



Utterly Dauntless (Return to Culloden Moor #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Who would want to outrun a lovestruck Highlander?

He's been searching for years, and now Gray Strachan may have finally tracked down the little witch.

Strike that. Former witch—and thief. Before she bolted, she stole his bloody heart!

Now he won't give up the chase until he's got it back, until she's out of his bloodstream. Then she can go wherever she pleases...probably.

Aries has her reasons for running, but she's not sharing. There's a lot going on in that head of hers, and she's got to stay clear of the man she loves if only to keep her sanity. But priorities will have to change to clear the way for basic survival when a new player joins the chase.

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER ONE

The hour was late. Grey reckoned he ought to let the lass sleep, but he wouldn't. The chase was finally at an end, and though he was weary himself and would like nothing more than a bracing drink and a quick scoot off to a bed of his own, he couldn't risk it. She might slink away again.

Nae. It has to be now.

She'd made a mistake, had used a credit card this time. After years of evading him, she must have assumed he'd given up the hunt. The more fool she.

He studied the hotel through the rain-streaked window of his hired car while he gathered his gumption. The Grand stood majestically along Brighton's seafront. Her massive pale facade stretched up seven floors into the dark sky. Row upon row of tall windows marched symmetrically across her face, most of it dark except for a few scattered lights that glowed behind closed curtains.

The ornate Victorian architecture spoke of an era when buildings were meant to impress with detailed stonework, wide bay windows, and decorative wrought iron on the balconies. The entrance commanded attention with its strange front of green glass and the illuminated sign that simply read, "Grand."

When Grey finally crossed the street and pushed through the revolving door, the lobby hit him with both a warmth and welcome he hadn't expected at such an hour. His boots clicked across the polished marble floor that led to an impressive reception desk. Behind it, a sleepy clerk eyed him warily. The soaring ceiling and crystal

chandeliers spoke of old-world luxury, though the lights had been dimmed in respect for the time of night.

The walls were adorned with elegant moldings and ornate wallpaper. But his attention was caught by the grand staircase that swept upward, its elaborate railings gleaming softly in the low light. Had the lass chosen this place for its historic grandeur or its location beside the sea?

Wide-girthed columns rose from floor to ceiling, and though the massive fireplaces stood cold and dark at that hour, their marble mantles still impressed. The sound of rain on the tall windows was broken only by the quiet hum of modern climate control and the gentle snoring of an elderly man who'd fallen asleep in one of the plush chairs scattered about the space.

Grey caught the subtle scent of polish and leather as he approached the desk with a friendly smile. "Went fer a wee walk and forgot to take a key along. Room 420. Dinnae wish to wake m' wife, ye ken."

The man blinked himself awake. "A walk? In this?" He pointed to the closest window, the view through which was blocked by a million dots of rain.

"Aye, and why not. Fine Scottish weather clears the mind."

The bloke made a face, typed in the number, and squinted at his screen. "Mr. Davies, is it?"

Davies? Why would she use a different name than on her card? But he had to trust the information he'd been given, and that the captain of Wickham Muir's guard, Kitchens, knew what he was about. "Davies, Aye."

The man ran a card through his wee machine and handed it over. "We hope you and

Mrs. Davies are enjoying your honeymoon."

Grey smiled harder. "We are and thank ye."

He took the staircase, determined to work off some of his boiling rage. Better to be winded before laying his hands on the real Mr. Davies. If Aries was truly there on honeymoon, Grey would make good and certain there was neither sweetness nor honey to it—at least not that night.

Unfortunately for the man on the other side of the door, Grey reached #420 with plenty of breath in his chest and plenty of vice in his grip as he slid the card smoothly through the slot. The lock beeped, and the light turned green. He depressed the handle and pushed inside like a North Sea wave. A light in the loo showed a clear path to the bedside. Better that way. He wouldn't want to throttle the wrong body—at least not yet.

He leaned over the bed and breathed down on the man. No, it was a lad. A mere lad! A poor excuse for a beard barely cast a shadow on the pimpled jaw. What had Aries been thinking?

How does one drag a laddie out of bed? Well, by the ear, of course.

With half his attention on the womanly form on the far side, Grey grabbed the man-child's ear and, with a suitable amount of pressure and lift, insisted he stand forthwith.

The nuisance yowled and sucked wind through his flappy, overused lips whilst he tried to see out the back of his head to find who dared assault him.

"Aries, awake. Find me a sack to stuff this pup into, there's a good lass."

The woman—or child, rather—gasped once, sat up, and began to scream. Clearly, she

was not Aries, for Aries couldn't have hit those high notes had she been tossed into an icy sea. In addition, there were a few things missing. Besides her remarkable dark hair that found its way into Grey's dreams far too often, there were a pair of things that couldn't possibly be hidden beneath the sheet now smashed flat against the young lassie's chest.

"Ye're not Aries," He barked, when the lass took a breath.

She started another scream but stopped suddenly to glare at the lad dancing nude while trying to free his ear. " Whooo is Aries?"

Grey lost interest immediately upon realizing that his prey wasn't anywhere inside the room. But he could still find answers.

Since the lad looked as if he might pass out, he took hold of the other ear and released the first. "Tell me who let the room for the night."

The pup bit his bottom lip.

"I'll advise ye to tell the truth."

"Dunno. I entered a draw-ring ...and won."

The girl gasped again. It seemed she'd been led to believe something different. Likely something far more romantic than, "Hey, I've got a free night at The Grand. Are ye up fer it?"

"How did they contact ye?"

A tighter pinch brought another yowl. "How do ye think? All anonymous, yeah?"

Grey turned him loose, gave the lass a quick nod of apology without giving her a second look, and excused himself. They were already arguing before the door closed, so the pup wouldn't be coming after him. Surely, he wouldn't care to risk one of his sore ears again.

"Damn ye, Aries," Grey grumbled aloud, knowing that somewhere on God's green earth, she would be imagining exactly what had just transpired.

And she would be laughing.

Grey took the lift to the lobby, not wishing to spend another second in that hotel than absolutely necessary.

As he crossed toward the revolving doors, the porter waved at him. "You Mr. Strachan, sir?"

He noticed the phone in the young man's hand. "I am."

"A lady would like a word, sir."

For the length of a heartbeat, he hesitated. But if he had to choose between her mocking laughter and no sound of her voice at all, he'd choose the former every time, damn her.

He closed the distance and took the offered cell phone. "Hello, Aries."

"Grey." The silence was a mix of torture and bliss. At least she wasn't laughing. "Why on earth are you still looking for me?"

"Because I wouldnae wish to disappoint ye." He regretted the whisper instantly and sought for better control of himself. "Had I not come, ye'd have been weepin' in yer

tea."

Another long stretch of silence then, during which they breathed in and out...together.

"Let it go," she said quietly. "The woman you want doesn't exist anymore. I've changed. You wouldn't like me like this."

"Like what, exactly."

"I'm not the witch you fell in love with all those years ago. You wouldn't recognize me."

"Not so many years."

He'd found her once, on a beach in Italy. She'd given in then, or so he'd thought. Said she was ready to stop pretending she could ever live without him. Had taken him back into her arms, had held on so tight how could he help but believe her? They'd spent two glorious days and nights together. Just long enough for the pieces of his heart to fall back into place, for the cracks to start filling in...

Then she slipped that heart, still beating, into her bag as she left in the night, quiet as a shadow. Shadow on shadow, there in the dark, and then gone...as if she'd never been there at all.

He'd drunk the bar dry before his friends came to collect him and take him back to Scotland. He'd made a phone call he never remembered making. And by the time they'd reached Inverness, he'd convinced himself the encounter had been nothing more than a dream he'd conjured. His friends still teased him about his powerful imagination.

"No," her voice pulled him out of that memory. "Not so many years, I guess."

And just like that, this web of delusion he'd woven dissolved like candy floss in the rain. He hadn't imagined Italy, which means she had, in truth, left him a second time.

"Ye picked a pretty place," he said smoothly, hoping to seduce her with his voice as she was seducing him with hers. "I'll tarry a while, if ye'd like to join me..."

She sighed. "I'm a thousand miles away." Then her voice hardened. "But like I said, I'm not her anymore. You're in love with a ghost—" She caught her breath, realizing the irony.

"I suppose that makes two of us."

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CHAPTER TWO

Aries cut off the call and stared at the burner phone in her trembling hand. After only a second or two, she let it drop onto the wet pavement of the bridge to destroy it. The crack of plastic under her boot was oddly painful, as if she'd crushed her own heart all over again. She didn't stop grinding, though, until the device was thoroughly decimated. Then she bent down, gathered the big pieces, and hurled them into the dark waters of the River Ness. The smaller bits she toed over the edge.

Her tears followed, dropping silently into the current below.

Just a little more of her moving out of reach...

"You wouldn't recognize me," she repeated. The truth of it still stung, even after all these years without her powers. But what truly squeezed her heart was the bare emotion in his voice. "Because I wouldnae wish to disappoint ye."

She pushed away from the railing and hurried toward the shadows of the trees that lined the riverbank. The night air was thick with Highland mist, and her boots clicked against the damp pavement. She had to get away from this place before she did something stupid—like call him back and tell him exactly where she was.

Brighton had been a clever diversion, using her credit card to lead him out of town so she could come home without getting caught. Even if he headed straight north on a fast train, she'd have a whole day before she had to be gone again.

Of course, there was always the chance she might run into his friends. After all, she

was far too close to the ranch where Wickham might still live. But even if they saw her, by the time they told Grey, she'd be in the wind.

"I'm sorry," she breathed—maybe to herself, maybe to Grey—and another flood of hot tears warmed her cheeks.

The remnants of the burner phone were already headed downstream. Just like her, always running, always flowing away from the one place she truly wanted to be.

No. That wasn't right. Inverness was where the old her wanted to be. The new her...the new her had to find another place to love. And she would. One day.

She pulled her coat tighter and quickened her pace. She had to get back to the hotel and sleep while she could. Then she'd do what she'd come for and get out of town. And though a little devil on her shoulder whispered the temptation in her ear, she wouldn't leave any breadcrumbs for Grey Strachan to follow.

The early morning train lurched forward, heading north toward Scotland. Grey stretched his long legs into the aisle, earning a disapproving look from the conductor. He pulled them back with a mumbled apology. The rows just weren't made for men his size.

A group of tourists filled the seats ahead. Their excited morning chatter grated on his nerves, though it wasn't their fault he'd had no sleep. One kept sneaking glances his way. Was she unaware that he'd been blessed with peripheral vision just as she had?

He ran a hand through his hair, longer than it had been in his first life. Perhaps it was time for a trim. The attention had been flattering at first, but now it only reminded him of everything he'd lost. Aries had loved his hair long...

His phone buzzed, a welcome interruption. Kitchens. Finally.

"Tell me ye found something."

"Sorry, mate. The call came from a burner. Couldn't trace it. But listen?—"

"Damn." Grey sat up and pressed his forehead against the padded seat in front of him. "I thought I was so close."

"Maybe closer than you think. Grey, she's never slipped up like this before. Using her credit card? Calling you? After all these years of staying three steps ahead?" Kitchens paused. "I'm thinkin' she wanted ye in Brighton."

Grey straightened, his heart pumping as hard as it had when he'd reached Room 420. "Ye reckon she was there, watchin'?" He looked out the window to gage the speed of the train. He had to get back!

"Maybe. Maybe. Or maybe she wanted ye out of the country. Not so far ye wouldnae at least try to catch her, but far enough..."

"Because she doesnae wish to be caught in Scotland."

"Exactly. Whatever she came back for, she didn't want ye in town to stop her."

"Bloody hell." He'd been played like a fiddle. Again.

"Good luck, mate. I'll let ye know if she gets careless."

