



Torin and the Princess (Torin and the Princess #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: There are three things we know to be facts:

Lexi is a modern woman living in the modern world. Always has been.

Torin is a Scottish Highlander living in an ancient world.

And Time Travel does not exist. Their paths will never cross.

Except none of this is true.

Because occasionally our origins are more ancient than we know. Family ties and royal lines do not forget. Most of the time our fates mean to entangle us. And always our deepest loves become complicated by time — that is the only truth.

And sometimes Time Travel can be the only explanation.

Torin and the Princess is a contemporary time traveling romance with a dash of history and a bit of SciFi. From the writer of Kaitlyn and the Highlander and the Scottish Duke and the Rules of Time Travel.

Total Pages (Source): 43

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am

TORIN

Max looked over the windowsill and whispered, “Tis right there, Torin, we just hae tae go get it.”

“Tis easier said than done.”

He drew his sword.

I said, “How many times hae we laid our eyes upon it, yet dinna get our hands on it?”

“Too many times.”

“How many times hae we almost died in the gainin’ of it?”

“Every time, but we dinna die, and this time?—”

But I dinna let him finish.

I jumped over the sill intae the room while he was still scramblin’ up tae follow me, as I was in full sprint across the chamber.

I stepped on a stool, knockin’ it aside, and flung m’self through the air, graspin’ the device off the end table — I raised it in my hand, “Got it!” as I rolled tae the hearth.

I jumped tae m’feet, spun, and bounded across the floor back taeward the window. Max was already scramblin’ out, “Ye dinna wait!”

“Ye are too slow!”

I hurdled the windowsill, my feet hit the garden, and we raced across the wide field.

“And ye are too wee!”

Max was panting. “Ye are giant! A giant arse!”

I glanced over m’shoulder. “Och nae! They are in chase!” My breath was coming heavy, our stride was fast, but we would tire soon.

He looked back. “Seven men! We are almost tae the trees!”

I said. “We ought tae split up!”

“Aye, we meet in Muckhart!” He yelled, “Toss it, I will head south! Ye go north!”

I started tae toss it, but it vibrated in my hand — twas shocking, like a sort of lightning flashing through me, trying to reach into me to snare me.

It felt as if it had grabbed hold.

Mid-stride I tried tae shake it off, but there was the sound of roarin’ around me, a rumbling comin’ at me, as if I were caught in front of a barrelin’ horse.

A gust of wind plowed against my back, so hard that I was knocked, stumbling forward, a second gust shoved me from the side. I lost m’footin’, and then a gust struck against m’chest, raisin’ my feet from the earth?—

My body felt like it exploded in pain. I was thankful when I lost consciousness.

I dinna ken how much time had passed, twas hours, possibly, but also I had crashed intae a tree. Wind whipped and branches clawed as I plunged down through tree limbs, the only thing slowin' m'descent was slammin' against a branch, and another and another afore I landed on m'shoulder on the ground.

My eyes fluttered open enough tae see the device right there, in front of m'eyes. I weakly said, "Still got it!"

Then I said, "And yet again, we dinna die."

I lost consciousness again.

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LEXI

The dream went like this:

I was about four years old and staring out from behind a chair curled up small ‘like a kitten’ like I had been told, but I was peeking out.

It was dark. The only light was from the fire in the hearth, but I could see a man, a man I knew, who cared for me, who I loved, and there was a whip slicing down through the air on his back.

He was groaning in pain, the woman beside him was also someone I knew, who cared for me, that I loved.

She had her hands clasped together, on her knees, crying and begging the man holding the whip to stop.

“Please sire, we daena ken what tae tell ye!”

The man yelled, “Tell me where—” The whip cracked through the air, aimed at the man’s back again and?—

Hands grasped around my waist. I was lifted, struggling, terrified, a hand clasped my mouth, gripping my face so I couldn’t scream. I tried to go limp so I wouldn’t get taken, I needed to help the man and woman, but I was a wee bairn. I couldn’t. I was only supposed to get small. Be quiet.

Don't let anyone know I was here.

I was held clamped under a man's arm, banging against his hip as he raced through the night. I squealed with pain and fear.

"Wheesht, lass!" He ran around a corner and then sped across a wide field.

His footsteps hitting the ground, thud, thud, thud. My head lolled. I was shaken and so afraid, then it grew even darker. He dropped me into what felt like a bush and crouched in front of me.

I made out his face briefly, but I didn't recognize him. He had something I didn't recognize in his hand — he shoved it against my chest, and placed my shaking hands on it. "Hold it!"

I burst into tears.

He scrambled away.

I said, "Where they go? Go back! Take me back!"

He said, "Och nae, lass, daena let go?—"

I drew in a big terrified breath and scrambled to sit up, grabbing my chest.

Cooper had his hand on my back. "You alright, Lexi?"

I tried to catch my breath, but it staggered and I felt like I was suffocating. I had my arms around my knees, trying to breathe.

He sat up and shook me. "You okay?"

Then, “Lexi?”

He flung the covers off and crawled so he was in front of me. He held both of my hands and put his cheek on the back of my head. He said, “Shhhhhhh.”

I nodded.

“Shhhhhhh, now whistle, babe.”

I pursed my lips and blew. A weak sound came out.

He said, “Do it again.”

I nodded, pursed my lips and blew again.

“There ya go, that was stronger, do it again.”

I blew once more. That one was strong. He asked, “Can you breathe?”

“Yes.”

He collapsed beside me. “Holy shit, Lexi, that was scary, I was in a deep sleep.”

“It was the nightmare again.”

He rolled toward me and took my hand. “I know, babe.”

“...I just don’t get why it’s so real, like, it doesn’t feel like a dream, it feels like I’m there in the room.”

His voice, with his southern drawl was comforting in the darkness, “But you aren’t,

you're right here, in the bedroom, in Laurel Ridge, the house your great-great-grandfather built."

"Yeah, I'm at home, you're right." I sat quietly thinking. "It's almost more like a memory, but weird because I don't remember it happening, but then again, I'm really little... 'wee bairn'. Have you heard the term 'wee bairn'?"

"Nah, you've asked me that before."

"Yeah, I know, I'm sorry."

"It's not a memory. Ask your uncle, he'll tell you it never happened!"

I had my cheek on my knees, facing him. "Yeah. I just... I was young, right? Three or four, do you remember things when you were four?"

"I think you would remember something like that, and again, Lexi, your family ..."

I nodded and lay back down in bed. "Yeah, you're right, it just always haunts me for a bit after, I have to think it through." I pulled up the edge of my grandmother's quilt to my chin. "It feels like a memory, but it's not, it's a dream, got it."

I looked over at him in the darkness, I could make out his features, handsome and familiar. "I'm sorry I woke you up. You have a flight to catch, when do you have to leave?"

He looked over at the alarm clock with a groan. "Two hours."

"Damn, I'm sorry and I love you, go back to sleep. I'm fine."

He kissed my hand. Then kissed my forehead. "Good night, Lexi, love you."

“Love you too.”

Over his shoulder I could see out the bedroom window and the woods beyond the lawn. A comforting view. I could close the curtains at night, but I liked to see what was out there, and I loved getting up with the morning light.

The tall pine trees rustled in the wind, black against the moon-glow of the night sky, but then I realized the uppermost boughs were beginning to whip, pummeled by strong gusts of wind.

A storm.

From out of nowhere there was a storm right on top of us. Jagged fingers of lightning shot across the sky and lit the room as bright as day. The thunder came right on top of it, crashing so hard, so loud, I felt the bed vibrate.

Cooper raised his head. “Oh shit! What was that?” He looked around half asleep. “Did you know we’re having a storm?”

“I didn’t hear it mentioned, this one is right on top of us.”

The screen on the door to the porch began swinging, banging against the old Victorian house — bang, bang, bang. I was used to this old house’s squeaks and creaks, but those loud bangs were going to keep us both up.

I climbed out of bed as Cooper mumbled, “Don’t go out in it.”

“I’m not crazy.” Wearing a tank top, pajama pants, and thick socks, I padded from my bedroom down the wooden stairs and the long hall toward the foyer.

Outside the wind howled and thunder clapped and lightning sparked. I opened the

front door and a gust blew in. Brrrr. I stepped out on the porch, grasped the screen door, and yanked it closed. I secured it by putting the hook in the eye.

But then my eyes caught sight of something, down by the tree line. Another flash of lightning — it looked like something, or someone lying on the ground.

Three seconds later and there was another clap of thunder. The wind seemed to slow.

“Weird storm,” I said to myself, peering out into the night.

Was someone out there?

I kept watching. The wind died, there was no more lightning. The air smelled of ozone and wet earth.

Whatever it was, it was not moving. I watched for a bit longer, and then, contrary to my assertion to Cooper moments before, I shoved my feet into a pair of rainboots, opened the screen door, and went ‘out in it’ to see.

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LEXI

As I crossed the grass, my shoulders huddled against the night chill, I kept my eyes on the form ahead of me — what was it?

But then, as I drew closer, I knew... a person. Someone was on the ground under the tree.

I began to run.

But then I slid to a stop about six feet away — a man, big, bearded, unconscious, dressed in... really odd clothes, like a historic costume.

It flashed in my mind, like in my dream, but I shoved that thought aside.

“Hey, hey, you’re sleeping? Get up. You’re on my land.”

He didn’t move.

I crept forward, crouched, and shook his shoulder. Nothing.

I pressed my fingers to his throat. Pulse, yes.

I shook his shoulder again.

Behind me I heard Cooper, “What’s happening, Lexi?”

“Some guy, unconscious! Bring your phone!” I leaned over the guy’s mouth and listened, he was breathing.

I was shivering, “Bring my sweater!”

Cooper tossed a flashlight towards me and raced back to the house. I should have gotten the phone first. It would take a moment for an ambulance to get here.

I picked up the flashlight and looked all around.

The guy had a handsome, chiseled face, light brown hair, and a beard.

I looked over his clothing — he was wearing a pale linen shirt, with embroidery at the cuffs, a plaid kilt, and a cloak.

I shone the light on the edge and it looked like a real fur trim.

His boots were almost more like elf shoes, form fitting and without heavy soles, fur sticking out of the top.

He had a long knife sheathed on his hip.

It looked like there was a long sword under his body.

I noticed the guy’s shirt was torn at his stomach, a pine twig embedded in it. I peeked in the hole to see he was bleeding. I looked all around and then up at the tree. Branches were broken.

Must have been the wind from that storm.

Cooper raced up. A sweater was deposited in my arms. “What the hell — where’d

this guy come from?”

“I have no idea. None at all. Can you call 911?” I stuffed my arms in the sweater sleeves and then adjusted the guy’s cloak over his shoulders while Cooper called in the emergency.

He put his hand over the phone. “What should I tell them happened?”

“Best guess? He was walking through the woods and got hit by a branch in the storm.”

“Why’s he in our woods—?” He held up a finger as the 911 controller came back on the line. He paced explaining where we were and what had happened.

He hung up and walked back over to me. “They’re on their way.”

“Great.” I checked the guy’s breathing again. Sort of poked and prodded his shoulder and adjusted his hands.

Cooper looked at his phone.

He huffed. “I don’t have much time before I gotta go.”

“I know.”

He stood there for a second. “Is that a sword? What the hell is a guy with a sword doing in our woods?”

I directed the beam of light at the handle, it was leather-wrapped and there was a green stone on the hilt.

“I have no idea. And what’s this thing?” I picked up a metal device that was close in size and shape to a Red Bull can. In the flashlight’s beam I could see it had small markings on the sides. “Weird.”

“I have no idea, never seen anything like it.”

“Me neither.”

He looked at his phone again and exhaled.

I said, “You know, we don’t both have to wait for the ambulance, I mean, neither of us do, really. I’m just being nice. He’s a trespasser, you know, so you can go back to bed, grab a last bit of sleep before you go.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You honestly think I’m going to leave you alone out here with a guy with a sword?”

“I guess not, but you’ve got a plane to catch. You need to be rested. You’re irritated.”

He said, “Yeah, of course I am, but it’s not your fault, Lexi, you didn’t magically conjure up a strange guy on your lawn. You didn’t draw him here. Let me huff. I’m not leaving you alone, he’s probably drugged out or something.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

He grew quiet.

I asked, “Did you just fall asleep standing up?”

“Little bit, might fall over.” He dropped down on his ass beside me, sat crosslegged, and put his chin on his hand. He yawned, then said, sleepily, “Should I go get my

gun?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary, he’s unconscious.”

“If he wakes up, nudge me.”

“Of course.”

We sat in the darkness, waiting for the ambulance to arrive. Cooper dozing in and out.

It was a long time to be sitting vigil with a stranger, my mind worked through all the scenarios: stalker, trespasser, villain, friend? I checked out his clothes, checked his pulse now and again.

The ambulance drove up with no siren because it was about 4 am. I nudged Coop and whispered, “Ambulance is here.”

He looked around bleary eyed and stood up, brushing off his pants. “Guy hasn’t moved?”

“Nope, still out.”

Cooper looked at his watch.

I said, “You can go in, I’ll talk to them, you gotta get ready to go.”

He kissed my cheek and headed up to the house.

I was exhausted, but also my nerves were jangled and there would be no more sleeping. Cooper would be leaving in an hour and I had planned to see him off.

I needed coffee.

The medics, with headlights on their hats, rushed down the lawn to see what they were dealing with. I waved hello, lit in their beams.

One of them asked, “Friend? What happened to him?”

“Not a friend, I have no idea. We had a storm, and then the door was banging on the house.” I pointed up there for no reason. “I looked out and saw him on the ground.”

A medic was kneeling beside the guy, peering in his eyes and checking his vitals. Then the medics conferred before one ran up the lawn to the driveway for the gurney and the backboard.

“Backboard? You think he’s hurt his back?”

“Could be, you didn’t move him?”

“No, he’s too big to move, I... how could he hurt his back?” I looked up in the tree, pointing my flashlight beam up. I hadn’t been wrong, there were broken limbs. “He might have fallen out of the tree?”

A medic followed my eyes up. “I don’t see why he would be up in a tree — this is your property, right?”

“Yeah, sure, why would he be in my tree? Plus it’s the middle of the night. If he needed sleep there’s ten better places to sleep.” I lowered the beam. “It makes no sense.”

The stretcher arrived, the backboard was maneuvered under his back, velcro around his head, lifted up, he had the sword beside him, his knees showing under his kilt,

looking ancient, placed on the modern stretcher.

He slept through the whole thing. Then the medics pushed the stretcher up the lawn to the driveway.

I followed behind them, in case — in case of what, I had no idea.

At the waiting ambulance, the stretcher was pushed inside. A medic asked, “Will you be filing a police report?”

“Not sure, why would I... what hospital are you taking him to?” My eyes had drawn again to the tree, and then back to his handsome face. I felt dazed, kind of confused.

“We’re taking him to Regional. The reason for the police report is because he might be a stalker or staking out the house or something. He’s carrying a weapon.”

I raised my brow. “Oh good point, I didn’t think of that, yeah...” My eyes went back to the tree — could he have seen through my window? My open curtains in my bedroom window? I gulped. “Yeah, he was carrying a sword... maybe I should.”

They closed the door on the ambulance and I watched it ride away down the two lane country road.

I walked into the house and in the predawn made a big pot of coffee while my orange Maine Coon cat, Dude, made his trilling noise, pacing back and forth on the countertop.

He wasn’t as big as a full-size Maine Coon cat, only about sixteen pounds instead of growing to over twenty, so my guess was that he was a mix, but he had the personality, being crazy smart and wildly loyal almost like a dog. He had walked up a stray and moved in about two years ago.

I heard Coop turn on the shower upstairs.

I said to the cat, “Hey, Dude, you know Coop doesn’t like you up here.”

Dude ignored me, making his trilling noise, giving me a look, and with his paw, knocked over the salt shaker.

“Coop’s going to be grumpy, he hasn’t slept enough.”

Dude had so much fluff around his neck that it seemed like a mane, and gave him a dignified, kingly look, even with his torn ear, and the knotted fur.

I tried to keep him untangled but he did not care to be combed unless I talked him into it.

And that took almost as long as it did to detangle his coat.

He seemed unfazed by my concern about Coop’s mood.

I checked the clock — Cooper needed to leave in thirty-five minutes.

I stood at the kitchen sink, petting Dude, looking out the window, thinking about the strange man. What had he been doing out there?

I was interrupted when I heard the shower turn off and the thud of Cooper’s feet as he stepped out of the tub. He had a full day of travel and then high-stakes business meetings for the next few days.

He had needed his sleep — it was a terrible night to have had so much chaos.

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LEXI

I carried two cups of coffee up and found him already dressed, brushing his teeth in our tiny bathroom.

This bathroom was a step up from the master bedroom and had a slanted roof because it was built in the eaves.

There was a room for a clawfoot tub, with a shower-head at the high end of the ceiling, and a pull around shower curtain.

Beside that was a toilet, and a pedestal sink with no counter.

I would joke that we could brush our teeth, pee, and turn on the shower all at the same time.

I reached past him to place his mug on the edge of the sink. "Coffee for you?"

With the brush in his mouth, talking to me through the reflection in the mirror, he mumbled, "Don't need it, not yet, might be able to sleep on the plane, maybe."

I said, "Fine, more for me."

He spit in the sink, then put his toothbrush in the holder next to mine.

I continued sipping my coffee, admiring him as he fastened the leather strap on the Movado watch I had given him for Christmas.

He was tall and lanky, enough muscles to rock climb, but lean.

He ran his hands through his hair and straightened his shirt.

“You look good. Are you wearing the blue tie?”

“Yep.” He stepped down and crossed the bedroom to the antique arm chair in the corner where his clothes had been laid out. He picked up his blue tie, pulled it on, tied it effortlessly, and straightened it. He pulled down his collar. “How do I look?”

“Great, you’re going to wow them.”

“You can barely tell I didn’t sleep last night?”

“Not at all, and I’m so sorry, Coop.”

“I know, no worries. If a little exhaustion screws up my meeting then I wasn’t very well prepared.”

I said, “You’re prepared.”

“Yep.” He stuffed his toiletry bag in his suitcase, zipped it up, and slung his suit bag over his shoulder.

I left for the kitchen carrying both cups of coffee, asking over my shoulder as I descended the stairs, “You got your dress shoes, your trainers in case there’s a casual moment?”

“Yep and I got two suits, three ties, four shirts, and work-out clothes for the gym.”

“And your toothbrush, that’s all you need.”

He deposited the suitcase in the kitchen and ran back upstairs, calling, “Forgot my toothbrush!”

I laughed. “Glad you remembered, but none of this matters. There will be a drugstore right there, and Target is always only a taxi ride away.”

He jogged back down the steps and crouched in front of his suitcase, stuffing his toothbrush into his toiletries case. He zipped it all back up. “You always say that.”

“It’s always true. You could literally get on the plane with nothing and buy all the stuff you want once you’re there, probably in one afternoon.”

“You can also tell you grew up with money. In my family if you forgot to bring your toothbrush you’d have to use your finger.”

I laughed, “I’ve met your mom, she would never allow that.”

“We would be too scared to tell her we forgot our toothbrushes.” He glanced at his watch again. “I have to... I’ve got just a minute and... oh, what the hell.”

He picked up his coffee mug and sipped while leaning out so it wouldn’t drip on his clean clothes.

Then he put the mug back on the counter. “That helps.”

He focused on me. “You going to be okay? I could... I don’t know... need me to stay?”

“Absolutely not, don’t be crazy, this is your big moment, Coop. I’m fine, that was just some fluke.”

“Call Jen if you need company.”

“As you know, I have her on speed-dial...”

Then I asked, “I was wondering, what if... could it have been a tornado? Could a funnel have picked him up and dropped him there?”

He screwed up his face. “I don’t think that’s a thing, babe. Not where he would survive, ya know?”

“Yeah, probably, but whatever, I’m not worried. He didn’t look like someone who was from around here, like I’d be more worried if?—”

He checked his watch. “I’m sorry to cut you off, Lexi, I gotta go. It’s a long drive, I don’t want to miss my flight.”

“Yes, of course, yes.”

He picked up his suit bag and wheeled the suitcase behind him down the hall. I held the door for him as he lugged it all out and down the porch steps, then pulled the suitcase careening behind him down the walkway to his Toyota 4Runner.

There was a momentary bustle as Cooper loaded his suitcase and hanging bag into the backseat and then he kissed me goodbye.

“Call as soon as you get to the hotel. I love you.”

“Of course, love you too, and call me if anything weird goes on, promise?”

“Promise.”

“Have a good week.”

“Thanks, Cooper, don’t worry about me, got this all under control, and we’re still going out to eat next weekend?”

He sat down in the driver’s seat. “Yep, got the reservations.”

“Perfect, have a good week.”

I waved as he started the car and pulled away.

Dude met me and stood beside me as I looked all around at the first glow of dawn brightening the sky. But then I saw a glint in the dew near where that guy had been lying.

Weird.

I walked towards it down the lawn with Dude following and found that odd object, lying unnoticed in the grass.

“Uh oh, he’s going to want that...” Dude sniffed it and then batted it with his paw. “Whatever it is.”

I sighed.

That was a complicated thought. That sounded like a lot of trouble for me. I added, “He’s going to want that if he survives.”

I picked the object up and headed up to the house. It seemed like there was a weight inside that moved around as I turned it over in my hands, trying to understand what it was. The word ‘gyroscope’ came to mind, though I didn’t really know what a

gyroscope was.

In the kitchen I poured myself more coffee and made two decisions: One, I would take the object to the hospital in a few hours. Two, I would try to do an internet search, maybe there was an explanation of what it was.

There wasn't an explanation.

I tried search terms like, 'metal can heavy like a weird gyroscope that has markings.' No wonder they didn't bring back an answer. I removed 'gyroscope' because I got weird results, then scanned websites and blogs, but ultimately the search returned nothing helpful.

I drank coffee, leaned against my kitchen counter, with a cartoon turned on the little TV on my kitchen island. What was this thing?

How often in the world did we come across things that were new, that no one had ever found before?

It was 2004, for sure there would be a blog post about it.

But I couldn't find anything in this first search, which sucked.

I loved research and was good at it. I had been researching my family tree and documenting the history of my old Victorian house for months.

Stacks of documents and folders were piled all over the desk in my hobby room.

I should have been able to find something...

I sighed, leaning against the counter, thinking about the events of the night. My

nerves were jangled — the nightmare, the storm, the stranger, not to mention having an ambulance in my driveway. And Cooper leaving for his trip.

Probably too much coffee, too early.

I had gotten up before the crack of dawn and so my whole day had been thrown out of whack.

I sipped from my mug and said to Dude, up on the counter again, “It just seems kind of connected, somehow, right?”

Dude looked indifferent.

I said, “Like all of it at once...?”

Dude trilled.

I said, “Of course I don’t mean the dream, that’s ridiculous, the dream was a coincidence — I mean the storm and the stranger.”

But how could a storm be connected to a stranger?

I dumped the last sip of coffee into the sink and used a sponge and soap to wash out our mugs, placing them on the dish drainer to dry.

“Likely he was crossing my land and hid in the trees when the storm came on, and... then a branch fell on him.” I peered out the window, my eyes sweeping the lawn down there. No branch. But...

My eyes fell on the weird object again, sitting on the kitchen counter.

I came up with the best explanation: He was a sculptor from down at the art center.

This was one of his pieces, or something.

He looked like he had been wearing a costume, he probably performed at the...

using my phone I searched the arts center calendar to see if there had been a performance last night.

Maybe an actor got lost, or like somehow it was a prank.

There was no show last night. He did not look like a student from the college.

This was all so freaking mysterious.

I took a shower, got ready for my day, and then called Jen.

“Hey, lady, I’m going to pick you up in a half hour.”

She groaned. “I’m not even up yet, what-the-hell time is it?”

“Time for you to get up, it’s 7:45, we gotta go .”

She was quiet.

“Jen!”

She snored.

I huffed. “Getupgetupgetup.”

She chuckled. “Why? It’s Saturday, I don’t get up on Saturday. I’ve been around monsters all week, I’m in no mood, plus this is spring break now, I don’t have to get up until noon.”

“Those are kids, you’ve been around kids all week, stop complaining — I need you to go to the hospital with me.”

She said, “Why what happened? You okay? Is Coop okay?”

“Yes, we’re both fine. He’s on his business trip — the craziest shit happened last night, or really, early this morning in the storm.”

“ What storm?”

“That giant storm! The one that almost lifted my house from its foundation and then left some stranger lying in my yard.”

“What the heck? So, like a tornado? I didn’t know we were having storms last night. Man, must have slept right through it.”

She went quiet again.

I said, “Jen, I’m going to be there to pick you up in twenty minutes. You’re going to the hospital with me.”

“Bring coffee.” She hung up.

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LEXI

When I pulled up in front of Jen's house, she emerged after about five minutes, looking like she had just awakened: bedhead hair pulled into a loose bun, rumpled clothes, strolling.

She yanked open the door, sank into the seat, and put out her hand.

I placed a coffee travel mug in it. "Don't spill in my Beamer. "

"Of course not, and don't speak until I drink."

I said, "I wouldn't dare." I pulled my car away from her house.

She drank and stared out the window, then smacked her lips. "It is a testament to how much I love you that I'm here. The only reason is because we're practically sisters. We've been friends since like, when?—?"

I said, "Phew, an exhausting — two whole years."

She joked, "Everyone knows it's the new friends who are the real friends. The people you went to high school with are?—"

I said, "Buttheads and deserters."

"Yep, they all ran off to college leaving you here, practically friendless, which is ridiculous because I've met all of them and you're the best of the lot.

Look at you, beautiful, with your long golden hair, and bright blue eyes, you practically glow with sunshine, but here you were, friendless, and I took pity on you and we've been friends ever since. ”

“Yep, like we were meant to be.”

“And I introduced you to Cooper and here we all are, practically family.”

“That’s why I called, because you’re my bestie, practically family, you’re always there for me.”

“Damn right. I even got out of bed for you — better have a damn good reason. Where are we going again?”

“Hospital — there was a guy in my yard last night.”

Her eyes squinted. “In your yard? But like... you live on the outside of town. Was he a lumberjack or,” her eyes went wide, “axe- murderer?”

I shrugged and turned left at the light. “I have no idea. He didn’t look like either, not really, but he was injured, so I called an ambulance.”

She sipped from her coffee. “Kinda think you don’t need to visit an axe-murderer at the hospital.”

“He left something in my yard. I guess I think he wants it or needs it.” I gestured toward my big bright green handbag. “There, on top.”

She plucked up the object. “What is it?”

“I have no idea. The whole thing is so mysterious. What was he doing out in my

woods during a storm — what is this thing he left behind? I spent a lot of time sitting beside him in the dark last night, waiting for the ambulance while he was unconscious. Watching over him. I'm invested .

That's why I'm going to the hospital and why you're coming with me. ”

“Fine, now I'm intrigued too, but we gotta get food on the way back. I'm already hungry.”

I said, “I brought you a snack, I know how you get.”

She reached into my oversized handbag again and pulled out a paper lunch sack. She unfolded the top and looked inside, “An egg sandwich, for me? ”

“Yep, I ate hours ago. I've been up since four.”

Jen took a big bite of her sandwich and asked, “How was Coop's send-off?”

“Dramatic, I had a nightmare and woke him up, then there was a stranger in my yard. Woke him up, again.”

“Then he had to be ready to go at the crack of dawn.”

“Yep, it wasn't optimal.”

She chewed and looked out the window. “But you guys are doing better?”

“We're working on it. We love each other, you know, we just want different things.”
I was quiet for a moment. “Really different things.”

“Yeah, he is hyper-focused on his project. But, you never bicker or fight, that's good,

right?”

“Everyone bickers — we fight, sometimes.”

“You are very nice, you never tell him what’s bothering you.”

“True. We keep spending a lot of time just being like roommates. I keep thinking it will get better once this deal happens...”

She frowned. “But will it?”

I shrugged. “The important thing is we are working on our relationship, and once he finishes these meetings, secures the money, guess what he’s doing next weekend?”

“I have no idea.” She took a big bite and chewed.

“He’s got reservations for us at Falls Landing.”

She swallowed the bite and said, “Oh.” Then she said, “Oh! Maybe he’s going to pop the question?”

“I do not want to get ahead of myself, but... it would fit, right? We’re working on our relationship, in a good place, he’s about to start the business, and so... yeah... I think that’s why we’re going somewhere fancy.”

“You need a pretty dress.”

“Definitely.”

She wiped her hands, having finished the sandwich. “I’m glad you kids are doing well. When you are fighting, I get all ‘My Parents Are Getting a Divorce!’”

I laughed, “No divorce, I promise, though we would have to get married first.”

She smiled. “That’s happening any day now, I can feel it!”

“Yeah, me too.”

I directed our car across town to the county hospital.

We sidled up to the main desk. “I’m looking for someone who was brought in by ambulance last night. I have personal effects for him.”

The woman typed a whole bunch and asked, “Patient’s name, please, and how are you related?”

“Um, they... I don’t know his name. He was on my property when he got injured and so...”

She continued typing, I couldn’t tell if her typing was related to my request or just something else she was doing. “Trespassing? Do you have a police report?”

“No.”

Jen asked the receptionist, “Why on earth would she need a police report?”

The woman shrugged. “If he got injured on your property, you might want to get a police report in case you get sued. I would.”

I said, “Well, great, that sucks, um... no. No police report, but I need to give him something, is he still here?”

She continued typing and gestured with her head. “He’s back in the treatment room.”

Jen and I began walking that way.

I said, “Well, that’s a whole ‘nother reason to be here, I need to find out if he’s the kind of guy who would sue me — just great.”

She said, “Girlfriend, this is what you get for being way too nice.”

We came to the nurse’s station and I said, “We’re here to visit the guy, the one who um...”

“Which one, Mr Jones or...”

I said, “I have no idea. He was brought in last night by ambulance?”

The nurses gave each other a look. One picked up a clipboard. “So what’s his name, age, address?”

“I literally don’t know. He was just in my yard last night. That’s all I know?—”

Jen said, “Wait, he didn’t have an ID on him?”

The nurse said, “No, nothing, he’s a John Doe.”

I explained, “That’s unfortunate. Sorry, I don’t know him, but he dropped something in my yard, I think he’ll want it. I brought it for him.”

The nurse pointed. “He’s in that room, but I wouldn’t give him his valuables.” She gestured to a sword and a knife on the edge of her desk. “He’s got a lot of valuables and weapons on him. He’d be better off leaving them with you until he’s released.”

I shook my head. “I mean, I really don’t know him, I think I need to return this.”

“Fine.”

Jen asked, “When will he be released?”

“By the end of the day, if we can get a positive ID on him.”

Jen and I walked toward the wide open door on the treatment room. It was darker inside, with two beds and a curtain down the length of it.

Jen glanced at me, but I shook my head, the old man in the first bed was not the man I was there to see.

I gave him a weird wave and sort of bowed awkwardly while crossing the room. Then as I passed through the curtain to the second bed, I called in cheerily, “Hello!”

And there was the man from the middle of the night.

He was handsome, with a chiseled face almost like Superman except rougher, not quite so clean cut.

Like Superman if he also rode a motorcycle, or a horse, plus he smelled of hay and smoke and musk and incense.

He had brown hair and a beard, but everything seemed dark about him, like he was sooty, maybe, or his aura wasn’t lit up enough.

I glanced at Jen. Her eyes were wide, she mouthed: I call dibs.

He couldn’t see her, either of us, because his eyes were tightly closed. I said, “Sir, I’m sorry to bother you.”

His pale yellow linen shirt was pulled down one side, and across his well-formed, muscular chest he had a strap connected to a sling holding his left elbow. The bedsheets were pulled up to his waist.

He opened one eye and squinted, then he squeezed his eyes shut again. “Och nae, tis bright.”

Jen looked around. “Is it?”

I pressed closer to the bed, standing between him and the window. “Sorry to bother, but it was my lawn... last night... I’m the one who found you.”

Both his eyes opened. “Dost ye hae it?”

“What, the thing — the thing you dropped? Yes, I’ve got it.” I rummaged through my bag, asking, “What is it?”

Jen nudged me and whispered, “Rude! Why you so nosy?”

I passed it to him. “Don’t know why I just blurted that out. I’m curious...” I waited, but he didn’t explain.

Instead he placed it beside himself on the bed with his hand on it. “Thank ye for it, Mistress. Where am I — what is this place?”

I said, “Um... county hospital?—”

“I daena understand those words.”

“I’m so sorry, the county hospital, in...” I watched his face for recognition, “Transylvania County? North Carolina?”

Nothing.

I added, “You know where that is?”

His eyes were closed again, tightly . He shook his head.

He didn’t seem to recognize anything I said. He didn’t know where he was, apparently. And he wasn’t planning on explaining what that little object was. Great , mystery unsolved.

Jen said, “Boy, were you lucky you got injured on Lexi’s land. She is the nicest person and she called the ambulance. You definitely don’t want to sue her. Plus, at great trouble, she even brought you the... that thing you got there.”

He opened one eye again. It looked as if he were straining. “I am verra grateful for yer help and sorry the trouble caused, Mistress.”

Jen said to me, “Good, see, Lexi? Should we go?”

I ignored her and asked the man, “Are you from Scotland?”

“Aye, Alba.”

Jen pretended to leave, gesturing we ought to go.

But I was still curious and drawn to ask questions. “How did you end up in my yard?”

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“I daena ken, but I am just here fleetingly. I winna bother ye again, Mistress. Ye hae m’assurances.”

His eyes closed tight again.

There was a quick knock on the door and two police officers entered.

Jen grabbed my arm, pulling me to the side.

An officer sized us up. “Friends or family?”

I shook my head. “Nope, just a bystander — just here for a moment to make sure he was okay.”

The officer said, “Can you step outside, please?”

The other officer said to the guy in the hospital bed, “Sir, can you produce an ID, sir?” For some reason he was speaking loudly, probably because the guy kept his eyes shut tight, though that didn’t make any sense.

Jen and I stepped out to the hall.

She said, “We ought to go now, right? This is pointless.”

I stood quietly, listening.

She laughed, “ Or we can stay here and eavesdrop.”

And that's what we did.

The officers remained for a few moments and asked questions: "What is your name? Where do you live? Where do you hold citizenship?"

He answered, his voice so low and rumbling, that it was hard to make out the words. I stepped closer to the door and concentrated, but all I could make out was the name, "Torin."

A few moments later the officers left the room.

Jen followed them down the hall, peppering them with questions. "So, guy in there, a police record? Outstanding warrants? Where's he from?"

One of the officers said, "Nope, we've run his information, he seems clean. We're going to let the hospital decide what to do with him."

Jen returned to my side. "A clean record. Surprising for someone who carries a sword."

I nodded, "True," and stared into the room at the curtain. "I thought by bringing the thingamajig, I'd solve a mystery but now it's even more mysterious."

Before she could say anything I turned on my heel and reentered the room. As I came around the curtain I cleared my throat. "Sorry to bother you... I just wanted to make sure, you're okay?"

"Aye, Mistress, I am battered and bruised and hae injured m'arm, but tis nae m'sword-drawin' arm." He dolefully chuckled. Though he looked like he was in pain, he seemed overall to have a fairly good humor. "I am assured I will be able tae commence m'verra important work soon enough."

I laughed, “Your work is sword-drawing?”

“M’work is drawin’ my sword.”

Jen entered the room behind me and overheard. “Ah, military, that makes more sense.”

I screwed up my face. “Does it?” Then I said to the man, “There’s not a lot of need for drawing a sword in Brevard, North Carolina.”

“Aye, that is why I must return home.”

“Scotland is a long way away from here —you’re not from these parts...” I laughed awkwardly because he didn’t laugh. Then I asked, “Have they told you when they’ll let you leave?”

He was squinting at the plastic hospital band around his wrist. “Nae...” Then he raised his eyes to mine. “There is a chance they winna allow me tae leave?”

“I think you have to wait until the nurses tell you that you’re well enough to go, either that or your insurance runs out.” I laughed, awkwardly for the second time.

He looked at me with his brow drawn down.

I said, “Well, speaking of... we gotta go.”

He asked, “What is yer name, Mistress?”

“Oh um, this is Jen, I’m Lexi.”

He nodded. “Twas verra fine tae meet ye, Mistress Jen, Mistress Lexi. I am Torin of

Castle Glume in Dolair.”

I bobbed my head, as if I were bowing. “Nice to meet you, too.”

Jen stifled a laugh, whispering, “Why so weird?”

I ignored her. “I have to go, gotta... you know, do some stuff. Hope your shoulder feels better and that you get out of this joint soon.” For some inexplicable reason I was doing jazz-hands. I shoved my hands in my pockets.

“Aye, I will rest and all will be well, thank ye for yer consideration, Mistress Lexi.”

I did a weird salute because I never knew how to leave a room and especially not when someone was calling me ‘Mistress’. “You and that odd thingy there... whatever it is, you know... Safe travels.”

He said, “Aye, beannachd leibh, Mistress Lexi.”

Mid-turn I turned back, “What does that mean?”

“It means ‘blessings tae ye.’”

“Oh, yeah, blessings to you too, goodbye, Sir, um... Torin.” And left the room, glancing behind me to see he was swinging his feet from the bed, wearing his linen shirt and plaid kilt, looking like he was from some long-ago past, as if he were getting up.

Jen and I went down the hall, she looked at the side of my face as I groaned. “Was I weird?”

“You were so weird, I’ve never seen anyone as weird as you.”

She mimicked the salute I had done, clicking her heels together joking, “Blessings to ya, Hottie!”

I groaned. “I’m so embarrassed, it just kept getting worse and worse, he’s so freaking hot, it got me all flustered. I couldn’t remember how to stand right, or move my face.”

She laughed. “You’re in a relationship, I think you should be able to talk to hot guys without turning into a bumbling mess of stupidity.”

I bared my teeth, “Do I have food in my teeth? I forgot how to be normal.”

“You got some egg right there,” she pointed, “but he probably didn’t notice or care, he looked like he’s used to Viking wenches with questionable mouth hygiene.”

I sucked on my tooth and picked at it with my finger. “Well, it wasn’t just me, that whole experience was weird. What was that metal thingy?”

“Who knows.” We left the hospital and outside she blinked in the sun. “What a wild morning, I got to meet a crazy person in the hospital and see my bestie become a jabbering idiot.”

“Yeah, I thought it was going to get less weird, but it only got weirder. Why was that guy in my yard this morning? I got no answers.”

