. It was a breathtaking tapestry of lush meadows, rugged cliffs, and shimmering lochs. Niall told her that while that day was sunny and not very chilly, the weather was going to get more rainy with high gale winds and very cold pretty soon. Not only that, but in the winter, they could see the amazing lights in the northern skies that were magical to behold. She was very much looking forward to seeing them, once she had the proper attire for the weather.

As the sun began to go down, Mae and Niall rode into a quaint oceanside village, their arrival met with curious glances from the villagers who paused their daily activities to observe the newcomers. To Mae the village seemed frozen in time and reminded her of the various movies she'd seen based in Elizabethan times, which was less than a hundred years ago from where she was now. Rows of stone cottages lined narrow cobblestone streets, their thatched roofs weathered by the salty sea air. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the town, mingling with the briny aroma of the nearby shoreline.

Mae couldn't help but feel a sense of awe at the countless treasures this land held, both in its rugged landscapes and in the hearts of its people.

Dismounting from their wagon, Niall helped Mae down and tied the horses to a post. He and Mae made their way toward the inviting warmth of a nearby tavern called Ballygrant Inn. The rustic charm of the building beckoned them, its worn wooden sign creaking gently in the ocean breeze. The sound of merry laughter and clinking glasses spilled from within, drawing them closer to the promise of respite and camaraderie.

Stepping through the tavern's door, Mae's senses were immediately assailed by the lively atmosphere within. The air was thick with the fragrance of ale and the hearty aroma of simmering stew. The tavern was alive with conversation and music, the melodic strains of fiddles and jovial voices filling the space.

Finding an empty table, Mae and Niall settled in, their weary bodies grateful for the chance to rest. They leaned back against the sturdy wooden chairs, taking a moment to soak in the vibrant energy that filled the tavern.

“Welcome to the Ballygrant Inn, what can I get you?” the barmaid asked.

“We'll have some ale and a meal, if'n you've got it,” Niall answered.

“Aye, we’ve got lamb stew. I’ll have some out to you in a moment,” she said before scurrying off, back to the kitchen.

Mae thought about how going out in her time there were a plethora of options but here it was a eat what they’ve got or don’t eat at all kind of atmosphere, and she found that didn’t really bother her at all. The food in this time period was so flavorful and filling, she looked forward to just about everything she’d been given.

“You seem amused, love,” Niall murmured.

She nodded and said, “I was just musing about the food here and how much I enjoy it.”

“Well, the cook at the Ballygrant is quite skilled, you willnae go hungry, I promise.”

A moment later, the barmaid returned. Mae's gaze met Niall's as she set their plates of tantalizing stew before them. The savory aroma of the lamb stew filled the air, making their mouths water in anticipation. Niall chuckled.

"Ah, a meal fit for a king," he exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with delight. "And queen," he added, looking at Mae with a grin.

"It does look that way, this portion is huge." Mae turned her gaze to the barmaid and said, "Thank you so much."

“My pleasure, Miss.” She bobbed a curtsy and then jotted off to help someone else.

Mae and Niall began eating and their conversation lagged. They were both too hungry and the food too good to allow for conversation until they were both satiated.

The barmaid returned just as they finished eating. “Would you like more, or are you

ready for another ale?"

Niall grinned mischievously, a twinkle in his eyes. "Aye, lass, ye've spoiled us with this fine meal. I cannae remember the last time I enjoyed a meal as much as this but I find myself quite full." He looked over at Mae and said, "What about you, love? Would you like another helping?"

Mae wiped her mouth and smiled. "Oh, no. As much as I'd love to say yes, I think I would have to be rolled out of here if I ate any more."

"I shall tell Cook you said so," the barmaid said as she removed their crockery. "Perhaps another ale before you are on your way, or shall you be spending the night with us?"

"We'll be letting a room, if you've one available, but yes, another ale would do us well," Niall replied.

"I will let the innkeeper know and return with your ale."

As they enjoyed their second ales, their conversation shifted to talking about the trip and the wonders they had encountered along the way, which turned into Niall telling her of other trips he'd made. He recounted a humorous encounter with a mischievous Highland cow that had crossed his path and chased him, causing his horse to veer off course and end up knee-deep in mud. It had taken a good hour to get him out, but he'd been none the worse for wear. Mae's laughter mingled with his as he told her about the event.

"You know, Mae, I never expected to find such companionship and love in this life. You have brought joy to my life, and you own my heart," he confessed, his voice filled with sincerity.

Mae's heart swelled, at his words. "Niall, you have my heart too. I've fallen in love with you."

He drew her up from her chair and toward the front of the inn, quickly getting them a room. Once upstairs, he made quick work of getting her out of her dress and then spent the rest of the night making love to her and showing her how much he loved her.