As soon as Kitchens hung up, Grey started calling his friends. "Shug? Aye, listen. Aries is in Inverness. I need ye to contact some lads. Search everywhere. The river. The shops. The ranch. And Peg's house, o' course." He paused, listening. "I don't care if ye have to lock her in a dungeon with a pile o' bones, dinnae let her get away!"

Two more calls and he had two dozen men combing the city, but that didn't appease him. The train couldn't move fast enough. Every mile of clicking and clacking could signal the very minute she was making her escape!

No, no. Not this time.

This time, she would sit and face him until she explained herself, until he was satisfied with her answers. This time, she wouldn't distract him with sweet words and sweeter touches. And maybe, just maybe, he'd finally understand why she ran from the love that still lay between them.

The tourist twisted around again, batting her eyelashes. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help overhearing your accent. Are you a Highlander?"

Grey barely glanced her way. "Aye. I thought I was. But I reckon I'll have to prove it all over again."

CHAPTER THREE

Aries stood at the gate of the stone house with her heart hammering. The garden was overgrown. Herbs and flowers tangled together. Grandmother's pride and joy looked abandoned, though she knew better. A witch's garden often looked chaotic to outsiders—it was part of the protection.

"Stop stalling," she muttered, and pushed open the iron gate. It creaked in protest, and she winced at the sound. A quick glance up and down the street proved she was alone. No Highlanders lying in wait, at least not that she could see.

Dawn was just breaking, painting the Highland sky in shades of pearl and rose. She'd come at first light, knowing her grandmother would already be awake. The woman always said the magic was strongest at dawn and dusk.

The letter had arrived in Aries' hand only three days ago, forwarded through so many channels it had taken weeks to reach her. Just a few lines in her grandmother's shaky hand: Come soon, mo chridhe. Time grows short. She just hoped she wasn't too late.

The path to the door was lined with rosemary for remembrance, thyme for courage. She knew every plant, every stone. Nothing had changed except her. She was no longer the young witch who had fled Inverness so long ago, when she thought she was a curse. And she was no longer the Aries that Grey had fallen in love with before she abandoned the city a second time.

She reached for the brass knocker, but the door swung open before she could touch it.

"Took ye long enough," her grandmother said, waving her closer. She was smaller than Aries remembered, more frail, but her eyes were as sharp as ever, and the sparkle in them allayed her immediate fears. "Well? Are you going to stand there catching flies or come give your gran a proper hello?"

Aries stepped into her gran's embrace. The old woman smelled of dusty herbs and woodsmoke, just as she always had. For a moment, Aries was a child again, safe in familiar arms.

"I shouldn't have come," she whispered into her grandmother's silver hair. "Grey's looking for me. His friends too, by now."

"My, my." Her grandmother pulled back to look at her. "That boy's more stubborn than a Highland bull. Had to be, to keep chasing ye all these years."

"Gran—"

"Don't 'Gran' me in that tone. Come in and have some tea. We need to talk." She turned and walked into the cottage, leaving Aries to close the door and follow.

The interior was exactly as she remembered—herbs hanging from the rafters, jars of mystery ingredients lining one shelf, a kettle always ready on the hearth, and the same frilly pink cushions on the kitchen chairs. But there were new things too. Bottles of modern medicines on the kitchen counter. A walking stick propped by the table.

"Sit," the woman ordered, and lowered herself carefully onto her usual chair. She waved toward the hearth. "The tea's already brewing. Fetch it when ye've caught yer breath. Saw ye coming, didn't I?"

"You're still having visions then?" Aries took a folded rag to the hearth and collected

the kettle before taking her seat.

"Some. Not as clear as they used to be." Gran poured tea into two of her most beloved cups. "But clear enough to know my time's runnin' short."

"Gran, no?—"

"Hush now. We all have our allotment of life, and mine was more generous than most." She pushed one of the cups across the table. "Drink and listen. There are things that must be said."

Aries took a tiny burning sip, then set the tea aside. "You're not dying, Gran. Do you hear?"

The old woman's laugh was as papery as a breeze rustling through the herbs drying overhead. "I've lived long enough to see three generations of Muir witches come into their powers. And long enough to see one give hers away." She reached across the table and touched Aries' hand. "Nothin' wrong with that, mo chridhe. And nothin' wrong with findin' happiness with yer dragon, neither. But to suddenly leave it all... It was a spit in the face, it was. And no matter how long it's been, ye need to own up now."

"I've moved on," Aries lied. "And he needs to?—"

"Aye, he needs to move on as well, but how can he? How can he marry another when?—"

"Marry?"

Her grandmother filled her lungs and let the air out in a long sigh. "Ye took his heart and ran, Aries. After two years of happiness, and without explanation. It's time to

give it back so he can offer it to another. And ye must do it face to face."

It suddenly dawned on Aries that her grandmother might be in league with Grey. Had he fallen in love with someone? Was that why she'd been summoned back home? To sign some paper?

Barely able to breathe for the pain in her chest, she shifted so she could look the old woman in the eye. "Did he put you up to this? Did he ask you to send that note?"

"Pah!" The old eyes held steady. "No matter how badly I wanted to see ye, I would never have betrayed ye."

"Then you...you really aren't well?"

"I'm heartsore as much as anything else. Heartsore and weary. And before I lay down my bones, I'll have peace where ye're concerned." Gran patted her hand again. "What frightened ye off, hmm? Did ye regret givin' up yer power after all? If ye wanted it back, ye could have asked Wickham?—"

"I didn't want it back. I don't want it back. Ever. I'm...I'm happier without it."

The woman snorted, then took a sip and rolled her eyes above the edge of her cup. "Happier doesnae mean happy, though, does it?"

"I'm...I'm still looking for...my place in the world. And no, before you say it, my place is not here, and it's not with Grey."

Gran huffed and lifted her hands in the air. "Then what? Obviously, ye still love the man. After Italy?—"

"He told you about Italy?" Aries' voice rose with each word until she was practically

shouting. "He had no right?—"

"No right? The man was destroyed. He came here hopin' for answers, looking for a friend who could assure him he would survive a second round of your perfidy, certain he couldn't."

"But he did."

The old woman lifted a brow. "Did he?"

"He's alive, isn't he?"

Gran scoffed. "No. No. I couldn't make that claim about either of ye today." She paused and tilted her head as if listening to something only she could hear. "Well, he's getting closer by the minute. Train, I'd say."

Aries shook her head and got to her feet. "I have to go."

"Ye don't."

"I do. I'm sorry."

"Just tell me, Aries. Explain it to me so I can explain it to him when he comes. And he will come."

"I can't."

"Then explain it to me and I'll keep yer secret."

"I can't."

"Ye mean ye won't."

Aries sucked in an impatient breath and instantly regretted it. If this was the last time she saw her beloved gran alive, she couldn't bear to leave on such terms. She grimaced and pulled the woman to her feet so she could hug her properly. And with her face hidden over the frail square shoulder, she whispered, "I can't explain what I don't understand."

The old arms squeezed her tight. "I'm sorry, mo chridhe, but that won't be reason enough to make Grey stop."

Half an hour later, Aries was on the road again with a tin of cake, an old doll she barely remembered, and one of those beloved teacups wrapped in bubble wrap—as protected as the secret torment she refused to share.

Her ability to lie was finely honed now, making it simple to deceive herself, to pretend it didn't thrill her a little to know Grey would still pursue her—if only to get his hands around her neck.

CHAPTER FOUR

The shushing of tires on wet asphalt and the occasional roar of a passing lorry were the only sounds accompanying Aries as she drove south from Oban. She didn't appreciate any of the radio stations that had been programmed into the rental, and she hadn't risked the time it might take to reset them. So she was left with her own thoughts as her only source of entertainment.

The picturesque harbor town, with its bustling shops and cheerful cafes, had offered a temporary respite, a fleeting illusion of normalcy. The new scarf was a vibrant splash of emerald green against the grey of her coat. And the lingering taste of dark chocolate dulled the edge of her constant state of vigilance.

Or at least it had...

Now, as the road wound along the Firth of Lorn, a familiar unease pricked the back of her neck. Something wasn't right. She scanned her surroundings and triple-checked her mirrors. She shook herself physically to get her blood moving, then exhaled slowly. This was no time to let her imagination run wild. But if something was wrong, she had to know.

She had trained herself to spot patterns, to notice shifts in rhythm, disruptions in the flow of people and things in her periphery. She glanced in the rearview mirror again and caught sight of a blue van. Was it the same one that had followed her from Inverness?

She'd pulled off the road at a scenic lay-by and allowed it to pass, just in case. Then

she hadn't seen it again. And she'd been watching.

Now it was back. The same large driver. The same make and model. The same rust on the bumper.

What were the chances the guy had spent the exact amount of time in Oban, or anywhere, in order to hit the road again at exactly the same time she had?

Slim. Very, very slim.

She tightened her grip on the wheel, pretended she hadn't noticed him, and glanced at the mirror at regular intervals. But the distance remained constant. If it was one of Grey's friends, they wouldn't hurt her. It would be tough to shake him off, but she was in no real danger.

So why was her fight-or-flight mechanism screaming?

Who else would be following her? Some creep who just happened to be headed south at exactly the same pace?

She'd already ruled out coincidence. And if not one of The 79, that meant this was intentional.

Despite her comfortable bank account, she never drove anything flashy, didn't wear expensive clothes or jewelry, and did her best not to stand out in a crowd, any crowd. So why would a stranger follow her?

What if it wasn't a stranger?

A wave of icy fear washed over her. She couldn't imagine anyone more determined than Grey Strachan. And she couldn't imagine anyone else coming after her. After

years of living off the grid, blending in, and avoiding personal attachments, had she harmed someone without knowing?

The road ahead narrowed, the mountains rising on either side, watching to see what she would do. Each time she saw a flash of blue in the mirror, more adrenaline splashed through her body. Each time she passed an exit, she prayed he would take it. But then the blue would return.

Beside her, the doll rattled against the cake tin. The teacup was safely packed in layers of bubble wrap. As long as she could stay on the road and stay awake, she was safe too. She just hoped the van ran out of gas before she did.

If she had her powers back, she would wish she would have stayed in Inverness, would have risked facing Grey.

Grey! Of course!

He could put an end to this torture.

She pulled out her new burner phone and didn't hesitate punching in his number. He could probably track her before she could destroy it, but she didn't care. Anything was better than drawing out this terror when he might be able to help, and there was no doubt about it—he would be eager to do anything she asked. She was just careful to never take advantage of that.

His voice mail picked up instantly. She waited for the beep.

"Grey? Listen. If this guy in the blue van is one of yours, call him off, would you? He's freaking me out."

She ended the call and tossed the phone on the empty seat. She held her head straight

but her eyes cut to the side mirror. The van was catching up!

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear...

CHAPTER FIVE

The rainclouds finally stopped trying to get Grey's attention and moved off. They left a sheen on the cobbled streets that reflected the yellow glow of streetlamps as he navigated the narrow lanes up to Peg's house. He relished the scent of peat and woodsmoke that hung heavy in the air and assured him he was home.

A dull ache pulsed behind his eyes, but he ignored it like he ignored the rain.

Minutes later, his knuckles rapped against a familiar green door. He'd knocked there countless times before—after that first betrayal, then again when Italy nearly destroyed him, and dozens of times between. Now here he stood again, his heart battered and loupin', but still undaunted.

Peg opened the door and gave him her usual resigned smile. "I wondered when ye'd get here." She stepped back to let him in. "Though usually ye dinnae come so late."

The kitchen welcomed him with its perpetual scents of wood smoke and drying herbs. Peg's cottage had been a sanctuary for him these past years. Tonight, however, the usually cozy room felt charged with possibility.