As we crossed the parking lot for my BMW, she said, “Maybe it was simply an unexplainable mistake, he seems nice enough, he was passing through, he just got lost, and now he’s getting ready to leave the hospital.

It’s all perfectly normal, except he has that thingy that we don’t know what it is, but we don’t know everything in the world.

There is a reasonable explanation, the only thing silly about the whole morning was you. ”

“I am so glad Cooper didn’t see me act like that. I got flushed.”

We climbed in my car and I started it.

She said, “He was very, very hot. Something about that voice, hot-hot. I, for one, am glad I don’t have to watch you be all awkward anymore, you weirdo.”

“Are you going to let me live it down?”

“Let’s see,” She pretended to bow while flourishing her arm, ““You’re not from these parts, I’m just a simple girl, don’t got no sense.”” She laughed. “Nah, I’m probably not going to let this go, not for a few hours.”

I groaned. “Well, it was worth it, did you see his chest?”

“Hell yeah, and his hand, when he had it on that object, wow. The veins running on the back of it, I am a sucker for those.”

We both sighed dramatically. “Well, it’s over now, we have established that I am a doofus and... I can’t seem to make myself be...”

I had driven up to the parking lot exit and was about to pull out to the street when I glanced in the rearview mirror.

Torin was running out of the front doors of the hospital. The cloak around his shoulders, a sword in his hand. Kilt flapping behind him as he ran.

“Uh oh.”

He was running across the grass sloping into the woods.

A nurse was at the door waving her arms, trying to get him to return.

Jen turned, following my eyes. “Girlfriend, I don’t know what’s going on with that, but you do not want to get involved.”

The car behind me honked.

He disappeared into the trees. “Yes, right, absolutely, no way, I am done with that.”

I pulled out on the road and drove in the opposite direction. But every now and then I found my eyes drifting to the rearview mirror looking back there — what was going on with that guy?

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TORIN

O ch, the harsh, unnatural illumination of the world stung m'vision. I was disoriented, squintin' my eyes, desperate tae see clearly, tae understand where I was and how tae find m'way back home.

I had tae get home. Max was supposed tae hae the vessel — twas his, not mine. He had been haunted by its loss, desperately searchin' for it, and yet, here I was, with it in m'possession.

Except I dinna hae it in m'possession anymore — I could see a pale white bag with m'few belongings on the chair beside m'bed. I had struggled tae reach it and pulled it close, feelin' around the bottom before lettin' it go. The vessel wasna inside it.

Max and I had been working tae get our hands on it for long months, I had mistakenly spirited it away, and now twas no longer with me. I dinna ken where it had gone or how I had ended up here, in this hellish chamber.

Och nae.

And m'sword was missin' as well. Where was m'sword?

I kept my eyes closed while the physician worked upon me, only openin' m'eyes when a nursemaid yelled "Sir!" intae m'face.

Their shrill voices made a piercin' clamor that vexed my ears. The room was filled with an endless din and jangle, so I could scarce hear. They cast a blazing beam intae

m'eyes, and all about was a wild uproar.

I shook m'head or nodded in answer when they forced me tae speak — who were these people ?

They asked numerous questions and demanded answers. What had happened tae me? What had happened tae Max?

Och, he would be so disappointed in me. He had received a message tellin' him where tae find the vessel and that had been the first time I had seen him with hope in his heart.

Where was he now? He had been near me. Now I couldna tell where he had gone and this place was a quandary, twas confusin' tae be in a bed in the middle of it — when a bonny maiden entered the room.

She was radiant, most of her skin bare, and she smelt like sunshine beaming upon a field of blossoms. Her presence was a blaze of brightness, almost blinding, clashing with the glare of the chamber. The light she emanated overwhelmed m'senses, making it hard tae focus.

And then she handed me the vessel.

Twass a moment of grace in a terrible day.

She stood beside m'bed, speakin' tae me, I asked her where I was, but her answer increased the mystery.

And then she withdrew when the guards entered and forced me tae press m'finger tae their ink and then their paper. I hid the vessel under the covers.

The men asked who I was and where I lived. I answered, "Torin," and that I was, "From the Highlands."

One of the men said, "Highlands, that's right up the road. His prints are clear, he's got no record."

The other said, "Do you have a way to get home?"

I opened my eye. "Aye."

The other man said, "As soon as you are released, head on home. Don't stay here causin' trouble."

"Aye, I will."

After a time of extreme discomfort and confusion, the guards left the room. Then Mistress Lexi spoke with me further, and then she left. And through it all I had gained an awareness: I was being held captive. They wouldna allow me tae leave this strange place.

I couldna remain if I wanted tae be free. M'shoulder ached, but I had tae go.

I opened an eye as best I could and scanned the room. I could leave through the window, but best tae go down the hall. I had seen the direction Mistress Lexi had gone, I simply needed tae go that direction.

I shoved the vessel intae the wrappin' on m'shoulder so that twas hidden at m'chest, under m'arm and dropped m'feet tae the floor. Takin' brief glances, moppin' m'burning eyes with m'wrist so I could see. I found m'boots under the chair.

A nurse rushed in. "Sir! You have to get back to bed!" She made me lay back and

lifted m'feet up tae the end of the bed and patted my knee. "There, we have some paperwork before you can leave."

I said, "I need m'sword, dost ye ken where tis?"

"It's a valuable, we are sending it down to the locker. You can pick it up there when you're free to go."

"Tis nae there yet?"

"No, it's still in the nurse station, it'll get picked up in a few minutes?—"

I said, "I am famished."

"I will see if I can find you something."

She left.

I swung m'feet tae the floor again and the movement sent spasms of pain through m'body. I looked down tae see the buckle on the front of m'belt was undone. I tried tae fasten it with one arm, the ache stealin' the breath from m'lungs.

I gritted m'teeth as I pulled the bag of m'belongings tae m'good shoulder, threw m'cloak over m'other, and shoved m'feet in m'boots, my heels crushin' down the back.

All of this was takin' too long a time.

The man sharin' the chamber asked, "Where you going?"

I grunted, "Home."

He said, “I don’t think you get to leave yet.”

I held on tae the front of m’kilt and lumbered tae the door. “They canna stop me.” I added, “Tis probable they canna stop me.”

I watched for a moment from the shadows, peerin’ intae the intense light.

I needed tae run, but m’kilt would fall tae the floor, m’boots would fall from m’feet, and I wanted m’sword.

I could see the glint of light upon its hilt on a table across a wide empty hall. There was only one person sittin’ near it.

A woman with her back tae me. Another person neared in the passage, so I slipped intae the shadows, and got m’belt buckled, securin’ m’kilt, grittin’ my teeth against the pain. I got the cloak twisted so it was secure. Then I leaned down and pulled the back of m’boots on.

I would need tae run.

The man behind me sayin’, “You’re going to get in trouble.”

I took a deep breath, ridin’ the waves of pain. “Nae... for what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Aye, they canna hold me.” I rested my shoulder against the door, waves of anguish rollin’ through me and forced out, “I am well, tis time tae go.”

I watched until the passage was clear, then I counted three, muttered under m’breath m’clan’s war cry, ‘Cruachan!’ and rushed from the room.

It took ten steps tae cross the passage, and made it tae m'sword and dirk. I was tryin' tae be stealthy, quiet and careful in spite of the pain. I reached tae gather them in m'hand, but the woman turned and exclaimed in shock, "No, who said you can touch that!"

I yanked m'sword and dirk free and began tae run.

I ran down a long passage, through doors intae another, lamentin' that I might be lost in a maze, but then at the end of the passage there was a glimpse of green grass and sky.

Nae one made chase, but many people leered as I raced by.

I made it tae the door and shoved through, m'eyes stingin' from the sun.

I hastened down the steps and raced across a wide field tae the woods — twas a long way, my breaths staggerin', m'heart pounding in m'chest. With every thud of m'feet pain shot up my shoulder, causin' me tae gasp for air. Noise roared in my ears.

I made it tae the woods and kept running until I felt certain nae one could find me while I rested and figured out how tae work the vessel.

I dropped tae my knees behind a boulder but in the descent knocked m'breath from my lungs with the pain.

Och nae. I collapsed tae my side and blew out puffs of air gripping my elbow tryin' tae keep the pain from draggin' me away from the conscious livin' world, but that was the last thing I remembered for a long time.

When I woke m'shoulder was throbbin' with pain, but I had been injured before. It took a few moments for it all tae calm enough tae pull the vessel from the wrappings

on m'chest.

I laid it beside me on the boulder and then tried tae calm m'self, the pain was unbearable.

My breaths were bullish — och, how my shoulder ached.

I had tae pray and override it, but more concernin' was that I was verra hungry.

The ache of it causin' my middle tae scream louder than my shoulder... almost.

I mopped at my brow and relieved m'self and then sat on the boulder tae use one hand tae sheath m'dirk at m'right hip and sheathed m'broadsword on my left. I removed m'belongings from the pale white bag, coins, a few jewels, and a piece of bread wrapped in a cloth and ate it hungrily.

I pulled the cork from my small ceramic jar and guzzled down the last of the cider.

“Och nae, I am still thirsty.” I capped it once more.

When I arrived back in Scotland, I would need tae solve m'thirst problem first, then m'hunger.

I placed everythin' I owned in m'sporran and attached it tae m'belt.

I managed tae get the silver brooch fastened tae pin m'cloak at m'shoulders.

I was goin' tae toss the bag away, but it looked useful and rare so I rolled it verra small and put it in m'sporran as well.

Then I looked down upon the vessel. I had only seen it from afar, until yesterday, and

I hadna had a chance tae really look it over. I needed tae get from here. Twas bright and unsettling, but the trouble was I dinna ken how tae work the vessel.

There were grooves and markings, some numbers, and though I was in cool shade I had tae squint tae make them out — my eyes still burned by the brightness of light filtering through the leaves of the trees overhead. But it dinna matter, I had nae idea what their meaning was.

I thought... I wouldna be able tae figure this out, but likely it dinna matter much. If the vessel had dragged me here, then it ought tae drag me back, twas only fair.

I held it in m'good hand and raised it tae my eyes. "Go on, lad, do yer magic."

I closed my eyes tight waiting for it tae turn on. I opened my eyes, "Tis time, do what ye need tae do — let us go, wee friend."

Naething.

I huffed. "I ken ye can do it, ye hae done it afore. Just yesterday, ye ripped me away and injured m'shoulder, look what ye hae done tae me. Let us do it again. Now."

I looked around at the woods and considered. Twas a verra sheltered spot, I had been in a field, runnin', when I had been lifted.

I wasna interested in returnin' tae the building I had left, so I headed the other way, picking a path toward a break in the trees, comin' upon a creek.

I knelt beside it and drank from m'hand then filled the jar, and replaced the cork.

Twas nae easy with one hand. Then I straightened, holdin' the vessel once more.

“Alright vessel, do yer best. Ye can see the sky above us. Tis day. Dost ye need darkness? Or...” I looked all around.

“I was runnin’ last time — daena ken how it happened, but I will try.

” I clutched the vessel in m’fist, with all m’belongings banging against m’body, I began joggin’ down the bank of the creek, leaping from rock tae rock, concentratin’ tae keep on m’feet.

Then I drew tae a halt and addressed the vessel again, “The jostlin’ is injurin’ my shoulder anew, and for what purpose? Ye winna do yer part! And I look like an arse if someone comes upon me! They would see a grown man, an accomplished warrior, beggin’ a rock tae carry him off.”

I huffed.

And dropped m’arm, bangin’ the vessel on m’thigh. I felt it move, it seemed tae twist and grab ahold of m’hand. It felt as if twould rip m’limb from my body. A storm rose around me and I was torn asunder.

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LEXI

I was enjoying the bright sunshine of a spring morning by pouring clothes into the washing machine to do a load of washing, when a chill crossed over the room.

The light dimmed. My eyes drew to the window.

Weird. A dark storm cloud had drawn over the sun and the wind had risen, whipping the trees outside once again — as if from nowhere.

What was going on with this weather?

Dude walked into the kitchen, trilling his head off.

Likely the porch door was open, I needed to batten down the house. I peered out again and then dumped detergent into the machine, cranked the dial and pushed go. I stalked over to the door as the screen door smacked against the house again.

I needed to remember to latch it with so many storms, but I liked to leave it because Dude could come and go as he pleased. I grasped the screen door to close it again and my eyes caught a sight — a body, lying in the field again.

I froze, oh no, oh no, that was not... no.

I slammed the door closed, locked it, and then rushed to the window, kneeling on the couch, peering out. The storm seemed to be dissipating but it was unmistakable — there was that man, the same man, Torin, wearing the same clothes, lying in the same

place in my back lawn.

Not even a different part of my lawn, the exact same place.

He sat up.

I shrieked and locked the window, yanked the curtains closed, and backed away.

He had been facing away, so he didn't know I was here, but what if he came to the house?

I rushed around, closing all the curtains on the ground floor and checking the doors were locked. Then I rushed up the stairs two at a time for Cooper's gun in the bedside table.

I pulled it from the drawer and then went to the guest room to look out the upper window.

He was sitting up with his head in his hand.

Then he was moving his shoulder, gingerly, carefully, and from his body movements he looked to be in a great deal of pain. What the hell was he doing here?

I watched him for a few moments. He wasn't in a hurry. He just sat out there as the sky cleared, as if the storm had never happened. He shook his head and looked dazed.

Though he was big and armed he looked kind of lost and helpless.

Cooper's voice played in my head: You are such a pushover, Lexi.

Oh yeah? Well, he's not asking for my help, if I'm offering then that's fine...

Then I added out loud, “I will carry the gun though, I’m not crazy.”

I walked down the stairs to the main floor.

Little crazy, not calling the cops... why you not calling the cops, Lexi?

My only explanation was that it felt like that would cause trouble for Torin and that was likely the dumbest reason in the world to not call the cops on a trespasser.

When I crossed the porch he turned to look.

I said, loudly, “I’m armed!”

“Och aye, ye ken, Mistress, tis tae be expected.” He started to stand up.

“Don’t get up! I’m armed, Torin, you stay down!” I crossed the lawn with the gun pointed at him, my hands shaking. I got within about fifteen feet and said, “Why the hell are you on my land again?”

“Mistress... och I hae forgotten yer name, Mistress—” He was squinting and his expression looked like he was in a great deal of pain.

“Lexi.”

“Mistress Lexi, I daena ken why I am on yer land again, tis an unfortunate mistake for which I am deeply distressed.”

“What does any of that mean? Where is your car, how did you get here? Did you walk from the hospital? Did you sleep out here last night?”

He rubbed his temple. “Och nae, if I understand yer meanin’ ... nae, none of that.”

He was wearing the fur-trimmed cloak that now in the light I could see was dark blue wool, the grey fur was thick and wild looking, over his pale yellow linen shirt.

He had embroidered green knot-patterns at his cuffs and down the front of his shirt, and he was wearing a blue, green, and red tartan kilt.

A hot and sexy kilt. In his position, I could see his knees.

At his shoulder was a round silver brooch, engraved with more Celtic knots and in the center there was a small, raised stag.

Finally, notably, he was armed with a knife and a sword that each had leather wrapped hilts and jewels on the handle. He seemed rich, but in a very older version of rich.

And he had that weird metal object leaning against his thigh.

I gestured with the gun. “What is that thing?”

“I honestly canna tell ye, Mistress Lexi, tis called a vessel. Tis the only one in the world and I daena ken how tae explain what it does — dost ye hae any food and drink? I am desperately hungry.”

I said, “You must think I’m crazy, Torin, if you think I’m inviting you into my house and offering you food and drink.”

“I am nae a scoundrel. I am a gentleman of honor. I find m’self on foreign lands and I am desperately hungry.

I need a bite tae eat so I can think through m’predicament.

Send yer guard tae surround me. I will remain outside yer walls, away from yer private chambers.

” He raised his hand and wiped the sweat from his brow.

I narrowed my eyes.

Then I lowered the gun. “If you promise not to move I will go inside and get you a drink and some food, but if you try to follow me, Torin, I will shoot first and ask questions later.”

He nodded. “Aye, Mistress Lexi. Though if I could remove the cloak, tis swelterin’.”

I said, “Okay, fine.”

He winced as he undid the fine silver stag brooch with one hand and let his cloak fall to the ground. He deposited the brooch into the round leather bag on the front of his belt.

“What kind of fur is that?”

“Tis wolf fur.”

“Oh, interesting, I never saw wolf fur up close before — do you want a soda and a sandwich, do you like mayonnaise or mustard?”

His brow drew down. He looked like he didn’t understand the choices, then he answered, again, “Aye, Mistress Lexi.”

I turned and stalked back to the house, thinking to myself, What the hell is wrong with me? Now I have a big hulking, strange, homeless trespasser on my property, and

I just offered to make him a sandwich.

I locked the door behind me, went through to the kitchen, and looked out the window. Torin was sitting in the same spot, rubbing his shoulder.

I got a bottle of Tylenol from the pantry and poured a couple of pills out onto a plate.

Then I built him a ham and cheddar sandwich with lettuce and both mayo and mustard.

Then I got a bottle of Diet Coke from the fridge.

I put it all on a tray and the gun beside the plate, doing this weird calculation as I carried the food out: If things went south, as they say, I'd have to put down the tray to grab the gun.

That wouldn't be easy. But also, if things were fine, I would still have to deposit the tray and get the gun at the same time.

I couldn't let Torin get my gun.

He was huge.

He was also already armed.

A rivulet of sweat rolled down my face.

This all sucked.

On my way across the lawn, I yelled, "Don't move, Torin, I mean it!"

“Dost ye need my assistance, Mistress Lexi?”

“Nope, I don’t want any help!” The coke bottle tipped over just then, making it seem like I was lying.

I yelled, “I’m still armed by the way!”

He nodded. “Tis a good thing.”

I placed the tray down on the grass about six feet from him, grabbed the gun, and jogged a safe distance away. I turned around with my gun pointing at him. I blew the hair off my forehead.

He didn’t move.

I said, “There, you can eat.”

He knee-walked to the tray and then sat on his heels and looked down on my offerings. “Och, this is verra good, Mistress Lexi, I thank ye.”

He continued tae look at it, blinking.

I said, “The pills are Tylenol for the pain. I assume you didn’t get any from the hospital?”

He looked around and under the rim of the plate then picked up the two pills. “Tis this?”

“Yes, those pills, Tylenol, for pain.”

He nodded looking down on them in his palm, kneeling in front of the tray.

I said, helpfully, “You can use the Diet Coke to wash them down.”

He cocked his head.

“Have you never tasted Diet Coke before?”

He put his finger on the lid of the Coke. “Tis similar tae a cider?”

“Kinda, maybe?”

He picked it up and looked it over. “There is a cork?”

I pantomimed unscrewing the lid. “Unscrew the top.” Then I realized it would probably be hard to do it with one uninjured arm.

He put the pills in his mouth and chewed.

I grimaced. “It would be better to just swallow those, they taste terrible .”

He grimaced. “Och, tis disgusting.” He put his tongue out with an ick sound, then put the bottle between his knees, clamped his hand on the top, and twisted.

He looked the lid over, then placed it down carefully on the tray, and lifted the bottle to his lips. He swigged and then spit-sprayed Diet Coke while trying to put the bottle down. He choked and coughed with tears welling up?—

“Are you okay?”

The bottle tipped, pouring all over the grass, making a puddle that quickly rolled down to his kilt and leg.

He tried to get away from the puddle, but used his injured shoulder — he winced as his arm crumpled and he spasmed to hold it, moaning, “Och nae, twas...” He spit trying to get it out of his mouth. “Och nae, that is not...”

“You don’t like Diet Coke?”

He frowned, saying, “Nae, tis verra good, I thank ye.” He grimaced and tried to cover it with a fake smile.

“Will you stay there and eat your sandwich? I will go get you water, does that sound good?”

He nodded. And swallowed, then spit again, his face looking positively green.

I jogged up the lawn to my porch and returned to the kitchen. I got a large water bottle from the fridge and because I felt guilty for having given him a drink that somehow — how was it possible he never tasted a Diet Coke before? — I got a little bag of chocolate chip cookies for him.

I returned to the door, went out, and got all the way down the lawn to about seven feet away before I realized I had left the gun up on the kitchen counter. Dumb ass.

But at least now I had my hands free to open the lid of the water bottle so I wouldn’t have to explain that part, again — why in the world did I need to explain how to open a soda bottle? And wouldn’t that suck on my gravestone:

Here lies Lexi, she didn’t have a gun but at least her hands were free.

I passed him the opened water bottle and he guzzled a quarter of it.

Then he held the bottle up and admired it in the light.

He poured a bit on his head and brushed his fingers through his shoulder-length hair, pushing it back from his face.

He drank a bit more then put the bottle between his knees, picked up half the sandwich and took a bite.

He closed his eyes, a smile spreading across his face as he chewed.

I asked, “I made it right?”

“This is the best thing that has happened tae me in days.” He took another big bite.

“Aw, that’s a nice thing to say, for that you get a cookie.

” I placed the cookies down on the tray.

He took another bite of sandwich, finishing off the half and picking up the other half, and a moment later he was done with the whole sandwich, brushing off his fingers.

His eyes settled on the cookie bag. “What is it?”

“You have to open it.”

He picked up the bag, turned it over, dropped it onto the tray, yanked a knife from his belt. He held the bag still with two fingers of his injured arm, and started to stab it?—

I interrupted, “Let me help.”

I crouched beside him and ripped the bag open.

We were very close.

He raised his brow. “What kind of weapon was it ye carried, Mistress Lexi? Ye daena hae it on ye anymore?”

“Oh, what? Oh.” I scrambled up and away. “What are you... is that a threat?”

“Nae—”

“Because it’s a gun, Torin, a very good, dangerous gun. And I practice with it all the time. I’m a really good shot.”

“Och, I dinna mean tae frighten ye, Mistress Lexi, I just wondered about it and now ye are unarmed. Ye ought tae carry it with?—”

“I left it up at the...” I took a step back and another and another, then turned and ran to the house.

My heart raced.

I slammed and locked the door and picked up the gun and stood, breathing heavily, watching him through the window.

He hadn’t followed, he was just staring up at the house, his head cocked, inquisitively. Not at all menacingly.

I built up my nerve.

Finally I went back out onto the porch and yelled down the lawn, “Why are you here, Torin, what do you want? I’ll have you know, I called the police!”

He stood up. “Mistress Lexi, my most earnest apologies tae ye, I mean ye nae harm! Ye hae fed me this fine meal and when ye came out I admired yer courage and

wanted tae ken more about yer weapon. When ye dinna hae it, I wondered why... I traveled here by accident, now twice. I canna explain it, but I will be on my way, I winna bother ye anymore.”

I said, “Good, leave!”

I stood watching him.

He leaned over, picked up that strange metal object, and stuffed it into that round bag.

I waited, then yelled, “What are you doing? I said it was time to go!”

He said, “I am tryin’ tae, Mistress Lexi.” With another wince he pulled the cloak up and draped it over his arm and then lumbered up and glanced at the food, but looked like he was going to walk away from it.

I yelled, “Take the water, if you want the cookies you can have them. They’re open now, anyway.”

I saw him mumble, “Aye, Mistress Lexi,” though I couldn’t actually hear it.

He picked up the bottle, screwed the lid back on it, shoved it in his belt, picked up the bag of cookies, and placed them carefully in his bag.

He began walking and as he passed he bowed. “Thank ye, Mistress Lexi, my apologies for taking yer time.”

With his head high, he left my property.

Dude opened the screen door to come out and meowed and rubbed against my calves. I said, “The handsome yet weird, hot guy in the kilt is finally gone, Dude, we got rid

of him.”

I realized I was still holding my pistol, so I carried it back up and took in the wider view from the window at the top of the stairs. I could see him way down the road, trudging south.

I felt relief — he was headed out of town. The next town over was Rosman. There would be a store and a bus, he would be fine.

I put the pistol back in Coop’s drawer and returned downstairs to finish what I had been doing. Laundry?

Yeah, washing clothes.

Normally I might have clicked on the TV, but my nerves were jangled, so I kept watching the windows, trying to figure out what was going on.

It took hours to calm down.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am

LEXI

The next day I called Jen after a bit of puttering around. “Want to come to dinner tonight?”

She said, “I can’t, I got a date.”

“With the guy from the art gallery?”

“Yep, but... I already know it’s not going to work out, so once I ditch him I’ll come over.”

“You already know?”

“Yep, I’m wondering... was his voice too high?”

“Ugh, Jen, you said you liked him. You said he was funny. You always find issues and you haven’t even given him a chance.”

“But I don’t know, Lexi, his voice ! I thought it wouldn’t bother me, but listening to that guy at the hospital with that deep Scottish accent — oh my .”

“Yeah it was really good, it resonated, when he said, ‘My deepest apologies?—’”

“When did he say that?”

“Um... yesterday, he was here for?—”

“He was there? Why was the guy in a kilt there?”

“I have no idea, there was a...” I meant to say storm, but it wasn’t possible that there was a connection. Guy in yard plus storm? It would be ridiculous to mention it.

But what other way to explain what happened? The whole thing sounded insane with or without the part about the storm.

So instead I finished with, “...and he was in my yard again.”

“Why didn’t you call me? I was bored last night, I would have stayed over!”

“It’s fine, he’s gone.”

“Did you call the police? Oh my god, Lexi, you called the police, right?”

“No, I didn’t. Honestly, Jen, I think he just ended up here again accidentally , by mistake, somehow, and he left when I told him to. He didn’t come back. I have a gun. He knows I have a gun. He doesn’t seem to want to cause me any harm.”

She exhaled irritably.

I said, “And I was so tired last night I fell right to sleep.”

“Fine, okay, but you’re not sleeping there alone again, after I ditch Mr High-Pitch, I’m coming to spend the night tonight.”

“You need to give that guy a chance, you were happy when you met him. Be cool. It’s been forever since you dated someone good.”

She wailed, “I know, because there are no good men anymore.”

I sighed. “Your standards are really way too high.”

“Maybe I should date your stalker.”

“That is a terrible idea. Besides, he’s not around here anymore. He’s gone. Don’t have terrible ideas, date the nice guy you met at the gallery.”

“But I don’t want to!” She laughed. “Okay fine, I will go out, I will be nice. I’m the nicest person in the world?—”

“Totally overly opinionated about yourself, you’re like the third nicest at most.”

“Well, either way, whether I adore him or ditch him, I’ll come stay the night. I have a duty to keep you safe.”

“You know how to protect us?”

“Nope, but as you know I’m kinda a bitch?—”

I said, “One second ago you were the nicest person in the world!”

“Third nicest. And I don’t know how to protect you, but as we all can see, I’m totally necessary. I need to be there to call 911, because you, bestie, have no idea how to, apparently.”

I said, “See you tonight.”

LEXI

I was washing dishes from an early dinner. Dude was sitting beside me on the counter. “You know, you’re getting very insolent. Cooper hates cat butt on the kitchen counters; it’s bad enough you’re walking around here, but sitting...?”

Dude gave me an insolent look.

“Fine, I guess since he’s out of town, it’s fine. But no getting in the butter. I can see you eyeing it, you’re waiting for me to leave the room.”

Dude meowed, staring at the butter dish.

I put the lid back on it.

“No touching it. No pushing the top off. No eating butter.”

He stood up and batted my arm.

“I know, I love you too. You’re the best boy in the world.” He stared at me, that — I’m a good boy and slowly starving to death and you know you love me — look. I caved. Lid off, spoon in. I held it for him to lick.

I said, “I know I know, Dude, I am such a push-over, Cooper would agree if he was here.”

It was dusk, the light was dimming. Near the trees I thought I saw the first lightning

bug of the season.

I smiled, peering out, thinking about how my mom would have said, “The first one, that’s good luck!”

But then I realized the wind was whipping up, spiraling around the ground. Dust rose from the ground up into the air — there was a roaring sound of a gusting wind.

Another storm? Holy shit, what was happening?

I got scared.

“I need the gun.” I turned and raced up the stairs again, taking two at a time, and yanked open the drawer, pulled the gun, and barreled back down the stairs.

I burst out the door onto the porch as a brutally ferocious wind gust slammed into me and sent me falling back against the wall. Holy smokes.

There was a loud thunderclap at the same time and a giant flash of light.

With my back to the house, I put my arm up to block the spraying rain, the splashing mud, the wind blustering around the porch, whipping my hair.

My heart was racing. I shook, certain there was something paranormal about this storm — it was too big, too intense, too sudden. It lasted for about the longest eight minutes of my life before it began to wane.

Thankfully, except out in the distance on the edge of my lawn were two forms. Definitely human. Two.

My eyes were on them as I crept forward, almost dark now, the ground wet from the

brief yet torrential rain. I kept my gun ready, but for what? The two forms were unconscious.

I got about twenty feet away and one of the bodies moved.

I froze.

The other body moved its arm.

It was now too dark to fully make them out, but one did resemble Torin — he was here again, in my freaking yard. And now he had brought a friend.

I was so shocked I didn't know what to do.

I was frozen, staring, as the other man slowly dragged a big sword close.

He was dressed like Torin in that same kind of medieval costume.

They both had on pale yellow, linen shirts, and both were wearing kilts with tartan print fabric that gathered over one of their shoulders.

But in contrast Torin's clothes made him look fancy and rich.

He wore that blue cloak with the wolf fur trim fastened with that silver brooch, and with the green embroidered details on his cuffs and down the front of his shirt.

His clothes were far more elaborate than the other man's.

Was he Torin's friend? Did they come to fight me, were they going to kill me?

But then Torin lumbered to his feet, dragging up his sword. He bellowed, "Drop yer

sword!”

The other man stood with a groan. “Nae, ye drop yer sword.” They sounded murderous towards each other.

Torin staggered, holding his sword up. Both looked dangerous, but exhausted, dazed, and weak. Torin looked like he was in real pain.

The two men stumbled at each other swinging. Their swords clanged together, a clang so loud it hurt my eardrums. I shrieked.

They both turned as if noticing me for the first time.

The other man started stalking toward me, his sword swung back as if he planned to strike me down. I froze. I don’t know why, but I did.

But then Torin barreled toward him with his shoulder down, plowing into his side, knocking him stumbling off balance.

Torin recovered his feet and moved in front of me. “Stay behind me!”

I did, I got right behind him. I thought about trying to help — I could shoot the guy.

The man had a sword on my land, I had the right to kill him, but that was easier said than done.

Ultimately, I didn’t really know how to kill someone with this gun.

Despite carrying it around as if it was my protection, I had never shot it before.

I backed up, as the two men swung their swords again and again, clang clang, carving

at each other, trying to kill each other, and then Torin was caught off balance. He stumbled.

The guy he was fighting raised his sword to swing it down?—

Torin yelled over his shoulder, “Run!”

I turned and bolted toward the house.

Torin was going to die.

The man was going to kill him — oh my god, they were battling to the death on my lawn.

I hit the porch at top speed, raced in the door, yanked the screen door around after me — clang!

Clash! — and tried to get the latch in the eye hook.

My hands shook too much, I could not get it to lock. And this was not enough protection.

I slammed and locked the front door and rushed to the window to see Torin shove the other man, then charge him, swinging his sword.

His opponent had been sliced, blood soaked his shirt.

He stayed on his feet, but lost ground, backing away, stumbling, then finally, he turned and ran.

Torin chased him, up the lawn, down the driveway and out to the main road.

I pressed my face to the window, watching as Torin drew to a stop at the end of my gravel driveway.

He doubled over, his sword fell to the ground, he clutched his arm as if he were in great pain, his knees buckled and he crumpled to the ground.

Carrying my gun, I unlatched the door and rushed back out. “Torin, are you okay?!”

His breaths were bullish. “Och nae, Mistress Lexi, tis verra sore.”

I crouched beside him. “Did you get cut? Are you bleeding?”

He was on his side on the gravel, a rock poking into his forehead, his words clipped between his short breaths. “Nae.. tis m’shoulder... only... twill pass.”

I looked down the road, I couldn’t see the other man. “Do you think the other man is injured?”

“Aye, gravely. I hae slain him, but it might take some time afore he falls.”

“Great. That sounds like trouble.”

He moaned, his face was a grimace.

“Do you need medicine? How long has it been since your last?”

“It has been days since m’last, and a verra long time since m’last meal and drink.”

“Oh no. Let’s see. I gave you painkillers and a sandwich yesterday,” I counted on my fingers, “That’s been a full day, you must be feeling it, and you must be famished if you haven’t eaten anything else... Okay, let me think of what to do.” I glanced all

around taking stock.

There had been a sword fight, this stranger had returned, somehow, there was now a man bleeding, possibly to death, running down the main road.

Cheese Louise, this was likely to be a big issue, could I harbor a murderer and make him another sandwich?

“I just... I can’t take you inside, Torin, it just doesn’t seem safe...”

I have the back house, my uncle was living there, he named it the back-shack.

It’s closed up, let me go get the key...

” I pointed. “Do you see it, down there? Can you make it there?”

He sat up gingerly holding his arm. “Aye, I can get there, Mistress Lexi.”

“Meet me there, I’m going to get the key, hold on.”

I rushed to the house, thinking, Did Torin just kill that man?

I was insane to give a murderer food. Likely certifiably insane. But then again that man had charged at me. He had wanted to kill me. Torin had saved my life.

I banged through the screen door entrance, stalked down the hall to the kitchen, and grabbed the key to the back-shack from the hook near the door.

I grabbed the Tylenol, a bottle of water.

I wasn’t sure if there would be ice in the freezer down there, I decided if he needed

food I could get that later. I didn't need to be... too nice.

He had just likely killed someone. With a sword.

Of course I had thought about killing that guy with the gun. But I didn't actually do it. I wasn't crazy, I thought to myself as I returned to unlock the door for him to rest in my back house.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am

LEXI

Down in the back quarter, I saw him slowly using the rail to heave himself up the three steps to the front stoop of the one story building.

My uncle had lived there before he got married and moved for a job in Texas last year.

It was fairly clean, last I checked, but completely shut down and dark.

And now that I thought about it, I hadn't checked it in about six weeks.

I jogged down the grassy lawn while Torin was looking all around at the porch, and tapping on the glass of the window.

But then he turned to the sky. I followed his eyes, looking to the south, where a giant storm was rising into the air.

That man had been heading that direction.

Torin said, "Och, he is leavin'."

"Really? How?"

"Tis the storm."

"Oh."

Torin exhaled, “It answers a question Max and I hae had though — are there more vessels? Now I ken there are more.”

He shook his head. “And this is terrible news.”

I unlocked the front door, walking into the dusty room; it smelled of must, and disuse. I flicked on the overhead light. He groaned and put an arm up to block his eyes.

It was a large living room with a very small kitchen to the side, a bathroom past that, sharing a wall, and then a bed in the corner, with a wall but no door separating it from the main room. I crossed to the end table, turned on a lamp, and then turned off the overhead light. He visibly relaxed.

“Go ahead and sit down, rest a bit.”

He bowed. “Thank ye, Mistress Lexi.”

He went and sat down on the couch, his big broad shoulders and splayed, bare knees, making it so that he took up most of it.

He dropped his heavy sword on the floor beside the couch.

With his one good hand and a pained expression, he unclasped the brooch and shoved his cloak off his shoulders. He said, “Och nae.”

“What?”

“I hae lost the sack I took from the hospital, twas carryin’ the bottle ye gave me, twas precious.”

“That’s fine, it’s not that precious, I’ll give you another.” I put the gun down on the

counter, then poured a couple of Tylenol out on my hand and crossed the room to pass him two. My hand trembled from fear. I felt overwrought by what I had just seen.

I passed him the water.

He put the pills on his tongue and expertly unscrewed the cap on the water and drank a large gulp. He grimaced, then sighed. “Och, I needed it.”

“I am not alone, at the house, I mean. I am for a moment, but my friend is coming.”

His arms were on his knees, his head hanging. It was apparent he was exhausted and in a great deal of pain. “I winna cause ye any harm, Mistress Lexi, I am nae a danger tae ye.”

“Good. That’s good to know, though I don’t exactly trust you.”

He raised his eyes. “Tis wise of ye, but I winna cause difficulties.”

I nodded, and then feeling bad I went and looked in the cupboards. The first thing I saw was a box with brown sugar cinnamon Pop-Tarts. I looked inside: a foil pack of two was left. Brilliant!

I opened the top, peeled down the back, and placed it in front of Torin.

His head still hanging wearily he picked up a Pop-Tart, broke it in half and practically ate it in two bites, then he hungrily took the second and ate it almost as fast. He grimaced as if it was the most disgusting thing he had ever tasted, then he guzzled the last of his water.

“You like Pop-Tarts?”

He frowned. “Tis verra um...” He smacked his tongue, distastefully. “I am verra grateful for it, thank you.”

I chuckled, then remembered that I was upset. “I need an explanation.”

“Twill be longer than I can bear, Mistress Lexi, I am verra weakened.”

I folded my arms. “Give me the short version.”

He leaned back on his cloak, spread across the pillows of the couch. “I am here by chance and although I hae tried tae leave, I keep returnin’... I daena understand it but I keep endin’ up here.”

“Like going in circles?”

“Aye, tis like that.”

“Who was that man and do you really think he is gone now?”

His brow was furrowed. “After I last saw ye, I ended up in the place I had left, and that man was waitin’, he attempted tae steal my vessel — I had tae battle him, but in the middle of it, mid swing, Mistress Lexi, I was drawn here once more.

Och nae, as I was dragged away I caught a glimpse of Max, runnin’ intae the clearin’.

He yelled, ‘Torin, wait!’ But I couldna, the vessel had me in its grip.

And that man held on tae m’arm as I felt m’self bein’ dragged through time. ”

“Where did the man go?” I dropped into the chair across from him.

“I daena ken, wherever he has gone he will likely die. He deserved it though, he tried tae take what was mine. If he had gotten it, I would hae been lost forever.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So we don’t need to go find him? We don’t need to call an ambulance?”

“Nae, why? He was a detestable, vile fiend, and he has left, we saw the storm. We ought not worry on him, I hae done the world a service in slayin’ him.”

I nodded, though none of that made me feel more comfortable at all.

“I just don’t understand...” I shook my head. “Like, I don’t even know where to begin the questions. How do you keep ending up here? You say it’s a vessel but it’s the size of a can, what are you talking about?”

He shrugged. “I daena ken any of the answers, Mistress Lexi, tis not my vessel, it belongs tae Max. I was helpin’ him procure it — we hae been trying tae locate it for a long time, then somehow I am the one who has it in m’possession, nae Max.