CHAPTER 24

As the morning sunlight filtered through the room's window, Mae stirred from her slumber, her senses slowly awakening to the reality of the new day. Blinking her eyes open, she felt a pang of confusion and momentary panic as she realized she was alone in the bed. Thoughts raced through her mind, wondering where Niall might be and if something had happened during the night.

Just as she was about to swing her legs out of bed to investigate, the door to the room creaked open, and there stood Niall, a warm smile gracing his face. Relief flooded through Mae as she took in the sight of him, the worry dissipating like morning mist.

In his hands, Niall carried a tray adorned with a delightful breakfast spread. Freshly baked bread nestled next to a pot of steaming tea, accompanied by a selection of sweet preserves and bowls of steaming porridge. Mae's stomach rumbled in anticipation of the meal.

Mae couldn't help but beam at Niall, her voice filled with genuine appreciation. "Oh, Niall, you're the best. Bringing breakfast to bed like this, it's such a wonderful surprise," she exclaimed, her eyes shimmering with delight.

Niall's expression softened as he set the tray down on the small table by the bedside. "You deserve the finest, Mae. A proper meal to start our day together," he replied, his voice laced with tenderness. "Besides, sharing a meal with you is a joy I cherish."

Seated side by side in the bed, Mae and Niall savored the delicious morning fare. Between bites and sips of tea, their eyes locked, conveying a depth of emotion that words

couldn't capture. In those stolen moments of shared intimacy, breakfast in bed became a celebration of their love, a testament to the bond they had formed.

With breakfast savored and their hunger appeased, Mae and Niall rose from their comfortable spot in bed, and shared a sense of contentment between them. Mae dressed in one of the two dresses she had with her, and Niall put on a clean linen shirt, his plaid and kilt, and then pulled on his boots.

As they descended the stairs into the main entrance of the inn, they were greeted by the innkeeper. "Did you sleep well," he asked.

"Aye, twas a good night's sleep," Niall agreed as he handed over the key to the room.

"Will you not stay another night?" he asked.

Niall looked at Mae who nodded. She would like to have a day to enjoy the town since they still had to go speak to the Campbells and who knew how long that might take. "One more?" she suggested.

"Then, aye, one more night, if'n you've got the accommodations for us?"

"Aye, you can have the same room, we'll tidy it for you an' have it ready when you return."

"Thank you," Mae replied, taking Niall's arm.

Their cart and horses had been taken to the stables, so they went there first to retrieve them. The familiar scents of hay and horse mingled, triggering a sense of excitement in Mae.

Niall made sure their belongings were secured, and they mounted the cart, ready to

ride forth toward the Campbells' lands.

As Mae and Niall rode side by side, their laughter intertwined with the sound of their horses' footsteps. Finally, after traversing the few miles of winding trails, Niall and Mae arrived at Sir Kellan Campbell's estate. It was on the Campbell's grounds, but sat a distance away from the massive castle the Laird resided in. Mae had thought Fort Donald was large, but the Campbell castle was something else entirely. She was actually glad they weren't headed there, but stopping at Sir Kellan's place instead, which was a grand stone structure.

Niall helped her down from the cart after parking at the front of the home. He moved to the back of the cart and picked up the satchel of Brian's things he was delivering. Together they headed for the entrance of the home. Niall knocked and waited.

A man came to the door dressed in the Campbell colors, but he looked more like an English butler than anything else to Mae. She had a feeling that the staff in Sir Kellan's home were treated more like servants than family, like they were at Fort Donald.

"May I help you?" the man asked.

"We're here to see Sir Kellan," Niall shared. "Niall MacDonald, and Lady Mae Welles."

"Please come in. You may wait here, while I inform Sir Kellan of your presence."

Mae stood quietly next to Niall, taking in the opulence of Sir Kellan's home. It was much more posh than anything she'd seen so far in being here. She felt underdressed in her plain gown, almost as though she were a servant or a peasant in comparison, which was really just ridiculous because she obviously wasn't.

“Ah, Lady Welles, Niall, what brings you to Ballygrant and more specifically to me?” His eyes narrowed. “It doesnae have to do with young Brian arriving in a harried state yesterday morning speaking of outlandish tales, might it?”

Niall and Mae exchanged a glance, feigning innocence as Mae responded, “I’m not sure what kind of tales Brian was sharing. What on heaven’s green earth was he saying?” And then she frowned and with a surprised look added, “He wasn’t claiming Fort Donald is haunted again, was he?”

“He was indeed. Spoke of Vikings and witch’s curses.”