Bundles of rosemary and thyme hung from the rafters, casting strange shadows in the lamplight. The old stone hearth glowed with banked coals, and the kettle steamed gently on its hook. So many memories lived in this room. He and Aries had spent countless evenings here in those two auspicious, precious years listening to Peg's stories, sharing tea and scones, falling deeper in love.

While he searched for an outlet to plug in his dead phone, he noticed signs of decline that worried him. Cobwebs gathered in corners that the aging woman could no longer reach. Only one cup remained of her prized china set. He'd have to find a way to replace them without wounding her pride.

"Sit," Peg ordered, gesturing to his usual chair. The pink cushion was worn thin from years of Highland backsides. She poured tea into mismatched cups, her hands trembling slightly. "I expect ye already ken she was here."

Grey's fingers tightened around the hot ceramic. "When?"

"This mornin'." Peg settled into her chair with a soft grunt. "And before ye ask, aye, I could have called ye. But she needed to speak with me." Her eyes held his steadily. "And I needed to speak with her."

"No matter. She'd sent me chasing geese in Brighton. Did she tell ye anything helpful, say why she runs?"

"Nay. Says she doesnae ken it herself."

The familiar rage and helplessness rose in his chest. He set the cup down carefully, though he wanted nothing more than to send it flying across the room to shatter in the fire. "I dinnae believe that."

"Neither do I." Peg's shoulders drooped. "Grey, love. Perhaps it's time to let her go. Find someone worthy of ye."

"I cannae."

"Ye can. And ye should."

He stood and paced to the window to stare out into the dark that was, even at that moment, hiding his wife from him. How many times had he watched Aries tinkering in that garden? How many times had he kissed her on those stepping stones between the heather and rosemary?

Finally, he was able to blink those images away. "Ye dinnae understand."

"Then help me understand." Peg's voice cracked. "What keeps ye chasin' after someone who clearly doesnae want to be with ye?"

He turned back, caught by the pain in her voice, realizing it hurt her to speak those words as much as it pained him to hear them spoken aloud. "That's just it. When I found her in Italy..." The memory squeezed his heart. "I was blind then. Thought the emotion in her eyes was love. But now I believe it was fear."

Peg's hand rose to her throat. "Fear? Of what?"

"I dinnae ken. But something haunts her. And I cannae just leave her out there alone with it."

"Ye think she's in danger then?"

"Aye. From what, I cannae say. Perhaps herself. But she needs help whether she kens it or no. And I'll see that she has it."

Peg stared at him for a long moment, conflict clear on her face. Finally, she pushed up from her chair with effort that made his heart ache. She went to a cupboard and pulled down a small tin. From inside, she extracted a folded slip of paper.

"I shouldnae do this." Her voice wavered. "She'll never forgive me. But if ye're right..." She held out the paper. "If my granddaughter truly needs help..."

Grey took it carefully. An address in Belgium was written in Peg's shaky hand.

"That's where my letters start," she explained. "I dinnae ken who gets them or where they go after, but that's how I reach her." She gripped his wrist with surprising strength. "If ye do find her, please dinnae tell her?—"

"I won't. I promise." He tucked the paper into his shirt pocket where it lay over the new hope growing in his chest. This was the first real lead since one of The 79 had spotted Aries in Italy.

"Ye're a good man, Grey Strachan." Peg patted his hand. "Better than she deserves, and we all ken it."

"Dinnae say that." He caught her hands in his. "Whatever drives her, she suffers for it." He smiled sadly. "Remember how I was when I came to ye that first time? When she left without a word?"

"Aye. Ye were angry then. Ready to tear the world apart."

"And the second time, after Italy..."

"Ye were shattered." She squeezed his hands. "I feared for ye then."

"But now I think I understand. The first time she left, it was to protect what was left of her family. Perhaps she does the same now, to protect we two." He swallowed hard. "And that's why I cannot stop."

"Just...be careful, love." Peg's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "And bring her home safe. And soon."

Grey bent and kissed the delicate wrinkles of her cheek. "I'm sending someone 'round

tomorrow with the shoppin'. And some wood and peat. And it looks like ye could use a new cup or two."

"Nonsense. Some things were never meant to be replaced."

"Aye, well. Ye'll bite yer tongue and take what ye're given. Anythin' else ye need?"

She shook her head.

At the door, he paused and looked back. Peg stood in her kitchen, small and frail and all forlorn. The years had taken their toll on her as well. Bring her home safe—and soon...

He stepped out into the Highland night feeling a renewed sense of urgency. He and Aries might have the rest of their lives in which to play cat and mouse, but Peg didn't have that luxury.

CHAPTER SIX

Grey headed home, though not to the charming home he and Aries once shared. Together, they'd meticulously curated each piece of furniture, each picture on the wall—memories that began a collection he once believed would grow forever.

He'd walked away from the lot of it after Italy. The memories were too sharp, too jagged for daily exposure. Now, he lived in a small, sparsely furnished flat, a functional space devoid of sentiment. He didn't care how comfortable a chair was, or the size of the tub. Didn't care if there was only one cup on the shelf, one fork in the drawer. He would never need a real home again.

All he really needed was sleep. And food. And he needed both now.

His freshly charged phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket and read the name on the screen. Kitchens.

"Yeah?"

"Got something."

Grey's heart jumped. "Tell me."

"One of Shug's friends kept watch on Peg's cottage through the night. Saw a rental car pull up just before dawn. Managed to get the plates, but he had to leave for work. I just got the numbers. "

"Had to be her. Peg said she'd been there this morning."

"Dinnae ken. By the time Shug got over there, the car was gone. But we're tracing the plates. Should know more soon."

He'd been prepared to fly to Belgium, to chase that lead across the sea. The possibility of finding her sooner, of confronting her on Scottish soil, cheered him to no end. "Grateful, Kitch. Let me know."

Maybe he'd have to settle for a few bites and a little nap...

Fifteen minutes later, when Grey was just pulling into his car park, his phone buzzed again. Kitchens again.

"Got the rental traced. A Jenny Smith. Bogus, of course. But we caught the car on CCTV heading west out of Inverness, then south. Looks like she's making for the Irish Sea. Ferry to Dublin, maybe. Or the long way round to England. Maybe she'll fly out of Glasgow. If she does, we'll know."

"I'd bet Dublin."

Aries had lived in Ireland's capital for a time, after her father's death, after she'd first fled Inverness. She'd admitted she'd found a strange sort of peace there and thought the Irish were the kindest people on earth. A natural choice if she were feeling threatened. But he'd have to move fast. She never stayed anywhere long.

He didn't bother pulling into his car park. He had a go bag in the boot, always packed, always ready. He turned the car around and headed for the west end of town, past the old ranch, then on toward Oban, though his adrenaline couldn't possibly get him that far...

The road curved and Loch Linnhe would have been in view if not for the late hour—almost midnight. His lack of sleep was taking its toll. He caught himself drifting toward the center line and cursed himself for a fool. The lapse brought him wide awake, but it wouldn't last. He'd reached his limit.

By rubbing his eyes furiously, he bought himself another few minutes, long enough to reach a wide gravel lay-by near a cluster of trees. The air tasted of pine resin when he walked into those trees to piss.

After returning to the car, he lowered the seat back, turned to the side, then forced deep breaths into his lungs and let exhaustion claim him. And claim him it did. When the vibration of his phone woke him next, the sun was nearly up. Only a narrow field and a few trees separated him from the grey stretch of Loch Linnhe, newly emerged from the darkness.

He found the phone and answered. “Aye,” he croaked. “What’ve ye got?”

“Grey? Her rental’s been found.” From Kitchens' tone, this clearly wasn't good news.

"And?"

"Traffic Police spotted it abandoned near Inverbeg, just short of Luss, along Loch Lomond.”

His foggy brain churned, grasping for implications. “Empty?”

“Empty,” Kitchens confirmed. “Rental company’s sending someone to collect it now, but I’ve got one of the lads on his way. He’s not far. I’m hoping he’ll get there first.”

Grey swore under his breath. Why abandon her car? What is she doing, for pity's sake—hitchhiking? "She’s mad...”

"We don't know enough yet. Give our man some time."

"She always keeps a car. Always. Never risks being caught without an escape plan. Never broke pattern before."

"Like I said, we don't know enough yet. Talk soon." Kitch hung up.

Grey tossed the phone aside, opened the door, and climbed out to accept a cold kiss from the morning air. After a second trip to the trees, he popped open the boot of his car and removed the go bag. Protein bars, a box of Tunnock's tea cakes, and two bottles of water were going to save his life.

She was lost in the wind by now. A clever man would turn back, head for his flat, and get some proper rest before thinking any further. He even started the engine, convincing himself it was the logical step. After some sleep and a shower, he could hire a plane to Dublin and be there to greet her when the ferry docked. But when he pulled back onto the road, his car continued south, as if it had decided for him.

That was it. He would blame the car.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In Fort William, he stopped for petrol and checked his phone for any messages from Kitchens. It was then he noticed he'd missed a call the day before from an unknown number. His heart stuttered to a stop, stunned by the possibility it might have been from her.

His fingers fumbled to open his voicemail. There was a single message. When he pressed the button and heard her voice, he nearly wept.

"Grey? Listen. If this guy in the blue van is one of yours, call him off, would you? He's freakin' me out."

He immediately returned the call, hoping against hope she would pick up. If she was all right, she wouldn't want him worrying after leaving him such a message.

The phone rang and rang.

A man answered. "Aye?"

"Who's this then?"

"Tristan Bain. Is that ye, Number 25?"

"Aye, it's me." For a few hundred years, while haunting the battlefield on Culloden Moor, Grey and 78 others had known each other by their numbers, from when Reville was called. "She left the phone in the car?"

"Aye. Not as empty as I expected."

"Tell me."

"There's an old doll, a tin of half-eaten cake, and a cup and saucer wrapped carefully. Found a packed bag in the boot. I reckon maybe yer woman wouldnae have left them behind if she'd have had a choice in the matter."

"No, she wouldnae." He told the man about the phone message. "So we're lookin' for a bastard in a blue van."

"There's an officer here now. I'll pass the word."

"I'm grateful. And Number 10?"

"Aye?"

"Guard that demitasse and saucer like yer life depends upon it, would ye? And the doll as well, I suppose."

"Done."

Grey dialed Kitchens and got back on the road.

"Grey?"

"Aye. I just spoke to Tristan Bain. He found the car. She left her phone behind."

"A burner?"

"Aye. But that's not all." He told him the rest, including the phone message.

"So we'll assume she's been taken."

"Aye."

"Any idea who, besides you, would do such a thing?"

"Not the first idea."

"Right then. We're looking for a poor bastard in a blue van?—"

"Poor bastard?"

"Aye. He'll need all the pity he can get after takin' a woman who belongs to The 79."

"Pity him later. Find him first, would ye?"

"We'll find him, Grey. And we'll try to save a few pieces of him for you, if ye like. And dinnae fear. She'll be all right."

Grey nodded, though the man couldn't see it. Then he thanked him, even though Kitchens was lying to keep him from worry. They didn't know the threat or the motivation behind the move, so how could they know Aries was even alive?

Well, other than the fact that he would know, in his soul, if it were time to lie down and die...

CHAPTER EIGHT

Watching the lengths of Loch Lochy and Loch Oich pass by her window left Aries with a stiff neck, but she welcomed the sting that distracted her from the zip ties cutting into her wrists. The morning sun cast long shadows across the road ahead, and she found herself searching each passing vehicle for a familiar face. She dearly hoped Grey was looking for her by now.

She'd been foolish yesterday not to change cars in Oban as she normally would have. But as her captor hauled her out of her rental, forcing her to leave Gran's teacup behind, she realized her mistake might have been inspired. One of The 79 had surely been watching her grandmother's house, so they would know what she'd been driving. Eventually, they might be able to trace the plates and learn that she'd abandoned the car, maybe against her will.