.. I am takin’ journeys upon it without knowin’ how tae steer. ”

“Max is your friend?”

“And m’laird.”

I chewed my lip. “And you’re from Scotland, somehow this ‘vessel’ carries you from Scotland to here — that... it doesn’t make sense, that’s impossible. It’s not an airplane, I can see that. You didn’t fly here.”

He scoffed.

“What?”

“Man canna fly, Mistress Lexi, tis impossible.”

My eyes went wide. I leaned back in the chair. “You’re from Scotland and I guarantee they have an airport.”

He looked confused.

“Wait, Torin — okay, I’m going to ask you something crazy, don’t think I’m weird or whatever... What year are you from?”

“The Year of our Lord, one thousand five hundred fifty-eight.”

“That’s impossible, Torin, man cannot time travel.”

“What year is this, Mistress Lexi?”

“You don’t know what year it is?”

“Nae, it looks far different from the time I am used tae.”

“Two thousand and four.”

“Och nae, the Year of our Lord, two thousand and four?” He looked around the room.

“Tis a verra different time.”

We sat quietly for a moment, while his attention was caught by the lamp on the table beside him. He ducked his head to look under the shade, then shook his head, as if removing the thought of it. He asked, “Ye canna time travel, tis not usual?”

“While there are stories, lots of lore and rumors, and many books and movies exploring the principle of it — no, it doesn’t happen. It’s impossible.”

His brow drew down even more. “I dinna understand, yer words are incomprehensible.”

I scoffed. “This is unbelievable. I don’t trust a thing you say?—”

“This is as true as the blood upon m’sword and the bruise on m’shoulder, ye ken, ye hae seen what happened — I attest, I am tellin’ the truth.”

“I don’t even know you?—”

“I assure ye, I am trustworthy. I swore tae protect m’laird, Max, and I hae never left his... side.”

I raised my brow. “You’re not there now.”

He nodded sadly, looking down at his hands. “Aye... we were bein’ chased. I had one thought, tae get him free from the harm, or lay down m’life tryin’, but then I was drawn away. I would never hae left him of m’own will.”

“...well, you don’t seem like someone who is purposely trying to bullshit me?—”

His head raised, one of his brows went up. “Bull shite?”

“Yes, to fool me, to lie.”

He chuckled. “Nae, I am nae full of shite.”

I continued, “But here’s the problem, Torin, time travel doesn’t exist. It’s

unbelievable. Whereas you say that human flight is unbelievable?—”

“Tis. Ye say men in this time hae wings and take tae the skies like a bird?” He scoffed. “I hae seen men since I arrived and not one had grown wings.”

“Men don’t have wings, that’s not what I mean. Airplanes have been invented. We figured out how to fly in a machine. We went to the moon.”

He screwed up his face, and shook his head slowly. “Och nae, Mistress Lexi, I daena believe ye. Ye are the one who daena seem trustworthy!”

“Well, I haven’t sworn to lay down my life, but I am honest, and I do have close friends who will vouch for me.

And they will attest to the fact that human flight does exist.” I checked my watch.

“Speaking of... my friend, Jen, you met her at the hospital, is about to come over... Do you have anywhere to go? I mean, you probably shouldn’t stay here... I don’t think.” I looked all around.

He chuckled tiredly, “I could attempt tae leave again, but tis likely I will simply return and each time is takin’ a toll on me. M’soul is threadbare. I need tae rest afore I attempt it.” He smacked his hands on his knees. “But I can sleep in the woods, I hae done it many a’night.”

I chewed my lip, trying to decide. This was pretty far away from my house. If I locked up it would be fine, probably...

I had the gun.

I asked, “What about the man you were fighting, will he return to fight you?”

“I will be honest with ye, Mistress Lexi, I daena ken. I had nae idea there was another vessel — it complicates everything.”

“So having you here could be dangerous for me?”

“It could be, aye. I am concerned about yer safety. But if ye allow me tae stay and rest I will make a good guard, if he does return I will keep him from ye, I promise.”

I still wasn't convinced. “You say it involves the storms, so I suppose if one of those storms happens I can just lock up, call the police, that kind of thing...?”

He asked, “What dost ye mean, ‘call the police’?”

“I use my phone to call the men who arrest the bad guys.”

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“Och, good, ye hae a guard, I dinna discern it as I hadna seen them around. Aye, ye can tell yer guards tae be watchful of the storms and they will keep the trouble from yer gates. I wondered why ye dinna hae them, I am relieved.” Then he asked, “Were the men who came tae my bedside yer guards?”

“Yes, at the hospital, those were police men. That’s who I would call.”

He smiled. “Ye see, yer guards dinna think I was a scapegrace, they let me be.”

“True, they said you had no prior criminal record, of course you are not from here. They hadn’t seen you sword fight. You carry a sword, maybe you are a... what did you call it?”

“A scapegrace...” He screwed up his face. “But ye say they are yer guard and ye said ye called them earlier and yet they never came.”

It was my turn to chuckle. “I was lying.” I added, “But I will call them, if anything goes down that frightens me.”

“Dost they live here on yer land?”

“No, they are in town.”

“How long will it take for them tae arrive?”

I lied, “They can be here really fast, within minutes.”

The corner of his mouth went up. “Och, that is slow, ye need a better guard. Ye need me tae stay and protect ye.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay, fine, you can stay here tonight.”

“Thank ye, but also, Mistress Lexi, ye need a guard who will be here when ye are in trouble instead of sauntering up after tis done. Nae wonder ye need tae carry a weapon, ye ought tae hae men here tae carry weapons for ye. Tis a good thing I am here.”

“I have a man, Cooper, he’s just out of town, and I can totally take care of myself while he’s away. Plus, the only danger is what follows you here, it’s not really fair to act like you’re going to protect me when you’re the reason for the danger.”

“Aye, tis nae fair, but I will keep ye safe and as soon as I can go I will go and draw the trouble away.”

“Good, and in the meantime, you’re still hungry, need some food? The water... is...” I got up, strolled into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. It was running but only had jugs of water inside. “There’s cold water in here.” I opened the freezer. “No ice in the trays.”

I opened the cabinet. There was a Tupperware container of cereal. It was pretty old. Some instant coffee, not helpful, and a few assorted dishes and... not much.

I turned to tell Torin I would need to go to the — but his head was back on the couch, his eyes closed.

I whispered, “Torin?”

One eye opened, he muttered, “Aye, Mistress Lexi?”

“There’s no food, really, but water, do you need anything?”

“Nae, Mistress Lexi, I will just sleep.”

“Okay, come knock on the door if you need anything, I guess.”

“I winna bother ye, I will leave in the morn.”

I nodded and left the back-shack.

I was strolling up to the house, until I remembered the sword fight, and that scary man who had wanted to kill me, just an hour ago, and I got a prickly feeling on the back of my neck. Was I alone?

I ran to the porch, crossed it fast, slammed the screen door closed, and latched it. Then I closed the door and locked it.

I rushed to the window and looked out. Torin was on the stoop of the back-shack, watching that I made it home safely. He went back inside.

I assumed the lights would turn off, but everything stayed on.

He didn’t know how to turn off the lights.

I had a time traveler in my yard.

He claimed he was from the sixteenth century. He seemed like he was from a long time ago. It seemed true.

This was the most bizarre night of my life.

In all that time I had left my phone on the counter and now that I looked I had missed three calls from Cooper.

My answering machine was blinking.

I listened to the message:

Hey Lexi, tried to call, did you forget your phone again? My meetings went great today. I think they liked the powerpoint. So hey, call me when you get this, but also headed to bed soon, so not too late.

I checked my watch. It wasn't too late. I called, wondering if this guy in my backyard was something I ought to tell him.

"Hey Lexi. Did you forget your phone again?"

"Yep, how did you guess?"

"Because you hate it, you never carry it."

"So your meetings went well"

"I think so, they seemed to like the presentation. I've got another meeting in the morning with the full team of investors."

"I'm so glad. When will you know for sure?"

"I'm hoping they'll tell me tomorrow. I thought maybe they would have told me earlier today, but realistically they'll need to meet to discuss. They might let me know later in the week by phone, but I doubt they need to wait."

“It’s fine, I’m sure they loved your presentation.”

“Yeah, but it’s a lot of money, they gotta cross the Ts and dot the Is.”

I laughed, “Exactly. And did I detect a slur, you were in the bar celebrating?”

“Yep, glad that part is over. Man, I was wound up over it, drank a lot, now I gotta sleep so I’m fresh tomorrow. It’s exciting. Blue Ridge Cabins and Adventures is happening, Lexi, I can feel it.”

“Good, me too, can’t wait.”

“Once the investments roll in I’m gonna be flush. It’s going to be grand.”

“I can’t wait to celebrate. I invited some people over, I’ll have dinner waiting for you, we’re going to have champagne to celebrate your first check.”

“Getting ahead of ourselves, might take a few weeks before the first check.”

“Well, fine, but I’m still popping the champagne. I’ll let you go so you can get some rest, Coop, love you.”

“Love you too, Lexi, see ya tomorrow night.”

We hung up and I went to watch some TV in the living room. The Bachelor was on, but it was a repeat, so I kind of paced the house, checking the back-shack through the window — the lights remained on.

About ten pm, I called Jen. “So what’s happening? Did you ditch Mr Passable?”

She answered, cryptically, “Oh, how are you, is everything okay?”

I said, “Is he right there? Do you need an excuse, because Dude is missing if you do. I need you to come help me find him. If not, I just wanted you to know that Dude says hi.”

She said, “Tell Dude I said hi, also how did Cooper’s meeting go, did he call you?”

“Went great, think he’s going to get the investors.”

“Great, okay, I’ll talk to you later.”

We hung up. Apparently the date was going well and she didn’t plan to ditch him.

My eyes drew back down to the back-shack, fully lit, and wondered if I ought to be nice and go down there and turn off the lights.

Then I wondered if I had lost my mind.

There was a sword-wielding mean guy around, and a nicer one sleeping inside the back-shack. I was just going to saunter around in the dark? He was right, I did not have good enough guards.

Just going down to the back-shack in the middle of the night to ‘check’ on him?

It was a ridiculous idea.

But then again... it wasn’t the middle of the night.

I heard a soft jostle of my screen door and my heart dropped — but then Dude meowed. He sounded pissed that I had locked him out.

I let him in. “Sorry, Dude.”

He brushed past me and headed straight for his food bowl.

As I closed back up I looked up at the sky. Would there be another storm? I hoped not, this was all plenty of excitement for one night.

I checked the back-shack again. Light still on, door still open.

I returned to the study, feeling kind of bored.

I had three different half-finished projects — a stained-glass window of a field of purple flowers that was near finished; a cross stitch of a family tree —the trunk was done but I needed to add the family names on the branches; or the Heritage scrapbook I had started two years ago, a few months after I lost my parents.

I sighed. A lot of my hobbies were so damn sentimental. The last thing I needed to do right now was be melancholy. I had real things to worry about.

Like the dangerous, hot guy in my back-shack.

So I turned on the TV and just did that.

LEXI

A car pulled into my driveway, tires crunching the gravel.

I ran to the window to look out. I quickly thought both: Oh good, Jen is here, and also, uh oh, Jen is here.

I grabbed the gun and opened the door, looking right and left.

She got out of the car and froze with her hand on the door. “What’s going on, Lexi? You look spooked.”

I waved her over. “I am spooked. Come inside. I need to tell you about it.”

I glanced down at the back-shack.

Her eyes followed mine and went wide. “Did someone break into the back house? Is someone here?”

“No, it’s a guest — just come inside. That’s not the scary part, not really.”

I let her in and closed and locked the door behind us. “First, how was your date?”

“You’ve got a gun waving around and you’re locking doors like you’re a fugitive from the law and you want to know about my date?”

“Yes, I want to know about your date. This is nothing.” I put the gun down.

“Everything is fine.”

“My date was fine. He’s actually fantastic. I will see him again.”

“How come you’re here? You didn’t bump uglies? Weren’t feeling it?”

She laughed, “That’s so classy of you, how do you know we didn’t?”

My eyes went wide. “He’s high-pitched and fast in bed? Doesn’t sound like a fantastic guy, sounds kinda like you’re out of his league.”

She sat down on my kitchen stool with a sigh and put her handbag on the counter.

“He’s not out of my league. One thing I’ve wondered as I’ve gotten older is — where do I get off with so many highfaluting ideas about my own worth?

I’m not that great, honestly. He’s fine, he made me laugh.

He kissed me nicely at my door. And he told me he wanted to see me again.

I told him that I was expected here and so he let me off the hook.

It was all very responsible and he was reasonable.

I didn’t lie or make excuses. He didn’t get weird. ”

“Great, he sounds like a keeper. I’m going to call him Mr Passable.”

She raised her brow. “So whatchu doing, nut job?”

“Who me? Just harboring a time traveler in my back-shack.”

“Say, what?”

“So,... you know the guy from the hospital the other morning?”

She looked incredulous and sarcastic. “No recollection at all, I totally forgot about the hottie with the Scottish accent, the chiseled cheek that could cut glass, and the wide burden-carrying shoulders.” Her eyes went jokingly far away and she sighed.

Then she redirected her narrowed eyes at me. “Are you saying he’s in your back house?”

I nodded. “Remember how I told you that there had been a weird fluke storm and then he was lying out on my grass?”

“Yeah, hence the endearment I used for you earlier, ‘nutjob’. The storm is not related to it, probably.”

“But it is. Because now it’s happened again twice .

The next day, and just a little while ago, I think...

without Cooper here, the days are running together.

Both times there have been storms and he’s out on the lawn again.

Practically the same place.” I opened a bottle of wine and got two glasses from the cabinet.

“What the hell? It’s like Groundhog Day.”

“Exactly! I grabbed Cooper’s gun and went down there and he was really pitiful, in

pain and exhausted and thirsty, so I gave him water and made him a sandwich.” I poured wine in our glasses and passed her one.

She raised her brow. “You made him a sandwich! I bet you made him a sandwich. I bet you wanted to smooth some butter on it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? That is a pitiful comeback, really beneath you.”

“Yeah, I’m off my game. I had to be so attractive and fun on my date, now I’m spent.”

“He was pitiful, Jen, that’s the point.” I took a sip and then thought, I really shouldn’t drink, there’s likely danger about. I pushed the glass far away on the counter.

She said, “He is too hot to be pitiful. I suppose if he’s pitiful in front of you, you want to make him a sandwich.”

“I told him to go away and thought that was the end of it, then just a little while ago, there was another one of those storms. I tell you, Jen, I didn’t really believe that it was related or worse, supernatural?—”

She scoffed. “Come on, Lexi, that’s crazy .”

“I know, I didn’t believe it, but when that third storm happened, my heart just dropped, it was... I knew it wasn’t normal or natural. I rushed outside and there were two men lying?—”

“Two!”

“Yep, and then, as I approached, they got to their feet and started swinging swords at each other, fighting to the death on my lawn.”

“Right outside?”

“Yep, it was like something out of a movie. I can still hear the sounds of their grunts and the steel blades, clanging. It was wild and terrifying.” I gulped. “Nothing like a movie, this was really scary.”

“So you were like out there and these two guys were sword-fighting in your yard...” She fanned herself. “Like big swords? Like really big swords?”

“Yes, and this is not funny, and it’s not sexy, Jen. The other guy charged at me and Torin got between us and told me to get behind him — it was like he was protecting me?—”

“Hot.”

“Terrifying. Then Torin cut the guy, so much blood, and the guy fled.”

“So Torin won.”

“I think it was more like a draw. I didn’t know what to do — Torin needed to rest. He’s wiped out. His shoulder was already injured before the sword fight, so it made sense to let him stay in the back-shack.”

“So kinda like Dude, he’s a stray and you’ve taken him in.”

“Exactly like the cat, yeah, very perceptive. He’s just like a cat.” I rolled my eyes again.

“So, putting all the insane stuff aside, what is his explanation for why he’s been stalking you for days, while, I will remind you, Cooper is out of town?”

“That isn’t... I don’t think it can be described as stalking. He doesn’t want to be here. His explanation is that he’s stuck, he has a vessel thingy, and it keeps accidentally bringing him here.”

She screwed her face up. “To your yard? That is not a thing that happens. You can’t possibly believe it.”

“I don’t not believe it. It doesn’t make sense, but I can’t think of any other explanation. He’s landing in my yard, unconscious, and it keeps happening. He’s not there, then he is. Plus the storms.”

“So you totally believe the storms are related?”

“The storms are caused by it.”

“He’s riding storms? Like some kind of god — is he Thor?” Her eyes went wide, “His name is Torin, is he?—”

I interrupted, “Do you hear yourself?”

“Yeah, back at you. It’s wild that you can believe he’s riding storms but if I ask if he’s Thor you dismiss it as loony.”

“Thor isn’t real.”

“Tell that to the Vikings.” She raised her glass.

“Let’s get back to the matter at hand.”

“Sure, you’re telling me that Torin’s story is that he travels around on that can-sized object. That somehow he keeps appearing here by mistake. From where, Scotland?

This doesn't sound right."

I corrected, "The question isn't from where, the question is from when . I told you, he's a time traveler."

"He's a 'time traveler'." She used her fingers for air quotes. "You just say, 'He's a time traveler,' like it's a reasonable thing."

"Yep, he's from... like the 1500s, I can't remember."

Her eyes drew to the window, as she sipped from her glass, looking down at the back-shack, nodding her head.

Then she put the glass down. "I've thought this through and I have one thing to say: Hogwash."

I shrugged. "I agree, give me one other more reasonable explanation for how a weird ferocious storm, a historical-seeming man wearing a kilt, a small hand-held object, and a sword-fight all happen to appear in my yard. I'm listening. I want to know what you think."

She joked, "Do you think he sleeps in the nude? Let's go down there and tell him I'm confused and ask him to explain the whole story to me."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"So this man, you say is from the 1500s, is in your back-shack. How long is he planning to live back there?"

"Just while he rests and, I don't know, figures out how to get back to his home."

“His home in the,” she counted, “sixteenth century?”

“Ayup.”

“Well, this is wild. Kinda glad I came over, this is much more exciting than sucking face with Mr Passable. A time traveler? I just still don’t think that’s something that happens.”

“It’s happening.”

“So what is Cooper going to say, you think?”

“You’ve known him since high school, you tell me.”

“Yeah, I think he’s going to be pissed, I think he’s going to think you’ve let down your guard?—”

“I’m armed.”

“And that you’ve invited some hottie?—”

“You keep saying that, he’s hot, yeah, but I’m not really into that many muscles. I like my men more lanky, I guess.”

“Please don’t say that to Cooper, not while you’re telling him you let a kilted stranger with a big long sword into the back-love-shack while he’s away.”

“Yeah, I guess that would not be good, but I do think Cooper is plenty hot enough.”

Her eyes went to the window again and she said, “Oh, look, he’s outside.”

He had walked out onto the stoop and leaned against the wood rail. He had his fingers tucked in his belt, a sword at his hip, wide shoulders, and a broad chest. He was illuminated from behind by the light streaming from the back-shack. He looked as if he were guarding over the yard.

He was very very handsome.

Jen fanned herself. “Boy, howdy, that is a hot man, even in his weird, handmade medieval cloak. Is there anything sexier than a kilt? I mean, come on, I can almost see his knees, and knees are almost as hot as the veins on the back of his hand.”

I said, “Maybe I should go talk to him. You think he needs something?”

He left the porch, sauntered over to the trees, and disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he was adjusting his kilt.

I grimaced. “I think he just pissed in my woods.”

“Yep, this is the first time I actually believed you that he’s a time traveler.”

“I don’t think he knows how to turn off the lights either. Should we go down?”

“Yep. Let’s take the bottle of wine.”

LEXI

As we neared the back-shack, I asked, “Whatcha doing, Torin?”

He glanced over his shoulder at the light on in the house. “I had trouble sleepin’, decided tae stand guard.”

“Do you need me to show you how to turn off the lights?”

“Nae, I am well, thank ye, Mistress Lexi.” He winced as he straightened.

I passed him a glass and poured him some wine. “Do you need more of the medicine?”

“I thought tae hae some, but couldna get in the bottle.”

I went inside to find the bottle, lying on its side on the table, and brought it out. “This kind of twist cap you have to press down as you twist.” I showed him how, adding, “But now that I think about it, this would not be easy with one hand.”

I gave him two, then went inside the back-shack again and poured four pills onto the counter.

I opened a gallon of spring water and filled a glass for him, but when I came out to the stoop he had already swigged back the pills with the wine.

I said, “There are more pills on the counter, but you’re supposed to give about four

hours between.”

He nodded.

Jen had been watching all of this with a bemused expression. She said, “You’re having fun playing nurse.”

I scowled.

She said, “So, Torin, Lexi has told me an amazing story about you.”

He raised his brow. “She has, has she? Did she call me ‘amazing’? What did Mistress Lexi tell ye of me?”

He sipped the last of his wine and I filled a bit more in his glass.

“She said you’re a time traveler.”

He said, “Tis true. I hail from the land of Alba, I hae been livin’ in Castle Glume, servin’ m’laird, the Earl of Argyll, and loyal tae m’friend, Maximillian Campbell, since I was but a boy. When I left the lands on this infuriatin’ machine, the year was fifteen hundred and fifty-eight.”

“That’s the year Lexi told me.” She shook her head. “But I don’t get it, why would you both make up a story, what’s the point...?”

I ignored her and said, “Torin, do you need instructions on using the um... restroom? It dawns on me that it might be different than the one you had way back in the fifteen fifty-eight.”

“The restroom?”

“The place where you, um... relieve yourself.”

“The privy for doin’ yer necessities?”

“Yes. I realized that I didn’t give you a good tour earlier, maybe it’s different where you’re from...”

“Where I am from we use the garderobe, twas verra different from the garderobe in the... twas called a hospital?”

“Yes, right, you went into the one in the hospital — so you know how it works?”

“Och nae, tis a blur, I could barely see, the nurse had tae help me walk because I was havin’ trouble with balance. I believe I pissed upon her shoes.”

Jen and I laughed.

He added, “I daena usually suffer havin’ people tell me how tae do things. Especially when I am surrounded by bonny lasses.”

Jen laughed. “You have a lot in common with Lexi, she also doesn’t like to be told what to do.”

I grinned. “That is the truth, so how bout this, Torin, because you had just been in a battle, likely you don’t remember the brief tour I gave you. I will give you another one, a quick tour of this back-shack, without any intrusive instructions, while Jen runs up for more wine.”

Jen drained her glass. “Are you hungry too?”

I said, “Whoa, fifteen minutes in and you’re already offering to make sandwiches

too?”

She laughed, “I’m offering to get food to eat, not to make anything. Totally different.”

She left, stalking up the slope.

Torin watched her go.

I said, “I forgot about the danger, she might not want to go alone.”

“Nae, she will be fine. There is nae one here, I hae been watchful.”

I yelled at her departing back, “Lock the house while you’re in there!”

She waved her hand over her shoulder and kept walking.

I led Torin inside. “So, this is the back-shack, this is the front door, the door handle...” I entered the kitchen. “This is the refrigerator. It’s a box to keep food cold.” I opened the door and put my hand in.

He put his hand in. “Och, tis wintery inside. Is all yer food served cold? Where I live, we like tae heat our food.”

“We heat our food here too, this is to store it before we heat it. We heat the food here, on the stove, or here in the microwave. You don’t need to know anything about those, please don’t turn them on — fire hazard.”

I gestured for him to follow me to the main room and then tilted the shade on the lamp. “See this button? Push it with your thumb, the light goes off, push it again, the light comes on.” I threw the room into darkness and then light.

I glanced at him, he was wincing and I wasn't sure he had seen my instructions.

I said, "Is the light too bright because of the time travel?"

"It daena pain yer eyes?"

I shook my head.

"Tis verra loud as well." He tugged on his earlobe.

"Then it must be because of the electric lights and...who knows about the volume."

"Tis more likely that God daena want me tae be on the other side of time, tis against his will, and I am cursed tae suffer for it." Then he smiled, "But I ought not complain in front of the bonny lass, continue showin' me yer wee cottage."

I gestured toward the bathroom. "And then this is the... privy." I said, "You'll stand here and...

you know. Or sit on it like a throne." I took a deep breath but still heat rushed up my cheeks as I stood in front of this huge hulk of a man, a handsome man, and said, "This is the toilet paper, you tear off some squares and use it to um... wipe your... you know."

I pantomimed wiping my ass and his eyes went wide. He chuckled. "Och nae, Mistress Lexi, I ken how tae clean m'arse, I am nae a bairn."

"Oh, good, I didn't think you would have seen toilet paper before."

"Och, we daena hae toilet paper, but I ken how tae devise leaves or cloth for the task. I daena think I will hae a difficult time figurin' out the procedure."

“Good, perfect, then you throw the paper in here, and flush this handle. It whisks it away.”

I flushed and the old toilet rattled and made a racket.

He said, “Och, now that is a miracle.”

“Yes, yes I imagine it is. You know what’s cool? If I remember correctly, the flusher is a Scottish invention.”

“A Scot invented it? Are we in Scotland?”

I said, “Wait, you don’t know where you are?”

Behind us, Jen was putting down bags. “I’m back! Wine, cheese, booze, beer, crackers, all the fun things!” She spread out boxes. “I couldn’t decide what everyone wanted so I brought an assortment.”

We met her in the kitchen and Torin asked, “This is all from yer larder, Mistress Lexi?”

I nodded. “Yep, I always have snacks.” We stood around the counter and ate crackers with meat and cheese stacked on top, and drank beers in cans that Torin admired greatly.

Eating our snack, I said to Jen, “Torin was just telling me he has no idea where he is.”

“Oh, weird.” Then she added, loudly, as if she were speaking to someone hard of hearing, “You’re in A-mer-i-ca!”

“Jen, you don’t have to yell or talk slowly.”

He jokingly rubbed his ears. “Och nae, I ken where we are, we are in the land of the screechin’ harpies.”

Jen cracked up. “Oh man, I just met you and you’re already calling me a harpy? Men usually wait to call me that until the third date.”

I said, “You were too loud, his ears hurt from the time jump, we were just talking about it.”

Torin bowed. “M’apologies, Mistress Jen, twas a shock.

This is all stupefying. Ye arna wearin’ enough clothes, tis late at night.

I canna figure out where yer husbands are, ye are both alone, and I daena ken where I am or even whose lands these are, but I must be protective of ye as yer husbands hae nae left ye with enough guards. ”

I winced. “When you put it that way, that is stupefying.”

Jen looked down. “I am covered from my ankles to my shoulders!”

I said, “Them’s some tight-ass date-night jeans.”

She said, “You cannot say a thing, your jeans are just as tight.”

I scoffed.

Then said to Torin, “I’m sure this must be very different from what you’re used to.”

“Ye dinna answer m’ most important question: how dost ye hae nae guard — what are yer husbands about?”

Jen said, “No husband, I went out on a date tonight — he was adequate.”

He said, “I daena understand a word of it.”

I said, “Here in America, the place where you are, we date men first, before we get married, to see if we fit.”

Jen sighed. “But no one fits, except Lexi and Cooper.”

He said, “Mistress Lexi, ye hae a husband?”

“We are still dating, but we’ll probably get married — someday... hopefully soon.”

Jen said, “He’s asking you this weekend, I will bet money on it, if I had any.”

“Where is he now?”

“He went to pitch an idea to some investors, he wants to have an eco-tourism spot, near here with cabins.” I directed my next words to Jen. “Did I tell you, he thinks it went well?”

“Yep, earlier, and thank God, he’s been dreaming about this for so long, some might say obsessing, it’ll be good for him to get onto the next stage of it.”

I nodded.

Torin said, “I daena understand much, but this man — he haena married ye, Mistress Lexi? He leaves tae go on a journey without seein’ tae yer safety and protection?” He scowled. “This world causes bewilderment... but ye haena explained — where are we?”

Jen said, “America — you don’t know the United States? Oh right, that was after you were... whoa, this is weird.”

“Tis Europe? Or perhaps farther?”

I remembered there was an atlas. “Hold that thought!”

I opened the closet door and pulled the atlas from its spot under a stack of blankets. Jen pushed food away to make room on the counter.

I said, “ Much farther, Columbus discovered this land in 1492, have you heard of that?”

“Aye, the Italian, Cristoforo Colombo. He discovered the New World.” He looked all around the room. “This is the New World?”

“Yep.” I opened the book to the world map and pointed. “We are a whole nother continent. There’s Scotland, and this is about where we are. This whole place was settled by people from England, Scotland, and other parts of Europe. Over the centuries it became its own country?—”

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Jen added, “After a revolution, we overthrew the King of England.”

He nodded, “Well done.”

I said, “Except he was also the king of Scotland at the time, the whole place.”

Torin scowled. “Nae, that canna be possible, we would never stand for it.”

Jen started to answer, but I shook my head so instead she said, “Maybe I’m remembering my history wrong, but... the US has been our own country for over two hundred years now.”

I said, “It’s called the United States of America, and you are in one of the states, North Carolina.”

“How far is it tae get tae Scotland?”

“If you fly by airplane , like I told you about earlier, it’s a six hour flight, I think.” I drew my finger across the blue of the Atlantic Ocean.

“Och, over the ocean? Ye would fly it, nae by boat?”

Jen and I shook our heads.

He grew very quiet and finished his beer in one chug and put the bottle down.

Jen asked, “Want another beer?”

“Nae, I think I need m’head about me in case there are... troubles.” He closed the cover on the atlas and pushed it away.

I said, “We should go up to the house then, the... time is, wow, 11:45. Yep, time for bed.”

I saw his eyes focus on my watch, his brow drawn down. He chewed his lip.

Jen and I stood up.

He stood up and bowed. “Mistress Lexi, Mistress Jen, I will walk ye tae yer door.”

I said, “You remember how to turn off the lights?”

He looked around as if he didn’t quite remember, so I said, “I’ll click this one off.”

He said, “Aye, good, I will likely stand guard outside. I winna need the light.”

“Do you need some food before you go in the morning?”

“Nae, I winna bother ye, I will be gone before dawn.”

We trudged up the hill and he remained quiet as we walked. Until he asked, “What is that sound?”

“The hum? That’s the cicadas, grasshoppers, and katydids. Insects. In the spring and summer they really like to make a racket.”

He tugged on his earlobe as we continued striding.

At the porch he stiffly bowed.

“Good night, Torin.”

“G’night, Mistress Lexi.”

He waited until the door was locked.

Then from the window we watched him trudge down the long slope of the lawn.

I turned to Jen with my eyes wide. “I’m so glad you’re here, you would never have believed me.”

“I still don’t believe you, girlfriend, not really, but that is... I mean, what’s the other explanation?”

I grabbed the bottle of wine and poured two glasses.

We carried them to the living room, stopping by the stereo to turn on some music and then sitting on the ends of the couch facing each other.

She said, “Here’s some ideas: he could be lying, he could be joking, maybe he’s just cosplaying. Maybe it’s some kind of dare from a fraternity brother. An audition...”

I said, “Sure, but to what end, why ?”

She shrugged and sipped her wine. “I have no idea, it makes no sense.”

I said, “I can’t come up with any reasons he would be lying and he just seems like, so truthful. Even Daniel Day-Lewis couldn’t method act this well.”

I got comfortable, tucking my feet up under me, lying against the pillows with the wineglass tucked under my chin.

She giggled, mirroring me. “You look like a lush.”

“You too.”

She said, “What are you going to tell Cooper about this guy? It’s awkward, ‘hey, honey, that huge mysterious, armed, likely criminal guy is sleeping in my love shack.’ I don’t think Cooper’s going to be down with that.”

“Yeah, he’s going to flip out, but... Torin will be gone tomorrow. Cooper won’t even meet him.”

“You would lie to Cooper — are you expecting me to lie too?”

“First, no, I wouldn’t lie, I can just casually mention it.

After the fact it will be a lot less drastic.

‘Oh by the way, Cooper, that man who was in our yard stayed in the back-shack because he was injured and had nowhere else to go. Don’t worry, I was totally safe, and it’s all clean.

He won’t be back.’ Second of all, of course I need you to back me up, whose side are you on? ”

“Your side, though Coop and I have been friends longer, you’re by far my favorite.” She sighed, overly dramatically, the edge of her mouth going up. “But you know, I never lie on principle, especially to my dear old friend, Cooper.”

“You do too, just the other day you lied to him about your credit card debt — you did not pay it off, you borrowed money from me.”

“Because he was lecturing me! Why does he get to lecture me?”

“Because you’ve been friends, he’s trying to help.”

She pouted. “Fine, but please don’t use that against me. I will pay you back.”

“I don’t care if you pay me back, I don’t want you to pay me back. I’m not holding it against you. You were in a bind, you needed help. I’m your best friend. I don’t mind, but yes, you lied and you asked me to lie too.”

“Fine, yes, tell him after the fact, and I will tell Cooper whatever you want — as long as you don’t make me pay you back. Because I do not have the money.”

“You’re a school teacher, I get you, but I will tell him.

Homeboy, out there, will be gone in the morning and Cooper returns the next day.

I will tell him then, after the fact, and he’ll be in a good mood because he’ll have the investors and he won’t care about anything else but starting his business. ”

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TORIN

T he next morn, with the dawn, wearin' m'cloak and with m'belongings in m'sporran, I walked out of the wee cottage and closed the door behind me.

I left Mistress Lexi's lands and strode south down the road until I made it tae a large field.

It looked unused, and there was a corner hidden from the road and passers-by.

I stood there and got the vessel from m'pocket and looked it over in the dim light.

I dinna understand the markings, but I had beheld them for many days — they were the reason why whenever I returned tae Scotland twas fleeting, and somehow I ended up here in the New World once more.

If I could understand the markings I could rule them.

Without following them, I was forced tae rebound back and forth, in and out of time, with nae way tae influence it.

I tried tae make sense of them. Which ones would send me where or when...

? I dinna relish the idea of provin' the sequence, the journeys were too painful, but I feared I would need tae begin.

I mulled it over last night: I could change the order, one marking at a time, until I

understood the device.

But this would mean journeyin' and reboundin', and — och nae , twould take a pound of m'flesh.

I loathed the idea.

I decided I would do as I had been doing, twisting the form and pray that this time Max would be a'waiting.

I would hurl the vessel at him and say, tis yers, Max, I daena want it. And I might beat his arse for not explaining how tae use it earlier.

Nothing would ever compel me tae use it again, not even the chance tae see the bonny Mistress Lexi, twas unnatural and I felt certain that God dinna approve.

I exhaled long, looking down on the vessel. Unless Max needed me tae accompany him, I would do it if I were asked. But I dinna think Max would request it of me. He would ken that this had been too great a sacrifice.

I said a prayer that I would be delivered home and that this time Max would be waitin' for m'arrival and would join in the battle.

I could hear Max's voice in my head, 'Och nae, Torin, ye are too hopeful, ye always think everything will work out. Ye place too much trust in things.'

He dinna ken that I often had doubts, but I hid them because I wanted tae keep his spirits up. He had lost a kingdom by the time he was eight years auld, if anyone needed a friend tae be hopeful, twas Max.

I decided tae ignore m'doubts — what if this time it delivered me tae death's door? I

twisted it. The vessel began tae quiver, and the now familiar power grasped me by the arms and yanked me clear from m'conscious mind.

Arise, arise! Ye must arise!

I pulled m'self up and looked around at the hazy world. It looked Scottish but I couldna be certain. I rose on tae m'shakin' legs, clutchin' the vessel in m'hand, and beat m'thigs tae get the blood flow tae them, lookin' around the landscape tae determine how much danger I was in.

A great deal — I couldna tell where or when I was.

But at least I dinna hae villainous thugs tryin' tae kill me.

Twas midday, overcast.

I would hae time tae get m'bearings and tae find a meal and a place tae sleep afore nightfall.

Then I heard voices.

I scrambled up, rushed tae the trees and crouched in the darkness. Och, I wished I had a horse so I could get from this place.

Two men on horseback rode up, their swords drawn. One man said, "The storm was centered here."

I peered out, wonderin' if the person was friendly, but he looked villainous.

The other said, "We need tae search the forest, he's likely on foot. He's got it on him, we need that vessel."

I silently crept further back in the dense underbrush, until there was enough distance, then I turned and ran. They yelled when they saw me and began tae pursue.

I raced through the forest and continued on, until the trees thinned, and I kept going even though m'chest ached from the pounding, and my legs were weary from the chase.

I found m'self racing across a wide field.

I looked over my shoulder, were they still in chase?

When I turned back, I was at a cliff's edge, I slammed tae a stop, m'arms careening against momentum — I was dangerously close tae fallin', pullin' against the air.

I swayed for a moment, but then the ground slipped away and my foot descended, gravel and dirt, spilling down the side.

I was goin' over, swinging — I grasped frantically and found a root, hanging by my good arm.

The root was rope-like, but the surface was smooth and hard tae grasp.

I slipped down an inch. Och nae. Wincing with pain I pulled my other arm up, and tried tae get purchase, higher up, but the pain near knocked m'breath from m'lungs.

I glanced down, the drop was not sheer, twas a steep incline.

I was about forty feet up, below me were large rocks that would break me when I fell.

Dampened with sweat, my hand slipped, I dropped another inch.

I looked down again. Twas makin' me dizzy, my body ached — could I survive the fall?

Twas unlikely.

But then from a distance, I heard Max's voice, "Torin!"

I yelled, "I am here!"

"Hold on, I'm coming!"

He sounded far away, "Hurry, I canna hold on!"

I had tae climb up, but m'other arm was useless, then above me a man chuckled, "Och, ye are in a bind, Torin?"

Twas nae Max's voice.

I looked up, the face was in shadow.

"Where's Max?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "He winna make it in time, ye're about tae fall."

I groaned.

He said, "And ye hae something that is mine."

I joked, "It is about tae break upon the rocks, perhaps ye ought tae help me up from this precipice so Max and I can discuss yer property."

The man flicked his boot, sending a cascade of gravel down on my head. “How about ye pass up the vessel?—”

“Why does everyone want this blasted thing? Tis nothing but a pain in the arse.”

I slid another inch down, and groaned, twistin’, lookin’ down at my certain death. I yelled, “Max, hurry!”

There was nae answer.

I told the man, “Ye are about tae lose it on the rocks if ye daena help me up.”

I couldna hold on with one hand much longer. I jammed the other hand in my sporran, rummaged around, and wrapped it around the vessel.