Mae rolled her eyes. “You know he kept telling me of seeing ghosts, but that is complete nonsense.” She waved her hand. “Fort Donald isn’t haunted, is it Niall?”

Niall shook his head. “Nae, I’m not even sure where he would have gotten that idea. As to Vikings and witches, well, all I can say is he has some interesting ideas when he’s been drinking.”

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Sir Kellan scoffed, “I knew there had to be a reasonable explanation for his outlandish tales. Witches and ghosts donnae exist.”

“Nae, they donnae,” Niall agreed. “We’ve actually come to be sure he made it back to you safely, and to return the things he left behind.”

“That is very kind of you to do so, considering he left in such a hurry without even informing the Laird of his impending arrival.”

“We were quite surprised to see him leave in such a rush on Samhain. We had a feast prepared and I knew he was looking forward to it,” Niall shared.

“You do realize the Laird had only sent him for a few weeks, just to be sure his

interests were being looked after. It was quite unexpected when Brian wrote a few months ago to say that he was going to stay on.”

Niall tilted his head. “No we were not aware that he was only meant to stay a few weeks. We were happy to have him of course, as we would welcome any Campbell to Fort Donald.”

Sir Kellan’s lips twitched. “I am glad to hear it. I did inform the Laird after my brief visit that his interests were well taken care of and Brian’s extended stay should end, but he does like to indulge the boy... when he’s not home, that is.”

Mae read between the lines, taking that to mean that the Laird didn’t put up with Brian draining their supply of whisky and ale, but was more than happy to allow him to do it to others. “That is probably good. I fear the whisky has made Brian see things that just aren’t there,” she said, “it might be best if he dried out some.”

Sir Kellan nodded. “I fear you are probably correct, Lady Welles. Forgive me, would either of you care for a drink or some food before you leave? I am not used to seeing to guests, and I’m afraid I’ve forgotten my manners.”

“Oh, thank you, but no. We’ve already eaten and Niall has promised to show me around Ballygrant.”

“Then I will see you off,” he replied, walking with them back to the door. “Have a safe journey back to Fort Donald.”

Niall helped her back into the cart and they returned to Ballygrant. After dropping the cart at the stables and taking their things back to the inn and up to the room they’d shared the night before, Niall escorted her about the town. Mae was surprised to see so many places to explore.

Their first stop was in the general store where Mae found a few ribbons to buy that she could weave into her braid. She also came across some hard sweet candies called Suckets, and something called a Sugar Plate which she bought several of. The Suckets were a candied fruit that were very sweet, and the Sugar Plate was like eating fondant icing about the size of a quarter. Both were pretty tasty.

From there they visited a few of the other shops, before making their way into the dressmaker's. Mae wandered through, feeling the material and then haggling over enough to make a cloak out of, not that she actually knew how to do that, but she'd have Sally help her. She also was able to purchase a couple of dresses that the dressmaker had ready made as they fit her fairly well and only needed a few minor adjustments.

"You've the perfect figure, m'lady," the dressmaker said. "I will have these ready for you when you leave in the morning. You can pick them up on your way back to Fort Donald."

"Thank you so much," Mae replied, happy to have found some things she liked.

She and Niall returned to the inn and had supper and then made an early evening of it. The next morning, they picked up her packages from the dressmaker and set off on the journey back to Fort Donald.

"I still have coins left over," Mae said, as they made their way out of town.

"Best hold on to them for next time. I'm sure you'll want to come visit again in the spring when the weather is good."

"Most definitely." Mae grinned and then turned to Niall. "I'll need to figure out a way to earn more though."

Niall looked at her curiously. “You know you donnae need to, love. I can provide you with whatever it tis you need or want.”

Mae placed a hand upon his arm. “I know that you can, but I’m not your wife, Niall, you shouldn’t have to provide for me.”

“Is that something you’d consider? Being my wife?”

“Is this you asking me?” she said with surprise.

He grinned. “It is.” He stopped the horses and turned to her. “Marry me, Mae. I have fallen hard for you lass and I cannae imagine a life without you in it. Without me wakin’ up to your sweet smile every day.”

Mae wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “Yes, Niall. I love you too. I’ll be your wife.” She felt a thrill race through her. “The sooner the better.”

“Then we shall have a Christmas wedding, if that is all right with you? I donnae want to wait until spring. I want you as my wife as soon as possible.”

“Christmas sounds perfect.” Mae could barely contain her excitement. Never in a million years would she have imagined she’d travel through time and find the love of her life, but that was exactly what she had done.

EPILOGUE

CHRISTMAS

N early two months had flown by, and the much-anticipated Christmas day had arrived. Not only were the Donald clan excited to be celebrating such a special day, but also the day of Mae and Niall's wedding.