It was a long shot, but any hope was good hope. And no man was as tenacious as her dragon, Grey Strachan.

She couldn't ignore what else that mistake had meant.

Dear Lord, had she wanted him to catch her this time?

Surely not.

Surely...

She clung to that little bit of faith in Grey to keep from completely losing it. She still

didn't know who this man was, though she studied him from the corner of her eye whenever she dared. He had to be a Scot. No man from another country would have driven all the way to the Highlands in his work clothes. The coveralls he wore were smeared with oil and grease. Maybe he worked on an oil rig. Maybe a mechanic. Did she know any roughnecks?

His dull brown hair hung past his collar, his beard scraggly and unkempt. The boots on his feet were coming apart at the seams. She tried not to flinch each time he glanced her way with that knowing sneer, but she couldn't quite control the tremors that rolled through her when he did.

Yeah, she was scared. But she sensed this guy would stay much calmer if she kept it together.

"Still don't reckon who I am, eh?" His voice was rougher this morning.

She shook her head.

"Well, ye will soon enough."

She pointed her chin at the road stretching north. "Headed back to Inverness?"

He scowled.

"I saw you behind me yesterday morning. I'm just wondering why you didn't stop me sooner."

He looked away and she thought he wouldn't answer, but then he spoke. "Had to find my moment, didn't I?"

His discomfort finally made sense. It had taken him all day to build up the courage.

And when she realized he wasn't as tough as he pretended to be, she relaxed a little.

He'd been gentle with her thus far, let her sit up front after she promised to behave. When exhaustion had overtaken him in the night, he'd laid her down in the back, secured her feet and attached her hands to a spare tire. But he'd covered her with a cargo blanket, and when the lorry got really cold, he'd turned on the engine and the heater for a while. By her guess, he'd slept about three hours. If he'd worked a full shift before following her all day, he needed much more than that. But he seemed alert enough for now. They'd already passed Fort William, so they'd be in Inverness by midday.

But then what?

Damn. Maybe she didn't really want to know.

She flexed her fingers, trying to maintain circulation without drawing his attention. Her shoulders ached from being bound for so long, but she wouldn't complain. Instead, she focused on memorizing every detail—his mannerisms, his voice, anything that might help her place him in her past. Because somewhere in her history, their paths had crossed. And whatever she'd done then had led to this moment.

Unfortunately for her, it seemed he was after more than just an apology.

The sign for Inverbeg flashed past, and Grey crushed the wrapper of his last Tunnock's teacake into a ball. He'd been running on sugar and determination for the past hour, scanning the roadside for any sign of where Aries' rental might have been abandoned. But the police were long gone, the car hauled away. He had no idea where to even start looking.

He pulled onto the shoulder and killed the engine. The silence pressed in, broken only by the ticking of the cooling engine and the occasional whoosh of a passing car.

"Lord," he whispered, "I could use a wee bit of help here." He scrubbed his hands over his face, his stubble rough against his palms. "Just...just let me find her."

His phone buzzed against the console, the screen lighting up with Emergency Last Resort. Wickham's sisters.

Grey stared at it, his thumb hovering over the screen. The witches never called unless something was truly wrong. Or truly right. The problem was, you never knew which until you answered.

With a deep breath, he swiped to accept the call. "Aye?"

"Grey." A familiar voice crackled through the speaker, though he couldn't guess which sister it belonged to. "Kitchens told us what's happened."

"Then ye ken why I cannae talk now?—"

"Listen to me. You need to turn around and head home."

He barked out a laugh. "I dinnae think ye're gettin' the full picture here, marm."

"I assure you, we are." Her tone held that eerie certainty that made the hair on his neck rise. "Whoever has Aries is taking her home."

"Givin' her back?"

"That's all we know. He's taking her home. No idea whose home. But you and she are moving in opposite directions." She paused. "And this time, I mean that literally, not figuratively, dear."

Grey's heart thundered, spreading sugar and hope through his veins. "Ye're certain?"

"Would I call if I wasn't? Now promise me you'll turn around. And don't just say it to get rid of me."

"I wouldnae dare." And he meant it. One did not make false promises to a witch.

"Good man. Drive safe."

He ended the call, tossed the phone onto his go bag, and swung the car around to head north again. If they'd been moving in opposite directions, did that mean a blue van had by-passed him at some point? The idea of her coming so close while he slept brought a growl out of him and he pressed harder on the accelerator. When he finally let up, he remembered to say a prayer of thanks...for witches who stuck their noses and their talents into other people's business.

CHAPTER NINE

Grey's stomach growled loud enough to compete with the engine. If he got his hands on the villain in his current state—half-starved and running on pure Highland temper—he'd end up in jail. Still might.

He pulled off at the next exit, found a petrol station, and loaded up on cold water and whatever food they had that wouldn't require two hands to eat. Back in the car, he noticed a missed call from Kitchens and quickly dialed back.

"Traffic cams picked up a blue van heading north on A82 this morning. Plates match a vehicle registered to Carson Campbell, Kingsmills Road, Inverness. Ring any bells?"

"None." Grey crushed an empty water bottle and tossed it aside. "But that's Peg's neighborhood."

"The bloke really is taking her home then."

"Aye. Let's hope it's in one piece. Do ye mind sending some men to watch the place. If she's in danger, I don't want them waiting for me."

"Already done. Talk soon."

Grey ended the call and pressed harder on the accelerator. "Let the traffic police chase me all the way to Kingsmills Road if they want me badly enough."

The van headed into the heart of Inverness. Aries' emotions warred within her—the thrill of being home again mixed with the old dread. Bad things happened when she came home.

Her captor pulled into a petrol station and insisted she climb into the back and lie low. She did as she was told, the threat to harm her grandmother still hanging in the air. If she didn't do exactly as he said, he would drive directly to the old woman's house and slit her throat when she opened the door. And there was no guarantee her gran could see it coming, so the threat was all the motivation she needed to behave.

Unfortunately, with her in the back, that meant neither Grey nor his friends would see her riding through town. She sat on the floor against the sliding door and faced forward, aware of every turn and every street.

She almost expected him to head to Clachnaharry Road and Wickham Muir's old ranch, since the only controversial events she'd been involved in had included the 79 Highlanders who had been raised from the dead on the battlefield at Culloden. But to her surprise, he turned right and crossed Friars Bridge. Was he headed to Gran's house after all? She had done exactly as he'd said.

"Wait a minute," she started.

"Shut it," he snapped.

"I did what you said."

"I said shut it."

He was nervous now, on edge with being in town where a scream would draw attention. Or maybe he was anxious because of what came next. Aries had to be careful not to provoke him further.

They passed her grandmother's road, and Aries felt a surge of relief when they drove on by. Her captor chuckled, knowing he'd made her nervous. But it only pissed her off.

They passed a few more streets before pulling between two houses and into a back garage. He got out and closed the rolling door before opening the van to let her out.

"Who are you?" Aries demanded, unable to keep the frustration from her voice.

He sneered. "Still haven't worked it out? And here I thought ye were clever."

"Just tell me."

"Not yet." He cut the ties off her wrists with a knife, then offered his elbow. "Now, ye're goin' to take my arm and walk into that house like ye're my dotin' girlfriend. Smile pretty and keep yer mouth shut. Remember what happens if ye dinnae."

Aries placed her hand in the crook of his arm but couldn't bring herself to look at him. As they stepped out into the yard, movement caught her eye. Someone skulked at the corner of the neighbor's house—she would have recognized the handsome man anywhere, even from the sliver of him as he leaned around to give her a wink and touch his finger to the side of his nose. Then he was gone again.

It was McHenish—one of The 79.

Smiling was easy then. This fool had no idea what kind of hell was about to rain down on his head. And she might have felt sorry for him, but he'd forced her back into Grey's territory, and that she just couldn't forgive.

CHAPTER TEN

After his stop for food, Grey had plenty of time to think in the two hours it took him to get back to Inverness. By the time he hit town, he had slowed considerably, but in direct opposition, his mind raced faster.

Kitchens had called with details. Aries had gone willingly into the house, and hadn't seemed in immediate danger. But there were eyes both inside and outside. Thanks to a laser microphone, they could hear everything, but it wasn't much. From what the men had gleaned, Aries had been isolated in a room or a closet, told to take a seat, then left alone. It appeared the man was in no hurry to deal with her.

Conversely, Grey couldn't wait.

Carson paced the kitchen anxiously, his eyes darting to the pantry door that separated him from Aries. He had dreamed of this moment for years, ever since the day of her father's funeral. He had watched and waited, biding his time, hoping against hope that she would return to Inverness. And now, long after he'd given up, she had.

He replayed the events of the previous day in his mind. He had spotted her rental car as she was leaving Peg's and knew he couldn't let her slip away again. So, he had followed, waited for his chance. When the road finally was theirs alone, he'd nudged her onto the shoulder and blocked her in. His threat had been so convincing, she'd come along quietly. What luck!

He just hoped his luck would hold.

Now, with the witch safely contained on the other side of that door, Carson could think rationally again. He must decide exactly what to say before he confronted her. He'd write it all down so he didn't forget anything. One would think, after decades, he'd have it all memorized, but he didn't trust his memory. Every time he looked at her, his mind blanked.

No. He needed crib notes.

He searched the drawer and found a pen, no paper. He headed for the desk in the back room, but his feet and heart stopped together. Blocking the doorway was a towering, kilted Highlander with a sword on his hip. A man whose entire body flexed when he opened and closed his fists.

And all Carson had was a pen.

He turned to flee, to draw the man out of his house and away from the woman secreted away in his pantry. But when he wrenched open his front door, another big man was waiting. A shorter menace than the first, but dangerous nonetheless.

The first had followed him. Carson's only escape was the stairs. He flew up them like he had wings on his feet, then wracked his brain for anything that might serve as a weapon. When he found yet another Highlander stretched across his bed with a wicked grin on his face, he dropped the pen.

"Well, well," the man drawled, "if it isn't Mr. Blue Van."

Carson fought to pull air into his lungs, to get oxygen to his brain.

Had one of them witnessed him taking the witch from her car? Impossible. If so, they would have pounced on his arse when he stopped to sleep.

"Lookin' for somethin'?" The man's tone was deceptively solicitous.

Carson suddenly remembered the knife in his pocket and whipped it out. When the intruder just laughed, his thoughts began to scramble. So he carefully thought one thing at a time.

Knife. Drop the knife.

He dropped it.

Run!

He ran, but when he flew down the stairs, four big men gathered at the bottom to greet him. Three of them wore the kind of smile that invited him to piss himself. The fourth silently promised pain. And lots of it.

With sweaty hands squealing along the walls, Carson finally stopped his momentum still steps from the bottom, but it was too late to turn back. Long arms reached for him. Massive hands grasped his clothing, his arms, and guided him down. Then they insisted, not so gently, that he return to the kitchen. Once there, all five of them surrounded him like a fighting ring with him in the center. There was no chance he could win against any one of them. Even the shortest bastard had a confident, lethal look about him.

"It wasn't supposed to go this way!" He couldn't help but be pissin' mad. He was about to be robbed of the vindication he had sought nearly the whole of his life!

He put his hands on his head and began to pace in what little space they allowed him. Rage made it impossible to hold still, no matter what these bastards wanted.

"First things first," the mean one said. "Where is she?"

The rattle of a doorhandle drew all attention to the pantry. Carson took a step to the side, hoping to go for the door while the intruders were distracted, but the shortest one clamped a hand around his arm.

"Grey?" Aries pounded on the door. "Grey, is that you?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At the sound of the bolt sliding, Aries stepped back. The only thing she'd found to use as a weapon was a glass jar of marinara which she could bash over her captor's head, a container of olive oil cooking spray she could squirt into his eyes, and some salt, also to throw in the eyes. But she'd had a hard time keeping the grains from seeping through her fingers, so she'd filled her shirt pocket in case the other two weapons failed.