He knelt down and put out his hand. “Give it tae me. Tis mine.”

“Nae, ye canna hae it.”

I would fall tae m’ death on the rocks, or I would journey through time. I dinna want tae do either. They were both brutal and terrible and I felt certain they would both kill me. If I tried tae do one would I end up doin’ them both at once?

“Max!”

His voice was still too far away, “Hold on!”

The man said, “Give me yer hand.”

Either way I was certainly a dead man. I might as well depart.

I pulled the vessel from my sporran, tucked it under my arm, clamped down, and twisted it with one hand, grunting from the effort. I felt the dragging clawing pain shoot up my arm and body as m'other arm slid from the root and I was flung.

I was pulled tae consciousness once more. Everything ached. My body was tormented by pain, but the sun was bright, the smells intense, the feel of the wind was soothing, the now familiar smell of earth and grass — twas the time of Mistress Lexi and I was somehow returned tae her lands.

LEXI

I woke up on the couch, my feet under Jen's ass. The left one was asleep. Ow ow ow owie. I dislodged them by shoving her aside, pulling them out, swinging my legs off the couch, and pressing the foot on the ground, stamping?—

Jen mumbled, "What?"

"My foot's asleep." I massaged it. "You slept on me."

She said, "You're kind of on my bed, no complaining. You have a bed upstairs, this downstairs is mine." She opened one eye to look at Dude.

He meowed.

"Fine, it's your couch, Dude, but still, I let you sleep with me, so you share."

"I also have a guest room, you know this."

She said, "I blame the wine and the hottie down there in your back-shack."

"How is it his fault you drank too much?"

"He was confusing me with his, you know, muscles."

I chuckled.

Then I looked at her with wide eyes. “You think he’s still outside standing guard?”

“Let’s go see!”

We both clambered up and went to the window. It looked empty down at the back-shack shadowed from the surrounding trees, even though it was late morning.

For some reason I whispered, “Is he in there?”

She said, “We must go see.” She added, “With coffee.”

We watched the back-shack as I brewed a pot, then we took our mugs and a carafe with coffee for Torin down the hill to check on him.

As we approached, I called out, “Torin? Torin, are you here?”

We peeked in the front door.

He wasn’t there. The house was completely empty.

She scanned my property. “Is he off somewhere, relieving himself in the woods again?”

“I don’t think so. He said dawn, I’m sure his idea of dawn is a lot different than ours. If he’s not here, guarding over us, he must have um... you know, gone away.”

“Why can’t you say it?”

“Because it sounds crazy.”

She sipped her coffee leaned on the stoop post like Torin had been last night. “Well,

he's gone, that's one less thing you have to deal with." She glanced at her watch. "I really ought to go home. I've been away since yesterday. I'm still invited to dinner tomorrow to hear Coop's tale of conquest?"

"Absolutely, I'm whipping up spaghetti and meatballs, his favorite."

"When was the last time you talked to him, how's it going?"

"Who knows, I'm sure it's going well, he's busy. We'll have the whole story tomorrow."

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LEXI

I was forming hamburger mix into little meatballs and stacking them in a small bowl, when my eyes drew to the sky through the kitchen window. No no no!

It was a storm again, what the heck?

I peered out. The wind had risen and was whipping the trees. A huge gust swept up my yard and the screen door, once again, began to bang, bang, bang.

Dude jumped off the counter and sauntered down the hall in the opposite direction, trilling like a maniac. A deserting me maniac. “You’re a terrible watch dog!”

He just kept going.

I put film over the bowl and shoved it into the fridge, washed my hands, then dried them as I walked toward the door, ostensibly to securely latch the door, but also to see .

By the time I got there it was a furious storm, like a tornado touching down in my yard.

I grabbed the screen door handle and tried to pull it closed when my eyes drew across the yard to the same spot and somehow, against all logic, a body lying there, again.

I froze.

My mind reeled.

I let go of the door, it was hurting my hand because it was so forcefully pulling.

It commenced its bang bang bang.

I had seen something unexplainable.

Had learned something impossible.

Then I had seen the unexplainable and impossible thing happen, again and again.

And here it was, once more.

I watched — how did he appear there? He had not been there a moment ago, I hadn't looked away, but visibility had been terrible.

The banging slowed and then ceased.

There was a last big wind gust and then just a twirling breeze in the middle of the yard, lifting dirt and dust toward the sky. I stalked across the yard and as I approached, said, "Torin? Torin, are you okay?"

He groaned and his fingers shifted.

I knelt beside him. "Do you need a hospital? I can call the ambulance."

He weakly said, "Nae, I daena."

He rolled over onto this back with a moan. "Och nae, Mistress Lexi, how did it come that I am here again?"

I sat down crosslegged beside him. “I have no idea, I don’t understand how it works.”

“Och, tis so bright.” He put his good arm over his eyes. “I am payin’ a price for m’hubris, tis a tool of God, and I hae tried tae use it tae my own ends. I am being cursed for it, the eagle is eatin’ m’liver, Mistress Lexi, I hae become like Prometheus.”

“But you haven’t used it for your own ends, you’re here accidentally.”

He lowered the arm and looked up at me intently. “Accident or nae, tis against His will, I am trying tae return home, yet I am foiled from every direction. And I daena ken how tae do what must be done.”

“We just have to figure it out. What is the purpose of it, what is it... why did your friend want it?”

“He was worried about his family, he needed it tae rescue them.”

“So he’s stuck too, without it, and you’re stuck with it, and his family is... what is happening with his family?”

“They are royal, there is a usurper stealin’ their throne.”

“Damn, I thought you were going to say something normal like, they got lost on a hike.”

“Nae, tis about bloodlines and kings. Tis dire. Max must be verra concerned and I hae sworn?—”

“To protect him, yeah, but he might think you have deserted him.”

“Och nae, he might believe it, but I think I hae proven my loyalty through the years. It would be difficult though tae understand how I left and haena returned.”

“I just wish there was an instruction manual for it. Did you ever think there were directions? Maybe you can find them?”

He pulled the vessel close, sat up, and stuffed it in the round leather bag hanging at the front of his kilt. “I daena ken if anyone on earth kens how tae work it.”

“Except you and you can’t do it well. But you learned the other night that there are at least two.”

“Aye, I suppose there is a chance someone else kens how tae use them.”

“You just have to find them and ask.”

He nodded, rubbing his forehead. “Aye, until then I must accept havin’ m’liver pecked by the eagle.”

I exhaled. “When was the last time you had a big meal, Torin? I’m planning a nice dinner tonight. Cooper... my, um... boyfriend is coming home, so I’m making his favorite meal.”

“I wouldna want tae interfere with y?—”

“Nope, that’s unnecessary, Jen will be there, and I invited a couple of other people too. It’s a dinner party. And you can stay in the back-shack as long as you need while you figure this all out. I’ll explain it to Cooper, he’ll understand.”

“Ye are certain? I wouldna want tae cause ye trouble.”

“No trouble at all, first, I need to go to the store for a bit more pasta, maybe a pound more of hamburger, you look like you get hungry.”

“I am verra hungry.”

I checked my watch. “It won’t take me long, I’ll be back in about twenty minutes?—”

“I ought tae go with ye, I think. I was bein’ chased, I daena ken if tis safe.”

I narrowed my eyes. “But they’re after you, if I’m not with you...”

He just looked at me.

I said, “Fine, yeah, if you want to go with me, you can.”

I started walking towards the car, then I looked back and he wasn’t following.

He asked, “Where are yer stables?”

“I don’t have stables?—”

“Nae horses? Then we are tae walk?”

“Nope, we’re going in the car. Come on.”

He followed me, his sword belt and the leather bag hanging from the front of his belt, rustling as he walked.

I reached the driver’s side first, but then realized he was standing, dumbly, beside the car. “Oh, right, you don’t know how to get in, have you ever been in a car before?”

“Nae, but I daena need tae, I will walk alongside.”

I stood with my hands on the roof. “I will go too fast.”

“I can run.”

“Still too fast.”

He screwed up his face. “I think I ought tae remain here. I will guard yer house.”

“You said you wanted to come, needed to come.”

“That was afore I kent ye wanted me tae ride somethin’ I hae never seen before, I hae had plenty of that already.”

“This doesn’t hurt, there is nothing to be afraid of, I’m a very good driver and I will go the speed limit.”

“I am nae afraid. I am never afraid of anything, I just daena want tae ride something when I canna see the horses that are draggin’ it.”

I sighed. “This is a car, it runs on energy, like the heat from a flame, right? We invented a way to capture that energy and ride it without needing horses.”

He narrowed his eyes at the car. “Tis on fire?”

“No, but it runs on combustion, like a controlled spark. If it helps, we call the power its horsepower. This car has about 300 horsepower. This is a BMW. I love this car. Imagine if there were hundreds of horses hitched up, right there.”

The corner of his mouth went up. “Tis a terrible thought, the amount of shite would

be unbelievable.”

“Exactly. That’s why we invented the car.”

“Twas a Scotsman who invented it?”

“I have no idea, but maybe.” I drummed my hands on the top of the car. “You ready to go?”

“Aye, I will go because ye need the protection.”

I came around the car and opened the door. He leaned over and inspected inside.

“Sit in the seat.”

“I ken, I wanted tae see what I was doin’ first. Tis like a carriage. Ye are certain tis nae just for the women? If there was a horse I could ride alongside ye. Twould be safer I think, I would be up higher, I could see danger comin’. I could warn ye if the road was washed away.”

“None of that is necessary, and I don’t have a horse... climb in — boy are you in for a good time.”

He took off his sword belt and placed it on the back seat. Then he slid into the seat, leaving one foot out on the ground, his hand on the roof.

“Whatcha doing, Torin?”

“Tis so I can jump out if I need tae.”

“You won’t need to, you have to get all the way in, or we can’t drive.”

“I am expected tae drive?”

“No, figure of speech.”

He drew his foot in and I closed his door and went around to get in the driver’s seat.

I pulled out a key and put it in the ignition. My Beamer roared into life. I grinned.

“Hear the power?”

He said, “Och nae, I hear it, it daena sound like tis working.”

I revved it. “You like this, Torin?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “It daena seem safe.”

I said, “Put on your seat belt.” I leaned across him, pulled the belt across his wide chest, and clicked it into the buckle as he watched every movement, but then his eyes settled on the side of my face. He was very close, his chiseled cheek right there, almost close enough to kiss.

Dear God, what was I doing?

His eyes narrowed.

I nervously laughed, pulling away. “Sorry, all up in your personal space.”

His voice deep and rumbling, hot, he said, “I daena mind.”

I was flustered. I put on my own belt and tried to change the subject. “What’s the round bag with the silver clasp that you wear on the front?”

“Tis m’sporran.”

I repeated, “Your sporran,” blowing air at my forehead trying to cool off. “What’s the design on the front?”

He said, “I tooled it m’self, tis a stag.” He ran his hand through his hair.

“I like it, is that a thistle on the clasp?”

He nodded.

I pushed my favorite driving cd into the player: the Dave Matthews Band, the best song, Crash into Me. I loved the vibe of the music as I drove down the two lane winding roads through these woods.

Yet, as the first notes began to play, Torin’s hand tugged his lobe with a wince. “What is the...?”

“Too loud?”

I turned the volume down. “This is an um...” I had almost said ‘love song’ but said instead, “Perfect driving music, we must play it while we careen down the road. The beat inspires the speed.”

Then, my hands on the wheel. I grinned again. “Ready?”

He said, “Tis against all of m’better judgement tae say aye?—”

I threw the car into reverse and pulled from the driveway. He gripped the dashboard and jerked forward and back as if I had peeled out. “Tis sorcery!”

I laughed, “You told me you time-traveled here by holding onto a little can-shaped vessel, and you think my car is sorcery?”

He had one hand on the dashboard, with his eyes averted towards the space between our seats. “They are both the dark arts and I am goin’ tae burn for eternity for havin’ done it.”

I looked both ways and pulled us out onto the road. “That is being overly dramatic. This is an invention, just like a carriage, and we are going to go to the market. If you want to close your eyes you can, or you can keep them open and enjoy the ride. It won’t hurt, I promise.”

He glanced up, then quickly averted his eyes again.

I cheerily said, “It’s right up here, we don’t need to go to the big store outside of town, this is a mom and pop right up the street. It’ll have what we need.”

He took a quick glance, then tucked his head again as I turned a corner. He muttered, “Och nae.”

I said, “Torin, I think you would get really comfortable if you just look. This is much safer than riding horses.”

“It canna possibly be true. How can I find ease when we hasten so swiftly?”

“We are only going forty miles per hour.”

He said, “Tis fine, I am comfortable, I just prefer tae ride this way.”

“Just sit straight in your seat and look, just look, I promise it will be okay.”

He slowly pulled his head up and settled straight in his seat and drew in a long breath and then exhaled. He had sweat rolling down his cheek from the angst.

I said, “See, I know it’s going fast, but check this out.” I pressed the button and rolled down my window.

He watched and then looked at his own door.

He punched the button and rolled his window all the way down and then put his head out.

The wind blowing through his shoulder-length hair, rustling the wolf fur trim on his cloak, his chin forward, the sun shining on his chiseled cheek and the tendon on the side of his thick neck, his wide shoulders, his biceps.

.. he was so freaking hot, he was warming my insides.

I looked away quickly. “There you go, that’s the spirit, and now we’re at the store.

” I pulled into a space in the small parking lot.

Using big gestures that he could mimic, I unlatched my seatbelt and then waited for him to get his undone. Then I opened my door with the handle and he fumbled on his door until he figured it out.

He stepped from the car. Then he unbuckled his brooch and swept the cloak from his shoulders. He placed it on the seat of my car.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Aye, that was verra fine, Mistress Lexi, I am glad ye convinced me that m’presence

was necessary — dost I need m'broadsword?"

"Nope, and you have the long knife, right?"

"Aye, m'dirk."

"You have your dirk, we should be fine." I started walking across the lot.

He followed, saying, "But this is nae long enough for a—" Then he interrupted himself, "Och nae, it daena feel right, I need the broadsword," and jogged back to the car.

I stood with my arms folded watching him as he navigated opening the car door, pulling out the sword belt, and strapping it around his hips.

He swaggered up to me.

Holy cannoli he was so hot, everything he did was making me yearn — what was I doing? I swept my hand through my hair and tried to focus on the task at hand.

LEXI

We went into the small shop, the bell ringing to let the owner, Marjorie, know we were there. Marjorie came out. “Hello, Lexi!” She stopped and her head cocked to the side. “That’s not... um...”

I glanced at Torin who was so big he loomed over the store, and was gaping around, his eyes sweeping the walls, the aisles, the shelves and all the products.

It was a little like a convenience store, but more like a micro general store, and had been my favorite for years. It had everything from meats and liquor, to big jars of candy, and some basic hardware.

“Yep, this is not Cooper, Cooper is out of town?—”

“Oh right, he’s meeting the investors.”

“And this is Torin, he’s a friend of ours from out of town, staying with us for a bit.”

“Oh, yes.” She put out a hand. “I’m Marjorie.”

Torin bowed deeply and kissed her knuckles. “Mistress Marjorie, tis a pleasure tae meet ye.”

She distractedly ran her fingers across her chest. “Wow, where did, wow... that was something.”

I said, “Just picking up some more hamburger for the spaghetti, Cooper gets home in a bit.”

I went to the cooler and fished out a package of hamburger and a package of ground sausage. Torin followed me, his sword swinging, knocking a box of cereal from the shelves.

When he put it back he looked down at the box. “What is this?”

I said, “Cereal, that one has marshmallows, want to try it? Wait, I don’t mean open it here, we’ll buy it and take it home. Just carry it.”

I put a box of pasta in his arms on the cereal box, and then two loaves of French bread on the pile. I got a gallon of milk from the cooler. “Put these on the counter,” I gestured to where Marjorie was watching. “Let me grab wine.”

She asked, “Where are you from, Torin?”

“I hail from Scotland, Mistress Marjorie.” He slid the groceries from his arms to the counter and she began ringing them up while also sort of batting her eyes, flirtatiously.

“Is that why you’re wearing a kilt? You look like you’re out of the movie, Braveheart.”

Torin shook his head, blankly, then looked all around the shop again.

I carried two bottles of wine and a six pack of beer over to the counter.

Torin watched everything intently as she rang up our groceries and then I paid with cash. He pointed. “This is ale?”

“Beer, yes, a lager.”

He pulled up a bottle and looked over the label.

I said, “Look good?”

“Aye, but I daena think there is enough.” He put his hand on one of the bottles.

“These are each nae much more than a noggin, dost they hae any rundlets?”

I said, “Now I have no idea what you mean, but I get your point, you need more beer than this.”

Marjorie said, “We don’t have any kegs, we have a case in the back.”

I said, “Alright, give me a case.”

I put the six pack back while she disappeared in the back to get me a case.

Torin’s stomach growled loudly.

I said, “Ah, you’re hungry right now.”

“Aye, m’middle has grown rowdy surrounded by all this food.” He nodded toward a big jar. “I am allowed tae eat one of those?”

“A pickled egg? Definitely.” I grabbed up the tongs, opened the jar, fished out two eggs, placed them in a wax paper bag, and passed them to Torin. I put the lid back on and glanced at Torin. His cheeks were puffed out with both eggs in his mouth, chewing.

Marjorie had returned and laughed. “Hungry, Torin?”

“Aye, famished,” he said through a full mouth.

I said, “You need something more? That’s a lot of pickle, you like pickled?”

He grinned, his big handsome smile in his beard. “I dinna even taste it, aye, I like pickled. Tis verra common where I am from.” He held out the bag. “Two more would fill me up.”

I fished out two more eggs and he ate them really fast again. I pointed to the napkins and he cleaned his hands while Marjorie bagged everything, which always took a minute because she was overly methodical. “How long are you in town for, Torin?”

“I am leavin’ by the next morn.”

She put the pasta in a paper bag nodding her head.

I said, “Don’t forget to include the eggs he ate.”

She placed the French bread slowly in the bag. Then she unfolded a second bag and began putting the meat inside, asking me, “You have parmesan?”

“Oh right, parmesan! I have the can, but do you have some fresh?”

She reached over the counter to the shelf where there was a block of wrapped parmesan. “Is this enough?”

“Yep. Oh, and another tomato too.” I ran to get a tomato from her produce section. “Now I have everything.”

I paid for the second time. And then waited again while she wrapped and bagged the rest of the groceries.

There were small carts but I hadn't used them, so instead we both carried bags and the case of beer in our arms and managed to get it all out to the car in one trip.

I opened the trunk and we loaded it full of groceries. Then I closed it.

Torin slapped his hand down on it. "Now that we hae added tae the load, dost ye need me tae walk?"

"Nope, the car can carry all of it."

"Tis miraculous."

LEXI

I said, “Alright, you ready to get back?”

“Aye.” He went around to the passenger side door and with no assistance opened the door.

I got in the driver’s seat as he took off his sword belt and placed it in the back seat.

“This is the only trouble with yer carriage, Mistress Lexi.” He was very close, leaned over the seats, his shoulder brushing against mine.

“One canna wear a sword easily, or access it if trouble nears.

It ought tae be right on yer hip so ye can pull it and wave it menacingly out the open window.

He rolled down the window and put his elbow out.

“Look at you, you’re an old pro.”

He ran his hand through his hair.

“Don’t forget your seatbelt.”

“Tis necessary?”

“It’s illegal to ride without it.”

“Och nae, there are many rules in yer world.” He put on his seatbelt.

I pulled the car from the parking lot out onto the road, noting that his fingers tapped on his legs to the music.

He didn’t duck his head at all this time and as I got faster he put his head out the window and let the wind blow through his hair without me needing to tell him to.

“Can ye push the carriage tae go even faster, Mistress Lexi?”

“Yep, hold on,” I pulled up to a red light. “We have to wait for the light to turn green.” I started bouncing my head and so he did it too, bouncing our heads like we were raring to go, music on, the best song, I grinned. “You like the music, perfect.”

“Aye, what is he singin’?”

“He’s singing, Crash into me.. . He means it romantically.”

Then it went green and I said, “Go!” I peeled out, kind of, not really, but he grabbed onto the dashboard to steady himself as we jerked forward. Then he winced and rubbed his shoulder, then put his head out the window again, “Cruachan!!”

I laughed. “What does that mean?”

“Tis the Campbell clan battle cry.”

“Cool.” I yelled, “Cruachan!” Then I asked, “Does that mean your last name is Campbell?”

“Nae, tis Elphinstone, I am a cousin of Lord Elphinstone, dost ye ken him?”

I shook my head.

“Our lands are near the Campbell lands and they are a verra powerful Clan, so m’father pledged loyalty tae their chief. I hae been a member of Clan Campbell m’whole life. Tis why I was raised in Castle Glume.”

“This is very interesting, since I just yelled it, what does Cruachan mean?”

“Ben Cruachan. Dost ye ken the ben?”

“What does ‘ben’ mean in this context?”

“A mountain?”

“Oh, no I don’t know that mountain. Learn something new every day. And do you want to hear something cool? These mountains and the Scottish Highlands were once the same mountain range.”

“Nae, tis true? But ye said there is a full ocean between.”

“Yes, the continents were one big land mass, I heard it once, does it look the same?”

“Nae, not at all.” His eyes scanned the land. “But I think if I were tae become familiar with this landscape it might.”

We passed my house. “That’s my house, but we’re going to take this baby up to 55 for a minute.”

We drove down the highway at 55 and Torin acted like it was the greatest thing he had ever done. I rolled down my window and showed him how to put his hand out and wave it up and down in the wind.

Then he leaned forward as if he were on a horse and smacked the outside of the car through the window.

“Are you urging me to go faster?”

“Aye, can ye?”

I got the car up to 65 before we came to the next town and a stoplight.

He exhaled. “Och nae, they shouldna hae these signs, ye ought tae go without havin’ tae stop.”

I laughed. “You have to stop sometimes, so the cars crossing the road have a chance to go.”

He narrowed his eyes. “But we are more important... I am the cousin of Lord Elphinstone, a warrior for the Earl of Argyll, a member of Clan Campbell, and the loyal hand tae the exiled king, Maximillian. They ought tae bow and wait until I hae passed.”

I opened and closed my mouth. “But how would they know you’re more important?”

“From lookin’ at me, they can see they ought tae avert their eyes and allow me tae pass, ye daena follow those rules?”

“No, not at all, we all have to wait for the light and take turns.”

“But what if yer journey is urgent, Mistress Lexi? Ye must need tae go first, och nae, it sounds verra difficult tae get yer way.”

“But your way would be very confusing and lots more accidents. This way is safer.

We stop, they get to go, then they stop, and now we go.” I took a left. “See, very civilized.”

“Tis not verra civilized if there are peasants takin’ a turn and ridin’ in yer way! What would ye do, Mistress Lexi, if there are peasants in yer way?”

I laughed. “I have no idea. Once a farmer was riding a tractor down the lane, and we all slowed down until we could pass.”

“Och nae, Mistress Lexi, he must pull over and bow, ye would hae the right of way — tis the proper order!”

“How would the farmer know I’m more important?”

“He ought tae just ken his place! If I came across a peasant he would ken because of m’size, m’dress, m’manner, the strength and skill of m’sword, m’bearing, and m’stature upon m’horse.”

“But this isn’t a horse. He can’t see me inside this car. How would we see each other?”

“Ye might hae a flag upon yer carriage tae announce yer title, or I would wave my sword out the window, except...” He pretended to reach in the back seat and chuckled.

“I canna reach m’sword! I am learnin’, Mistress Lexi, that yer luxurious and magical carriage is allowin’ the peasants tae think too verra highly upon themselves. ”

I laughed, shaking my head, “This is a very interesting point, and would greatly help my impatience in traffic if I could just demand the right of way. I would love that, but it’s not at all how we do things here.

” I drove around the block and got back on the main road, waiting at the same light but from another direction.

Torin looked every which way. “Tis clear, not a peasant in any direction tae lord over yer rights, ye could go.”

“Nope, gotta follow the rules.”

“There are a lot of rules.” He sighed dramatically. “What is the noise?”

“The blinker, it’s telling everyone around us that we are going to turn left.” I pointed ahead of me. “See that car, it has its blinker on too. It’s going to turn right.”

Torin turned and looked out the back window. “The man behind ye looks tae be a peasant as well! Here is this bonny lady beside me, a land owner, and she has her carriage clickin’ tae warn him which way she will be turnin’ as if tis anything for him tae ken — och nae, I will never understand this.”

I laughed and said, “I suppose we will have to agree to disagree.”

“What does that mean?”

“Instead of arguing the point that we will never agree on, we just agree to not argue anymore.”

“Aye, Max would say, ‘Let us leave this matter tae rest, each holdin’ his own mind,’ but ye ken what I then say tae him?”

“What?”

“That tis always the man losin’ the argument who wants tae ‘hold his own mind’. I

can usually get Max tae buy at least one more round of ales by saying it.”

I smiled at him. “You like to argue.”

“Aye, and tae drink. The nights are long, ye hae tae hae some discussion. Max and I agree on most everything, but we will take the other side for the challenge of it and some nights I will change sides two or three times.”

Our light turned green. I turned us left and Torin held onto the dashboard, as if we were careening.

Then he added, “I daena usually argue with ladies, though, I pray the bonny Mistress Lexi daena mind.”

I smiled, “I don’t mind at all, I thought it was interesting, and it made me laugh.”

He nodded. “Me as well.”

And we drove back to the house.

He leaned out the open window, letting the wind blow through his hair and then closed his eyes, warm sun and breeze on his handsome face.

I took furtive glances, thinking about how handsome he was, how he looked like a model, when his mood clouded over.

He sighed. His expression turned dark and sad.

He was so strapping, muscular, and big that it seemed he couldn’t take things to heart, but it was clear he was feeling something deeply.

It made me want to make things better for him. “Are you worried, Torin?”

He kept his eyes on the horizon as he spoke.

“Aye, Mistress Lexi, I am troubled. I am far from my time and though this journey is wondrous, my heart yearns for home. I long for the reek of sweatin’ horses, the clatter of carts lurchin’ over ruts, roads near impassable with muck and mire, and the deep nights, where ye pray for a glimmer of light tae find yer way.

” His mouth drew up on the corner and he met my eyes.

“You’re homesick, huh?”

“Aye, and I wish Max were here tae see this. He would take joy in the fleetness of yer carriage, the pickled eggs — och, he would relish them — and he would find pleasure in sparrin’ about the peasants takin’ the right of way.

Max treasures his birthright as an exiled prince, ye ken, and fiercely argues tae defend his rights. ”

“Maybe once you master the vessel, he could join you here for a visit.”

“Alas, he is beset with troubles.”

“He really is an exiled royal? Is this true?”

“Aye, he’s a prince of a mighty realm, rich in power and name.” He chuckled and ran his hand through his hair. “Max oft says tis more perilous than ye would wager and less grand than ye might think.”

“He’s probably very rich, though?”

Torin shrugged. “He dwelt with me in a cold, drafty keep, and I am but a baron’s son. Our lodgings were nae what ye would call princely—more stone and shadow than silk and gold.”

“Why?”

He sighed. “Because he is exiled, he is hunted. His foes want tae see his line ended. I knew he needed tae remain hidden, but I dinna understand the depth of the danger until I saw with my own eyes what this vessel could do. Max’s life will be in grave danger if his foes gain this sorcery.”

I sighed. “I’m not sure I understand any of it, but I get that it’s dangerous.”

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His head turned as he watched a sign go by. “Aye, tis, when I time-journeyed the last time I ended up being chased and fell from a cliff. My death was near-assured.”

“Ugh, that does not sound good. Besides the fact that Max is the prince, the danger is for his throne, you’re just his friend.”

“I hae sworn to protect him. His troubles hae become my own. I must lay down m’life for him.”

I said, “That’s very devoted of you. I’ve got a few close friends, and Cooper and Jen, I’ve never asked them if they would lay down their lives for me... I’m sure they would, possibly, but I don’t think we measure friendships that way anymore.”

He watched my face as I spoke. “Hae ye lived here yer entire life?”

“Yep. In the house where I grew up. It was built by my great-grandfather’s father way back in 1820. My parents um... passed the house down to me.”

He nodded, then looked out the window again.

Then he looked back. “I appreciate all ye hae done for me, Mistress Lexi. Someday I will learn tae wield the time travel vessel and bring Max tae see these wonders. Twould lift his heart tae meet the bonny mistress who took on our troubles. Ye hae done a great service, I daena ken what I would do without ye.”

“Likely sleep on the ground in the woods.”

“Aye, I would be even more disgustin’. I want ye tae ken, as I am invited tae share a meal, I am usually in better form.”

I said, “Yeah, right, true. You need clothes. I don’t think Cooper has anything you can fit. My uncle has a box in the attic, but I don’t know...” I turned on my blinker and took a left. “Hold that thought?—”

He gripped the dash as I turned the corner, laughing. “I hae nae idea what ye want me tae hold ontae while ye careen. If this were a carriage and I had been ridin’ alongside, I would likely be chasin’ one of its wheels down the hill!”

“But this is my BMW and there is no way a wheel is coming off.” I swerved the car a little just to keep him on his toes.

“We have a second-hand clothing store. We’ll grab you a shirt and pants so you’re more comfortable at the meal.

You made a good point, and I mean this with all due respect, you stink. ”

He chuckled and sniffed under his arm. “Tis the sweat of fear and it has turned.”

I pulled into the parking lot of the Attic and he got out of the car as if it were the easiest thing in the world. “Sword?”

I shook my head and he followed me into the thrift store.

I went to the men’s section and found a pair of chinos that looked like they would be the right size and a dark shirt with a collar. I held them up, they looked like they would fit.

He held the clothes bundled against his chest as his eyes drifted to the rack of shoes.

“Will they hae shoes?” He rubbed his right boot against his left to show that there was a gaping hole in the side. “Or I will need a needle and thread tae mend them.”

I went over to the rack and we tried a couple of pairs up against his feet. There were a pair of Nikes that looked like they would fit. “There, you will look clean and ready for a meal.”

At the counter I paid for the clothes. “Can I return them if they don’t fit?”

Her brow went up as she looked at his chest. “He can try it on in the um... dressing room.” She literally licked her lips.

I glanced into the corner, there was a small curtain, it wouldn’t come up to his neck. “Sounds complicated.” I tossed a couple pairs of socks in with the clothes and a package of underwear in what I guessed was his size.

She said, looking at Torin’s bicep as he had his hand resting on his sword hilt. “He can’t return the um... the underwear.”

“I get you.”

I paid, took the plastic shopping bag, and led Torin to the car.

As I drove us back home, I said, “I have a lot to do to get the meal ready, do you think you can figure out the shower and put on all these clothes?”

He chuckled. “Aye, but what if I said ‘Nae, Mistress Lexi’?”

I laughed. “I don’t know what I would do. I guess it would be inappropriate to help you.”

“Aye, I imagine yer man, Cooper, would take issue with his bonny maiden helpin’ another man dress.” He looked down at the clothes in his lap. “Is m’presence goin’ tae cause problems for ye, Mistress Lexi?”

“No, not really, not problems. Cooper won’t be mad, it’s just going to take some explaining, and I’m not sure if he’ll take me at my word. It’ll actually be good that you’re here, once he meets you...”

“He will ken I am from another time?”

“Yep, it’s pretty apparent. Though you are pretty relaxed in the car now.

” I pulled into my driveway. “And after we eat we’ll all try to come up with some ideas to help you get back.

I don’t know if I can help, but I’ll try.

The back-shack is unlocked, get cleaned up, make yourself comfortable.

I’ll call you up when it’s dinner time.”

He grinned, “Ye canna get rid of me so quickly, ye will need m’help carryin’ in the supplies.”

“Great point. Yes.”

I opened the trunk and we pulled out the bags and beer and wine and lugged it up the steps to the door. I unlocked the handle and pushed it open. My cat wrapped around my legs, purring. “Careful, he will trip you if you’re not careful.”

“Tis yer cat? I met him earlier, he visited me in yer wee cottage.”

“Yep, his name is Dude. Are there a lot of cats where you’re from?”

I glanced back to see he was smiling down at Dude. “Och aye, ye are a lion, leòmhann gaisgeil Albannach!”

“What does that mean?”

“I told him he looks like a brave Scottish lion. He is a verra braw cat. When he visited he told me he catches many wee beasts.”

“Whenever he can, that’s why I let him stay. He just walked up one day and now he lives here.”

We put the groceries down on the counter and Torin knelt down and put out a hand and Dude sniffed his fingers, rubbed against his arm, and while I was still marveling, Torin picked him up and stood petting him and nuzzling with him.

I said, “Wow, he likes you, Dude doesn’t usually like people right away.”

“He can see we are both fellow travelers. We both carry the scars of our rough lives, and we are both lookin’ for a place tae land.”

He grinned at me, with Dude purring beside his strong jaw line. “We hae both been taken in by the bonny Mistress Lexi, we are verra fortunate, arna we, Dude?”

Dude meowed.

LEXI

I had allowed the afternoon to slip away. I checked my watch. I needed to get the meatballs finished so that when Cooper got in we could open some champagne, have a glass, and hear his stories without having to work so hard.

I rolled meatballs with the new meat and chopped the tomato, glancing through the window at the lawn, watching the back-shack, wondering if Torin was figuring everything out. It was impossible to tell because the house remained dark as the shadows of the woods around my yard grew long.

The door was open though, he was in there. He hadn't tried to leave again.

I chopped the tomatoes and started the sauce in a large skillet, then I slid the meatballs into the oven. It wasn't time to put the water on to boil, I was just getting this step started.

But then I heard the sound of a truck pulling into the driveway. I checked the clock — Cooper!

I rushed out to the porch.

“Cooper! You're home!”

He was sitting in the driver's seat, hands on the wheel, the truck turned off.

“Cooper, you okay?”

He opened the door and slowly climbed out. His face was drawn down. He exhaled and said, “No, I’m not.”

“Oh, oh no!” I threw my arms around his neck. He dropped his head to my shoulder and breathed against my neck. He seemed so sad, accentuated by the fact that his hands remained down by his side. “Oh, I am so sorry, Cooper. This is... did you not get it?”

He shook his head, just a shift against my shoulder.

I didn’t know what to say, so I just held on.

And we stood quietly, until finally his arms went around my back, seeking comfort from the despair.

I said, “I don’t know what happened, can you talk about it?”

A long silence was followed by, “There’s nothing to say, they told me this morning that they decided to pass. John, my ‘handler’, told me that it wasn’t my...” He exhaled. “Can we go inside?”

I nodded and pulled from his embrace.

He went around the truck to get his suitcase from the back and trudged behind me up the steps to the house.

We went to the kitchen table, the best place to talk. He had left the wheeled suitcase in the hall and now slumped down in a chair.

I sat down across from him. “What did he say?”

“Who?” He ran a hand through his hair despondently.

“Your handler, John? You didn’t finish your thought.”

“He told me it wasn’t my fault. He said they liked my project, they just don’t think the market is right for it, not right now.

They think there’s a bubble in the real estate market and that it’s not a good time for eco-tourism.

‘Too risky,’ they said. But to me they just said, ‘thank you for coming to speak to us, we’ve decided we’re going to pass.

’ It was... the most demoralizing thing I ever heard. ”

“Damn it, that really sucks.”

He nodded.

I said, “It’s hard to come up with the right words for how bad that sucks.”

He nodded again.

“So maybe we begin talking again about how I can give you the money to start it.”

He shook his head. “No, I said it before, Lexi, no, that’s your money. You know it wouldn’t be good to have you be the money person in my?—”

“I know no such thing. I know I love you and I’m happy to go into business with you.”

“I don’t think relationships usually outlast business contracts.” He cut his eyes.

I frowned. “That’s cold. Ours could. We love each other. I mean, I know we’ve been having some troubles, but we’re working on it. We’re going to...” My voice trailed off, then I finished, “...be good.”

He sighed. “I know, yeah, we’re good. I’m just disappointed, brutally disappointed.”

“If it’s not a contract, if we don’t go into business together, I could loan you the money?—”

“You want me to not only take on the risk of building a business, but to do it with a loan on your money? I don’t think so, Lexi, it’s not the way it should go.

You want me to be indebted to you? It would cause more stress on us, change our relationship.

I already live here, in your house, I just... no.”

“I just want to help — your idea is really good, I believe in it, I believe in you, and there’s this account with money in it, it’s just a smart investment...”

He was frowning.

My words trailed off.

“I don’t really want to discuss what my next step is.” He shook his head. “It’s nice that you believe in me, because I don’t think I can keep going. This dream feels pretty dead right now, I kind of want to quit.”

I blinked. “You would give up your dream?”

“For over a year I’ve been in meetings, going to banks, designing brochures, coming up with marketing strategies — you know, I’ve got the plan forward and backwards.

I have the property, I bought the building plans for the cabins, I know the contractor to build them.

I’m just tired of not being able to convince anyone else of the merits of the idea. ”

I frowned. “You convinced me.”

He squeezed my hand on the table. “Yeah, but really, Lexi, think about it. I have a grand idea and the only person I can convince to invest in it is my girlfriend. ”

“Your ‘girlfriend’.” It sounded so unimportant to call me that in this moment.

That had been our problem, he was still ‘dating’. His focus was entirely on his business. Always. “I think I’m more than your ‘girlfriend’.”

He sighed. “I mean that you might be too easily swayed.”

“You’re suggesting I’m swayed by your hot body?”

“Heck yeah, and my hot moves in the bedroom.” He half smiled. “I don’t want to be a kept man.”

“Fine, I guess I understand. I get you, but I don’t like the idea of you quitting. So I’m going to tell you to hush up about that. This is just a bump in the road. Your path to success is still in front of you.”

He huffed, his eyes traveling to the kitchen counter. “You got the champagne out?”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t feel much like celebrating.”

“Kinda feel like day drinking, though. Five o’clock somewhere.”

“It’s actually past five o’clock here. You’ve got a little jet lag.

” I stood and went to the champagne bottle.

“But... I’m not opening this, this is for when we are celebrating your business.

It will happen, Coop, I’m sure of it. You can’t have been working on this for so long without it coming true?—”

“Lexi, the world of business is full of failed dreams.”

I put the champagne back in the fridge and asked, “Want a beer or a glass of wine?”

“Beer, when does Jen get here?”

“Soon.” I chewed my lip trying to decide when to tell him about the stranger in the back-shack. The conversation had just gotten a lot more complicated.