Being winter, they held the wedding in the dining hall. Mira, Sally and the rest of the staff had decorated the walls with boughs of holly and greenery. Mae was surprised to find that as Chief of the clan, Cam could wed them, and it would be a legal marriage. She had also been surprised that brides of this era didn't wear white gowns. It was Dub Sith, who'd popped in for a chat shortly after their return from Ballygrant, who had informed her of the fact that white gowns wouldn't be the custom for a few hundred years yet. So instead, she'd chosen to wear a dress made of the Donald clan wool tartan. It was warm as well, which was good since the castle tended to be a bit drafty these days.

Niall, donned in his traditional Scottish attire, stood tall and proud at the far end of the dining hall where Cam stood on the dais before him. Feeling radiant, Mae walked down the aisle created by the long tables, accompanied by the melodic strains of a Scottish bagpipe serenading their union.

Mae could see the love in Niall's eyes as she joined him to stand in front of Cam. He held her right hand as they said their vows, promising to love and cherish one another for the rest of their days. As the rings were exchanged, the crowd erupted in applause, their joyful cheers filling the air.

“To Niall and his wife Mae! May they have a long and prosperous life together!” Cam shouted.

Niall wrapped his arms around her, and she looked up at him with a smile. She’d never felt so happy in her life. He leaned down and kissed her in front of everyone and she felt her cheeks heat as there were whoops and hollers around them.

“Bring on the feast!” Cam shouted and the staff scurried to make that happen.

Soon, succulent roasted meats, hearty stews, and freshly baked bread filled the air with an enticing aroma. The sound of merriment intertwined with the lively tunes played by the ceilidhs band, inviting guests to partake in joyous dancing and spirited revelry.

Amidst the celebration, heartfelt toasts were raised to the bride and groom, their journey honored, and their love celebrated. Mae and Niall, surrounded by their loved ones, danced in each other's arms, their smiles radiant and their hearts full of love and happiness.

As the moon cast its ethereal glow upon the castle, the wedding festivities continued. The night echoed with laughter, music, and the warmth of camaraderie, as clan members and guests reveled in the beauty of the Scottish traditions and the bonds that had been sealed on this special day.

As the merry celebration reached its crescendo, a hush fell over the dining hall as Sir Kellan, made a grand entrance. All eyes turned toward him, the flickering torches casting an ethereal glow on his distinguished figure. The joyous atmosphere was momentarily tempered by a mix of anticipation and respect.

Mae was shocked to see him, as they’d only sent an invitation to him and the Laird out of respect. They hadn’t actually expected either of them to come, especially not in

winter.

Sir Kellan, approached them, a small smile on his face. In his hands, he carried a beautifully crafted wooden box, adorned with intricate carvings, and polished to a gleaming finish. He presented it to Mae and Niall, their curious gazes fixated on the mysterious gift.

“Congratulations,” he said. “I do hope you enjoy this, and I apologize for my tardiness. The weather was a bit harsher than I’d anticipated and it took me longer than I thought to get here.”

“We appreciate you making the effort,” Mae said, floored by his apology.

The music picked back up and around them people began to dance once more.

“I also wanted to thank you again for delivering Brian’s things to us.” He gave a rueful smile. “I fear some of the behavior I witnessed while here, has made an appearance at home, however, thanks to whatever it was you did, I am no longer required to keep an eye upon him. The Laird has arranged a more suitable companion for him.”

Mae swallowed and looked at him slightly with fear. She hoped he wasn’t here to find out what that something was. She glanced over at Niall, biting her lip.

“Not to worry, I am not here to bring trouble to your door.” He smiled. “Perhaps you will allow me to propose a toast?”

“Of course,” Niall agreed.

Sir Kellan, took a glass from a passing staff member and then raised it, and proposed a toast to love, loyalty, and the strength of alliances. The room resounded with the

clinking of glasses and joyful laughter as the revelers joined in the toast, their voices united in celebration.

The music swelled once again, filling the night air with its infectious rhythm. Mae and Niall, their hearts brimming with gratitude and happiness, embraced the enchanting moment, dancing with renewed vigor and spirit.

Sir Kellan joined in with the festivities and Mae couldn't help but hope that his appearance and gift would help to bring some peace between the two clans. She looked at her new husband and smiled. Taking his hand, she led him over to join the others in the dancing and frivolity.

“I love you, Niall MacDonald.”

“And I love you, Mae MacDonald.” He held her close and kissed her. “I cannae wait to start a family with you.”

Mae just grinned.

That was a secret she was saving for later.

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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.

CHAPTER 2

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 tower's 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-inlayed 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.