Now, she just looked ridiculous standing there, hands full and raised, while she waited for the door to open.

She'd been a fool. The voice on the other side of the door couldn't possibly be Grey's. Even if he'd gotten her message about the blue van, he wouldn't know where to look for it. If he still cared to. Brighton might have been the last straw for him. And if he'd given up chasing her now, in her most dire hour of need, it served her right.

The door opened swiftly...by someone not her captor.

She could have wept at the welcome sight of Grey Strachan filling the open doorway with that powerful body that was tailor made for rescuing damsels in distress. This was the man who had haunted her dreams nearly every night for years on end.

Those years had been kinder to him. He would realize it as well. Just give him a minute.

He searched her eyes, scanned down her body and back again, to see if she was all

right. The concern on his face was quickly replaced with relief, then amusement. "Fixin' to cook for the man, are ye?"

She looked at the spray and the bottle of sauce, then set them down. By the time she faced him again, his smile was gone. In its stead was a coldness she could only guess at. Then he stepped away, and her heart tried to drag itself out of her chest to follow.

Come back, it begged.

Another big body took Grey's place. A cheerful Wyndham McLeish had to duck his head to see her through the doorway built a hundred years ago. He waved her closer. "Come. Let's hear the bastard out before we call the police."

The kitchen was full to bursting with Highlanders. Banner Wallace had her captor by the arm, though the latter was seated on his kitchen table with his feet hanging. He looked resigned to an ominous fate.

Thanks to a shower and a shave since he'd locked her inside his pantry, he shared little resemblance to the man who had run her off the road. The wet hair was the same, and with a clean face, he looked ten years younger...

Memories tripped over each other, rushing to gain her attention.

"Campbell," she said. "You're one of the Campbell lads I sent..." She gasped and pressed her hand against her chest. " You were supposed to forget!"

The young man jumped off the table and out of Wallace's clutches. He was toe to toe with her before anyone could stop him. "That's right! Ye remember what ye did!"

Wyndham pushed him away from her and Wallace and McHenish hauled him back to the table.

He howled as if in pain, but he stayed where they put him. "No one would listen when I told them ye're more a witch than Old Peg!"

Aries shook her head. "I'm...I'm not. Not anymore."

"Damn ye," he hissed. "Damn ye for runnin' away. Now it's too late." He gestured with open hands while looking at the room around him. "They're gone. Ye're finally back. Can finally tell them I wasn't imaginin' it. Tell them I'm not mad at all. But my parents aren't here to listen, are they?"

"I had no idea?—"

"But ye would have! If ye hadn't run!"

Grey suddenly walked out of the room. Everyone noticed. No one moved. Wallace, McHenish, and Shug Buchanan averted their eyes, but Wyndham clearly expected her to explain. At that moment, there was no reason not to.

"It was a long time ago. I was twenty. I'd already lost my sister and my mother, then my father died. I was devastated, out of my head with grief." She saw it all clearly again. "We were in the kirkyard, my father's funeral. The priest was droning on. And two wee lads were chucking rocks into the open hole, where my father's body was about to be lowered, and I...I wished they would go away."

Campbell gasped, but she couldn't look him in the eye.

"The problem was, I'd been given the power of Wish. I also had my sister's power of Unwish. So the two mostly nullified each other. I wasn't as careful about wishing as I should have been because those wishes didn't come true like they had before my sister died. But I was...distraught, and I suppose my wish was very clear and likely earnest." Ashamed, she lowered her gaze. "And they went."

Wyndham sent Campbell a pitying look. "And where did they go?"

"To nowhere. A place that was...but wasn't. Wickham said he found them there. It's...complicated. But he was able to take them back home again, to the time they disappeared. Just a couple of days later. He said he'd wiped their memory of all of it."

Finally, she summoned a thimble of courage and faced the man she'd wronged so long ago.

Campbell shook his head over and over again. The tears on his face flew off in all directions.

She took a step toward him, but McHenish moved between them, shook his head to discourage her. But she shook her head too and waved him out of the way. Another step brought her to the table. If he wanted to reach out and strangle her, he could do it.

"Mr. Campbell?"

The poor man sniffed and wiped his sleeve under his nose. "Carson."

"Carson, I'm sorry. And if it helps you at all, know that I've regretted that wish every waking day of my life."

He sucked in a breath, then nodded. "It helps, though it cannae fix my life, can it?"

"What about your brother? Did he?—"

"Craig. He was younger. He remembered nothing. And now, he lives far enough away from his mad brother that he doesnae have to think of me too often."

The bitter statement made her wince. But he was right. Sorry didn't fix a thing.

She found her voice. "Where? Where is he now?"

"Glasgow."

"Glasgow. Maybe, after a good night's rest, we should go talk to him."

Carson blinked in disbelief. "Ye want to go find Craig?"

"We should go together, don't you think?"

He snorted. "He willnae believe ye're a witch, let alone what ye did. He'll reckon I put ye up to it."

"Maybe we should take another witch along, a real one. Make a believer out of him. What do you say?"

Carson reluctantly smiled, but he stopped short when he looked around the room at the sober mugs looking back. "I'd say I doubt I'll live 'til mornin'."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The sound of Aries' voice calling his name sent a jolt through Grey's veins. For two years, he'd only heard her in his dreams, in his memories, before the phone call in Brighton. Now, just days later, here she was, on the other side of that door. All he had to do was open it.

He pulled back the bolt lock, took a breath, and prayed she wouldn't disappear in a wisp of smoke—not that she could have done such a thing without Wickham's help.

With the door out of the way, his eyes locked on hers and time froze. She was hale and healthy, judging by the rest of her. She held a glass jar aloft and a can of spray, poised to defend herself. Grey couldn't help teasing. "Fixin' to cook for the man, are ye?"

When she smiled in return, his heart nearly stopped. He couldn't breathe, couldn't take the sweetness of the moment when he knew the bitter taste of what would inevitably follow after. So he stepped away and gestured to Wyn to take over. Thankfully, his friend didn't need any explanation and quickly traded places.

Grey moved to the far wall and stood guard beside the door, wishing he could blend in with the old burgundy wallpaper. Or better yet, wait outside for the police to be called.

But no. He had to listen to her and Campbell talk things out. Had to listen to the tragedy that had shaped her life, that she had fought so hard to put behind her. For years, she believed she'd wished them into oblivion, that she'd taken their lives. Only

after Grey and she had met did she learn from Wickham that the lads had been returned home. If she hadn't run away, she would have known it.

If she hadn't run away.

She should have learned by now that running away only complicated matters. But she hadn't.

And when Campbell started raving at her for running away and ruining his life in the process, it cut too close to the bone. Grey had to leave the room or start bellowing like an angry mule.

But he hadn't gone far enough. Now he stood in the parlor listening to her planning to leave again, to go to Glasgow with the man who'd kidnapped her rather than stay in Inverness another day, as if leavin' him was as easy as putting on the kettle.

Grey clenched his fists, closed his eyes, and prayed for patience so he didn't beat down Campbell's walls. When he opened them again, Wyn stood in the kitchen doorway watching him.

"Aye?"

Wyn folded his arms and shrugged. "I dinnae reckon Aries wants us to fetch the police."

Grey let out his breath. "I reckon not."

"Then what's the plan?"

"I dinnae trust him with her. Someone will have to go along on this quest to Glasgow."

Wyn nodded. "All of us. Just to be wary."

"Fine. But we'll draw straws. One of us must stay with Campbell the night, be certain he does nothin' foolish."

"Wallace already volunteered. I think he likes makin' the bastard nervous."

"I'll go let Peg know she'll have guests for the night, shall I?"

Wyn smirked. "Chookie."

Grey shrugged. "Chicken? Weel, ye're nae wrong."

Seated on a kitchen chair, Aries braced herself. In a matter of seconds, she and Grey would be face to face again.

She heard a door shut and Wyndham came back into the kitchen alone.

"He's goin' to Peg's, to let her ken she'll have company tonight."

Wallace grinned and bobbed his eyebrows. "Dinnae worry about us. Carson and I are gonna have a grand evenin'. Aren't we, laddie?"

Carson's eyes bulged but he said nothing. Still seated on the table, he looked like he didn't dare move.

"Now," Wallace continued, "what will be on the menu, do ye reckon?"

Carson darted looks at the other men, who gave him no help.

"Ch...Chinese takeaway?"

Wallace slapped him on the back. "Yer future's lookin' brighter by the minute, Mr. Campbell. Damn me if it isnae!"

Aries laughed along with the others, but she couldn't help be disappointed. It wasn't as if she would have many moments with Grey, so this missed opportunity left a hole somewhere very near her middle.

"We're headed to Peg's then?" McHenish headed for the side door and jerked his head, inviting Aries to come with him.

She told Carson she'd see him in the morning, promised him Banner Wallace didn't bite, then hurried outside. She was pretty sure the young man hadn't believed a word she'd said—probably doubted she'd come back—but she wasn't going to waste time trying to convince him. He'd believe it when she walked through the door in the morning.

She had more pressing issues at the moment. First, she had to share the plan with her gran and figure out a way to invite a Muir witch with some power to take a trip to Glasgow, and she had to get Grey alone, to convince him one last time that he should let her go.

Although, other than having McHenish as her escort, she didn't sense she was being held captive at the moment.

Grey had chased her down, but he wasn't trying to keep her?

It wasn't at all like him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

McHenish opened the gate for Aries, but before they reached the front step, Grey emerged from Peg's house. He pulled the door closed behind him and paused only briefly when he caught sight of them, then broke eye contact.

"Headed to the shops," he said. "Be back in a while."

"Grey, wait." Aries stepped forward, but something in his stance kept her from reaching for him. "I never got to thank you. For coming after me today."

He shrugged a shoulder and gave her a fleeting smile. "I doubt he would have harmed ye in the end. He only wanted to be heard."

The words hit her like a punch to the gut. He wasn't just speaking for Carson Campbell. Had he, too, only wanted to be heard?

Before she could think of a response, he strode past her and headed for a car. When he unlocked the vehicle, the beep and flash of lights felt like a message too. But she might be blowing things out of proportion. After all, she wasn't thinking straight at the moment.

"Well, then." Peg's voice drew her attention back to the house. Her grandmother stood holding the door open, one hand on her hip. "Are ye comin' in? Or shall I invite the midges?"

Grey shouldn't be driving. He could hardly see straight. He'd only started explaining

the events of the day to Peg when Alan McHenish's car pulled up with Aries sitting beside him, plain as day.

"Aries can tell ye all about it," he'd said quickly, while his tongue was still working. "I'll fetch the shoppin. Steaks, maybe?" He kissed the old woman's hand, then looked in her eyes. The kind smile said she understood his desperation, and she let him run off without another word.

Even now, with miles between him and Aries once more, his heart against his ribs was a beater against a base drum. Boom, boom, boom . And he feared it might not let up until the woman was gone again.

And no mistake, there was no way to stop her.

Or was there?

Something shifted in his mind—a shadow of an idea that still needed luring out into the light. And to keep it from running off, he dared not stare directly at it. To tease it out, he ignored it and began making a mental list of the things he needed to buy, starting with a worthy set of teacups...

Peg listened to Aries' account of what had happened since she'd last crossed her ancient threshold. It was a lucky thing Carson Campbell didn't live a little closer, and she herself wasn't a wee bit younger, or Peg would have given the man what for! But it was a comfort knowing that Banner Wallace was staying close and making the devil regret his misdeeds.

The way her granddaughter kept eyein' the door started Peg to thinking, considering possibilities she'd never entertained before. And she couldn't help but stick in a sturdy spurtle and start stirring the pot...

"Grey's lookin' well," she said, offhand.

Aries nodded and sipped her tea.

"Much better than I expected."