I popped the lid off a beer and passed it to him.

I turned on the flame under the pasta pot, took the aluminum foil off the sauce, combined sauce with the meatballs, and slid the whole dish into the oven.

I was feeling kind of proud of myself for having done so much prep-work that I could sit down and have a beer with Cooper.

I had thought we would be celebrating, but instead I was even more necessary for

consoling him.

I got a beer for myself when the screen door opened. Jen called, “It’s me!”

He said, “Dammit, now I gotta discuss all this again.”

She bustled in, dancing, with her phone playing music, singing, “Celebrate, good times... come on!”

Then she stopped.

“What...? What, no ‘celebrate good times’? What happened?”

Cooper said, “I didn’t land the investors.”

Her face fell. “Ah shit. That sucks.” She slumped into a chair and snapped her fingers at me. “Beer, please.”

I laughed and got her a beer. “Bossy, do I look like your bartender?”

“Well, you already heard the story, it’s my turn.” She focused on Cooper, “They didn’t like your plan? You can talk them into it, right?”

“They liked it, they just don’t think it’s the ‘right time’.”

“Ugh, that’s even worse.”

“Yeah. There’s no talking an investor out of an opinion on right and wrong time, it’s too ephemeral.

‘Nah man, it’s the right time.’ He says, ‘No, it’s not,’ and what have I got?

Just back and forth. I was thinking about it on the plane.

What if I convinced him that it was the ‘right time’ after concerted arguing?

You know what would happen — it would be provisional, right?

If the investor believes it’s not the ‘right time’ and I convinced him to invest anyway, it would probably be half the money.

Possibly there would be even more strings attached.

Or a higher interest rate, or... I mean, I don’t know what he would want, but my margins are slim enough.

I have no room to negotiate. I need all the money I asked for. ”

He spun his beer bottle while he spoke, then drank. “It’s a moot point anyway, the investors didn’t want to talk about it. No discussion.”

Jen said, “Damn, that sucks.”

“I guess this is a sign.”

Jen frowned. “This is not a sign, Coop, this is just a momentary setback.”

I said, “That’s what I was saying... see Coop, we agree.”

He said, after draining his beer, “So where’s Dude? He hasn’t greeted me yet.”

I said, “Oh, he’s probably just... somewhere, um...”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is Dude okay?”

“Yeah, he’s just, um... he’s probably down at the back-shack with...” I gulped. “Look, I have to tell you something, but it was going to be funny and an easy conversation when you had good news, remember that, now that you have terrible news, it’s not really that great?—”

His brow went up. “Someone’s visiting? Your uncle? You know I like him. That’s not an issue.”

“Not my uncle, remember that guy who crashed here on the lawn the other night?”

His eyes went wide. “What have you done, Lexi?”

“Well, the short story is that he was in the hospital and he didn’t have anywhere to go. So he’s staying in the back-shack and the rest is a long story, for a different time.”

“Lexi, is there a homeless guy living in your backyard? While I was out of town?” He turned to Jen. “Have you been a part of this epically dumb decision making?”

Jen put her hands up. “No, I mean yes, I am... and I know I’m supposed to be the sensible one, but honestly, Cooper, I met him at the hospital and talked to him here last night when he had to stay.

He seems really nice. This is not as crazy as it sounds, though I am kinda surprised he’s still here. This is not epically dumb.”

“See?” I turned to Cooper. “She agrees. I know it seems crazy, and it wasn’t every night, but he honestly doesn’t have anywhere else to go.” I took a sip of my beer. “Besides I had your gun, I was safe.”

His eyes got even wider. “My gun? ”

“Yeah, I was armed when I talked to him.”

“Holy shit, Lexi, that’s so irresponsible! What if you had gotten shot or worse, shot someone?”

“But I didn’t— and how is that worse?”

“Because of the trouble it causes! What you know about that guy is literally zero, and you’re waving my gun around?”

I bit my lips. “I think you’re kind of missing the point, the point was that you having a gun here kept me safe. I took care of myself, and made a decision that helped someone who desperately needed it.”

“He’s homeless, you found him in your yard...” He ran his hands up and down on his face, “Do you know anything about this guy?”

I glanced at Jen.

She said, “We know tons about him!”

“Like what?”

“Like... he’s from Scotland!” Then she pulled her phone from her pocket.

“But also, I hate it when people I love argue, can I help in some other way?” She looked at me.

“You invited Andrew and the boys, right? How about I text them and tell them the

big celebration is not happening, we'll do it later. ”

Cooper said, “That would be good, this has already been a lot.”

She started texting.

He said to me, “Well, out with it, what do you know about him?”

“Lots, um... Scotland, as Jen said, but the rest is not going to be easy to explain.”

Cooper shook his head. “Lexi, do you understand how absurd this sounds? This is the last thing I wanted to think about today, a homeless guy living here, while I’m just trying to unwind after a real shit few days.”

I patted the back of his hand. “I get you, I really do, I wish this hadn’t turned out this way, and I don’t know how to explain it but... he’s a time traveler.”

“Um... say what...?”

He looked at Jen, she shrugged, continuing to text.

He looked at me, then huffed. “I need to go take my stuff upstairs, I need to cool off, I need to take a break.”

He slid his chair from the table and stalked out of the room, grabbed his suitcase, and clomped up the stairs.

“Whoa Nelly,” I said to Jen, “that was not good, not at all good.”

She watched the door. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Coop so upset.” Her phone beeped.

She read her texts. “Everyone has been called off. Andrew says you owe him a meal.”

“Tell him next weekend, definitely.”

I watched her text, then stood and lifted the lid on the pasta pot, almost boiling. “I just don’t even know how to explain this. I get that this sounds so irresponsible and now I have to explain how time travel is real?—”

“This is going to require some epic explaining skills.”

I opened the oven and checked the sauce, it was sizzling hot. “Exactly! I don’t have those skills. So what I’m thinking is, you’re his friend too, maybe you could do it.”

“You want me to explain time travel and take some of the heat?”

I got out the parmesan and began shredding it. “Yes, please, because I cannot figure out how to do it. Also, put the wine bottles out on the counter. Some glasses.”

She put the bottles out and lined glasses beside it so it looked like a bar.

LEXI

The pasta was boiling when Cooper returned. He had changed his clothes, putting on dark jeans and his favorite blue t-shirt. His hair was combed, a bit of product making it shiny, his face freshly shaven. He looked handsome as he stood there glowering at the floor for a moment.

Then asked, “Did you say ‘Time Traveler’?”

Jen leaned against the counter. “Yep, that’s what she said, because that’s what he is — he’s a time traveler.”

“You’re both going to come at me with this?”

I said, “I’m not coming ‘at you’ with anything, I’m telling you that the man is a time traveler, if you’ll let me tell you how?—”

There was a knock on the screen door.

Torin called in, “Mistress Lexi, might I enter?”

Cooper’s eyes went wide. “Is that him, that’s the guy? Why is the guy on my — I mean your porch?”

“Because I invited him to dinner.”

He groaned.

So I said what we often said when we were irritated with each other, “Don’t you just love me, Cooper, aren’t I wonderful?”

“You are wonderful... as you do everything in your power to kill me.”

Jen went to let Torin in.

I said, “You are not going to die because I invited someone to dinner.”

He said, “You know that isn’t what the problem is.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I turned as Torin entered, wearing the slacks and shirt I bought for him — it fit, a little tight on his muscles. Dude walked along merrily beside him.

I said, “Hi Torin, hungry?”

“Och aye, I am famished.” He bowed deeply.

Jen’s eyes traveled over him as he bowed and then she mouthed to me: Whoa.

Torin continued, “Thank ye, Mistress Lexi for invitin’ me tae the meal.”

Cooper asked, “Are you going to introduce us, Lexi?”

“Of course, yes, Cooper, this is Torin, Torin, this is Cooper, my um... boyfriend.”

Torin’s brow drew down but only momentarily, then he smiled broadly when Cooper put out his hand.

He grasped Cooper's forearm, clutched it tightly, and pulled him closer in kind of an arm wrestling match.

"Och aye, tis verra fine tae meet ye, Master Cooper." The two men were eye-level, though because of Cooper's thin stature, Torin looked much bigger.

Torin let go of his arm. "I thank ye for yer hospitalities after m'regrettable incursion ontae yer lands." He rubbed his hands together. "I heard we were celebratin' yer good fortune!"

Cooper shook his head, defeatedly. "No, we aren't. My good fortune failed, it's bad fortune all the way down?—"

I interrupted, "But we don't need to talk about it, we need to celebrate. Cooper went on a trip and returned safely, so I made his favorite meal and... Hold that thought."

I picked up the bottle of champagne and untwisted the wire over the cork.

Cooper ran his hand through his hair. "Is this necessary?"

I said, "Yep." The cork popped, flying across the kitchen, disappearing behind the stove. I laughed. "Ignore it, I'll get it in the morning — who wants champagne?"

I poured and then we all held our glasses up. I toasted, "To friends, new and old, we are excited to share this moment with our new friend, Torin, and welcome home, Coop."

Everyone raised their glasses.

Torin asked, "Might I add one thing?"

I nodded.

“Tae the feast tae come, our gratitude that Mistress Lexi has cooked for us, it smells verra good. My mouth is waterin’. Tae our good company, good cheer, and God’s grace upon us all. May our hearts be merry and our days blessed. Slàinte!”

We all drank.

Then Torin stuck his tongue out with a grimace. “Och, I daena want tae be rude, but I think it has soured.”

I laughed. “That’s fizz, it’s supposed to be like that. It’s French, a type of sparkling wine.”

“Ah, the French will meddle in things they ought tae leave proper and plain.”

I said, “This is considered good, I paid top dollar for this bottle.”

Torin said, “If this was Castle Glume, we would send the drink back and tell the cellarer tae bring forth a new cask.”

Cooper narrowed his eyes. “You’ve never heard of Champagne before?”

Torin shook his head.

Cooper drank another sip.

Torin asked, “So ye went on a journey, Master Cooper, and twas long — where did ye go?”

Just then the timer dinged. I put on the oven mitts, picked up the pot, and drained the

pasta over a colander in the sink.

No one talked while I did it, because the steam that rose made the action seem so dramatic.

Then I pulled the pan of meatballs and sauce from the oven. “Drat, I forgot the garlic bread, hold on.”

I had bought garlic butter, so I quickly brushed it onto the bread loaves and stuck them in the oven, happily remembering to turn it back on.

I put my hands on my hips and blew hair from my sweaty forehead. “Okay, sorry, go back to the conversation.”

Cooper said, “Right, yeah, you asked a question, Torin, I was in Los Angeles on a business trip.”

Torin nodded, his eyes narrowed. “And where is Lusanjleez? Tis near?”

Cooper brow drew down. “What...?”

Torin said, “Yer journey on this day, was it a long distance?”

“Los Angeles ... in California?”

Torin shook his head, looking completely clueless.

Cooper looked around at all of us. “Y’all are messing with me, right?”

Torin asked again, “Tis near? Ye dinna hae far tae go?”

“Los Angeles is in the state of California. It’s on the other side of the country, about three thousand miles away. What is happening... ? I went by plane.”

Torin said, “Och, I heard of this?—”

Cooper’s eyes went wide.

The bread timer dinged.

I said, brightly, “Time for dinner!”

LEXI

I had planned to do a ‘sit down’, serving from bowls, but since it was less a ‘supper party’ and more just ‘supper’, I took the lids off the pots and pans and lined them down the counter. We would serve ourselves buffet style.

Jen went first. Torin watched her choose a plate and picked one for himself. I could tell he was watching her closely for cues.

His pants fit tight around his ass, his shirt pulled across his back, showing off all the muscular forms. It made me lose track of my thoughts for a moment, but then I shook my head to clear it. I handed a plate to Cooper who was confusedly watching Torin take cues from Jen.

Jen served Torin some pasta, using tongs. He said, “Och aye, what is it?”

Cooper asked, “Pasta, you’ve never had pasta?”

“Nae, it looks verra good.” He licked his lips. His eyes were huge, he looked very hungry.

Jen asked, “More?”

He said, “Aye, more.”

I said, “Save room for the sauce and meatballs.”

Jen passed him the spoon and mimicking her he put a careful small amount on his pile of pasta. With two meatballs.

Coop said, “Nah, man, you gotta really spoon it on, get a lot. Lexi makes the best sauce.”

Torin put another small scoop on his pasta, another meatball.

Cooper took the spoon and gave himself five big scoops, six meatballs. “Hey man, put your plate back over here.” Cooper spooned another spoonful on top of Torin’s. Two more meatballs. “You look hungry.”

“I am, verra hungry, it seems tae hae been centuries since I last ate. I had the pickled eggs earlier?—”

Jen said, “And the meat and crackers I fed you last night.”

“Aye, and Mistress Lexi fed me the sandwich, twas verra good, but this feast is verra grand.”

Jen said, “Follow me to the table, bring your glass.”

When they left for the dining room, Cooper said, “What the hell is going on — is he an imbecile? He’s joking, right?”

“Coop, I’ve had like four long conversations with him. That’s what I’m saying. He does not break character.”

“He’s a nut job.”

I shrugged. “I mean, maybe , but he’s so nice and you know, I don’t get a weird

feeling about him.”

“Yeah, you’ve let down your guard. Who knows what he’s up to. He could be dangerous, psychopathic, schizophrenic.”

“He protected me?—”

“What do you mean?”

I said, “One of the times he landed here?—”

“‘One of the times he landed’ do you hear yourself, Lexi?”

“I know it sounds made up, but remember that storm? The storms happen, then he’s in the yard. It’s connected, somehow.”

Cooper huffed. “This is all just... not cool, Lexi.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know, it sucks. This is not the conversation we should be having.”

Jen called in, “Y’all coming?”

Cooper called back, “Just a second!” He turned to me, “You said he ‘protected you’?”

“Yeah, there was a sword-fight in the yard?—”

“Jesus H Christ.” He turned on his heel and stalked into the dining room.

I got in there as he was putting his plate down in front of a chair, saying, “Sorry about that, haven’t had a lot of time to discuss...” He sat down, furled his cloth napkin over his lap, and then looked directly at Torin. “Why don’t you tell me what the hell

you're doing here."

Jen jumped up, "I'm going to go get a round of beers." She ducked out of the room.

"Och nae, ye sound troubled, Master Cooper, my apologies for steppin' foot upon yer lands and findin' m'self at yer table, uninvited by ye?—"

"Lexi tells me you were fighting with swords with someone out on the lawn."

Torin put down his fork and clasped his hands over his plate. "Aye, I time-jumped back tae m'homelands of Alba, where a battle was a'waitin' me — I was winnin' because I am verra good at it, Master Cooper, but as the battle was ragin', I was ripped away and brought here again?—"

"Who brought you here? None of this makes sense."

Torin dug through his sporran and pulled out the vessel. "This... this demonic device is dragging me through time."

Jen brought a whole six pack to the table and began popping beer caps off and passing them out.

Cooper said, "Okay, Medieval Man, fine, you're not going to break character. You're going to keep weaving this ludicrous story, convincing the ladies, easily, " he looked around at me and Jen, "somehow, but let's go back to discussing the rest of it. So you ended up here?—"

"Three times," he counted on his fingers, "nae, four times. I hae jumped many times in the last few days, but four times I ended up here."

Cooper had his hands clenched in front of his face, his legs jiggling. He was quiet.

I tapped his shoulder. “Maybe we should eat while it’s warm?”

“True, let’s do that.” He took a bite, then asked, “What I don’t understand is why are you here?”

“I daena ken, this vessel...” Torin placed the vessel on the table and nudged it with his finger. “It daena belong tae me. It belongs tae m’laird Maximillian. Tis his family’s artifact, part of their legacy. I had been helpin’ him recover it, and...”

Torin narrowed his eyes. “I wonder... hae ye ever met Maximillian Campbell, dost ye ken of him?”

He looked around the room as we all shook our heads. He nodded, “Twas just an idea...”

He took a bite of pasta. “This is verra good, Mistress Lexi, I hae never had such delicious food.”

Cooper rolled his hand. “So you’ve stolen your ‘laird’ Maximillian’s vessel?”

“Nae, twas lyin’ on a table in a croft in Moulin, dost ye ken the area?”

“Scotland? Nah, never been to Scotland.”

“Well, twas lyin’ there, and the window was open.

There were likely tae be guards near, but I dinna worry on them much.

The vessel was there for the takin’, so I jumped through the window intae the room — Max was slow, I got tae it first. Then we ran and I was about tae toss it tae him, when it ripped me from time.

” He sipped from his beer, then belched loudly and grinned.

We all looked shocked at first, but then Jen and I burst into laughter.

He said, “Tis how ye ken the meal is good, inna it?” He looked at us laughing, “Ye daena belch at the table?”

Jen and I shook our heads. Cooper looked at us like we had lost our minds.

“Och nae, forgive me, but also, ye ought tae properly belch. Tis a compliment tae the fine meal. Our cook expects the halls of the castle tae ring with belches or his mood darkens and he will fight with the buckets in the night.”

I laughed, “Yes, I suppose it is a compliment. I’m glad you are enjoying my cooking.”

Cooper ate quietly. “I don’t believe any of this, I’ll have you know, not one damn word.”

Jen said, “Can you think of any other explanation?”

“Nope, but it’s not up to me to explain it. It’s up to the cosplay-guy here to prove it.” Cooper turned to me. “You’re legit saying it was a sword-fight, out back?”

“Yes, it was terrifying, thankfully I was armed.”

“Thank God you didn’t shoot some medieval sword-fighting guy with my gun, who knows what would have happened, there are probably laws.”

Jen said, “Yeah, against murder.”

Torin said, “Aye, and the laws of the duel. I make sure tae always follow edicts, so I winna be held accountable by Argyll.”

Jen asked, “Who is Argyll?”

“The 4th Earl of Argyll. Archibald Campbell. Hae ye heard of him?”

Jen and I shook our heads.

Cooper put his hands out in disbelief.

Torin said, “He was a trusted noble tae King James V and has been a great and courageous military leader. I serve him.”

Cooper said, “You just said you’re loyal to some guy named Maximillian.”

“I serve them both. I hae tae follow Argyll’s commands, but I hae sworn my loyalty tae Max in his quest for the vessel.”

Cooper pushed his chair from the table. “I need to go to the bathroom.” He put his napkin beside his plate and left the room.

Jen whispered, “Cooper isn’t usually like this. He’s really bummed, huh?”

I nodded. “Yep. He’s dealing with a lot.”

We ate quietly for a moment. Then I realized Cooper hadn’t returned, and wasn’t returning, so I pretended to go get another bottle of wine and went to go check if he was okay.

LEXI

That's how I found Cooper looking very morose, leaning against the wall in the hallway.

I frowned. "Oh no, Coop, I'm so sorry." I stood in front of him, then leaned forward nestling my head against his chest.

He put his arms around me, and held on. "I had big plans, Lexi, I was going to build an eco-tourism empire."

I nodded and said quietly, "It's still a great plan, what do those guys know? They're idiots to not give you the money. They don't think the plan is a moneymaker? You don't need them. We'll figure it out, this is just the?—"

"I know you're trying to help, Lexi, can we just not try to fix it right now?"

"Yeah. I get you." I sighed and pressed against him, his arms around me. And we stood there, comforting each other with an embrace.

Finally Jen came around the corner. "Oh, sorry to interrupt. Wondered where everyone went..."

Cooper let go. I stepped away. Cooper said, "No problem, we're done."

As he passed Jen they went through their fancy handshake: fist-bump, bird wing, clutch, pinky twist, fist-pound, run hand through hair. They had been doing it since

they met, senior year in high school.

We returned to the table and Cooper immediately started grilling Torin again. “So, Medieval Man, what year are you from, you say?”

I said, “His name is Torin, Coop, let’s keep it civil.”

“He says his name is Torin, for all I know it’s Bob Johnson, not a reason in the world to believe a word he says.”

Torin said, “Tis fine, Mistress Lexi, I ken m’tale is difficult tae believe. I daena begrudge Master Cooper’s vigilance, I would do the same if he were feasting in my Great Hall. Tae answer yer question, Master Cooper, twas the year of our Lord, fifteen hundred, fifty-eight.”

Cooper said, “Alright, Torin , and you expect me to believe you came forward over four hundred years. And yet, I’m also supposed to believe you don’t know how to work it — can I hold it?”

Torin said, “Use caution, it grabbed me.”

I winced as he placed it in front of Cooper. “Honestly, Coop, be careful. We do not want that kind of storm in the dining room. This’s my grandmother’s china.”

Cooper nudged it with a finger, then picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

Torin said, “I wish Max had explained its workings, the only thing I ken now is not tae twist it or twill take me away — daena twist it.”

I said, “Did you twist it? Is that why it’s jumping you?”

“Nae, I hae been cautious, but it keeps grabbin’ me anyway without tryin’.”

Cooper opened his hand and let it roll back to the table. He concentrated on it for a moment with his eyes narrowed. “...And you’ve never left the...” He counted on his fingers. “Sixteenth century before, ever?”

“Nae, I hae always lived there.”

“You said this thing belongs to your lord, Maximillian, so somehow I’m supposed to believe he’s been time jumping around, yet time travel doesn’t exist and I’m damn sure if it did, and a man named Maximillian was jumping around, I would have seen him on the news.

I’d expect a man who time travels would be in the history books, yet somehow, Lexi’s kitchen is the only place and time it’s even being discussed.”

Torin said, “Dost ye want the full story?”

Cooper said, “Yes, enlighten me.” And took a big bite of pasta.

“Max was born in a different time. He is a prince. His throne is in the future. I daena ken the year, tis not something I ever asked about —”

Cooper said, “So not now, in the future from now?”

“Hae ye ever heard of a prince named Maximillian?”

“No, we don’t have a prince named Maximillian.”

“Then it must be further intae the future.”

“You’re saying we’ll be returning to a monarchy? This is a helluva story... fascinating that Lexi and Jen believe it. I’m learning so much tonight.” He swept his arm out, almost spilling his beer bottle. “Keep going.”

Torin broke off a hunk of bread as he told the story.

“Max arrived at Castle Glume when he was but a lad and because I was close tae his age, we were raised taegether as if we were brothers. The tale I was told is that dangers had befallen his kingdom. Max learned that his father, the King, had died in battle. Max was spirited away in the night, hidden in Castle Glume. The king’s men promised tae return for Max once the trouble was over, but nae one ever returned. ”

I said, “Oh no! You hadn’t told me the whole story.”

“Aye, tis a tough tale tae tell and harder tae hear. Max rarely spoke of it. Twas verra difficult tae hae been sent away and then left, forgotten, or worse — tae lose his whole family and his throne. He was young, twas impossible tae fight — he couldna go tae their aid.” He sadly shook his head.

“Max has become a verra capable warrior, he is fair and loyal, he would hae been an excellent king, but he has been trapped there in Castle Glume, a lowly man, servin’ an Earl.

Ye can imagine his desperation tae get his hands on this device.

He needs tae gather his family, return tae his kingdom, and fight for his throne. ”

His eyes fell on the machine. He popped the bread in his mouth and chewed, looking at the vessel, shaking his head.

Cooper pushed his plate away. “Yeah, that sounds like a terrible thing to have

happened to someone in a fairy tale. You believe this, Lexi?”

I looked away.

He said, “Seriously?”

I said, “Sometimes, I think, time travel is the only explanation.”

He turned to Jen, “I’ve known you for years, you’re very practical, this is normal to you?”

She shrugged.

He got up from the table. “I need something to write with.” He stalked from the room.

Jen popped the caps off more beers and passed them around.

A few moments later, Cooper returned with a notebook and pen. “I’m going to ask you a few questions. Because I want to prove that you’re making this up.”

I said, “Coop, this is rude.”

“It’s not rude, is it, Medieval—I mean, Torin? You already said you’d be skeptical if our roles were reversed, right? You don’t mind me asking a few questions.”

The corner of Torin’s mouth went up, as if he were enjoying this greatly.

“Ah, a challenge in yer Great Hall! I was wonderin’ when the games would begin, this will remind me of home!

Mistress Lexi, I daena mind if Master Cooper questions me, I look forward tae it.

I ken mine is not a common tale, and that he finds me unfamiliar.

” He tore a piece of bread apart. “Master Cooper daena ken I am trustworthy.”

“Exactly!” said Cooper.

Torin added, “He also dinna witness me save yer life.” He popped a piece of bread in his mouth and chewed.

Cooper said, “Yes, true, you mean during the sword-fight on the lawn?”

“Aye.”

I said, “The other man charged me, I thought he was going to kill me.”

Cooper said, “Damn, Babe, I’m sorry.” He looked at Torin. “Thanks, man, I appreciate that, but still... I’ve got questions.”

Torin nodded. “Yer gratitude and yer challenge are accepted, Master Cooper.”

Jen said, “You’re going to give Torin a test?”

Cooper said, “Why, yes, yes I am. I’m going to ask him questions about Scotland and see how he answers.”

Jen said, “But how are you going to know if he’s right? You know next to nothing about Scotland.”

“After he answers I’ll look it up. That’ll work, I’m pretty sure.

” He clicked the pen and poised it above the paper.

“Maybe it won’t. The truth is if I can find the answers, homeboy, here, might have studied all of this for his character — he is very committed.

I will give him that. But it might help persuade you all that this is pure BS. ”

He began to write while asking, “Torin, what’s the biggest political issue going on in Scotland right now, according to you?”

Torin looked up at the ceiling for a moment, “We haena been home tae Castle Glume in a while as we were on our quest, so I haena been privy tae the conversations in the Great Hall. That is where we usually hear the news of the day, but in the tavern the other night I was told that the Dauphin of France, Francis, has married our Mary, thereby bringing the thrones of France and Scotland taegether.”

I said, “Mary who?”

“Our young queen, Mary Stuart.”

Cooper wrote fast then read over it, before asking, “You said you overheard it in a tavern, how much does a tavern cost in your time?”

Torin said, “This is a complicated question, Master Cooper. Max negotiated for our room, and he dinna negotiate well, we had tae share it with another traveler. We were all sleepin’ on the same bed, but twas the last room available. Twas cheap considerin’—”

“An estimate is fine.”

“I drank about four pints, Max and I shared a meal, we gave the innkeeper a shillin’

and a half.”

Cooper exhaled. “What is a shilling and a half?”

“About eighteen pence.” Torin dug in his sporran and pulled out a few coins, placing them on the table between our plates.

He placed a finger on the gold one. “This is a pistole, this silver one is a shillin’, and these two are groats.”

Cooper picked up the gold one. Jen and I each picked up the silver coins.

I said, “Wow, that is, wild. You might have wanted to lead with this, Torin.”

“Ye haena seen coins like this?”

The one I held was not uniformly circular. It looked like it had been inexpertly stamped. It had a shield and... “Cooper, this one has a date.”

He took it and read, “1558. The gold one says 1552.”

Jen put her coin on the table. “That’s kind of conclusive, huh?”

“Or it’s part of his costume — coin collections are a thing, you know.” He added, “Alright, one more, Torin. What did your tavern serve for dinner?”

“In Moulin? Och, in Moulin twas naething special. I will tell ye of a fine dinner we had in?—”

Cooper said, “Nothing from, like, Glasgow, a place we all know about. That’s not going to prove anything.”

Torin asked, “Dost ye ken of Muthill?”

“Nope.”

Torin leaned back with his hands clasped on his stomach.

“Max was in a fine mood so we stopped in Muthill’s best tavern.

Tis a common spot tae rest and their larder is full, the fare is known tae be hearty.

We met up with some friends on their return tae Castle Glume and they were long from their last meal, so Max ordered a grand feast. The table groaned under the platters. We had roasted venison and wild boar?—”

I screwed up my face.

He asked, “Ye haena tasted wild boar, Mistress Lexi? Och, tis rich and gamey, twas served with a sauce of red wine and crushed berries. Beside that was salmon, verra fresh, caught in the River Earn, and we had side dishes of neeps in butter, parsnips, and bannocks?—”

Cooper was writing furiously.

Jen asked, “Neeps?”

“Turnips.”

I asked, “What’s a bannock?”

“A type of bread, twas served warm with heather honey.”

I said, “Oh man, that all sounds delicious, now I’m embarrassed by my one course meal.”

“Twas a tavern, taverns must hae hearty food for the journeyers. This is a verra fine meal for a small party, Mistress Lexi, and I am staggered ye cooked it all on yer own. In my time twould take five men. Ye would hae tae butcher the boar and deer, grind the oats, prepare the sauces, och nae, there be days of toil. How did ye procure the meat for the balls?”

“We bought that at the store earlier today. In the package.”

He nodded. “Did Mistress Marjorie butcher the meat?”

“No, she buys it from somewhere else.”

His eyes went far away as if he was trying to understand.

Cooper asked, “Back to the question, what did you drink?”

“We drank a copious amount that night —heather ale. Tis the tavern’s specialty, hae ye ever had it?”

We shook our heads.

Cooper said, “Nah, but I’ve seen it for sale in Nashville.”

Torin asked, “Dost Nashville hae moors?”

Cooper chuckled. “Nah, man, Nashville is known for country music, but that’s neither here nor there.” He wrote Heather ale. “Anything else?”

“Aye. After a round we asked for somethin’ sweet, and were served crowdie cream served with cherries.”

I said, “Oh man, that reminds me, I have ice cream! Want a banana split?”

I jumped up and began clearing places. I carried a stack of plates into the kitchen as they began looking up the questions and answers on the laptop.

LEXI

I stuck my head back in. “Torin, what kind of ice cream? Chocolate, or cookies and cream?”

He said, “Aye.”

I said, “And don’t find out too much, Coop, I’m totally invested, don’t want to miss anything.”

I returned with two gallons of ice cream, a spoon, a bunch of bananas, chocolate sauce in a squeeze bottle, a stack of bowls and spoons, and a jar of cherries. “I’ll make them here while you talk.”

Cooper pointed at the computer screen. “First question, ‘biggest political issue’. I looked it up, yes, Mary gets married, but Queen Mary also dies in 1558, you didn’t mention it.”

Torin’s face went pale. “Och nae, the young queen has passed! Nae, this is terrible news. Did it happen while I hae been gone?”

Cooper said, “You tell me — it says here that Mary died and Elizabeth took her place.”

Torin said, “That is odd, who is Elizabeth...? Och nae, Master Cooper, dost ye mean Mary Tudor dies? The Queen of England — when? She is replaced by her cousin, nae,” he shook his head, “this is not a good thing, but ye are discussin’ England, nae

Scotland — we hae been at war with them.

Our Mary, Queen of Scots , is bonny and fair.

She is now married tae the dauphin of France, as ye ken, Scotland will hae the assistance of France in our war. ”

I put two scoops of ice cream in a bowl and dripped chocolate sauce on it.

Cooper read the screen and said, “Fine, yeah, you’re right, thought I had you. It says here that Mary Tudor dies in November of that year.”

Torin’s face screwed up. “I daena like tae ken the future, tis distressing, but I am glad tae hear the English Queen will die, good riddance on her...”

Cooper reached across for the bunch of bananas right before I did, and tore off one, and passed it to Torin. “While Lexi serves our ice cream, how about you get the banana ready.”

He directed his focus back at the laptop yet I could see he was pretending to look at the screen while watching Torin peripherally.

Torin picked up the banana, honestly looking at it as if he had never seen one before. He peeled off the sticker, and flicked his hand having trouble getting it off his finger. Then he wiped it onto his pants.

He grasped both ends of the banana, pulling, squeezing, and attempting to break it in half, but instead causing it to split open and the ripe banana to squeeze out all over his hands.

He frowned.

Cooper's eyes were narrowed.

I picked up a banana and peeled it. Torin wiped his hands on his napkin, grimacing. "Och nae, I did not do this right."

I said, "Dump yours here in his bag, don't worry about it." I cut the banana in half and put it in his bowl and passed it to him.

Cooper said, "Am I to understand that you've never seen a banana before? You have no idea what it is and how to peel it?"

Torin asked, "This is a bana? Then, aye, I hae never seen one before." He used the spoon to take a bite of banana.

"Tis verra good!" Then he took a taste of the ice cream.

"Och aye, this is delicious!" He took another bigger bite and another, with his mouth full, "Och, I need tae slow down. I will become ill." He took another bite.

"How dost ye keep it cold when the weather is so fair?"

Cooper narrowed his eyes even more.

Jen said, "The freezer, in the kitchen, makes ice too. It's glorious in the height of summer."

"Tis glorious!" Then he added, "But, tae return tae our challenge, Master Cooper, daena tell me if something terrible happens tae Mary Stuart, our queen. I canna bear the idea of her coming tae a poor end." He swept the spoon out in the air, dismissing the thought.

“She is too bonny tae hae a poor end. I am certain she will lead Alba tae peace and prosperity now that we hae the royal intermarriage. Likely we will hae a union of crowns, twill be verra good.”

Cooper chewed his lip.

Jen asked, “So, Torin, when did you leave, what month was it?”

“A’ Chèitean.”

“Say what?”

“Ye ken, Maius m?nsis?”

Cooper tapped his pen irritably. “Are you saying ‘May’?”

Torin nodded.

Jen pointed at the laptop. “See, Coop, you thought you caught him in a lie, but he has a good explanation. The Marys are not the same Marys, and the other one died after he left. Proves it?”

“None of this proves anything, at all — he studied up. He’s a good actor. He’s a talented liar.”

Torin said, “Och, now we hae reached the moment in the challenge where ye are callin’ me a liar. Tae lie is a sin?—”

“On that, you and I agree?—”

Torin tossed his napkin onto the table. “Ye ought tae prove I am wrong, on anything

at all, afore ye accuse me of lying — or shall I go?”

I held up my hands. “No, please, that’s not necessary. I know it’s getting tense, it doesn’t need to, everyone just chill, right Cooper? Be polite and let’s enjoy the rest of our dessert, finish our drinks. We can keep going down the list, no one needs to be mad.”

Cooper said, “I can be cool.”

Torin said, “Aye, Mistress Lexi, the challenge over the feast ought nae turn intae a battle in the Great Hall, that is an important rule.”

Cooper drew the list closer and typed on the laptop. “It’s harder to find a good list of tavern food in the sixteenth... hmmm, you said, Muthill?”

“Aye.” Then Torin asked, “May I hae more, Mistress Lexi?”

I scooped more ice cream into his bowl.

Cooper continued, “There doesn’t seem to be much about Muthill... a mention on this blog, but in passing. Hmmm....” He kept reading. “What was the other place you mentioned?”

Torin gestured to the laptop as if he had just noticed it. “What is it...?”

“A laptop, a computer, it looks up information.”

Torin looked very confused but said, “We rested overnight in Moulin.”

Cooper typed.

Torin leaned to look at the screen. His face screwed up. He added, “M’home is Castle Glume.”

“That’s good...” Cooper typed, “Because nothing much about Moulin and Muthill.”

He added, “Now I’m searching for Castle Gloom.”

Then he turned the screen.

Jen and I both leaned closer to look. There was a name at the top of the website, Campbell Castle, and a photograph of a ruin.

Torin’s face darkened.

I said, “Are you sure this is the same place?”

“Formerly called Castle Gloom, situated above the town of Dollar, Clackmannanshire?—”

Torin said, “Aye, tis the same place. Tis a ruin... what happened tae it?”

Cooper’s eyes scanned the page. “Looks like, in July 1654, Royalist rebels attacked and burned Castle Campbell over two nights.”

I said, “Wow, that happened three hundred and fifty years ago.”

Torin looked down at his empty ice cream bowl. “That is long after m’life, almost a hundred years past.” He exhaled. “Tis unsettling.”

Cooper turned the screen away. “Okay, here’s a question: someone fairly famous visited your home in 1556, two years before you?—”

Torin said, “Famous, what dost ye mean?”

“Someone important. Someone who would be historically significant.”

Torin nodded. “Ah, yes, that would be the journeyin’ poet, Gavin Duggie, then. Och, he enthralled us with a ballad about...” His words trailed off as he watched Cooper.

He asked, earnestly, “Is he not who ye mean? Everyone agreed he was the best journeyin’ poet who visited the castle in years.”

“No, I meant John Knox.”

“Knox, the preacher ? Aye, he came around that time, m’laird the Earl invited him. I found him tae be like a rooster in a flock of grouse. His sermon was loud and impressive and the Earl is a great admirer, but nae one else seemed tae care about it much. Knox is famous?”

Cooper closed the laptop. “Yep, very famous.”

Torin looked back at his empty bowl. “Maybe I daena understand the meanin’ of it.”

I said, “Torin, do you want more ice cream?”

“Nae.” He stood, almost knocking his chair over, holding his stomach. “I think the bana dinna agree with the beers.”

I said, “You can use the bathroom if you...”

He headed for the door, holding onto the wall for balance. “Och nae, I over gorged m’self on the sweet fare. Tis fine, Mistress Lexi, I will retire and be well when I need tae get up for guard duty.”

I said, “I’ll walk you down to the?—”

Cooper stood. “Nah, I’ll walk him down, no worries.”

“But—”

“But what? If he needs a shoulder to lean on heading down, are you going to hold him up? He’s twice your size.”

I said, “I guess not.”

He met Torin down the hall.

We heard Torin saying, “I daena mean tae put ye out, Master Cooper.”

“No worries, I ate a lot of ice cream too, and drank a lot. I could use a little fresh air before bed.”

I went to the hall and caught a glimpse of Torin’s face, green, as he went through the door, calling over his shoulder, “Thank ye kindly for the meal, Mistress Lexi.”

And they were gone.

Jen said, “Damn, should we be worried that Cooper is walking him home?”

“Probably, he was in no mood.”

We began clearing the table.

She asked, “What did you think about the test, did Torin pass it?”

I was quiet for a moment. “I mean, I think so? I already sort of believed him, even without the test. I mean, just watch him, no one can keep a character that well, for that long.”

She said, “There was a moment when he didn’t seem to react about the computer and I was thinking, aha! You say you’re from the past but you’re going to take a computer in stride? But then he asked what it was.”

“Yeah, if he was pretending wouldn’t he just ask, ‘What is this, what is that?’ Instead it’s as if he doesn’t see it until he notices it. Then he asks about it. It seems legit. I believed he’d never seen a banana before.”

She carried all the ice cream stuff on the tray. “Truth. That was wild. How can you never have seen a banana?”

“Yeah. If he is from the past and this is all completely new, everything would be confusing. The room would be chaotic and you’d recognize nothing. I feel like that’s true. Then suddenly he’s like, ‘What’s that laptop thing?’