Aries hummed absently.

"Lucky for us he was still interested enough to have his friends track down that car."

"Very lucky."

"Not everyone is blessed with friends like his."

"Wonderful men. All of them. I need a lie down. Didn't sleep much." Aries got to her feet and headed for the hallway.

"Of course, of course! Take all the time ye need. If we don't see you until mornin', we won't think anything of it. And maybe ye can sleep a little more on the plane."

Aries turned back. "Plane?"

"Aye. Were ye not payin' attention? Wyn said they'd hire a plane to take ye all to Glasgow tomorrow. That there's no need to spend any more time on the A82 than they already have."

"They came after me, then?"

"Not sure who it was. Tristan Bain, I think it was, found yer cup and doll in the car before the rental company collected it. He'll bring them by next time he's up this way. I'll send them on to ye."

"So Tristan followed me."

"Aye. But it was Wickham's friend who ran the operation, I think. Anything for friends of The 79, aye?"

"Looks that way."

Peg took up her knitting and got it settled in her lap. "We're lucky ye were a part of them...for a wee while."

Aries nodded, yawned, then wandered away, obviously distracted.

It seemed it didn't take more than a few turns of the spurtle to get things flowing in the right direction. Why hadn't she thought to do this sooner?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Grey pulled up to Peg's house just after 6 in the evening. He might have been back sooner had that shadow of a thought not stepped out into the light to get his attention. From then on, the shopping had gone much slower while he recovered from the epiphany and then began to craft a plan.

Aries sat in the parlor looking as beautiful as ever, though a bit peely wally.

He headed into the kitchen with the bags and said over his shoulder, "Ye might want to go have a lie in whilst we cook dinner."

"I've just slept for two hours," she grumbled, suddenly on his heels.

A shiver ran up his spine.

"Tell me you got chocolate."

He set down the sacks, pulled out a red and silver box of teacakes, and tossed it onto the bunker. While he unpacked, she tore open the box, extracted two of the treats, then settled at the kitchen table and slid one to her Gran.

The old woman gave Aries some sort of warning that wasn't entirely kind, insinuating that Aries take it easy on the sweet stuff or her hips would regret it. In his periphery, he saw Aries' jaw drop open.

A day ago, he would have risen to her defense and assured both women that Aries'

derriere, and the rest of her for that matter, couldn't be more perfect...unless there were a bit more of her. But that was yesterday. He was a new man now. And the last thing he wanted was to look like the forlorn, abandoned pup that he still was.

The kitchen was warm and full of laughter. They'd finished their meal, and with the ice box full, Peg would be well fed for days. He'd also arranged for regular deliveries, though he hadn't mentioned it. The old woman would just have to accept his meddling.

"I wonder what Wallace and Campbell are up to now," Wyndham mused, leaning back in his chair.

McHenish grinned. "Poor bastard's probably polishing boots that haven't seen polish since the war."

"Which war?" Aries asked.

"Any war." The painfully handsome man winked at her. "Though I doubt Banner will let him retire early. Might keep him up all night just to watch him squirm."

Peg started collecting empty plates, but Grey took them from her hands. "I'll do that." He gestured for her to sit back down.

Aries tried to do the same, but he waved her off.

"Well," Aries said, "speaking of tomorrow... Gran, do you know of any witch powerful enough to help convince Craig Campbell of the truth? Someone who might be willing to go to Glasgow with us?"

The old woman's eyes sparkled. "Wickham's sisters. But they're in Edinburgh."

"I believe they're out of the country, with Wickham." Wyndham tapped a finger on his chin. "Oxford, Ireland maybe. Wherever they are, Kitchens is with them. We can reach him, obviously."

McHenish nodded. "They sent for my wife not long ago. Fixed up an estate house in Oxford."

Grey dried his hands on a tea towel. "I'll make the call." He headed out of the kitchen and Aries started to follow, but McHenish smoothly intercepted.

"Tell me more, lass, about what happened to the Campbell brothers. I want to understand just how Wickham found them if they were nowhere..."

Grey escaped onto the front porch and pulled in a deep breath. The evening had settled in properly now, and the scent of cooled heather mixed with wood smoke and steadied his jangled nerves. He pulled out his phone and dialed the emergency number.

"Grey?" Loretta answered on the first ring. "Everything all right?"

"Aye. We've got Aries back safe. Listen, can ye meet us at Glasgow Airport tomorrow, early?"

"Us?"

"Aries, myself, and a few others. It's a long story, but we need a witch's help to right an old wrong."

"Of course we'll come." There was a pause. "How are you holding up?"

"Too early to tell." He lowered his voice. "But I think my life's about to take a turn."

"Oh, it is," she said, with that knowing tone that made the hair on his neck rise. "It definitely is."

He took that as a good sign, though his stomach still churned at the thought of what lay ahead. He just hoped he'd survive until the end of the week.

Inside, laughter erupted, and Grey's heart squeezed at the sound of Aries' voice rising above the rest. Time to go back in and face whatever came next. After all, he was a Highland warrior who'd faced The Butcher at Culloden.

Of course...he hadn't survived that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the most cowardly act he remembered performing in either of his lives, Grey stuck his head back in the kitchen to let them all know the plane would be ready at ten in the morning, and that he'd be back with pastries at nine. Then he fled.

If Aries chased after him, not that she would, he didn't look back to see.

In the morning, Grey arrived at Campbell's to collect the two men. Carson was dressed in his Sunday best, and since Wallace looked wearier than his charge, Grey thanked him and sent him home. He'd done enough. Wallace only agreed after he arranged for Duncan Houser to replace him.

Grey was almost surprised to find Aries hadn't fled in the night. Instinct had tried to convince him to sit on the house and watch for her escape so he could follow her. But his need for sleep had overridden that instinct for once.

She had a closet of clothes at Peg's house, so she was able to change and pack a bag. When Tristan found out they were headed to Glasgow, he called and promised to bring her other things to her. He just waited for an address.

Peg's home was as quiet as the morning after a bender. Aries sported a pair of sunglasses. She smelled freshly laundered when he dared pass her in the kitchen, and he fought hard not to reach out and touch her when the pull to do so felt as if there were powerful magnets inside them both. His only consolation was when he noticed her pause and lean ever so slightly his way.

Then the moment was gone.

Appetites on the whole were enough to polish off the better part of two boxes of pastries before they loaded into the cars. Aries climbed into McHenish's vehicle, and when Grey didn't complain, he earned a few quizzical glances from his friends, though they held their tongues.

Five Highlanders, one traumatized woman, and her pardoned kidnapper arrived at a small hangar where a private jet and pilot were waiting. Due to the dim light inside their new transportation, Aries removed her glasses. Her eyes were red, but when Wyndham asked if she'd slept at all, she claimed she had.

Grey had slept fine as well...from about four in the morning onward, when his body just couldn't stand to listen to his tortured thoughts another minute. The mean devil on his shoulder hoped she'd been as tormented by memories and longing as he, but the angel on his other shoulder had nothing but pity for her—especially considering what he planned next.

By the time they reached altitude, Aries was slumped in her seat across the aisle, and he wished the flight would be longer than just twenty minutes for her sake. Shug looked over his shoulder, noted the empty seat beside him, then came back to settle into it. From the look of him, he had concerns, and he didn't mince words.

"I couldn't help but notice the bag ye loaded on the plane."

Most of them had been onboard when Grey had taken the large, soft-side duffel out of the boot and handed it off to the crew. But Shug Buchanan never missed much.

"Aye. What of it?"

"Weel," the man glanced at Aries' sleeping form and lowered his voice even further.

"I couldnae help but notice the size of it."

Grey shook his head. "It's not but half full."

"It's not what's in it that worries me. It's what—or who—might fit in it at the end of the day..." He bobbed his brows a few times, then lowered them and studied Grey's eyes.

Grey barked out a laugh, then took pity on the man. "I swear, on the souls of everyone I ever held dear, that no one will be put in that bag."

The big Highlander gave a single nod, satisfied. Then he patted Grey's arm and said, "Good man," before returning to his original seat where he could spread out to his heart's desire.

Grey regretted the fact that he couldn't share his plan with his fellows. After all, they had answered his beck and call without question, ready to do whatever he asked. But it wasn't a plan he could fully articulate as yet, and even if he could, he couldn't risk Aries getting wind of it.

With her asleep, he unabashedly took in every detail. Maybe the redness around her eyes wasn't a rare thing. Perhaps she was as weary of running and hiding as he was of chasing her. Or maybe he was simply wishful thinking.

She'd be thirty-two this year. There were only a few wrinkles on her face—he wanted to kiss each one of them, wanted to be around for the next one, and the next... Maybe the color of her hair was lighter than it used to be, but that could have been accomplished at one of those beauty spas. She needed no help there. Indeed, she couldn't be more beautiful to him.

His eyes fell to the blue bag beside her feet. After Tristan brought her things to her,

there would be no reason she couldn't carry out this meeting with the other Campbell brother and slip out of his life again.

No reason at all.

The plane began its descent and her eyes fluttered open. He should have looked away before she caught him staring, but he hesitated. He'd been aloof since he'd laid eyes on her. And if this was it, if he lost her again for good, he wanted her to know...to know he wasn't indifferent.

She sat up straighter and blinked a bit, then gave him a smile as if in apology for falling asleep. But then she realized what he was trying to say and her smile faded, replaced by a message of her own.

She, too, wasn't as indifferent as she pretended.

His chest felt lighter and heavier at the same time. Love was such a gift...and such a burden.

He exited the plane first and waited at the bottom of the steps. In those slowly drawn-out moments, his need to touch her was akin to his need for air. So, he offered his hand to her when she was still a few stairs from the tarmac. She clutched it like a lifeline then stumbled down the last steps and fell against him.

He might have given a wee tug...

"Tricky footin', lass," Shug said as he followed behind her. "Tread verra lightly, aye?" He said the last while staring at Grey, then he turned to her and winked. The warning was for her. The threat was for him. Poor Shug Buchanan was assigning himself her protector.

Grey wondered if that might just come in handy...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The group spilled onto the sidewalk outside Glasgow International. Shug's kilt drew curious stares from passersby. Loretta and Lorraine Muir had been waiting for them, dressed identically in blue and purple bohemian rig-outs that made them appear more witchily than Aries remembered. Probably intentional.

Loretta took charge. "After we got the skinny from Carson on the phone last night, we made arrangements at the Blythswood. Craig Campbell and his family are already there, though they don't yet know why. Can we fit in two taxis?"

Aries' stomach clenched. She wouldn't be confessing to just the brother, then, but a whole family. "What did you tell them?"

"That they'd won a luxury spa weekend." Lorraine's eyes sparkled with delight. "His wife was quite excited. And naturally, their teenagers will be happy for an excuse to miss school."

Before Aries could process it all, she found herself being ushered into a large taxi. She faced the rear with Grey on her left. The sisters took the seats opposite and insisted that a nervous Carson sit between them. That left the other four men to pack into the second car along with a large bag Wyndham had carried from the plane.

The close quarters of the taxi meant her thigh pressed against Grey's, and every tiny movement of the vehicle caused their hips to brush. She tried to focus on what she would say to Craig Campbell, but Grey's proximity commanded her attention. He smelled of body wash and...Grey, and the taste of him on her tongue invited a flood

of memories she'd tried so hard to forget.

"It will be fine," Grey said, to the taxi at large. "The sisters would ken it if we were heading for trouble."

Carson's eyes widened and he held perfectly still, as if just realizing he was seated between two actual witches.

Aries gave him a smile and a wink. If he thought Grey was joking, he might not be so uptight. But when Loretta patted Carson's knee, it was a wonder he didn't fly straight out through the roof.

Loretta didn't seem to notice. "The family will be taken to the conservatory for lunch at 11:30, where we'll all be waiting. We thought that would be best—neutral ground, lots of witnesses."

"And a lovely view of the gardens," Lorraine added. "Very soothing."

Aries nodded, her throat too tight to speak. She'd spent years running from her past mistakes, and now she was about to face another one head-on. At least Craig didn't remember what she'd done to him. But his brother did, and that was the whole point. If she could at least get the two back on the same side, it wouldn't matter what they ultimately thought of her.

Grey's hand rested on her upper arm, briefly, as if he wanted to offer comfort but wasn't sure she would welcome it. As he pulled away, she caught his fingers and gave them a squeeze before letting go. Whatever happened next, she was grateful not to be facing it alone.

The Blythswood's stately facade came into view, and Aries took a slow shuddering breath. Time to face the music. Again.

The conservatory was a masterpiece of glass and iron, flooding the space below with natural light that sparkled off cut crystal and polished silverware. Potted palms created intimate spaces between tables draped in crisp white linens. Through the soaring windows, the garden of manicured hedges waited to be appreciated.

Aries stood near a tall window wishing she dared lean her shoulder against the cool clean surface. The others had spread themselves casually around the room—the sisters at a corner table sharing tea, Shug's yellow tartan brightening a leather chair near the entrance, the rest of the men positioned strategically but not obviously around the perimeter.

And down the center of the room, a long table with tented napkins and table settings for fourteen until a staff member in a white jacket came through the doorway, consulted with Loretta, then took one of the settings away.

Grey leaned against a pillar a few feet from Aries, pretending to study the leaves of a palm while stealing glances in her direction. She caught him more than once, and each time their eyes met, the air between them crackled with unspoken words. She forced herself to look away, to focus on what needed to be done, but she was hyper aware of his every breath.

At precisely 11:30, Craig Campbell appeared in the doorway with his family. Despite their age difference, he and Carson could pass for twins. His wife was a petite blonde with kind eyes, and their teenagers—a lanky boy and an equally willowy girl—trailed behind, taking pictures with their phones. Craig's step faltered when he caught sight of Carson, then his face lit with genuine pleasure.

"Carson! What in Heaven's name?" He strode forward with open arms. "Ye arranged all this?"

Carson accepted the embrace awkwardly. "Aye, well, not?—"

"Ye should have just come to the house, ye daft man. Ye're always welcome."

"And ye're always welcome back home ."

"I work a lot," Craig explained. "Barely see the weans myself these days. Right, Emma?" He squeezed his daughter's shoulder.

The girl looked up from her phone to nod, then seemed to realize how much her father and Carson looked alike. "Dad's never home before eight."

"This is brilliant though." Craig beamed. "A proper family weekend."

A server appeared with a tray of champagne flutes. Something sparkling and golden for the adults, and pink lemonade for the teens. As the drinks were distributed, Aries stepped forward before she lost her nerve. "Mr. Campbell? I'm afraid I'm the reason for all this."

Craig's brow furrowed as he studied her face. "Do I ken ye?"

"No. But I'm the reason your brother's been...troubled...all these years." She swallowed hard. "I used to be...I am ...Aries Muir." The man wouldn't care about the small detail of her handfasting, whether or not it had any legal significance.

Carson's wife gasped softly. "The witch girl? The one who?—"

"There are no such things as witches," their son muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Actually, there are." Loretta rose from her corner table. "Your uncle has been telling the truth all along."

Craig shook his head. "Look, I dinnae ken what this is about?—"

"When you were boys," Aries cut in, "at my father's funeral, I wished you away. Both of you. Into nowhere." Her voice shook but held steady. "Carson remembers but he shouldn't have. Your memories were supposed to be altered. For some reason, it didn't work on your brother."

"This is ridiculous." Craig's wife moved protectively closer to her children. Her husband just laughed and waited for the rest of the joke.

"Not ridiculous." Lorraine joined her sister. "Aries doesn't have her power anymore, but we do. And we came along in case you needed some convincing."

The boy was paying attention now. "Cool. What can you do?"

"We can sometimes see the future," Loretta said cheerfully, as if she enjoyed saying it out loud. "For instance, your mother is carrying a child. Another son. One she hasn't told anyone about yet. We're always good at that." She faced the woman and peered into her eyes. "You'll name him...Carson."

"Mum!" Emma's eyes went wide. "That's gross! Ye're not pregnant!"

The brother took one look at his mother's face and groaned. "That is gross. Ye're so old!"

"Shut it, Jake," the mother hissed. Her face was white as a sheet.

"Mary?" Craig looked ill as well. "Is it true?"

She nodded slowly. "I only found out Tuesday. I was going to tell ye..."

"See?" Carson grabbed his brother's arm. "I told ye! I told ye! But no one believed me!"

Craig ran a hand through his hair. "I never thought ye were crazy, Cars. I just...it was easier to think ye had a dream ye thought was real." He looked at Aries. "But ye're saying it really happened? We really disappeared? Just a snap and we were gone?"

"Yes." Aries felt tears threatening. "And I am so, so sorry."

The brothers exchanged a long look and she could almost see decades of misunderstanding crumble and fall away.

Craig was the first to find his voice. "Ye poor man. Sorry I am that Mum and Da arenae here to hear it."

A server appeared to announce that lunch was ready, and everyone moved to the table. Shug said something to make everyone laugh, and the tension dissolved. The teenagers sat across from the Muir sisters. By their faces, it was clear they were creating lists of questions to ask—as long as it didn't have anything to do with their parents having sex.

No one expected the Campbell clan to swallow the tall tale that all five Highlanders had been born near the turn of the 18th century, let alone the fact that they were recently raised from the dead by yet another Muir witch. So, as they were seated, Aries introduced the five men as friends who had nothing better to do than come along for the day.

Grey pulled out a chair for her, then walked around the table to sit across and down a little. She truly hadn't expected to sit down together in the end and share a meal. But the Muir sisters were nothing if not miracle workers.

"So tell me," Craig said, "what exactly happened that day? I've heard Carson's version a hundred times, but I never could quite believe it."

Aries took a steadying breath. "I was young and angry. My father had just died, and I thought you boys were...being disrespectful. I had this power, you see. Whatever I wished for would come true. Only I didn't always control it well. When I saw you throwing rocks into my father's grave, I wished you would go away. And you did."

"Just like that?" Jake leaned forward, suddenly interested. "Like, poof?"

"Just like that," Carson said. "One minute we were there, the next we were...in the middle of nowhere. Looked like any old moor. Then some Highlander showed up and took us home. Our parents thought we were dead. Hadn't seen us for days. But I don't remember being cold or hungry, don't remember it getting dark. But I do remember thinking we were stuck on that moor forever. Lost."

"How long were we there?" Craig asked.

Aries shook her head and lied. "Who knows?" Aries explained. "That powerful witch who found you thought that he'd altered your memories."

The teens looked at each other, grinned, and spoke in unison. "Altering memories." Like it was a new ability they were about to be granted.

"That's why ye went a bit...odd," Craig said softly.

"Aye. No one believed me. Mum and Da took me to doctors, put me on pills..." Carson's voice cracked. "I would flush them down the toilet because I knew there was nothing wrong with me. And the only person who might be able to help...ran away." He looked at Aries and gave her a kind smile. A gift of forgiveness.

She looked for Grey, hoping against hope that he could do the same. But he was frowning at his plate, and she wondered if he'd been paying attention.

Mary reached across the table and squeezed her brother-in-law's hand. "I'm so sorry."

The first course arrived—a delicate soup that steamed gently in fine china bowls. For a few minutes, there was only the quiet clink of spoons and murmurs.

Emma piped up. "Ye said ye're not a witch now?"

Aries nodded. "I gave up my powers. They were too unpredictable."

"But you could never turn anyone into...say...a toad?"

Everyone laughed.

"No. Nothing like that."

"But we can," Loretta said, sharing a smile with her sister. "Would you like to volunteer, Jake?"

The kid blanched and shook his head.

The sisters snickered. "Just kidding."

Jake eventually relaxed, then he pressed. "Can you do some more? Something cool? Predict Emma's future? Will her husband be fat and bald?"

Lorraine closed her eyes for a moment, then grinned at him. "That girl you like—the one with the green hair? She's going to ask you to the autumn dance."

Jake's face flushed scarlet.

Craig shook his head in wonder. "It's all true then. Everything Carson said..."

"I'm just sorry it took so long to prove it," Aries said quietly. "I should have come back years ago, should have explained..."

"Ye're here now," Carson said. "We'll be grateful for what we get. And we're grateful to have my brother here. And grateful for this." He gestured to the parade of staff coming to exchange their bowls for the next course.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly. The men were cagey about what they did for a living, which was understandable. None of them wanted to admit they were set for life, thanks to each of them enjoying a tiny share of one of the greatest treasures of gems known to mankind. They spoke openly about their appreciation for the people they loved, friends and family alike. It was good for the teenagers to see physically impressive men admit that true love humbled them.

Grey nodded through it all, silent for the most part. On the rare instances where she caught his eye, he would smile. But those smiles were brief and always strained. Something was brewing behind those eyes, and Aries would have given anything to have the power to read his thoughts.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After lunch, the Muir sisters, who had rented a suite at the hotel, started handing out room keys and insisted everyone join them in the swimming pool. All excuses were rejected since the hotel had swimsuits to let in all sizes and was eager to accommodate them. They even had a key for Tristan and his wife when they showed up with Aries' things.

Grey's stomach plummeted when he saw Aries' eyes light up. She claimed her joy was at having her grandmother's Royal Dalton back, but he knew differently. It was her freedom that had just been handed to her. He was going to lose her for good.

The late summer sun warmed the flagstones around the pool, making this rare Scottish afternoon perfect for swimming. And more than one man wondered aloud if the Muir sisters might have some power over the weather. Steam rose from the heated water and created an almost mystical atmosphere.

"The magic will be if his suit stays put," Jake said, watching Shug execute a perfect cannonball that sent waves crashing over the coping. The big man surfaced with a roar and shook water from his hair like a massive dog.

"That's just physics, lad," McHenish called from where he lounged against the wall in the shallow end. "Mass and velocity and—" His scientific explanation was cut short when someone grabbed his ankles and yanked him under. It was Wyndham, who emerged from the water in a great whoosh and roared in the same manner as Shug had.

The teens shrieked with laughter when McHenish flew up out of the water to land on Wyndham's back. The two men wrestled and sent more waves across the pool. Craig tried to maintain his dignity but soon joined in, teaming up with Carson to dunk the Highlanders.

Aries floated on her back at the quiet end, trying not to stare at Grey's broad shoulders as he pulled himself up to sit on the edge. Water streamed down his chest, and she forced herself to look away.

"Chicken fight!" Jake shouted. "Emma, get on my shoulders!"

"I will not," his sister replied primly, but squealed when Carson scooped her up and deposited her on Craig's shoulders instead.

"Right then," Shug said, "who's my partner?" His eyes landed on Aries. "Come on, lass. Let's show these youngsters how it's done."

Before she could protest, she found herself hoisted onto that wet, shaggy dog to face off against Emma. The competition was on. They locked hands and tried to topple each other while Craig and Shug did their best to help.

"That's it!" Wyndham called. "Push left, Aries! She's off balance!"

Grey's low chuckle sent shivers down her spine that had nothing to do with the water temperature. "Too late. She's goin' down."

"Never!" she shouted, but Emma took advantage of her distraction and gave a mighty shove. Aries toppled backward and took Shug with her. Water flooded her ears and face and drowned out most of the shouting. When she came up gasping and laughing, the volleyball floated nearby. She grabbed it and hurled it at Grey, smacking him squarely on the side of the head.

When he found the guilty party, his brows flew high, then his head lowered like a bull. "Oh, aye?"