“So you believe him.”

I said, “I don’t not believe him... you know? He hasn’t given me any reason to doubt him. ”

We carried all the stuff into the kitchen and looked through the window to see Torin and Cooper were almost all the way to the back-shack.

She asked, “Want to go down there? See what they’re talking about?”

“Totally. I’ll do dishes when we get back.” We left for the lawn, with Dude following behind us.

LEXI

As we approached the back-shack, Cooper was standing just off the stoop in the darkness, looking in through the door to the fully lit interior.

He was watching something, intently, secretively.

He heard us walk up, and pressed his finger to his lips, telling us to be quiet. We quieted and joined him, watching.

Torin, alone in the house, was blowing on the lightbulb of the lamp, trying to get it to go out. He had forgotten how to turn them off, or the lesson from yesterday had been lost in all the other stuff that happened.

He finally gave up, sat down on the couch, and then rolled over onto his side, wearing his modern clothes, putting his Nike-clad feet up on the end. He looked like he was going to sleep, the light of the house on — bright as day.

It hurt my heart a little that the lights were on, I wished I could do it, but I didn't want to embarrass him.

We turned and walked back to the house.

Inside, we didn't speak about it. Jen and I did dishes, while Cooper went up to unpack his suitcase. Then Jen looked up the stairs. "You cool with me staying the night? I did kinda drink too much, but now, maybe y'all need some quiet time?"

“Nah, it’s fine, stay. You meant to stay, it’s fine. He’s in a mood, but I’m not, plus I need your help making breakfast in the morning.”

“Good,” she put down the drying towel. “It’s early as hell, only like, ten, but I think I’ll turn in.”

“Of course, I’ll finish locking up.”

She kissed me on the cheek and wandered down the hall to the guest room, where she stayed all the time. She even kept her own toothbrush in the drawer.

I looked down at the back house for a moment. Feeling a little melancholy about him, wanting to make sure he was all right... He would be okay with the door wide open, light on, not feeling good after eating too much ice cream, right?

Probably.

He was a big strapping fellow, he would be fine. He had eaten too much, happened all the time — how much sugar did a guy from the sixteenth century get usually? Likely none.

A man from the past would easily get ill from all this food and sensory overload. He was in a world so different from his own. A New World.

I chuckled. I guess I was convinced... Torin was a time traveler.

I climbed the stairs to go to bed.

Cooper was sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, staring down at his hands. I walked up and put my hands on his shoulders. He put his arms around my hips and pulled me close, nestling his face against my chest.

I whispered, "I'm glad you're home, I'm sorry about the complicated dinner guest."

He lay back, pulling me onto him and began kissing me, then said, "It's fine, you didn't know my meeting sucked."

"He kissed me on my neck and drew his lips up my throat to my lips."

"You invited a crazy person to dinner, so what. Usually it might have been funny as hell, but ended up, not. I'm sorry I was a jerk to you, it's just.. . I have no patience right now."

He pulled my shirt up and off over my head.

I kissed down the side of his face and sat astride his jeans. He cocked his arm behind his head.

I wiggled on his lap. "I really missed you."

He grinned and started undoing the buttons on the front of my pants.

I added, "You also weren't very nice to him."

He stopped and put his hands on my thighs. "I was nice enough, considering."

"Considering what?"

"That the guy stayed in character all night, Lexi. I lost my patience. No one else in my shoes would be able to stay chill, come on."

I narrowed my eyes. "Come on, what?"

“You get it, don’t pretend like you don’t.”

I rolled off his lap to the side. “I don’t get it, tell me.”

“I went out of town and you invited some stranger to live in the back house, a man, a big man with mental issues, and you’ve clearly let down your guard around him and he’s hitting on you.”

“He is not!”

He clasped his hands and mimicked Torin’s lower voice, “‘Mistress Lexi, might I have some of your cream. What is ice, Mistress Sexy, you make the best cream. I love your cream, Mistress Lexi.’”

I pouted. “I have never known you to be jealous before.”

“I never had to be, you’ve never had a big guy move into your back-shack before. You gotta admit it’s meant to make me jealous, right?”

“It is not, why would you think that?”

“He’s big, he’s what the ladies would call hot, he’s like Tarzan back there, all helpless, doesn’t know how to turn off the lights. Jen and you are all,” he raised his pitch, “‘isn’t he sweet how he’s like a big, hot baby?’ And meanwhile he’s clomping all around asserting himself.”

I put my hand on his chest. “You have to admit, if your business meeting had gone okay you probably wouldn’t be bothered by it at all.”

He turned his head to the side to look directly at me, raising his brow. “You’re saying this is all on me?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Because I’ve been preparing for this meeting for more than a year, and they...

” His eyes shifted back and forth across the ceiling as he spoke.

“they... it’s like they didn’t even consider it.

Like they had already made up their mind.

I made the whole presentation and they smiled and nodded and thanked me for coming...

” He was on his back, with his feet still off the bed on the floor.

“But they did do something weird, Lexi.”

He turned his head so that the strong muscles and tendons of his neck were prominent, my favorite place, a spot that was strength and vulnerability, both.

I leaned up and kissed him there, then lay back down, facing him. “What?”

“My presentation was over and we were in the questions part. Steve’s CFO and his Marketing Manager asked a couple of good questions, the kind that you would expect and that I was prepared for.

They nodded at my answers and jotted down the numbers.

It seemed like it was a formality for a presentation that went well. You know?”

I nodded.

“Then Steve said, ‘You know what would be cool? A Go-Kart track, on the back acres, those are really hot right now and that could be really lucrative.’ His CFO and the Marketing Manager turned all their attention on that and they just riffed for an hour on this ‘big idea’ of a Go-Kart track in my eco-village while I just nodded and smiled, agreeing with it, though as you know it was not at all my vision. I sort of knew, right then, that I wasn’t going to get the money. ”

“Aw man, that sucks.”

“Yeah, at the time I tried not to dwell on it, the meeting had gone long, everyone was tired. Sometimes long meetings get chaotic and off subject, we know this, but I had this nagging feeling he wasn’t seriously considering my proposal anymore.”

“You didn’t mention it when you called.”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to jinx it. Or let you down.” He yawned really loudly and wrapped his hand around mine.

“What if you had said, ‘Great, Go-Karts, I’ll draw up the plans’?”

“It wouldn’t have helped, I was nodding and smiling like a chump, pretending like Go-Karts were the greatest idea in the world, but ultimately the Go-Karts were just a signal.

The Alpha in the room, the guy with all the money, was telling me that my idea wasn’t good enough.

And then he ‘passed’ on it and sent John to tell me. ”

He sighed. “More than a year of my life, wasted.”

“I am just so sorry.”

He nodded. “I would just really appreciate you not making my reaction to Renaissance Boy into a big thing. He’s a loon, Lexi.

He stayed in character all night, in your dining room, eating your food, sleeping in your back-shack, and yeah, I get it, you’re a great hostess, and I do get that I’m in a crap mood, but.

.. how many more meals will he be joining us? ”

“I get it.” I asked, “So you don’t believe he’s a time traveler?”

He raised his head and looked at me, his face screwed up. “Of course not, Lexi, he’s just a very good bullshitter. I can’t explain how he’s so good at it, but it is bullshit. And that’s all more of a reason not to invite him to dinner again.”

I said, “I would like to mention that I need to feed him tomorrow before he hits the road. He’ll need breakfast. My grandmother would never forgive me for sending a traveler, time or regular, away on a journey without a meal. But after that, yes, he won’t be at our table anymore.”

“Good, thank you.” He yawned again.

“Sleepy?”

“Jet lag. Yes.”

I said, “I had big plans for your welcome-home-bang.”

He chuckled, sleepily. “I love you, but man, I think I’m falling asleep.”

I said, “I’m also really looking forward to our big dinner tomorrow night at Fall’s Landing. I picked out a dress.”

He yawned again and smacked his lips. “You know, don’t be mad, but I don’t think I want to anymore. I’ll cancel the reservations, we’ll do it... another time.”

“When, you think, like next weekend, or just later...?”

He shrugged. “Not sure... got a lot to think about, later.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. Good. I’m going to go get ready for bed. Get under the sheets.”

He said, “I will.”

As I stepped into the bathroom, and looked in the mirror, I took a good hard look.

I looked harried, as if I had had some harrowing experiences: I had cooked dinner, hosted a dinner party, gotten terrible news from my ‘boyfriend’ — he was not asking me to marry him, that was clear, and I had been a referee all night. I smoothed down my mussed hair.

I also didn’t get laid.

I said, over my shoulder, “I know you’re not into making plans, right now, but maybe a plan is exactly what you need.

” I squeezed toothpaste onto my brush, and brushed for a second, looking in the mirror, then said, loud enough for my voice to carry to the other room, “Let’s talk about how I can invest in your project.

I mean, I know there are rules to my trust fund, but they're not insurmountable.

We just have to talk to my lawyer, right, Coop? ”

There was no answer. I spit in the sink and looked out into the bedroom. Cooper was fast asleep, his feet still on the floor.

Dammit, he slept so soundly there's no way he would get into the bed, not for hours.

I finished brushing my teeth, went out, untied his shoes, and pulled them off his feet.

I slid off his socks and then pushed and shoved his shoulders and legs until I got him sort of regularly lying on his side of the bed.

He was on the covers so I pulled a throw blanket from the wooden chest at the end of the room and covered him with it.

He blearily smacked his lips and talked in his sleep, “Bed.”

I knew from experience it was not an invitation, he was too deeply asleep, there would be no welcome-home-bang until tomorrow. “I still need to take off my makeup, be there in a minute.”

He had already fallen fast asleep again.

I returned to the bathroom and piled my hair up in a loose bun and used makeup cleaner pads to wipe off my makeup and mascara.

Then I kicked off my shoes, peed, pulled on a pair of pajama pants, and changed into a comfortable tank top.

Finally I went to the bed to climb in, when I heard Dude meow downstairs.

I hung my head. Of course Dude wanted out.

LEXI

I pulled my hoodie on and padded down the stairs to the hallway, meeting Dude by the door. “Hey, numbskull, you waited until I was almost in bed.”

He looked at the door. “Yeah, I see, you’re impatient.

” I opened the door and undid the latch on the screen door.

“Don’t go to the back-shack, bugging Torin, he needs his...

” I looked down toward the back-shack to see Torin strolling across the middle of the lawn, still wearing the button down shirt and the chinos, whistling, looking up and around at the sky. “...sleep.”

Torin heard the door open and raised his hand, calling up to the porch, “Mistress Lexi, I assumed ye were asleep!” He had both his dirk and his broadsword sheathed on the belt, slung around his hips, looking incongruous with the chinos and Nikes.

I walked out to the edge of the wide porch. “Dude wanted out so I came down... Whatcha doing?” Dude had gone out to greet him and was rubbing against the bottom of his legs.

Torin leaned down and gave my cat a rub between the ears. “When I hae trouble sleepin’ I go on night guard, twill set m’mind that there is nothin’ tae worry on, and gets me in the fresh air. Usually tis easy tae rest after.” As he spoke he walked toward me and leaned against the pole on my porch.

I said, “You’re still wearing the clothes we picked out, are they comfortable?”

“Aye,” he did a kind of forward lunge, “the trews allow for a great deal of movement.” He crouched.

“I think I could sword fight in them verra well and they are much lighter than m’great kilt, tis better in this aimsir theth.

” He flapped the front of his shirt to show he meant the hot weather. “I will give them back afore I go.”

“You don’t need to, you can keep them if they’re useful, and when you go down to the back-shack there’re some plastic bags in the cupboard under the sink. They’ll be similar to the one you had, to carry your things in. Take as many as you need.”

He nodded. “I will.”

“Do you feel better? You looked pretty green.”

“I feel much better, the sweetness in yer cream set m’stomach churnin’.” He grimaced.

I said, “Usually you aren’t supposed to eat three helpings. I’m used to the sweets, I love and crave the sweetness, and even I don’t eat that much.”

“Aye, twas the gluttony. I paid for it with a purge at the bowl in the garderobe.”

I chuckled. “Well, you’ll be hungry in the morning.”

“Aye, but I will do m’best not tae bother ye, I will see if I can get the vessel tae work, and?—”

“You are invited to eat breakfast first, no question. Master, um... Cooper knows, before you try the vessel.”

The corner of his mouth went up. “Tis decided?”

“Yes, tis decided.”

He nodded in the darkness looking out at the stars in the night sky.

I said, “I’m sorry he didn’t believe you, that he was rude.”

“Tis not for ye tae apologize, Mistress Lexi, tis a conversation between two men, ye canna try tae get between them.”

I said, “Men will be men, huh?”

“If ye mean men will need tae argue and come close tae blows over differences of opinions, then aye. I am learnin’ that men will be alike in every century.

” He took a second before adding, “But I daena blame him, Mistress Lexi. I dinna believe m’laird, Max, when he first told me of it, and we had long traveled the same paths taegether.

Master Cooper daena ken me from a spice dealer on market day. ”

I said, “True. And it has been a really hard day for him, he’s usually much more chill.”

“Chill?”

“You know, like not hot-headed, not so quick to anger.”

“Aye, I see, tae be stoic. Remainin’ cool is a verra fine trait, tis important when one is facin’ down an imminent battle, but Master Cooper is done with his battle.

He lost, tis tae be expected that if a man loses a battle he will be agitated after.

A man who has lost a battle will pick new ones in an attempt tae prove tae the world that he can win.

The trouble is, he will likely lose those too — many a man will end up in deep despair by losing over and over until he has naething left tae lose.

In Scotland, we call this wrestlin’ with shadows, Mistress Lexi — fightin’ battles that arna there, when the real one is already lost. Master Cooper will come back tae himself in time.

Tis on my shoulders that I dined at his table on a night when he wanted tae pick a battle.”

“Wrestling with shadows, huh? That’s a good description. He wants to keep fighting, that explains why he won’t hear of me lending him the money.”

He raised his chin and looked down his nose at me, then shook his head. “I daena understand yer time — ye are holdin’ the gold? The lady is the head of the house? He is just a man ye keep here without marryin’ him nor sharin’ yer wealth? This is verra confusing.”

I chewed my lip as Cooper’s voice went through my head. Don’t be mad, but I don’t think I want to anymore...

I said, “It’s complicated.”

“Aye, it sounds it. I am a simpler man m’self, I will throw a lass over m’shoulder and take her tae m’castle. I will share the gold.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “That’s not at all how we do it, not anymore.” Then I asked, “But you haven’t done it yet?”

“Nae, I haena found the right lass yet for it, besides m’laird Max has needed my accompaniment on his quest. Twill be a time afore I am back at Glume with the wherewithal tae heave a lass up tae m’shoulders.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been tossed over someone’s shoulders before, except maybe my dad’s when I was very little.”

He grinned. “That is why ye arna married, I suppose, a bonny lass such as ye — must be because ye haena been heaved tae a shoulder properly.”

I chuckled. “Maybe that’s true.”

Dude rubbed around his legs again.

I said, “Dude is indifferent to most everyone, I’m so surprised he likes you this much.”

“I am surprised we like each other at all, I am generally wary of familiars?—”

“Familiars? Like witches’ pets?”

“Aye.” He knelt down and petted Dude.

“Well, I’m not a witch and he’s just a cat, not up to anything much but terrorizing the rodents, as is his job.” I leaned down and scratched Dude a little.

He trilled as he liked to do.

I stood back up.

Torin tilted back his head and looked down his nose again. “We ought not be out speakin’ tae each other in the night, ye ken, Mistress Lexi. Yer Master Cooper likely wants tae protect ye from my ‘advances’ on his maiden. He will think me a scoundrel and send me from yer lands.”

I chuckled. “You forget, sir, he already thinks you’re a scoundrel, he already wants you gone by morning.”

“Aye, tis the way of poor Torin, he is ever beguillin’ the lasses and provokin’ their masters?—”

“My master?” I sighed. “I suppose I’m going to let that slide since you’re an ancient man, but he is not my master, he’s just my... you know, ‘boyfriend’ as he helpfully pointed out earlier this evening.”

He narrowed his eyes and nodded.

I added, “But you think me beguiled?” I scoffed.

He chuckled. “Nae, I suppose ye arna beguiled, ye are discomfited by m’presence, nae beguiled.”

“That’s probably a better way to put it. Do you often beguile lasses? And provoke their masters?”

“Aye, m’laird finds it difficult tae extricate me from all the troubles that befall me...”
He grinned. “Tis all because I am so verra charmin’.”

I laughed. “Yes, I can see that. And your laird, Max, doesn’t get in trouble?”

“Aye, he does, but he has a better manner about him, he is a prince... he is often forgiven his...” He shook his head.

“Nae, I ought not discuss our intrigues in front of a bonny lass such as yerself. Tis too scandalous. Suffice it tae say, Max is often the one who is cleared and forgiven for our exploits and clear-headed on our failings and must solve the issues with the lairds and blacksmiths and priests...”

“And you’re the troublemaker.”

He grinned. “Tis true, and tis also true that I am more amiable tae be around.”

“I’m sorry I’m asking so many questions, I’m just kind of fascinated — Does your laird Max know you think he’s the serious one and you’re more fun?”

“Aye, he is often too serious, worried about his family. He kens he has the manner of a spring bear. I do m’best tae keep his spirits up, but tis a chore some days. And I daena mind yer questions, I enjoy a conversation in the darkness, oidhche mhath?—

“What does that mean?”

“A fine night.” He breathed in deeply, rolling his hand so that I breathed in deeply too. “If ye fill yer lungs, Mistress Lexi, with the cool damp air and stench of the deep muck of the forest, ye will be protected from the mischievous fae?—”

I exhaled. “How does that work?”

“If yer lungs are filled with the air of the forest the fae canna find ye by yer breath, tis protective, everyone kens. Whenever I am in a tavern in the night and I go out tae

relieve m'self I take a deep breath of the night air, a fae has never once harmed me.

Ye see, Mistress Lexi, it has proven tae be a good charm. ”

“I hadn’t heard that, but now I will breathe in at night more often.

I do love coming out here and standing under the night sky.

Do you see how, when you stand here...” I went out in the yard by about twenty feet, and stood in the grass, and looked up.

“See how the trees ring the sky? This is one of my favorite places in the world.”

He followed me to the spot and looked up. “I see it, the trees circle ye, ye are surrounded, and protected in the ring.”

“Yep, this is a magical spot.” I looked down at my feet. “Right here, this one foot by one foot square.”

I looked back up and then realized he was keenly watching the side of my face.

I blushed. “I really like to come out here at night, from now on I will remember to breathe deeply.”

“I will sleep soundly knowin’ that I protected Mistress Lexi from the forest fae.”

I returned to the porch and he followed. I said, “But I’m usually alone, you say you like to have conversations in the night?”

“Aye, I am rarely alone. I usually hae a band of men about me — we are on a hunt, journeying from village tae castle, or guarding up on the walls. Some of the men are

sullen and rarely speak, such as m'friend Boyd, but Max and I talk a great deal.

” He chuckled, “I ken ye are thinkin’, ‘Nae, Torin, ye are talking? I daena believe it!’ But the best thoughts are discovered in the night, good plans are laid, the best discourse happens under the stars. ”

The corner of his mouth went up, “I am storytellin’... m’apologies, Mistress Lexi, I think I long for home.”

“I bet this modern world feels really foreign.”

“Aye, ye seem tae hae all the comforts ye could want yet yer bonds with yer family are difficult tae understand... I hae a question for ye, where is yer father and yer uncles and brothers?”

“I lost my parents a few years ago and I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Och nae, I am sorry Mistress Lexi.”

“It’s fine, they left me this house and you know... My favorite uncle, who used to live in the back-shack, got married and moved with his wife to Texas. I’m an only child — basically all the cousins live somewhere else, and so all I have here are Cooper and Jen.”

He nodded, sagely.

I said, “Did that all make sense?”

“Not much of it. Except ye are verra alone in the world.”

I yawned. “I should probably head to bed, it’s getting late — what are you going to

do?”

“I will pace yer lands, keepin’ watch. I wish ye had some high walls tae look out over the valley.” He stepped off the porch and looked up at the roof. “Ye need a watch tower up there, tae see yer enemies a’comin’.”

“I don’t generally have enemies.”

“Och, ye are blessed, Mistress Lexi.” The he joked, “In my world, we daena hae much for comfort, but we can count on havin’ many enemies.

We must always keep them in our mind, or we might be taken unawares.

” He added, “I am always lookin’ for the highest ground.

But in lieu of it I will pace. Twill give me a chance tae consider m’problem.

Dost ye ken what I was wonderin’? Why do I keep comin’ here, in... what did ye say twas called?”

“North Carolina.”

“Has it always been here? I haena heard of it afore.”

“It was settled, I don’t know, four hundred years ago or so?”

“Aye, tis what ye said...” He counted with his thumb against his fingers. “And we found that I am aulder than the land we are standin’ on.”

He frowned. “Sometimes it hits me that I am verra auld and far out of time.”

“It’s a pretty young country, the United States of America. I wouldn’t let it bother you too much, but yeah, it doesn’t make much sense why a time travel vessel from Scotland would come here — what do we have?”

He shook his head. “Beyond bonny lasses, I daena ken.”

“Well, you haven’t seen much beyond my yard and the hospital... I wish I could show you the waterfall. And I’d love to take you to see New York City. It would be really fun to show a man from the sixteenth century the modern world.”

He said, “I think we will need tae say our farewells though, Mistress Lexi, I must away, there are things that hae tae be done. And I daena want tae cause more trouble for ye.”

“It’s not trouble, not really, I can handle it.”

“It has been verra good meetin’ ye.”

“Yeah, it has been.” I smiled. “And I understand you need to go, but first, breakfast.”

“Aye, at dawn we break fast.”

“At dawn! Dear me, no, we can sleep in and wake at a respectable time, we aren’t barbarians.”

“Barbarians, ye mean brutes?”

I nodded.

He chuckled. “Speak for yerself.”

I turned and walked to the door. “See you in the morning, Torin.”

“Aye, see ye in the morn, Mistress Lexi.”

LEXI

I latched the screen door, locked the door, and turned around to see Jen standing at the end of the dark hall. She was tapping a foot and her eyes were narrowed, suspiciously.

I said, “Whatcha doing?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Just letting Dude out.”

She raised her brow. “Who were you talking to out there?” Her foot tapped some more, like the second hand on a clock, counting down the time of my response.

It made me falter. Which was stupid. “Oh, Torin was out there, we were talking.”

“Why are you out talking to Torin? It’s the middle of the night!”

“First, it’s like 11:00, tops. Plus, you know, he’s nice, we were just conversing, it was a beautiful night and we... it was nothing, you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous! What would Cooper think if he wondered where you were and found you out there whispering on the porch?”

“Look Cooper does not have a jealous bone in his body, you’re being more suspicious than he ever would be — and besides he’s not even that into me...”

“Who, Torin, because I know you’re not talking about Cooper! Cooper is going to ask you to?—”

I shook my head, “No, he’s not, that’s not happening. If it ever was... how many times have I gotten my hopes up?”

She frowned deeply. “Aw, honey, I’m sorry.”

Then she added, “Damn.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal, what’s going on with him? You’re awesome, he’s kinda being an ass. I mean, he was flat out rude to Torin.”

I sighed. “I mean, he has had terrible news, I did invite a time traveler to dinner, and since he doesn’t believe in time travel because it doesn’t exist...”

She sort of laughed. “Yeah, I suppose there is that.”

“I sprung a lot on him at once, and he didn’t know I thought he was going to ask me to marry him. He had no idea. That’s on me.”

“I get all that, but why is he not... you know, taking you to the next level? He’s gotta see how amazing you are.”

“Thank you, that’s awesome, and he does, he just... He wants to do this on his own.”

“Well, that’s stupid.”

“And you know, I have my inheritance in a trust, it’s complicated, he... you know, it’s

probably better to wait, anyway.”

She said, “Yeah, but he should also say screw it, beg you to marry him, do it, and not worry about anything else. That would be romantic.”

“Yeah, but... I just wonder if we’re done.”

“Aw, honey, that’s not good.”

I shrugged.

She said, “You just saying that to keep me from lecturing you about being out on the porch at all hours with a boy?”

“You’re not my mom.” Then I said, “I really miss my mom.”

She came closer and hugged me. “This is a lot you’re dealing with.” She checked my face, to make sure I was cool. “Want to go sit in the kitchen?”

“Yeah.” I pulled away from the hug and we walked into the kitchen and I pulled the milk from the fridge, saying, “But back to the matter at hand, you could have come out there, joined the conversation. It wasn’t private, it was just small talk with Torin on the porch, no big deal.

” I said, “Wait, are you jealous? Is it because you think he’s hot? ”

She sat in the chair. “Well, I did call dibs, and you know it, that’s an ironclad rule, but that’s not it. You’re in a relationship . I’m just looking out for you.”

I poured milk in a glass. “Want one?”

“No thanks.”

I sat down at the table. “I’m just comfortable talking to him, he’s nice.”

Jen said, “There’s something else going on there, you’re very comfortable with him even though you know literally nothing about him. I’m just looking out for you, he’s encroaching, and I’m watching you fall for him, he’s hot and so gallant, is that the right word?”

I said, “Yeah, that’s the right word, but I’m not falling for him. I can’t explain it, he feels familiar. Like I know him. I told you about my dream, right?”

“Who knows? I generally tune people out when they talk about dreams — remind me, but give me the short version.”

I sipped from the glass of milk. “I have a recurring dream, it started a few years ago, I’m a little girl and...”

I thought about the dream and how the big man had put something in my hands, something that seemed...

familiar. What was it? I couldn’t look down and see, I couldn’t remember his face, just his voice, just the darkness and the sounds of the owls, twit-twooooo, twit-twooo.

How it all smelled and looked and even how it felt, familiar, but also, I had never ever been there before.

I shook my head and finished, “The voices in my dream have an accent like Torin.”

“That proves nothing, honey, just that you’re a loon looking for answers in dreams. I know the answer without interpreting your dreams — Torin is sexy and he’s

showering you with attention. You're flirting with him."

I scowled. "I'm not trying to prove anything. I'm just telling you one of the reasons why I'm familiar with him, it's because of this dream. I've never gone to Scotland, never known anyone from Scotland, but somehow there's this dream and..."

She counted on her fingers. "You've watched Braveheart, you've celebrated Saint Patrick's Day?—"

"Different place, dummy."

"...and you have an overactive imagination. He's likely watched Braveheart too, this is how he's wooing the ladies."

I scoffed. "Wooing the ladies! I am not being wooed. I'm not flirting with Torin, I'm not begging for attention, I'm with Cooper, fully, this is just a rough patch. We'll get through it. Cooper is overreacting to Torin, that's all."

"Cooper is overreacting, totally." She exhaled.

I said, "I can't believe Cooper asked him all those questions and still didn't believe his answers."

"Yeah, Cooper was being very hardheaded, but you can't be soft-hearted in reaction, you know? Don't forget, Torin's a total stranger. Doesn't even have an ID."

I chugged half the glass and wiped my mouth with a cloth napkin. "Because he's a time traveler, right? That's the only explanation. Did you change your mind?"

"Nah. It is the only explanation. I can't think of anything else. I mean, I don't really believe in time travel, but he is clearly a time traveler. That was not just a 'cool

story', that was true as hell. I have no doubt."

"Yeah, me neither." She smiled at me sadly, then pantomimed her head exploding.

Then she said, "Maybe you'll be famous for discovering it. That would be cool, you would definitely teach Cooper a lesson, he should not be so skeptical."

I turned my glass. "Coop just doesn't believe time travel exists so he can't accept anything to the contrary. He heard Torin's answers and his conclusion was that Torin was just a really good actor or a total bullshitter."

"All I know is be careful. Cooper loves you, you love him, just... don't... you know."

I huffed. "Let down my guard? That's what Cooper accused me of doing."

She nodded. "Cooper isn't being cool, but he's not wrong about that. "

I drank down the rest of the milk. "Cooper is my family, I'm not going to screw anything up for the visiting Scotsman."

"I just want you to be okay, you deserve to be okay."

"Thank you."

"And you also almost sound like someone who is leaving."

I shook my head. "No, just feeling like I've been left..."

She frowned again. "Oh honey."

"But it's just a mood, I'm not leaving, first of all, it's my house, also why on earth

would I tear down my whole life over a bad mood? Or a time traveler?”

She added, “He is hot though, I wouldn’t blame you for feeling a little... warm toward him, but I totally called dibs. And I am your bestie, even more of your family than Cooper, I want to point that out.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “Always so competitive.”

“It’s my way, three siblings, we fight over resources...”

I said, “Look, Torin’s leaving tomorrow. We discussed it. He’s gone right after breakfast. You going to help me cook?”

“Of course, sweetie, I’ll make my special pancakes, do you have syrup?”

“Yep, gallons. Sounds good, I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I slowly climbed the stairs, wishing I could go back to not believing in time travel, to not having the hot Scotsman in my back-shack, to thinking Cooper was going to get the deal, and believing that I was going to get married — life was simpler on the other side of yesterday.

But I couldn’t go back, I had seen this totally crazy story with my own eyes.

Dammit. It kinda felt like the world had flipped upside down and I wanted it to go right side up again.

I wanted everything to go right back to how it was before.

And then while I was at it, I wished it could go back to before my parents were gone.

As long as I could dream, why not that?

But instead I had to believe in this, a man jumping in and out of time, disrupting my everything.

LEXI

I peeled up the covers and slid into bed. Then I lay there for a moment thinking, this is fine, I don't mind . Cooper had a tough day, a long week. He deserved a passing out and a deep sleep.

I was proud of myself for not being irritated. I was taking the high road, being supportive.

But then I realized I was seething.

Seething hard.

I had been in a relationship with Coop for years.

And he wouldn't commit.

I mean, he wasn't cheating, but he also wasn't my husband. He was just my boyfriend, and then just lived here without making any kind of meaningful commitment to me. It hurt my feelings, to be honest, like we were roommates with benefits.

I understood that he didn't want to take my money. He didn't want to be the kept man. I got it, but also, if we married it would all be pooled together. It would be our money, our business. I could help him, be on his team. Instead he was just...

He wasn't a team player.

Either he wasn't ever a team player or he just didn't want to be a team player with me.

I huffed, almost wishing it would wake him up.

He didn't.

I fluffed and punched my pillow and flounced onto my side with another huff.

Then I rolled onto my back with my arms out.

Torin had questioned what I was doing with Cooper, why we weren't married.

Answer: Because Cooper hadn't asked me. He wouldn't ask me.

The closest we had come was months ago when we were talking about prenuptial agreements, just in general, and he had said signing a prenup worried him, but um... sorry, lots of people have prenups. It was not that big a thing, if he really loved me.

Torin called me Mistress Lexi and was genuinely interested in talking to me. Is that why I let down my guard around him? Was I starving for attention like Jen said?

That was distressing and kind of embarrassing.

Cooper smacked his lips and turned to look over at my side of the bed, he kinda smiled.

I thought, Oh, he's going to roll over here and cuddle with ? —

He rolled the other way so his back was to me, then realized he was on top of the covers and made a big irritated production of squirming and struggling to get his feet

under the covers.

I was completely still waiting for his kiss, his cuddle, any acknowledgment that I had taken off his shoes and helped him to bed, but no, he went back to sleep on his side.

His side of my bed.

The one that had been passed down through my family, carved headboard and footboard, covered with my great-grandmother's hand sewn quilt.

The truth was, Cooper and me, our troubles were much deeper than I had been letting on.

I didn't know how much longer this would go on — would I break up with him?

Could I?

Right after he got terrible news?

Jen was right, I was letting Torin get all up in my head.

I was happy before all of this. Mostly.

Ugh. I sighed. I was just being a jerk.

I hadn't known Cooper was going to ask me to marry him, I had just been guessing, and getting my hopes up about nothing.

Getting my hopes up had always been an issue, that I was still doing it was on me.

He had gone through a lot this week. He was disappointed. He just didn't want to go

to a nice restaurant, not now, not to celebrate, and I just needed to be supportive until he got through this, then we would come up with the next plan. Together.

And maybe we never got married, maybe we just lived together. That would be fine too.

Though I knew I shouldn't, I still seethed, my mind going round the troubles that were like enemies at my gate.

I slowly fell asleep.

TORIN

A s I stood out on the field under the starry sky, thinking about an owl who was hootin' but in a different language than I was used tae, Mistress Lexi's cat rubbed along my legs, makin' his trillin' noise. I looked down on him. "Aye, Dude, ye like tae keep watch?"

The cat meowed as if he were answering.

I said, "I was just thinkin' twould be good tae hae someone tae discourse with in the night. I think ye will do, cat."

The cat licked his paw.

My eyes swept the treetops. "Ye ken, I am thinking, I ought tae try tae time journey now, instead of waitin' for the morn."

Dude looked up at me.

I said, "I agree, if I remain I am causin' trouble between Mistress Lexi and Master Cooper. He daena like me much. I ought tae leave since I am able and though she has invited me tae breakfast, I ought tae spare her the trouble of it."

I petted Dude behind the ears. "We are in agreement." I turned to walk down tae the small house at the back, takin' heed that the lights in Mistress Lexi's dwelling were quenched.

I put m'cloak on over the clothes Mistress Lexi had given me, fastened the brooch, and put all m'valuables in my sporran. I did all the work in the blazin' light, wishing there was a softer flame. This one caused irritation tae m'eyes.

Then I located the pale white almost luminous sacks she had directed me tae and filled two with m'brogues, m'great kilt, my saffron-yellow lèine, and m'other belongings.

Done, I had the bags upon my shoulder, my sword at my hip, and the dirk sheathed on my belt. I got out the vessel tae check it once more afore I walked out intae the darkness tae time travel.

I looked down and groaned — the markings had changed, the sequence of them was different.

Och nae, a chill passed over me. Twas difficult tae breathe — as if selkies were pullin' me under the loch tae a cruel demise.

I had committed the sequence tae memory and I had a verra good memory... now three of the markings were altered.

When had they changed, when I pulled it from m'sporran at dinner?

Three! That alteration would likely be enough tae set me off course.

Yet I was uncertain how tae return them tae the former sequence. I had been rebounding, my use of this evil device had already been a pain in m'arse, what would I be changing? Time or place?

It couldna get worse.

Or could it?

I looked over at Dude, sitting on the rail in the darkness. He meowed.

“Dost ye think it could get worse, Dude?”

Dude meowed again, looking verra much like he was offerin’ important advice.

“Aye, ye are right, perhaps this is the correct sequence. Perchance twas not workin’ before — twas why I kept returning.

Maybe now it has righted itself. I am verra glad tae see ye hae a hopeful aspect as well, Dude.

I dinna think much of cats, but I suppose I hadna truly met one before or discoursed with them. Ye are a fine conversationalist.”

I turned off the light.

“Uncertain of what tae do, I will jump anyway.”

I strode off the porch, sayin’ tae Dude as I passed, “Ye must be bold when ye are faced with uncertainty, and if it goes wrong, Dude, I promise, I winna hold ye responsible.”

I walked tae the road in front of Mistress Lexi’s house, and then I walked down it for a time, but as I scanned the darkness I would see Dude, following along, “Dude, ye canna follow me, ye hae tae go home.”

He continued on, so I stopped walking and decided I had gone far enough. I twisted the vessel tae jump again.

LEXI

The next morning, the sun was warm, sparkling on the trees, shining through my window. I lay, thinking about seething some more, but decided not to.

Torin was leaving town.

He was expecting breakfast.

Jen was going to make pancakes, hers were always delicious.

And Cooper had been in a mood, but he would be in a better mood today. Time heals...

So I would not be a seether, I would be a facilitator. Breakfast. Conversation. Support. Starting now.

I pushed off the covers and went to the bathroom and peed and brushed my teeth.

I heard Cooper waking up. He called in, sleepily, “Hey, Babe, wanna come back to bed?”

I stuck my head from the bathroom. “Though that is a delightful request, yes, generally — I have a guest downstairs and one in the back-shack, gotta make breakfast.” I spit in the sink and rinsed my mouth. I pulled my hair up into a twist and secured it with a fancy clip.

I went to the dresser, pulled off my shirt, and put on my favorite white sundress covered in a pale blue flower print.

It was a corset-style, with spaghetti straps.

I said, “But yes, I do need a bit of sexy-fun time with you.” I smoothed down my dress.

“How about a little afternoon delight? We haven’t welcomed you home yet. ”

I turned toward the full-length mirror in the corner and checked myself, posing flirtatiously, because I knew he was watching.

I turned to smile at him and he was indeed watching, an arm cocked under his head. “You’re so sexy, why no bed? Why so sexy? No bed?”

I flung an arm toward the window. “Look at the day, Coop, the sun is up, and you’re home, I want to look sexy, but for later .”

“Fine, later, but the only reason I can put it off is because I heard there will be a big breakfast and I’m famished.”

I strode to the bed, kissed him. “Good morning, and yes, big breakfast. Come down when you’re up, I’ll have coffee brewed.”

And I went downstairs.

LEXI

First I banged on the guest room door and woke up Jen, then I went down the kitchen to make the coffee. I glanced out the window as I was putting the filter in the basket to see Torin striding up the lawn.

He was wearing his own clothes, the yellow shirt with the embroidered details, the plaid kilt, and the fur-trimmed cloak. He had his broadsword and dirk sheathed from his belt, and the sporran hanging in the front. He looked as if he were embarking on a journey.

He rapped on the door.

I pushed the button on the coffeemaker and went to answer it. Both Torin and Dude were standing on the mat.

Torin bowed deeply, “Good morn. I could see ye had arisen, Mistress Lexi, I hope ye daena mind that I hae come.”

“No this is fine, good morning, Torin, welcome.” Then I said to Dude, “Did you stay the whole night bugging Torin?”

Dude meowed.

Torin said, “He kept watch with me and followed close by m’heels, he is a verra loyal cat.”

I returned to the kitchen saying over my shoulder, “Jen will be up in a moment to get the pancakes going, I’m going to whip up the batter.”

He followed me in. “I had a question for ye...”

“Uh oh, is it bad?”

“Nae, twas somethin’ I was ponderin’ last night... Where is yer bread oven?”

“Oh, that’s funny, you made the question sound important.

” I pointed to the oven, “That’s the oven.

” I opened the door to show him. “I don’t really bake bread, unless it’s zucchini or carrot — this is bread.

” I pulled a loaf from the steel bread box that had been in the family forever and held it up.

“But we aren’t going to eat bread, we’re having pancakes.

” He unfastened the brooch, took off his cloak, and stabbed the brooch through the fabric and closed it to keep the bundle together.

He took off his sword belt and leaned it in the corner with the bundle beside it.

While he did that, I got my cookbook down from the shelf and flipped it directly to the page, pulled a bowl down, and stacked the bags of flour and sugars, the can of salt, and a dozen eggs beside it on the counter.

He came close and watched this intently, big and close, oh my, it got me flustered.

I poured flour into a measuring cup as I asked, “Have you seen a dozen eggs in a carton before?” I gestured with my elbow because my hands were full. “Can you pull me out four?”

He figured out the lid and passed the eggs to me, I broke them into a bowl and whisked them. “What does a kitchen look like where you’re from?”

He leaned on the counter, his shoulders wide, he looked a combination of dangerous strength combined with an easy smile and good humor. He was also vulnerable, far from home and reliant on me for everything.

It was very, very charming.

And his voice was so sexy, deep, and low when he said, “The eggs are collected in the morn, they are warm and kept in a pail.”

“Interesting, I buy them from the store, I would like to keep chickens, but...” I dumped the eggs into the bowl and began to whisk. “Not sure I can protect them from the predators. Sounds heartbreaking.”

“Aye, because ye hae insufficient guard?—”

Jen walked in. “Why are you making the pancakes?”

“Because you are not in here to make them.”

Jen said, “Good morning, Torin.”

“Good morn, Mistress Jen.”

She got busy pulling the griddle out from under the stove, placing it on the range, and

setting the flame to the necessary height.

Torin leaned over, asking, “How did ye start the flame?”

She showed him the dial, turning it back and forth, the flame going up and down. “Och, this is a miracle.”

I wiped my hands on my apron, pulled open my junk drawer, and found a box of matches. “Check this out.” I struck one on the side of the box.

His eyes went wide.

I blew out the match and handed him the box. “You try it.”

He fumbled until he got out a matchstick and struck it. It flamed up, first try. “Och, this is verra... this is a miracle.”

“You can have that box, keep it, it’s yours.”

“Are ye certain, Mistress Lexi? It must be verra valuable.”

“Honestly, Torin, it’s inexpensive, no worries. I want you to have it, plus this...” I dug through the drawer and pulled out a disposable Bic lighter. I held it up and pulled my thumb down the spark wheel. The flame rose.

His eyes widened even more. I looked at it against the light.

“This one has plenty of fluid, should last for a bit, but it won’t last forever.

” I passed it to him and helped him get the hang of lighting it, wishing I had thought to buy him a nice refillable one when we had been at the store.

“This is called a lighter, these are matches. Don’t let the matches get wet. ”

I pulled out a plastic pencil box, big enough for both, and dumped the pencils into the drawer. I put the lighter and matches into it. “This is waterproof.”

He shook his head.

“I won’t listen to no, I want you to have it.”

“Aye, thank ye, Mistress Lexi.” He took the box and clutched it in both hands. “Master Cooper winna be upset that I hae been given these gifts?”

“No, he would want you to have them, speaking of...”

Cooper came into the kitchen. “Ah, everyone is here.” He kissed me on the cheek, hugged Jen, and nodded at Torin. “Torin.”

Torin bowed his head. “Good morn, Master Cooper.”

I said, “Coop, will you pour the coffee? I’m cooking the bacon.”

He took down some mugs and asked Torin, “Cream or black?”

Torin said, “I daena ken, what is it?”

Cooper said, “Coffee? Have you never had coffee before?”

“Nae, how dost ye drink it?”

Cooper said, “Oh, this will be fun, introducing you to coffee. First, just taste it black.” He poured some in a mug and passed it to Torin.

I smiled, enjoying the fact that Coop was actually being cool, finally.

Torin immediately sipped and then dribbled it out, “Och nae, hot!”

Cooper said, “I’m sorry, I kinda thought you would know?—”

Torin grimaced. “Also, tis bitter.”

I said, “You’ll want lots of cream, plus a spoonful of sugar.”

Cooper said, “...or just a dash of cream.”

Jen said, “I like a vanilla latte.”

Cooper said, “What we’re saying is everyone takes their coffee differently, but I think you seem like a cream man, no sugar, not after the way the sweet got to you last night.”

Torin nodded, “Aye, I agree.” He passed his mug to Cooper who added cream to it.

Cooper and Torin both drank.

Torin nodded approvingly then looked at the mug’s Jurassic Park logo. My coffee mugs were an eclectic mix collected over my lifetime.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Cooper said, “I picked that mug for you, it’s from the movie, Jurassic park.”

Torin shook his head. “I daena understand.”

Cooper said, “The one about the dinosaurs in the park — you know, came out about ten years ago?”

Torin continued shaking his head, a grin spreading. “Ye keep explainin’ but ye are using many words — I daena ken the meanin’.”

Cooper chuckled. “Still going, huh? Want me to explain the movie Jurassic park?”

“What is a movie?”

Cooper said, “A movie, a moving picture, a film, a video... TV show?” Then he said, because Torin was still shaking his head. “Damn it, fine, okay, I’ll show you?—”

Jen said, “Nope, breakfast is almost ready, it’ll have to wait until after.”

I got the syrup out of the pantry.

Torin said, “I also daena ken what a dinauswer is.”

Cooper’s eyes went wide. “You don’t know what a dinosaur is?”

Jen turned from the stove with oven mitts on her hands. “Holy smoke, Torin! You don’t know what a dinosaur is? How freaking old are you supposed to be?”

I said, “Dinosaur bones are a fairly recent discovery in the scheme of things.”

Jen blinked for a moment. “I hadn’t thought of that... that’s wild. But... anyway, stacks are ready! Bring your plates!”

We lined up and Jen gave us each a stack and we sat around the kitchen table where I had the butter dish, a syrup pitcher, sliced strawberries, a dish of blueberries, and a

can of whipped cream.

We were all quiet for a minute while we passed the toppings and put it all on our pancakes. Torin studied our actions and copied us again.

Torin was so big his seat looked small under him, but he seemed self-conscious and trying to be well-mannered. He asked, “Dost ye mind if I pray afore we eat?”

“No, please do.”

We all bowed our heads and folded our hands.

I opened an eye to peek. Torin had his hands clasped tightly, his eyes closed.

“Oh merciful Lord, our hearty thanks for this bounty, I ask that ye watch over m’companions, keepin’ them in health and good spirits, also remindin’ them tae explain what a dinashwar is, and bless our sweet cakes of the morn, and grant that I may be strengthened in body and soul tae embark upon m’journey today, amen. ”

We all said, “Amen.”

He put his elbows on the table but then pulled them off.

Cooper said, “A dinosaur was a great beast, like a monstrous lizard, that roamed the earth long before man. Now their bones are turned to stone.”

Torin said, “Monstrous lizards, ye say? Sounds like a dragon — did these beasts breathe fire and plague villages?

I said, “No fire, no village-plaguin’. Just big, scaly things — some as long as a castle wall. But they were gone long before man.”

“So they werna dragons, but died long before man, and dragons were left. Dragons were the winners of the ancient monster wars.” Torin poured syrup on his pancakes.

“No, dragons aren’t real, dinosaurs were real.”

“Dragons arna real? But I hae seen them with m’own eyes!”

Cooper said, “No way, that’s not true.”

Torin said, “Tis true, well... twas nae me, I dinna see one, but m’uncle told the story many times. He was travelin’ in the highlands and witnessed a dragon departin’ a cave on Beinn Nibheis.”

Cooper raised his brow and looked at me. “Yet another wild tale.”

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Torin said, “Aye, but ye canna blame me for the wild tales, Master Cooper, I haena seen dragons, I admit, tis possible m’uncle was tellin’ a tale, he was prone tae weavin’ farcical stories, but I also haena seen a dinashwars.

Tis you that is claimin’ that the dirt under our feet is made from the ground up bones of ancient monsters.

” He grinned. “That sounds verra improbable.”

Cooper said, “I suppose it does.”

Torin gripped the table knife in his right hand, spearing the pancake to lift it toward his mouth, but then set it down, chuckling, and tore a piece with his fingers instead.

“Och, this is a rare delight! Cooked from a kitchen hearth without a single hare strung from the beams, nor a boar a-turnin’ on the spit. ”

He bit into a slice of bacon, chewed, and let out a contented moan. “Och, tae dwell in such a place must be a joy, tae sup on such victuals without Auld Sweaty MacFlarty cursing ye for daring to eat.” He winked at me.

I laughed. “Sweaty MacFlarty, is that your cook?”

“Aye, Auld Sweaty MacFlarty, not the young one.” Torin leaned in. “The man grows ever more sodden as he toils, and his temper sours like a bowl of cream in the sun. By the time he is ladlin’ pottage intae yer bowl, he is furious at ye for wantin’ tae be fed.”

I said, “Is the meal at least good?”

“Och nae, tis often a grim fare, unless Laird Argyll’s wife, the Lady Catherine, graces the hall — then the dishes will be verra fine.”

He raised his coffee mug and said, “Tae a feast well wrought, with nary a soul kickin’ m’shin for havin’ been hungry.”

We all raised our mugs and he said, “Slàinte mhath!” and drained his coffee in one gulp.

He grinned. “Ye can tell it is a good meal with fine company when more than one toast be needed afore it hath ended.”

He had already taken some bites but dipped his finger in the syrup and licked it. “What fruit is this?”

I said, “It’s maple syrup, you’ve never had maple syrup before?”

“Maple, tis a fruit?”

I said, “No, the tree, the maple tree, the syrup comes from inside the trunk.”

He ate another large bite of pancake, chewed, then moaned happily once more. “Tis verra delicious, I dinna ken trees could be food.”

He poured more syrup on his stack. And picked up the can to put more whipped cream on his pancakes, figuring it out, spraying some on the table, apologizing, then spraying a big mountain on his pancakes.

He ate another big bite, then wiped his mouth and beard with his cloth napkin.

He clutched his chest. “Och, m’heart is racin’.”

I said, “Oh, is it...? It’s the caffeine, maybe you should take a break from that. How about, would you like a glass of milk — cow’s milk?”

“Aye.”

I took the mug to the counter, got out a glass, and filled it with milk.

He took a swig and then grimaced again. “Tis cold!”

Jen said, “You drink warm milk?”

“Tis how it comes from the cow.” He grimaced again, then said, “My apologies, Mistress Lexi, I daena usually complain, but tis all verra different from home.”

I said, “I don’t mind, no worries.”

Jen said, “You miss home?”

“Aye, though this is verra grand, the food is verra fine, this bacon is the best I hae ever had, and ye should hae seen the boar we caught last year. Fat and ornery. Dost ye like tae hunt, Master Cooper?”

Cooper said, “I have never hunted a day in my life.”

“ Really ? Never?”

“Never. Meat comes from the store. It has come from the store for a hundred years, basically.”

“Och, that would be a life of ease, yet... I think I would miss the act of it. A hunt always tests the best and worst of a man. Ye will experience more of everythin’ — I hae been grateful for God’s largesse and angry, hungry, and fearful, sometimes in the same morn.”

Cooper nodded, then said, “So we’re comparing the two worlds, as if we believe it?—”

Torin leaned forward, “I dinna prove m’self, Master Cooper?”

“A little, I think you proved you were a time traveler, you’re very good in the role, but sadly you haven’t proven that time travel exists.

It doesn’t, so no matter how good you are at staying in character, I can’t believe you are who you say you are.

Like, if you told me you were, I don’t know...

a fairy, you could be the most convincing fairy in the world.

I could fully believe you are as close to being a fairy as possible, but it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t believe in magic, fairies don’t exist.”

Torin’s brow drew down. “What dost ye mean by fairy, the fae? Ye daena believe the fae exist?”

Cooper’s eyes went very wide, “Now what, you’re going to tell me they do?”

Torin shook his head. “Ye must hope they canna hear ye, Master Cooper, the fae daena take kindly tae men questionin’ their existence.”

Cooper rolled his eyes. “Man, this has been a wild couple of meals. It’s been really interesting meeting you... when do you leave?”

I raised my brow. “Cooper, you promised.”

Cooper said, “I know, sorry, Babe, I’m being cool... sorry Torin.”

Torin said, “It daena matter, Mistress Lexi. I said I was leavin’ after breakfast and I am, nae matter how delicious the cakes-from-the-pan taste. Tae answer your question, Master Cooper, I will leave once the meal is over.” He looked around the table. “Tis close.”

I said, “Would you like some more strawberries?”

“Aye.”

LEXI

I said, “So you’re leaving.”

“Aye, I will leave on the vessel as soon as we finish.”

“But you’ve left before...”

“Aye, four times already, if m’memories are correct, five if ye count last night.”

I said, “Last night! You left last night?”

“Aye, after we spoke. I knew ye wanted me tae come tae breakfast, but I thought twould be better if I left afore ye were beggin’ me tae go. Ye dinna see the storm?”

“No, I guess I was sleeping.”

He chewed his lip. “I walked a good way off. I meant tae go farther, but was concerned because Dude was followin’ me and I dinna ken if he knew his way back.”

Cooper said, “You time traveled last night... but now you’re back? It didn’t work again? ”

“Aye, I attempted it, but I had misgivings. The vessel had different markings than the last time I jumped, somehow they were altered. Dost ye remember anything changin’ when we looked at it at the table?”

I shook my head.

Cooper said, “I just held it for a moment, it didn’t seem to change.”

“Aye, I am in agreement, but the sequence is altered and I am unsure how tae get it back tae its original form. I went ahead and journeyed though I had misgivings... I jumped intae a different time and place than before, twas dark and cold and wet, a different season than I expected. Och, I was wearin’ the clothes ye gave me from last night, I was ill-prepared for the dreich weather, soaked through. ”

Jen asked, “What did you do?”

“I dragged m’self under a tree, wrapped in m’plaid and kept watch until the morn. Once twas light enough, my plan was tae figure out where I was, but that has always been m’plan. I haena had a chance tae yet?—”

Cooper said, “Why, what keeps happening?”

“I am attacked, usually. Tis why I dinna sleep and when I did twas like this.” He leaned back in his chair and kept one eye open, it looked funny with his full beard and mustache and one eye open.

I laughed.

“But though I stayed awake all night, nae one attacked, though it might hae been because of the dreich weather. Twas not good for men or monsters.”

Cooper ran his hand through his hair. “And though you time traveled last night, you’re here at breakfast?”

Jen said, “You don’t seem wet or exhausted.”

“Aye, because in the morn I traveled along a path and found a village inn.”

He speared another big bite of pancake and then ate two pieces of bacon.

He chewed, then swallowed while wiping his hands on a napkin.

He explained, “I procured a room and stayed there for three nights. All the while it down-poured. Twas impossible tae wander, ye ken, sometimes ye just hae tae stay put.”

I shook my head. “Not in this century, we just grab an umbrella, run to our car, and go. It’s fine, rain doesn’t stop us much.”

“Aye, that would be full fair. I had tae wait, m’purse growin’ lighter.” He patted his bag. “I am down tae one of the coins I shewed ye last night... I ate and drank in front of the hearth in the cellar of an ancient tavern, waitin’ out the storm, worryin’ on Max, and wonderin’ how tae get home?—”

Cooper said, “Back to gloomy castle?”

“Aye, ye remembered...!” He smiled good-naturedly. “And I had nae hope tae find Max. We had promised tae meet in Muckhart, but alas what I discovered on that first night in the tavern chilled me even more than the dreich weather that had settled on the lands of Alba. Twas the year 1635.”

I said, “But you left in 1558!”

“I ken, near everyone I knew was long dead, and I happened tae be in the land of Ferindonald, near Foulis castle, the lands of Clan Munro.” He sadly shook his head. “Nary a friend for miles or years. Och, I learned many terrible things about the future.”

I asked, “Oh no, what did you learn?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled. “The news was dire. The king was named Charles.” He scowled. “King of both England and Scotland — hae ye e’er heard anythin’ so outrageous?”

We shook our heads.

His eyes went to the window, his brow knitted deeply. “I was further told how our Queen Mary Stuart met her end, and tis as if a cold shadow has overcast m’spirit.” He shook his head. “She was sorely misused, and nae man ought tae ken such woeful futures.”

Jen said, “Remind me what happened to Mary Queen of Scots?”

I gave her a look.

She said, “I don’t remember! I gather that it sucks, but how much does it suck is what I need to know.”

Torin’s face grew mournful. “She was driven from Scotland, held captive by her cousin, Elizabeth, England’s queen, and then.

.. beheaded. ” He let out a long breath.

“Our bonny queen suffered great mischance at English hands. Then I learned her bairn, James, was given Scotland’s throne, and Elizabeth passed tae him England’s crown, uniting them. ”

He banged his hand on the tabletop. “Och, tis hard tae muse on it without yearnin’ tae take arms against the English.”

Jen grimaced. "Oh, beheading is bad." She patted the back of his hand, "I'm sorry I asked, my curiosity got the worst of me."

"Aye, thank ye, Mistress Jen." Torin said, his voice low. "I must return home. I hae a duty tae aid Max and I need tae stand ready tae fight for Alba."

Cooper said, "Does sound like you need to head back, pronto."

"Aye. That is what spurs me, I yearn tae return home." He picked up his fork and took another bite, then continued, "On the third day, the rain ceased and I emerged from the tavern. I had been in a battle with m'self."

I hated the device. I loathed the idea of usin' it again.

Therefore I decided tae bury it in the forest floor and leave it there tae face m'fate, but I was also verra far from home, and I would never see m'family nor friends again.

I wouldna be able tae join the fight tae liberate Alba from the English.

There was a struggle in m'mind. I walked out intae the woods and dug a hole.

"He showed his fingertips, they were cracked and sore from digging."

"You didn't have a shovel or anything?"

"Nae, dug with m'hands and a rock. Then I dropped the vessel intae the hole."

I stood looking down upon it when the dreadful apparatus began tae vibrate once more, twas faint, yet I could see twas alive.

Twas beckonin' me tae use it and twas the only way home.

I knew it, but tis verra painful. I dinna want tae touch it, but I couldna bear being lost in time.

I struggled with what tae do, but ultimately I reached intae the hole and as soon as my sore fingers grasped it, it latched down upon m'hand.

The pain spread up m'arm and I was pulled through time and deposited here once more. Ye dinna hear any of it?"

I shook my head. "I must have drunk a lot last night, I crashed out."

He continued, "Once I woke up, I said good morn tae Dude, who looked as if he had been waitin' for me, and all but dragged m'self tae yer back-shack. There I slept briefly, all the while wonderin' if I was days or weeks late for breakfast. I came by tae see if I was on time."

"You didn't miss breakfast, you didn't seem to be gone but for a few hours, we talked at like 10:30 pm, I think, I was in bed by 11:15, so you were gone by midnight, returned the next day."

"Aye, somethin' like it."

Cooper said, "Funny, you've seemed in good spirits all morning."

"I dinna want tae sour the pleasant meal and I dinna want tae hae tae mention tae Mistress Lexi that I lost the clothes she procured for me."

"Did you, where?"

"Aye, I dinna hae the bags on m'shoulder when the vessel dragged me away, they hae been left near the forest path headin' south through the lands of Ferindonald."

I said, “Well, that is fine, no big deal. There are more clothes and Nikes.”

He said, “Tis a relief, I was worried ye would find m’carelessness indefensible.”

Jen said, “But just imagine, hundreds of years ago, someone coming across a plastic bag with a pair of Nikes in it!”

Cooper said, “ That is a crazy thought...”

I asked, “And that’s why your shoulder isn’t as sore, Torin? You haven’t needed pain relief, it looks like you’re feeling better.”

He put down his fork and rolled his shoulder around, gingerly. “Tis feelin’ much better, but not completely healed.” He went back to dipping a strawberry in whipped cream.

Cooper put down his napkin and said, “Babe, can I speak to you for a moment?”

“Sure, of course.”

We both stood from the table. “Excuse us, please.”

Jen looked at me with her eyes wide. Then she joked, “Um, what are we going to talk about Torin — the great new album from Blink-182?”

He grinned, “Och, I daena ken any of those words...”

LEXI

Cooper led me out to the porch.

I asked, “What’s this about?”

He frowned. “I don’t know, I just needed to, I don’t know, talk to you...”

I frowned back. “How are you doing?”

“Not good. Super bummed, and instead of a good spiral I’m dealing with Torin’s senseless bullshit.”

I put my hand out, took his, and pulled him closer. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, you’re the nicest person in the world.

You love history, you love old things, and you love strays.

You collect hobbies. You got the perfect eccentric person in your kitchen right now, he claims to be old, he’s got a wild story, handsome, needs your help.

You’re going to be busy on this for a while now, I can see it. ”

“Hmmm.” I half smiled, trying to of course, ‘be nice’. “You’re saying this is like my stained-glass phase?”

“And your pottery phase and your scrapbooking phase, you’re getting caught up in it. Becoming obsessed. And because of that I think I’m going to have to live with Torin in my life for the foreseeable future.”

“Except he’s not a hobby, he’s a person.”

“He’s a person and you’re treating him like a hobby, is what I’m saying.

You’re taking on his troubles and I just don’t want you to...

you know, get caught up. It’s easier for me to ignore shards of glass all over the table in the TV room than it will be to ignore the giant medieval psycho at the breakfast table. ”

“...easier for you ‘to ignore shards of glass all over the table...’”

“Yes, so...?”

“I’m just repeating it so you know what I heard.”

He said, “Babe, you know I’m not being mean, I’m just talking about your hobbies, you know you start them and quit them, this is not new.”

“Yeah, I get it.” I huffed, looking out over my lawn.

My mind replaying all the drastic, shocking events of the last few days.

And how Cooper hadn’t once thought about me and what I had been going through.

I leaned forward so my forehead was on his chest. “I totally get all of it. It’s just... he needed breakfast.”

He put his arms around me and held me tightly, comfortingly. I breathed deep.

“And he’s going to leave in just a few minutes.”

“I will believe that when I see it. I love you, Lexi, your excitement when you have a new thing to focus on is endearing and I think it’s great, but... this time, it’s not so great.”

“You sound like you did when I let Dude move in, and look how much you like Dude now.”

He breathed in and exhaled. I loved when he had his arms around me. He said, “Yeah, and now Dude is my favorite cat in the world. Maybe I’m just upset that he likes the Scottish guy more than me.”

“Dude’s just caught up in someone new, like me. It can be boring around here when you and Jen and Andrew and the boys are all working and doing your things.”

He chuckled. “Maybe you need a hobby.”

“Exactly.” I kissed him. “And speaking of hobbies. You need to go climbing or rafting, right? That’s usually what you do when you want to get your mind off stuff.”

“Yep, as soon as he takes off on his little tin can, I’m going for a climb. Need to get my head straight.”

“You still don’t want to go out to dinner tonight? I think we still have the reservations.”

“No, I’m sorry, Babe, I thought we talked about that, I cancelled them right when I got up.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah.”

He squeezed me tighter. “Raincheck, I’m just not in the mood, we’ll do it some other time.”

I looked up in his face. “I was kinda looking forward to it. I thought it was...”

His brow furrowed. “Was what?”

“I don’t know... like you had been planning it, like there was a reason.”

“Nah, just thought it would be fun to go out in style with investor money, but now... not so much. We’ll do it soon, promise.”

I said, “Okay, yeah, sure.”

He kissed me again.

I said, “We’ll just see Torin on his way, and you’ll go for a climb, and while you’re there I’ll um... think of something for dinner.”

He said, “I’m in the mood for Mexican, would that be doable?”

“Sure... and by the time I sex you up tonight, you’re going to feel a lot better. Will you please just be cool?”

“Of course, I just needed a break, this helped, I’m cool and I’m going to hold you to the promise of sex, Babe. Thinking about that is the only thing getting me through this meal.”

I rolled my eyes. “Very funny, we need to get back in there, who knows what they’re

talking about.”

LEXI

We returned to the kitchen table where Jen had apparently just told Torin she was a teacher and his brow was down saying, “Tis twenty bairns, all the same age?”

She nodded. “Eight years old. I teach them reading, writing, and arithmetic.”

We sat down. I asked, “The story she’s telling you about her job, does it make any sense?”

“Aye, she works in the nursery, but nae, there are a great many bairns... twill give me much tae consider. How many people live here in yer village?”

Cooper said, “About six thousand I think, it’s a small town.”

Torin nodded. His eyes went far away as if he were thinking about what that number represented.

I couldn’t imagine how he could possibly understand it. How many people even lived in Scotland in his time? He had never been to a modern football stadium, sat in traffic on a highway, or even been to a mall. Maybe there were crowds in the bigger towns, but how many would you see at once?

Cooper took another sip of a fresh cup of coffee. “But all this conversation is skirting the real issue, you’re trying to get home and you can’t, so far you can’t, and you say that you keep boomeranging back here.”

Torin said, “Boom-raging?”

“It’s a stick that you throw out, it makes a big arc in the sky and comes back. A boomerang flies back. It’s a good word.”

“Aye, tis. I daena want tae keep boom-raging, not knowin’ where I will turn up is terrible. I am at its mercy and I daena understand it. It keeps graspin’ me as soon as I get there. I never hae time tae collect m’self and learn where I am.”

Cooper said, “Except this last time, you claimed that you were in the past for a few days.”

Jen said, “Maybe the vessel doesn’t work in the rain?”

I said, “It causes rain, there is a storm when it gets here, so that can’t possibly be it — the storms are terrifying, it’s like a hurricane and a tornado, centered over my yard.”

Cooper said, “Have you considered that it might not work if it’s underground? You said you were in the cellar of the tavern.”

Torin said, “Aye, I was, that is verra insightful.”

Cooper said, “Have you ever had it activate in a cellar or inside?”

Torin considered. “Nae, it has always been outside under the sky when it animates.”

Cooper said, “There... you have a new theory to test.”

Torin said, “When I get tae the next place, I will bury it. Perhaps twill allow me tae hae some respite while I learn where I am. Twould be good tae stop bein’ pulled without wantin’ tae be.”

I said, “If that’s your plan you need a shovel, no more digging with rocks. I can give you one. But don’t forget where you bury the vessel.”

“I am nae worried, I hae a good memory for places. I will mark it well.”

He took the vessel out of his bag and placed it on the table by his plate.

Cooper said, “So, I’m not saying I believe any of this, but to carry on as if this machine is a time travel machine, how many of the ‘markings’ are you claiming have changed?”

Torin looked down on it and turned it over in his hands. “Three of them.”

Cooper said, “Well, assuming this is true, it sounds like those are the three that sent you to a totally different century — do you remember the earlier markings?”

Torin nodded. “I do.”

Cooper said, “Then, to carry on with this test, I would put the original markings back, at least then when you,” he used air quotes, “‘time jump’ you will end up in the time period you know.”

Torin said, “Aye, I will do that, dost ye hae a basement, Mistress Lexi? I will feel much better twisting and turnin’ the vessel if I am underground.”

I grinned, “Why yes I do, I have the perfect basement, just what we need. I feel like we’re figuring this all out.” I stood from my chair and said, “Follow me.”

I stood to lead him from the room, but first I put my hands on Cooper’s shoulders. “Thanks for being cool.”

“No problem, told you I would, and this is actually kind of fun. I like a good project during breakfast, it’s taking my mind off my week.”

I asked, “Are you guys coming down to the basement?”

Jen stood from her chair. “Yep, I’m going to watch.”

Cooper said, “Yeah, I’ll come.”

We all went to the basement door, I flicked on the dim light, and traipsed down the wooden stair into the musty cellar. Jen and Cooper waited halfway down.

In the cellar I pulled the string, turning on the bare lightbulb in the middle of the ceiling and after blinking from the ‘brightness’, Torin stood in the pool of light, holding the vessel.

“I am goin’ tae turn it, Mistress Lexi, dost ye want tae run back up?”

I said, “Yeah, I do not want to be down here, in case.” I went to the stairs, climbing past Jen and Cooper. “You coming up?”

Jen said, “I’m going to stay here, half up and down, if I have to run I can.”

I told her, “If the wind starts down here the worst place to be will be on these stairs. I’m not doing it.”

She gulped.

Cooper said, “I think it’s highly unlikely for a tin can to start a storm in a basement, doesn’t make sense — but just wondering, have you ever turned it off once it’s started going?”

Torin said, “Nae.”

“Alright, then, do your thing.”

Jen asked, “Does this mean you believe him, Cooper, you’re finally going along with this?”

“Nah, just asking questions, always skeptical, but I do enjoy a science project.”

I went all the way up, watching from the doorway, Cooper and Jen waited on the stairs. I called down, “Okay, Torin, see if you can do it.”

Torin crouched down, so that the vessel was on the ground, I watched through the dim light as he turned and twisted it and then shoved it away. He paused and waited, then he picked it up and held it close to his eyes.

I said, “Fixed?”

“Nae, twas the first.”

He put it back on the ground and ran his hand through his hair. “Two more.”

He made another manipulation, then quickly pushed it to the floor and stood and backed away.

We all waited.

He crept forward and nervously looked.

“Two, now just one more. I daena ken if twill get me boom-raging back home, but twill be better than bein’ without kith nor kin in a time ruled by an English king.

” He scowled again and picked up the vessel, made a quick turn with his wrists, and rolled it back onto the floor.

He nodded, looking down on it. “There tis done.”

I said, cheerfully, “And it didn’t grab you or start a storm.”

“Aye, twas verra civilized in how it behaved.”

He picked it up, tucking it into his sporran as he climbed the stairs.

We all went down the hall to the kitchen. I poured some more coffee for myself and Cooper, we stood around the table, finishing up the conversation.

Torin pulled on his cloak and adjusted his sword belt, readying to go. “Once I am in Scotland, I will dig a hole in the ground and bury this blasted vessel until I can find Max and he can get it under control. I winna return here, and if I do... och nae, I will do m’best tae land elsewhere.”

Jen said, “I’m going to be kind of bummed, I want to hear how it goes. This place is boring without all your comings and goings. I’ve only got a few days left of spring break?—”

I said, “You could go out again with Mr Passable.”

“Maybe...” She turned to Cooper. “Speaking of dates, did you really cancel your big date with Lexi?”

I shook my head, trying to get her to shush.

She continued, frowning, “What happened, Coop, you were going to take her out

fancy!”

Cooper said, “I don’t know, not in the mood, we’ll go some other time — why is everyone all up in my grill about it? It was just a dinner reservation at Falls Landing, come on.”

He narrowed his eyes, “Seriously, why so much grief?”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s no grief, we’re all cool. I was looking forward to it, but it’s nothing, right, Jen?”

“Yeah, nothing, and you should treat Lexi really nicely because she’s the nicest person in the world.”

Torin looked back and forth from all our faces.

Cooper said, completely missing the point, “I promise I’ll take her out to eat soon and we’ll invite you, too. You can bring Mr Passable, whoever that is. Is everyone happy?”

I said, “Of course, that sounds good. Let’s get back on topic, Torin is not going to come back.”

Torin chuckled. “Aye, after this day, if ye see me out on Mistress Lexi’s lands, just lock the door and I will leave as soon as I am able. Twill be, as it has ever been, a misadventure.” He smacked his hands on his knees. “Tis time for me tae go.”

“Wait! Stay there, let me get the shovel I mentioned! Sit down, Torin, one more thing.” I shoved my chair out and rushed away.

LEXI

I pulled on a pair of socks and my blue, flower-print, short rainboots, that matched my sundress in a way, and went out to the garden shed behind the house to find my folding shovel.

It took a moment, it was behind a stack of pots but then I returned to the kitchen. “Ta da! This, see, a shovel, it’s perfect. I want you to have it.”

I held it out.

He said, “What is it?”

I pulled the pin from the side and the spring-loaded hinge opened, and the shovel was about two feet long when it was open.

I passed it to him. “This pin on the side releases it and closes it up.”

Torin held the shovel across his knees. “Och, this is verra fine!” He ran his hand along the wooden shaft. “Tis too fine, Mistress Lexi, I canna take it.”

I said, “I don’t mind, it’s from my dad, but I have a full-size set from him too. I want you to have it, you’ve still got the matches and the lighter?”

“Aye, I do, thank ye.”

He ran his hand along it again. “Twill make the work much easier.” I showed him

once more how to use the pin to fold the shovel. He said, “I can fit it in m’bags on m’horse.”

“That’s what I thought.”

His fingers stopped on letters hand-etched into the handle. “What are these for?”

“I carved that, a while back, it’s my initials, for my name.”

“A and D?”

“Yes, my full name is Alexandria Davis.”

The color left his face, he looked like he had seen a ghost.

“Alexandria?” He looked ill, he gulped, his face looked like he was anguished, he began to mutter under his breath, “Domine Deus meus, gratias tibi ago quod eam vivam inveni!”

I was standing by his chair, wondering what the hell I should do. “Yeah, um... That’s my full name, everyone calls me Lexi.”

“Och, I give thanks tae ye, Lord, she has been found alive!” He shoved the shovel off his lap, it fell clattering to the floor, and he pushed his chair back, knocking it to the ground. “Da mihi fortitudinem et fidem, so I may fulfill m’promise and keep her safe.”

His big hulking mass of a form yanked his dirk from the sheath at his waist and he dropped to his knees with a thud.

He was at my feet, praying, his eyes closed. “ I swore tae guard her, and now I fear,

Lord, that I may fail.”

He held the dirk before his face, clutched at the hilt on the top, a leather bound hilt with a blue stone at the end, its blade pointing down, catching the bright light streaming through my kitchen window.

“I vowed tae shield her, Lord, and I am weak with fear — Grant me strength and faith to fulfill my vow . ”

I looked around at Cooper and Jen, they both looked as shocked as I felt.

I said, “What is happening, Torin? I don’t understand!”

He whispered, “Holy Mary, mother of mercy, protect her from all harm! Help guide m’sword in her protection.”

“Torin, what...? ”

He lowered his dirk, and bowed his head, his voice low and trembling with awe.

“M’lady Alexandria, hear me: ye are Princess Alexandria, Yer Highness — yer brother, the Prince, has sought ye through many a long and bitter year.

I am sworn tae him, and now tae ye, by the grace of God and Holy Mary.

I pledge m’life, m’sword, and m’honor tae shield ye from all harm.

Tae guard ye till ye ken yer rightful place.

Fear not, for I will stand by ye, come what may. ”

I stood numbly, my mouth opening and closing. It was like my brain had stopped working, I couldn't compute.

Cooper asked, "What are you saying, Torin?"

Torin glanced over his shoulder, and said, "M'laire Maximilian, and I have been searchin' for Princess Alexandria, and she stands before me — och nae, I should have seen the familiarity in yer visage.

Ye are the Princess we have been searchin' for!

I have sworn to find ye, now I am sworn to protect ye — yer life is as my own, I will lay down my life to keep ye safe. "

I took a step back. "What is going on, why are you saying this?"

Cooper said, "Jesus Criminy, this is one more level of crazy. I keep thinking we are at the end of it, and looky here, new depths."

Jen said, "Look, Torin, you have her confused with someone else. This is Lexi, she was born here, she has... a family. They were all born here, she grew up here her whole life."

I gulped.

I blinked.

I asked, "Why are you saying this to me?"

Cooper jumped from his chair, came around the table. "Lexi, it's okay... he's just saying one more crazy thing."

I could barely see him, the blood rushing around my head made a loud sound that drowned out everything else as I looked down at Torin. “What the hell, this isn’t real. I just have the same name, Alexandria, it’s common .”

“Nae, ye are her, I see it.” He kept his eyes down on the ground in front of my feet. “I am vexed. I dinna detect it afore, but tis clear. Ye are the Princess Royal. We hae sought ye for long years.”

“Get up.”

He shook his head, his eyes still down on the ground in front of my feet. For some reason I was scared, and as my blood pumped my anger started to rise.

“Get up, Torin. Now. ”

“Aye, Yer Highness.” He rose to his feet, but kept his eyes down.

I said, “Look at me.”

He shook his head.

I was furious. “What the hell, Torin, explain yourself! This is all bullshit and I told Cooper that you were telling the truth, and now look! Why would you say something so crazy?”

He mumbled, staring at the ground, “I am deeply sorry, Yer Highness, that I hae vexed ye.”

He put his dirk into the sheath at his belt.

“So what, I have the same name as this Princess? A princess that you likely just made

up, right now, and you want me to listen to you on this, holy smokes!”

“Yer Highness, ye must listen tae m’earnest plea — ye are in danger, and I will do m’best tae protect ye while I try tae reunite ye with yer brother, m’laird?—”

I looked around at Cooper and Jen, “Can you believe this bullshit? What the hell! I regret all the effort I put into you, Torin. Holy shit. This is bizarre.”

Torin said, “Yer Highness, I promise ye, I am sworn tae protect ye. I daena mean tae cause ye?—”

I looked at Cooper for help.

He said, “Look, I’ve about had enough, I get that you’re looking for someone named Alexandria, but this is not her, it’s just a coincidence. She was born here, right, Lexi? This is her family home. She has lived here her whole life. Tell him, Lexi.”

The whole time he spoke, Torin stared at the ground in front of my feet, and I stared at his lowered lids, his strong nose, his beard on his downturned face.

I repeated, “I’ve lived here my whole life.”

“Cannae be true, I am certain ye are the Princess, Alexandria.”

“How?”

“Because ye hae the same name and yer visage is just like yer brother’s.”

I huffed.

Jen said, “But... but this is all coincidence. She is a local, raised in North Carolina.

This is her family home.”

“I canna explain it, but tis true.”

I said, “Try.”

“Try what, Yer Highness?”

“First, try to stop calling me that. I greatly prefer Mistress Lexi, and also try to explain what you claim is ‘true’.”

“When Prince Maximillian was a bairn, his father was killed in battle. I daena ken the full story, but Max was verra young at the time, his sister even younger. Their kingdom was lost. They were bundled away in the night and hidden in the past, so they wouldna be found by the new usurper of their throne. Max was brought tae Castle Glume, which is how we became known tae each other. His sister was given over tae another household, and he never saw her again.”

I blinked.

Cooper asked, “How old was she at the time?”

“I believe she was verra young.”

Cooper said, “Do you think she was a baby, or like three years old, or eight — what are we talking here?”

“I would guess, about three years auld.”

In my peripheral vision I saw Cooper glance at me.

I had to keep my voice steady. “What do you mean, ‘given over to another household’?”

“She was tae be raised by a landed baron, in a caput, a day’s ride from our castle.

Max was too young tae visit her, but by keepin’ them separate they were protected from those who would be searchin’ for them.

Max would receive news, and then one day he told me the messages had stopped and he dinna ken of her whereabouts or if she was safe. ”

I gulped.

Jen asked, “Where did she go?”

“Max dinna ken. He couldna find her. He prayed she had been rescued by someone in his family and returned tae his kingdom, but he couldna find her and as the years passed he grew tae believe she was lost for good.”

Cooper said, “This still doesn’t explain why you think this person is Lexi. She knows who her parents are. She studies her family tree. I mean come on, this is too ludicrous, even by Torin standards.”

Torin nodded, his eyes still averted.

I shook my head.

Then said, “Keep going.”

“Months ago, winter of 1558, a messenger approached Max, she told Max of the vessel that we needed tae procure, and how tae find his sister. It cost us blood and

treasure tae get the vessel, but somehow I was the one holdin' it...

ye ken the story. I thought I needed tae get the vessel returned tae Max so he could use it tae find his sister, and believed that bein' here on yer lands was a blunder.

I dinna realize ye were the Princess we were looking for... and ye ken the rest of the story."

Cooper said, "This sounds suspiciously like Torin doesn't plan to leave, told you." He shook his head. "Sorry, I joke when I'm faced with inanities."

I just tried to breathe. My stomach hurt. Like I needed to throw up. I wrapped my arms around my middle, hugging myself.

Jen came closer and put her hand on my shoulder.

"All of this is not true, Lexi, you know it. Your parents, may they rest in peace, can't tell you, but maybe...

I don't know, you could call your uncle, talk to him, just tell him what's going on, just get him to tell you some good stories about growing up. "

A tear slid down my face.

Torin asked, "Dost ye ken ye were a blood relation, or were they fosterin' ye?"

Cooper said, "Welp, now I've had enough. This is effing not cool. I'm going to have to ask you to leave." He put his hand out, gesturing toward the door.

Torin raised his eyes to mine. "Dost ye want me tae go?"

I nodded, chewing my lip.

He bowed deeply. “Tis my fervent desire tae keep ye safe, Yer Highness. I will go on yer command, but I will remain close tae keep yer life protected. Tis my oath.” He followed Cooper down the hall to the front door.

I heard them conversing but couldn’t tell what they were saying.

LEXI

Jen put her arms around my shoulders.

I stared straight ahead at the far wall, my grandmother's china cabinet, full of her teacup collection, frozen, while Jen tried to hug me close, to offer solace and a hug of support. I just stared blinking at that china cabinet, wondering, how would I know if I was adopted?

I scoffed to myself.

I knew I wasn't adopted. I knew it, it was a fact, I had always known it, it had always been true, except...

I had always kind of wondered.

When I was younger I wondered about it a lot, thinking of my family as a little bit different from me in some way.

But didn't all little kids wonder that sometimes?

Your parents would be embarrassing or mean and feel foreign and you'd wish that there was an explanation better than, 'parents are just like that sometimes.' It was a way of coping with growing up, millions of little girls thought they were adopted, sometimes.

But then when my parents died... after that, I hadn't wanted to think about it

anymore.

It seemed unfair. Traitorous, almost. Like I was an ungrateful brat for having it ever cross my mind.

So it didn't cross my mind.

It had been years since I had felt that way.

Those feelings were long lost relics of my youth.

Jen said, "You're shaking."

"Was I adopted?"

She was quiet. Then she said, "No, of course not — did anyone ever tell you that you were adopted?"

"No, definitely not."

"See? I think people tell you if you are."

"But my parents died, maybe they died before they could tell me."

"Ah, sweetie."

Her hands smoothed up and down on my arms, trying to sooth and soften me, but I was stiff and staring, my mind computing nothing.

"That can't possibly be true."

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t seem right.”

“That’s enough?”

She shrugged. “Yeah. Do you think it’s true?”

“I don’t know. Not logically, but... somewhere down deep it hit me, my dream you know?”

“I think you’re in shock.”

I nodded. “Probably, I’m feeling really fuzzy headed, having trouble being logical?—”

Cooper stormed in.

“He won’t totally leave, but said he’d be out on the edge of the property. I did my best.”

Jen let go of me.

He stood in front of me. His brow furrowed. “How are you doing?”

“Not good.”

“You look weird, like your eyes aren’t focusing right.”

Jen said, “I think she’s in shock.”

He said, matter-of-factly, “Not a reason for it, you can’t let him get in your head, Lexi. He’s manipulating you.”

“How...?”

“He knows you’re kicking him out of the back-shack. He’s a sociopath, he’s been working on you for days, now he found a weird in?—”

“Was I adopted?”

Cooper’s eyes went wide. “Lexi, no! You can’t listen to him, your family is your family!”

“How are you so sure?”

“Because this story is ridiculous, told by a nutjob, out of nowhere. It’s not true.

Your parents loved you, you loved them. You were raised by them here in this house, passed down through your family on your ancestral land.

I’ve never met anyone with as long an ancestral family line.

You have roots, how can you... jeez.” He frowned.

“Come on, Lexi, you live in the same house your great-grandparents built with their own hands.”

He looked at Jen, “What are you telling her?”

“I’m telling her that she’s probably not adopted.”

“ Probably? Seriously, Jen?”

She shrugged and then said this, and it chilled me to my core.

“I mean, her trust fund is really odd. Her family wasn’t that rich.

How’d they leave her so much? She doesn’t even have all of it yet, and she’s never had a job.

It’s probably millions of dollars, easy. You and I talked about it, you agreed.”

The world slowed down around me, a rushing sound around my head, inside my head.

I barely heard Cooper saying, “Aw, come on, Jen, that’s not fair — that was when I first met her.

We talked about it, sure, but you know the deal.

Her parents had money, passed down from her grandparents, good investments, you know... ”

But I stopped listening, my dream was playing out, me in a dark corner with light flickering on my cheek from a fire in a hearth, so scared, watching a rough strange man beat a man, a kind man, who cared for me, who I loved, while a woman, who cared for me, begged for his life, and then I was snatched, and carried away, a rough hand over my mouth.

I took a step back, shaking my head.

No no no no no.

In the dream I had been dropped down onto a riverbank and something was thrust into my hands, the man had yelled, ‘Hold it!’

And I looked down.

It was a vessel.

I had held a vessel in my hand.

I shook my head.

No no no no no, I turned around, stumbling. I almost fell down, arms out, lurching down my hallway. It was hard to keep on my feet, my balance was off, my vision obscured, my heart yammering in my chest, my knees weak.

Inside my head, that little girl’s voice, ‘ Where they go? Go back! Take me back!’

‘Och nae, lass, daena let go ? —’

Why couldn’t I remember what happened next?

Where had that little girl gone, where had she ended up?

I shoved out the front door and out onto the porch.

Torin was sitting on a boulder at the end of the driveway.

He turned and saw me, I yelled, “What do you mean I was given over to another household?”

The screen door slammed behind me, Cooper said, “Lexi, let’s come in, let’s talk this

all out.”

I stumbled down the steps out onto the grass, walking toward Torin in my sundress and rainboots, yelling, “Answer me, who were my parents, who raised me?”

Torin strode toward me. “Princess, I daena ken who yer parents were. I daena understand how this has happened, but I will make it right. This is my oath tae ye, I will?—”

A gust of wind rose on the lawn. Torin looked up at the sky. “Och nae!”

There was a rumble of thunder. The sky roiled with dark clouds climbing into the sky above us.

Torin yelled, “Princess, go tae the house!” He unsheathed his sword.

But when I turned, four men on horseback, broke from the trees. They were charging up the yard, tearing across my grass. My land shook with the rumble of their hooves. The wind from above whipped at my hair and I was frozen in fear at the sight of the horses.

Cooper yelled, “Lexi, run!” But I wouldn’t make it to the house, they would get me first .

How did I know they wanted me ?

I just knew.

Torin rushed in front of me, trying to protect me from the men charging at us.

Then, over the crest of the two lane road in front of my house, raced four more men

on horseback riding in a line.

The hooves of their horses dug into the gravel of the driveway, spraying rocks around as they raced, the men were frightening, intense, and carrying guns.

Torin was trying to block me from all directions.

I clutched his cloak, the wind of the storm rising so much that I was buffeted almost off my feet. I screamed, “Torin!” As a man on one of the horses caught up to me, and grasped my arm trying to wrest me up.

Torin yelled, “Princess, daena let go!”

He swung his sword. One of the men was sliced through his side, a spray of blood, his horse reared.

I stumbled back and fell on my ass.

And then men and horses descended on us as the storm rose, a blast of wind, shots fired but the crack was dampened by the roaring wind.

A man was on me, a horse screamed nearby. I was trying to grasp Torin’s hand, his kilt, his cloak, anything, but it was pressure, wind flattening me, my voice screaming in my ears. Lexi! As pain rose up my legs to my chest and filled my body so that it felt like I was going to be torn to pieces.

And then I blacked out from the pain.

LEXI

AN UNKNOWN TIME

As I came to from being unconscious, it was like pulling my mind up from mud, sluggish and slow to awareness.

The first thing I noticed was how hard my muscles were clamped, agitated, it dawned on me that I was shivering with cold.

I wrapped my arms around me. I was wearing a tiny little flowered sun dress and it felt like winter.

I peeled my eyes open. Nearly everything on my body hurt, even my eyelashes.

It was dark. When everything had happened, when I had been in a giant brawl on my lawn, it had been midmorning.

I could see a blade of grass in front of my eyes.

It was in focus, everything else was blurred and foggy.

I couldn't hear anything over the roar in my head.

It sounded like when you had earplugs in and yet it was loud everywhere, but you couldn't hear it, not really, not over the sound of your own breathing, your own self.

But under it, rising in my awareness, a man's voice.

It was Torin, his face at the level of mine, crawling closer. He whispered, "Wheesht."

As his face emerged fully in my view his finger was pressed to his lips. He silently shook his head.

Be quiet, don't say anything... I went small and quiet like a kitten.

He sprung up into a crouched position, his big rough hand lightly resting on my shoulder, comfortingly. I looked up at the underside of his bearded chin. He was looking out, and slowly turning his head, looking around in every direction, then looking over his shoulder, then scanning around again.

After a few very tense moments he asked, "Ye cold?"

I nodded.

He unfastened the brooch on his cloak, swept it off and laid it across me. It was a bit warmer. He passed me the brooch and whispered, "Can ye fasten it so I daena lose it?"

I nodded, fumbling the brooch's needle through the thick fabric and latching it, realizing it was pinned to my dress, and not the other side, so it was useless as a fastener, but at least it wouldn't get lost...

I think because of the pain subsiding, the cold, the fear, I crashed, losing consciousness once more. This time a bit more like falling asleep than passing out, though the two things were just barely different.

Both caused me to go dark.

I woke with a start when I heard a man yelp in pain.

I sat up bolt upright.

In the middle of a small clearing, two men were holding Torin's arms while another man punched his face.

One of the men was wearing a headlamp, blazing light into Torin's eyes.

His eye was blackened, a gash on his head. His lip looked swollen.

I slammed my hands over my mouth to keep from screaming.

I didn't know if they saw me, if they knew where I was.

I looked around, I was alone, about thirty feet away, in the dark.

I pulled the cloak around my shoulders, then I inched.

I inched more, stealthily, silently toward a tree. If I could get behind it before the light was swept around the?—

The light was swept around the clearing.

I froze.

The light hit me.

I stayed frozen, hoping they didn't see me, but they were all looking right at me. Torin bellowed and struggled in his captors' grip.

Run!

I scrambled up and began to run, run run run! Making it about eight steps before I was tackled from behind by some big asshole with a smell of body odor and evil.

I tripped over a rock, hard, as I fell forward with the big guy on me, knocking the air out of me. I shrieked in pain.

It was so dark I had no idea who was on me, what he looked like, but if you had told me ‘grizzly bear’ I would have believed you.

I was lifted and thrown over his shoulder, in shock with pain. I struggled but it was useless. I beat his back. I could hear Torin, yelling, his voice low from agonizing pain, “Lexi! Are ye okay, Lexi?—”

Another punch and he quieted.

I kept shrieking and pushing and shoving against the monster’s back, trying to get off, up, away, but his hand was clamped on my legs, clamped down on me, and as he walked and as I struggled, as my head was over his back, practically upside down, I just wore myself out.

He dropped me to the ground and roughly pushed and pulled until he wrenched my arms behind me and tied my hands together then he roughly shoved me up and over onto a horse, ass in the air.

The cloak hung uselessly from my shoulder.

I couldn’t move. I was going to fall forward or back and without my hands to stop my fall either way I would be seriously hurt.

Torin yelled, “Daena hurt her!”

The sounds of struggling, then the group of men moved closer to the horses and the horse I was draped across was set into a walk.

The leather saddle hurt my stomach, my ribs, and my hip bones — this giant horse’s movements were excruciating because I couldn’t adjust or move in anyway — the pain was overwhelming and relentless. My face was pressed against the side of a sweating filthy horse, all the blood rushing to my head.

My head was jostled, I raised it enough to see Torin shuffling along beside me as he was pushed from behind by our captors. He whispered, “Daena tell them who ye are.”

I moaned.

He whispered, “Mistress... daena die, please.”

I mumbled. “I won’t.”

“Daena worry, I will get ye free. I promise, I will get ye home, I promise I will keep ye safe...” I lost consciousness again.

JEN

My eyes swept the scene — the wind had lessened, the last of the rain was dripping off leaves, the lawn was trashed, mud puddles formed in the deep grooves created by the battle we had just witnessed.

The storm had been so sudden and intense that I had had to duck and cover, and now that it calmed enough to stand up and look around, everyone and everything was gone, all the men and horses had vanished into the storm.

Even the men who had been on the ground.

I was on the bottom porch step, my mouth wide open in shock. I slowly turned to see Cooper, his tall and lanky self, with his hands in his hair, looking out at the scene.

Cooper said, “What the hell was that, I just... where did she go?”

I shook my head and mumbled, “I don’t know.”

“You saw that, right? It was right there, Lexi was there, Torin... where are they?”

I said, “I saw it. Did you see the medieval men on horses?”

“Yeah, I saw a man dying on the ground, right there, dressed like he was at a Ren Faire, covered in blood. Now he’s gone.” With his hands still on his head he turned and said, “What the hell did we eat? Did someone spike our pancakes?”

I shook my head. “Doesn’t feel like a hallucination. That felt weirdly realistic, yet insane.”

He looked right and left. “Did he kidnap her?”

“They’re both gone, they were both kidnapped, somehow.”

He dropped his hands. “Did you happen to get a description of the guys, anything useful? I didn’t, that was too crazy, I couldn’t think.”

“For the police? No. I mean, the horses were brown. The men were wearing old-school costumes.”

Coop said, “Dammit, I never got my gun either. I didn’t get a good description, what the hell was I doing?”

“Well, none of that was normal. We should call the cops, right?”

He said, “Yeah, yeah, for sure, call the cops, we gotta. Do we need to get our story straight?”

“Why, we didn’t do anything!”

“But it just sounds so absurd. There were horses, like eight men?—”

“Two groups, were they all together?”

“I only know all of them were trying to get Torin.”

“Or Lexi.”

“Don’t start, Jen, none of that was...” His voice trailed off.

I raised my brow. “You think you still get to be skeptical of what he told us? He freaking told you he was a time traveler. He said he travels on storms. He said she was a princess and swore to protect her from danger, and not ten minutes later, there is so much danger and then they disappeared in a storm. Not believing him now is senseless.”

He shook his head. “I know, I know, I just don’t know what to think. I was wrong, I was totally wrong. Wait, where’s Dude?”

He looked around. “Do you see Dude?”

“No, but he probably went inside.”

Cooper turned and banged into the house, calling, “Dude! Dude, here kitty-kitty, Dude!”

He came back out a few moments later.

I said, “Did you check the basement, we were all down there.”

“Yeah, he’s not in the house.” His hands went back to his head. “Damn, did he get taken too?”

I scanned the yard. “I mean, sometimes he disappears for days, he’s pretty independent, he’ll likely come back tonight.”

Cooper said, “I don’t know, I think he’s gone.”

I said, “I’m glad you do finally believe in time travel.”

“Yeah, I know, I didn’t believe the unbelievable... I was skeptical and now freaking Lexi and Dude are missing. If I had listened, maybe I could have done something.”

I said, “Doubtful, what could you have done?”

“I don’t know, been ready for one. Jeez, we need to call the police. What are we going to say though, that a time traveler took Lexi?”

“Yeah, better sooner than later.” I walked into the house, but then turned around and came back out. “But, Coop, what are we telling them? There were eight armed men, horses, a giant storm, and now they’re gone?”

“That’s what I mean by getting the story straight. They’re going to haul me down to the station for questioning, for sure . None of this makes sense. I’ll be the number one suspect.”

I gulped. “They might think you did something?”

“Probably. Missing woman. A missing wealthy woman who I’m in a relationship with. Yeah, there’s no other plausible explanation.”

“The day after you didn’t get your investors!”

“What’s that got to do... oh. ”

“Yeah, they might think that’s suspicious.”

He groaned.

I added, “But in your defense, most men who were planning to do something dire to a rich?—”

He groaned again, “Don’t say it, it’s too awful.”

I finished, not caring about his discomfort, “...would marry the rich woman first, to get her money.”

“Ugh, why are you saying that?”

“I’m just saying, you could have married Lexi for her money, but you wouldn’t. You never wanted to. That’s proof you’re not involved in her disappearance.”

He blinked.

I said, “I’m just saying this is your defense.”

He said, “I wouldn’t marry her? What do you mean...? It just wasn’t the right time. I would have married her, I wanted to, it?—”

“Bullshit, you didn’t want to marry her, you could have asked her a million times. She thought you were going to ask her this weekend and?—”

He groaned again. “No... no, really? Is that what she thought? Damn... I had no idea.”

“Honestly, Coop, I love ya, you’ve been like a brother, but if you didn’t know that Lexi thought you were going to ask her to marry you, then you are a dimwitted fool.”

He exhaled, shaking his head. “I couldn’t figure out why she was so intent on going to Falls Landing.”

“Yeah, because you’re an idiot, and you’ve only been thinking about yourself for, I don’t know, months .”

“Shit, but... what do I do? How do I make it up to her? She’s gone.”

I shrugged. “I have no idea, she’s pretty bummed, she was even planning what she would wear to the big dinner.”

He had his hands on his head again. “Jeez, Jen, you’re right, I’m a fool. I’ll ask her, first thing, soon as I find her — We need to figure out how to get her back.”

I leaned against the rail. “Let’s think about this rationally . If it’s not time travel, then she’s here somewhere, right? And likely they won’t treat it like a missing persons case until twenty-four hours have passed. I saw that in a show.”

Cooper said, “True. That seems right.”

“Could she have run into the woods?”

He said, “I didn’t see it. Did you?”

I said, “Nope.”

“Put on your shoes, we ought to go look.”

I said, “But... to continue being rational. If it was time travel, then we are not going to find her around here. Those medieval dudes did not just chase her into the woods surrounding her house and then disappear.”

Cooper nodded.

I continued, rationalizing, “And the thing is, she’ll probably be back soon. If you think about it, Torin has landed here like five times in a few days. She’ll be back in a few hours, probably. Right?”

Cooper said, “It would follow, yeah.”

“So maybe we don’t get the police involved, there’s not much they can do, right? If it’s time travel they can’t do anything but be a great big hassle.”

Cooper chewed his lip. “Okay, but seriously, Jen, if she’s not back by... I don’t know, we... we call it in.”

“Yeah, let me put on some shoes and we’ll start looking.”

I sprinted up the steps and slammed into the house. I put on my hiking boots and then I left a note for Lexi:

Hey Babe,

Where did you go? Coop and I are out looking for you, if you come back here, stay put.

Love,

Jen

LEXI

A SHED IN AN UNKNOWN TIME

I woke up as I was yanked off the horse and crashed to the ground in a heap.

“Ow!”

The man laughed. It was very dark, a crisp night, we were in a wide field, a hum of night bugs. The stench of animal dung. There was a small building in the darkness and I was pushed toward it. Roughly.

“Where are you taking me?”

One of the big hulking men shoved me, and mimicked my voice, high, scared.

The men laughed.

A wooden door opened on the small cold shed and I was shoved in. I stumbled on the threshold and fell forward onto my knee and shoulder, my fall barely softened by straw coving the floor. It smelled like farm animal dung, in the worst way.

I winced and rode the wave of pain until I could sit up. Then I dug my heels into the ground and shoved up against the wall, as far away from the door as I could get. It was pitch black except for a window with a small glow of moonlight.

I was captive.

I heard outside, Torin yelling, struggling, and being roughed up, then a moment later the door opened, and he was shoved in, landing on his hands and knees with a groan.

He collapsed to his side and lay there weakly.

The man at the door laughed.

They slammed the door, making the shed even darker.

I was terrified. Desperately sad. And I was really angry.

Torin was responsible for all of it, and he was the only person in the world who could help me.

I could hear a laughing conversation outside.

And it slammed into me, what if he died?

I said, "Torin? Torin, are you okay?"

There was a long pause and then he mumbled, "Aye."

I burst into tears.

He said, "Och nae," and pushed himself up and then shifted and turned the bulk of his big body to the wall beside me with a gasp of pain.

He got situated so we were shoulder to shoulder, with his body between me and the door, then he exhaled the air from his lungs.

He said, "Twill be alright, Princess."

“Stop calling me that, you’ve ruined my life. You’ve destroyed my relationship, and I’ve lost everything. Why are you doing this to me?”

“I dinna mean tae cause ye harm, Prin — I just felt relieved that I found ye, I ought tae hae progressed more cautiously.”

“It’s too late now,” I sobbed, my throat tight from tears, I forced out, “I hate you.”

“I ken.”

I was physically shaking. “Who are these men, are they going to kill me?”

“I daena ken who they are, or what they want. They hae their own vessel, why dost they want mine? But they might want a royal princess, if they knew yer true self — we must be quiet about ye.”

I sniffled. “How did they find me? The minute after you told me I was a princess, they found me.”

“Aye, tis as if they were listening in.”

“This is all your fault.”

He nodded.

“You didn’t answer me — do they want to kill me?”

“They would hae tae go through me, and they winna go through me.”

Tears were streaming down my face. “You can’t die, Torin, I don’t know what to do.”

He groaned. “I canna tell if ye want me tae go or want me tae stay with?—”

“You can’t leave me!”

I said it so loud that the guard at our door slammed his hand against the wood in a loud bang.

Torin said under his breath, “Och nae... he is a dead man.”

I sobbed. “Don’t leave me, Torin, please. I don’t have anyone in the world, no one, everyone is gone and I don’t know where I am.”

His head was back against the wall, he said, his voice weary, “I would never, Prin — Yer Highness, I would never leave ye. Ye hae my word.”

My face was damp with tears and my nose was running and my hands were bound behind me so I couldn’t wipe my face, tears and snot rolling down it— I raised my knees, but my dress slid up my thighs, too short to give me any fabric.

“Och, ye are despairin’.” Torin had his arms tied in front. With another sharp intake of air, he raised his arms so that his sleeve was in front of my face. “Ye can wipe yer tears, Princess.”

I blubbered, “On your sleeves, Torin? That doesn’t seem...” But I leaned forward and wiped my face on his sleeves.

He said, “Good.”

His head dropped against the wall again, exhaling.

My voice sounded small to my ears when I asked, “Are they going to kill us?” Then I

said, “Maybe don’t answer.”

“I think if they wanted us dead we would be dead already. They want us alive — this gives us a chance tae escape.”

“Do you have any of your weapons?”

“Nae, I hae been relieved of them. Dost ye hae a weapon on ye?”

I shook my head. “No weapons... I don’t suppose you have a vessel?”

“Nae, tis gone. This is nae matter, Princess, we will escape, and I will use whatever I can find as a weapon. A rock will work, ye ken, I see one there in the corner. I can beat ten men with a good rock, daena worry.”

I huffed. “But without a vessel I’m never going home.”

I glanced at his face, he was chewing his lip, breathing heavily.

My chin trembled, despairing again. “Do you have any idea where we are?”

“By my best guess, we are in long-ago Scotland, verra far from yer time, closer tae m’own.”

My teeth chattered. The fear was getting on top of me. I was wearing his cloak, but it had fallen off my shoulders and there was nothing I could do. I was really cold, shaking with fear. “This seems really bleak, it must be winter.”

“I ken, tis cold here.” He struggled and breathed heavily, twisting, pushing to get one side of the cloak up and over my shoulder.

“Och, that is all I can do.”

I nodded. “It’s okay, that helps.”

“And, Princess, I believe ye are mistaken, tis not winter, this feels like a Scottish summer.”

I chuckled, through my tears. “Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“Aye, so ye winna be frightened.”

I looked at his face and in the dim light of the moon I could see his puffy eye, a fat lip pushed through his beard. His head drooped from pain.

I said, “I’m sorry you’re so hurt.”

He chuckled. “Och nae, Princess, I hae sworn tae protect ye, I am the one who ought tae be apologizing. If Master Cooper were here he would be callin’ intae question m’capabilities as yer protector.”

“What does he think happened? Did we just disappear?”

“Aye, something like that. Dost ye think he believes me now?”

I sighed. “Maybe, finally.” I added, “They both must be so worried.”

He leaned a bit, lowering his shoulder, “Ye can put yer head on m’shoulder.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder and whispered, “Are you serious, you really think I’m a princess?”

His voice was low and rumbling, comforting in the darkness, vibrating my ear against his warm shoulder. “Aye, Mistress Lexi, I ken ye are.”

We sat in the quiet. I sniffled occasionally, trying to calm down my crying from before.

He finally asked, very low, “Dost ye believe me?”

I whispered, “No... but... I don’t know. I’m so mad at you. I was happy...”

“I ken.”

“Now I am kidnapped by some evil medieval guys, who knows where, and I might never get to go home again.”

I exhaled. “This is so bleak.”

“Tis nae, ye daena ken me verra well, Prin— I mean, Mistress Lexi, but I winna rest until ye are home.”

I adjusted my face on his shoulder, a little like nuzzling in.

Then he tentatively put his head against mine, then it grew heavy.

There was an intimacy to his cheek on my hair. It warmed me.

I nestled my head against his shoulder. Then I raised my chin and nuzzled against the side of his face, his warm beard, and then I kissed him, his warm breath on my lips, my lips parting and for a second we were kissing deeply, desperately, but then he pulled his mouth from mine, and very close, his voice a low rumbling against my skin. “Nae, I canna, Princess.”

I put my forehead against his chin and in the darkness between us I said, “I’m sorry, I’m just scared, my adrenaline was pumping, I don’t know why I did that.”

“Ye hate me and yet ye kissed me.”

“I’m sorry, I think I needed your closeness.”

He nodded against my forehead. “Aye, I feel it as well, but we canna, ye are a Princess and I...” His lips brushed my skin. “I am yer devoted Torin, but I am beneath ye, I canna take liberties with ye when ye are weak and frightened, I am nae a scoundrel.”

I put my head back on his shoulder and the comforting weight of his cheek returned to my head.

“I’m scared.”

“I ken ye are, Princess, but I will take care of ye.”

I said, “It’s hard to get comfortable with my hands in the back.”

“Lie down.” He raised his hands so I could lay across his lap. “I hae gotten past the pain and m’eyes hae adjusted. I will get yer bindings off yer wrists. Then ye can do mine.”

“Do you think you could?” I shimmied onto his lap, with a wince.

“I will try, and I am sorry ye were injured on the horse, Princess.”

I settled in a way that had my torso across his thighs, my wrists by his hand, and he began to pick at the ropes.

There was too much to think about. My mind was a jumble, a cacophony of stress.

I needed to try to understand my whole past, everything in my life, my parents, my relationships, the money that had been set aside for me — it was all so complicated.

I couldn't even begin to think it through.

I would need to, once I survived this. If I survived this. ..

...then I realized Torin was humming.

I listened for a moment.

“That’s beautiful, what song is it?”

“Tis nae a drivin’ song, tis a walkin’ song from the Scottish highlands.” He sang a few lines, in a wonderful, deep brogue. “...now the summer is in prime, Wi' the flowers richly blooming, And the wild mountain thyme, A' the moorlands perfuming; All around the bloomin' heather, Lassie will ye go?—”

There was a bang and the door crashed open — I shrieked and turned over, hiding my hands.

A big man stood there. “What ye doin’ in here?”

Torin growled, “Naethin’ for ye tae worry on.” My heart raced, what if he took me? What if they beat Torin again. I froze, terrified.

Torin’s hands rested heavy on my shoulder, keeping me down on his lap.

“Ye are singin’.” The man swayed. He seemed drunk.

Torin said, “Ye are a detestable lout — The lady is restin’ and ye are makin’ a racket, go leave us be.”

The man swayed, then said, “Ye keep quiet, ye are a captive.” He staggered away, slamming the door behind him.

Torin gently pushed my shoulder forward, adjusted the cloak across my back, and wordlessly began picking at my bindings again.

He said, “I am sorry he frightened ye.”

I nodded. I couldn’t speak, I was so frightened, my whole body was shaking.

He put a calming comforting hand on my shoulder. “Ye ken I will protect ye?”

I nodded again. I did believe he was going to protect me.

And I desperately needed protection.

“Ye daena hae tae be afraid. Please daena doubt me.”

I nodded once more.

He went back to gently pulling at the bindings on my wrists. Then he said, “Can ye speak? I need tae hear ye.”

I said, quietly, “I know, I know you will protect me.”

“Thank ye.”

I whispered, “Does your face hurt?”

“Aye, Mistress Lexi, as Max would say tae me, ‘Ye ought not try tae beat a man with yer face, Torin,’ I tried anyway and only succeeded in hurtin’ m’self.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tis naething much, I will use m’agony as the power I need tae get us free and tae seek revenge. I greatly look forward tae the revenge. They frightened the princess, I will make them pay.”

“I like having my own personal avenger.”

“Ye hae me, if it takes m’last breath.”

I turned to look up at his face, it was aglow in moonlight, battered and bruised, but still handsome.

He looked down on me with a sad smile. “We ought not be alone, yet here we are once again, discoursin’ in the night. This is goin’ tae cause trouble for ye.”

“You promised to save me from trouble.”

“Aye, I did. I will, startin’ now.” He chuckled. “As soon as I get these cursed bindings off yer wrists.”

He worked quietly and then I said, “I thought of something, Torin, I was thinking about a piece of jewelry I have...”

He quietly asked, “What is it?”

“I have a... it’s a locket with a gold thread inside. Engraved on the front is a crown, and... thistles... and an ‘R’. It’s very small, made for a child, I think. It always

seemed too dainty for me to wear. I often wondered what its purpose was. Mom told me it was a family heirloom.”

I adjusted my knees, which were cold and stiff from the ground. “Do you think the crown might mean some?—?”

I felt him shift.

I turned to look up at his face, his eyes had gone to the window...

LEXI

A SHED IN AN UNKNOWN TIME

I n the window sat a cat — a cat who looked a lot like Dude.

The cat trilled.

“Dude, is that you?” As I said it, I knew — his torn ear was backlit by the moon. “Oh no, Dude, why did you come?”

He jumped down into the room and walked over as if he didn’t have a care in the world, trilling his head off.

I said, “Shhh, that monstrous ass is going to barge in here again.”

Dude put his paws on my shoulder and began kneading.

Torin petted Dude. “I told ye not tae come the other night. This is too dangerous for ye, Dude. I daena need yer help protectin’ the Princess. I hae this all under control.”

I turned to look up at his face. “Now my cat is here with us? This does not seem under your control.”

He smiled. “Och, ye canna doubt me, Princess, this is nothin’ but some adversities, I will hae us clear of this by the morn.”

I actually, oddly, felt a little bit better, our situation was still dire, but somehow seeing Dude, his familiarity, gave me comfort.

I teased, “You’re calling this just ‘some adversities’?”

We are kidnapped, beaten, and scared out of our wits, now Dude is here too.

Are you saying this will be easily solved? ”

“Aye, this is nothin’, and I am nae scared out of m’wits. Dude inna scared at all, he is a courageous lion. I will get ye tae safety as soon as I think of what tae do.”

Dude meowed and put his paws up on Torin’s chest and nuzzled against his beard.

I said, “He likes you so much.”

“Aye, he is a good lion, and he complicates this greatly. Now I hae two of m’favorite people tae save.”

“Dude is one of your favorite people?”

“Aye, he ranks among the top three best discoursers tae speak with in the night.”

“ Do you have this all under control?”

“Aye.” Dude sat beside my head, beside Torin, and quieted.

“How much longer will the ties take?”

“Just a moment more. Tis hard tae see with m’swollen eyes, but I am managin’.”

I sat quietly trying to be patient while he worked. “...Dude followed us all this way.”

“Aye.” He spoke to Dude, “If ye are goin’ tae be part of m’rescue of the Princess, ye must use stealth, follow along, daena cause mischief.”

Dude meowed.

I chuckled. “He’s going to be trouble, he’s independent, he only does what he wants to do.”

“Nae, he is loyal, he only does what he can do tae stay near yer side.”

“I suppose that’s true too.”

He tugged at the rope with a yank.

I said, “You also said I was one of your favorite people?”

He was quiet, tugging a bit more. Then he said, “Aye Princess... ye are m’favorite.”

A last final tug and the rope pulled away from my wrists. I rubbed them and swung my arms to get the stiffness from the shoulder joints.

Then I sat on my knees bent over his wrists in his lap and began trying to untie the knot on his bindings. I could feel his eyes on my face, it caused me to go hot. Hot angry and hot passionate, both.

I brushed my hair from my forehead, feeling flustered.

I was reminded how he had kept his eyes averted and how cold it had seemed, how it had made me so angry, and now he was warming me with his gaze, it was intimate... and unexpected. I raised my eyes to his.

And we stared deep into each other’s eyes.

He was so familiar...

Tis as if I hae known ye.

I nodded and returned to working on his rope.

It was thick, the knot tight, I tugged and pulled as I said, “I’ve been having a dream...

a recurring dream and in it, I’m very young, and I’m scared.

I’m in a dark room lit only by firelight from a hearth.

And there is a scary man in the room and he is beating the man who was taking care of me. .. a little like... seeing you beaten.”

I got an end loose and began wiggling it through a loop. “Then a bigger man grabs me and carries me away. And then...” I breathed before finishing. “Then he puts something in my hand and tells me not to let go. That’s when I wake up.”

“Hae ye ever been in that room before?”

“No, it all seemed really old, way too old for me to have been there, but I hear and smell and feel it like it’s real. It feels more like a memory than a dream, you know?” I added, “I just had no idea it could be a memory.”

“Twas when ye were stolen from the household near Castle Glume, I think.”

“Yeah, maybe...”

“Did ye recognize the man who carried ye away?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t really see his face, he was wearing a cloak — fur trimmed,

kind of like yours. He didn't use my name, he just seemed like someone who was trying to get me to safety. I never saw him again. He sounded like you though, his voice. But it can't have been you."

"Nae, it wasna me."

I freed the knot with a last tug and the bindings fell away from his wrists.

He rubbed his hands. "And in yer dream, Princess, what did the strange man put in yer hand?"

I quietly said, "A vessel. I know it now, that's what it was."

He reached out and pushed the hair back from my face. "Twas nae me... unless twas from m'future."

I looked into his eyes. "...oh, would that be something that could happen? You think you might do that...?"

He pulled the cloak around my shoulders and fastened it in the front at my breast with the brooch.

"I daena ken, but ye are important tae me, and if I needed tae get ye somewhere protected, and I could travel through time, I ken I would do anythin' in m'power tae keep ye safe.

My heart gives thanks tae whosoever saved yer life. "

I was petting Dude, but then Torin petted Dude too, and our hands brushed together, a spark of warmth

Then Torin took my hand.

It startled me, watching his hand enclose mine, his was big and warm and rough. And comfortable.

I didn't pull away.

I wondered if I would ever pull away.

He was quiet as his thumb rubbed back and forth across my knuckles. "This is all m'fault, Princess, I am sorry for it."

"What's next?"

He said, "We are goin' tae rest for a bit, afore I break us free."

I said, "Okay. They won't come in?"

"Nae, they are goin' tae sleep, they hae been drinkin' a great deal, and it has gone quiet out there, even the guard is fallin' asleep."

He gently pulled my hand so that I moved to his side and then he let go. Even with all my fear and anger, when he let go of my hand I felt a little untethered. He was the only person in the world who knew me, who knew where I was, in the whole history of time.

Oh.

That was scary.

"Do you mind if I put my head on your shoulder?"

"Nae, tis welcome. Dost ye mind if I put m'arm around ye?"

“No, I could use the warmth. We’re in this together, you know?”

I got comfortable with my head against his chest and his arm around me. Dude sat at my hip, licking his paw, cleaning himself.

Torin put his cheek on my head.

I said, “You’ll wake me up, if there’s an emergency?”

“Aye, Princess.”

I said, “You don’t need me to keep watch while you sleep?”

He chuckled. “Nae, I daena need the Princess tae take a watch.”

“I can be useful.”

“Aye, but ye need yer rest as well, and we hae Dude tae watch out for us. He will wake us if anyone decides tae come in.”

I whispered to Dude, “You hear that? We are counting on you.”

And then slowly, in the still night of the wee outbuilding, with the faint trills of my cat, the warm embrace of my new... What was he to me?

Torin.

The man who had upended my life on an unexpected storm.

Carrying secrets and surprises and promises of things that had been lost, he would help me find them.

I hadn't known they were gone.

He had consumed all my waking moments and had possibly infiltrated my dreams, somehow.

And now I was in the past, even if I didn't believe it, and totally reliant on him. He had become important to me, too.

He was the man who had ruined my life, and the only one who could save me.

My Torin.

I nestled in closer and slowly fell asleep.

I don't know how long we slept, but then he jostled my shoulder and whispered, "Tis time tae go, Princess."

I stretched and was confused for a moment, but then I focused — we were going.

He climbed to his feet and pressed his finger to his lips.

I got to my feet and looked at Dude. I pressed my finger to my lips, very quietly . Somehow it seemed like Dude understood.

Torin took my hand and led me to the door. I stood behind him as he pushed it open a crack and peeked out. He was focused on that outer world, our captors, the landscape, the night, his hand held mine, still, tense, ready to spring.

I waited.

Focused on his hand, and the signal that would come.

He tapped against my skin, one... two... three... and we ran.

*** the end ***