The game that followed was part keep away, part rugby, with alliances forming and dissolving as the ball was passed and stolen. Betrayal seemed to earn the most laughter. When Grey finally got his hands on the ball, Aries knew she was in trouble.

Shug bellowed, "Run!"

She didn't need to be told twice. She hauled herself up the steps, hurried to the grass, and sprinted as fast as she could, driven by pure adrenaline. Grey hopped smoothly out the side, already cutting the distance. With his longer stride, he gained quickly. He caught her arm, dragged her to a stop, then threw her over his broad wet shoulder.

She squealed and laughed and pretended to struggle. Back at the pool, everyone cheered, but their voices died quickly when Grey continued around the corner of the building.

"Breathless and panting," he growled. "Exactly how I wanted ye."

Strong hot hands lifted her hips and lowered her to the ground. Instead of letting her go, he pressed her against the sun-warmed wall. She was solemn as the grave when their eyes locked.

"Time to pay the piper," he murmured, as he lowered his head and claimed her mouth.

The kiss was familiar, like coming home—the remembered taste of him, the way his hands cradled her face, the solid warmth of his body against hers. She melted into him, forgetting everything else as the years apart began to contract.

How had she ever walked away from this?

When they finally paused to catch their breath, Grey rested his forehead against hers. "Don't run," he whispered. "Please. Not until I've had my say. Then I promise...I will let ye go."

Before she could respond, he stepped away, leaving her gasping.

Leaving her.

Shug scowled at Grey when he came back to the pool alone.

"She gone?"

He shrugged, not daring to hope out loud. But resigned all the same.

A body came whizzing past. Aries' bum, strapped in a too-small, hot pink swimsuit, bounced only a few times before she flew out over the water.

"Cannonball!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The hotel's rooftop terrace offered a stunning view of Glasgow at sunset. Aries' body had been spoiled by the warmer climate of southern France, so summer in Scotland felt like anything but, especially at night.

She sat in one of the cushioned chairs near the fire pit, watching flames dance behind glass walls that blocked the wind. The day's swimming had left her muscles pleasantly tired, but her mind still raced.

Nothing like a hot kiss to scramble the brain.

Movement made her look up. She'd hoped it was Grey coming to join her, but it was Carson.

He hesitated. "Mind if I have a word?"

"Sure."

He settled on a chair and clasped his hands between his knees. The firelight caught hints of grey in his hair and made him look as old as she was, but she would probably always see him as a little boy, now that she knew.

"Ye're a generous woman, forgivin' me so easily, when what I did was truly unforgiveable."

"I'm not?—"

"Please." He took a deep breath. "Now, that it's just the pair of us, I want to say I'm sorry for bein' a right bastard. Terrorizin' ye like I did. I spent so many years wonderin' if I was mad, ye ken? Then when I saw ye..." He shook his head. "I just had to prove that I wasnae the disturbed child my parents believed I was."

"I understand." She truly did. "And I'm sorry too. Not just for what I did that day, but for staying away. But you should know that wasn't the only reason I fled. I was running from...from a curse that was taking my family from me, one by one. I thought if I left, maybe I could save my brother at least."

He blinked. "Aye, Leo? Didn't he...?"

"Yes. Boating accident. Turns out my running away hadn't changed a thing."

They listened to the hiss of the fire for a long while before Carson shifted uncomfortably. "About the hotel and the plane. I must repay ye?—"

"Don't even think about it. The Muir sisters have more money than God's dog." She rolled her eyes. "And they love playing fairy godmother."

He chuckled. "Craig's weans want to adopt them, see what magic they can get out of 'em."

She was tempted to warn him, but the sisters wouldn't be sticking around long. They said they had to get back to Wickham. Something major was going on, but Aries wasn't foolish enough to ask what. She couldn't afford to get sucked back into the world of Muir witches and Culloden's 79 again. Her heart couldn't take it.

"Speaking of planes," she said, "you're welcome to a ride back to Inverness in the morning. Taxis at ten, they said."

He stood and shook his head. "Think I'll stay a few days. Get to know my brother again. Catch the train later."

"Good. That is just what I needed to hear. From now on, when I think of you, I'll remember you and Craig here, together and happy."

"Goodnight then. And goodbye." He started to walk away, then turned back. "I hope...I hope whatever still troubles ye, that keeps ye away from home..." He shrugged. "I hope yer many friends can help. They seem willin' to do anythin' for ye." He wrinkled his nose. "Specially that Wallace."

Aries' throat tightened. "Friendship can only do so much, but thanks for the kind words. Some things must be endured alone."

Around the corner, Duncan Houser stood with his back to the tall hedges and listened. He'd drawn the short straw for shadow duty, though truthfully, he didn't mind. Better than letting Shug do it—that man didn't trust Campbell as far as he could throw him, and he wasn't opposed to throwing him off the roof for daring to put his hands on Aries in the first place.

The conversation was quiet but clear enough. Duncan was heartsore for Aries, when she spoke of things she couldn't control. It surely had something to do with why she kept running from Grey, but he couldn't guess what.

He'd relay it all to Grey, and maybe the poor man could make heads or tails of it. His friend needed to know that whatever drove Aries to run wasn't just about the past. But first, he'd make sure she got safely back to her room.

Carson's footsteps approached. Houser melted into the shadows until the man passed, then resumed his post. From the terrace, he heard Aries sniffing.

Whatever ate at her, he hoped she would confess and have done. If the folks currently under that roof couldn't help her, no one could.

The sniffing grew closer. Duncan stepped back again.

Aries came through and stopped right in front of him. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He stepped out so she could see him clearly.

“Do you know which room Grey is in?”

“I do.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Grey had just turned on the gas fireplace when someone knocked. His heart stopped when Aries' voice came through the wood.

"Grey? It's me."

He opened the door and stepped back, openly shocked that she'd come. He had asked her not to leave until they had a chance to talk, but obliging him wasn't her usual style. After years of hunting her across continents, it seemed too simple.

She was wrapped in a hotel robe with her damp hair pulled back from her face. Her feet were bare. Somehow, she looked more vulnerable like this than she had in that borrowed swimsuit. Hardly running attire.

"Come in." He gestured to two chairs positioned near the fireplace. "Though I warn ye, that fire's just started. No heat yet."

"Better than nothing." She settled into one of the chairs and tucked her feet under her. "I can't believe how cold I got after swimming. I forgot what Scottish humidity does to me."

Nervous as a wet hen, he took the other chair, and when he looked up, his gaze caught on her mouth just as she licked her lips. One look in her eyes and he knew they shared the same problem—that kiss from earlier just hadn't been enough.

She cleared her throat. "You wanted to talk."

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees—an excuse to look down. "I need to tell ye what it was like the first time ye left."

She tensed but didn't stop him.

"I was mad with worry. Ye were just...gone. No word, no warning. I thought something terrible must have happened. Then when I finally accepted ye'd left by choice..." He shook his head. "Finding ye became everything. I thought of nothing else. I thought I could convince ye to give me another chance."

"Grey—"

"Let me finish. Please." He waited for her nod. "Then Italy happened. I thought everything was right again. But when ye disappeared, I should have faced the truth. Should have stopped hunting ye then and there. Because it wasn't just about us anymore, was it? There was something else."

Her eyes glistened in the firelight. "I can't?—"

"I know. I can see ye want to explain, but ye willnae. And if ye can't trust me with whatever is causin' ye pain..." His voice cracked. "Then I can't help ye. And what was between us was over long ago."

A tear slipped down Aries' cheek. She brushed it away quickly and hoped a faint smile could postpone the shattering of her heart until she could get out the door. Her gaze drifted to the large bag beside the bed. "You're leaving?"

"Aye." He finally straightened and glanced at the duffel.

"Is there...someone else? Do you need me to sign papers? Or do we do some sort of un -handfasting?" Her voice hitched. "The house—surely you're not taking another

woman to our house?"

He coughed on a laugh. "Nay. Nothing lives in there now but ghosts. Tables and chairs all covered in sheets. Every little thing exactly where it was."

"You didn't sell it?"

He shook his head slowly, sadly. "It's there if ye want it."

He still wouldn't answer the real question, so she pressed again. "Then where will you take her?"

A smile he didn't feel creased the lines around his eyes. "There is no her, Aries. And I'm done with Inverness. Done chasing. Go where ye please—I'll not interfere again." He met her eyes and held steady. "Just know that I loved ye with every wee bone in my body. I will never forget ye."

Seconds dragged by as pure pain filled the space between them.

She moved first, launching herself from the chair into his arms. He stood in time to catch her and pull her close to finally finish that kiss they'd started. Mindless, they ended up on the bed, both fully clothed, both wrapped around each other like their lives depended on it.

But it wasn't a reunion, wasn't the start of something new...it was a farewell.

One more minute. One more kiss. One more hour of holding each other before they would need to let go.

Aries remembered falling in and out of sleep. At one point, he got up to turn off the fire they no longer needed. She should have left then, but she pretended to sleep

through it. Each time he woke, he would press his lips against her head. Then he would sleep again, his light snoring like a kitten purring.

She wished morning would never come.

When she woke from a deep slumber, she knew the sun was up before she ever opened her eyes. Pale light filtered between the curtains and promised another sunny day—maybe for the rest of the world. But hers would be cold and empty, just like the bed.

Grey was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Aries threw the blanket aside and pried herself off the bed. Grey's bag was gone, the room was eerily quiet, and the chairs still faced the cold fireplace like abandoned sentries.

There would be no note. Just as she'd left him no note.

It made her sick to know she'd made him feel like this, like there were things more important to him now.

How in the world had he gone on loving her?

Back in her room, she changed, gathered her things together, and sat on the corner of the bed to wait for "taxi time." There was no reason she shouldn't go back and spend a few more days with her gran and at the very least, assure the woman her Royal Daulton had survived its ordeal.

At half nine, there was a knock on the door. A grin spread unbidden across her face as she flew to answer it, hoping that he'd merely been making his point that morning, but couldn't truly give up on her. But when she opened her door, she found five large Highlanders blocking her path. Shug, Wyndham, McHenish, Duncan, and Tristan Bain.

Shug stood front and center, arms crossed over his chest. "Grey's gone."

"I know."

"Just wanted to let ye ken that we are not."

"I appreciate that. I thought I'd head back with you, spend some time with my gran, make sure she's all sorted."

"We want to know what's wrong," McHenish said. The others nodded.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Cut it." Shug pushed his way into the room. The rest followed. "Ye ken what we mean. Why do ye run? Why can ye not stay with Grey? It's clear the two of ye?—"

"Not anymore. It's over. He's...over me."

They all rolled their eyes, snorted and snuffed, and shook their heads as if they couldn't believe she could be so daft.

"He told me last night. It's over."

"Last night," Duncan drawled. "In his room? All night?"

"Nothing happened."

They didn't like hearing that, and she laughed at their expressions. "Look. He's moving on, going to find a new happily-ever-after. It's what I wanted all along."

None of them were listening.

Wyndham picked up her bags and nodded for Duncan to grab the sack with her teacup and doll, then he headed for the door. "Come on, lads. We'll wheedle it out of her on the plane. Maybe we can hang her out the windae by her heels until she fesses

up." To Shug he said, "Bring her."

The big man came at her as if he intended to throw her over his shoulder like Grey had done at the pool.

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't you dare."

The train fled south. Each mile added distance between Grey and everything he'd ever loved. The Scottish countryside wasn't distracting enough to hold his attention, and the glass window was just something to rest his eyes on.

His phone buzzed again. Fourth time in an hour. He glanced at the screen. Shug. Again.

The first three times had been McHenish, Wyndham, and Duncan. He'd let them all go to voicemail, would text them his thanks later. He hated to look ungrateful, but he had to stick to the plan, even if it didn't work in the end.

He declined the call. Five minutes later, Shug tried again. Damn, but the man was persistent.

With a sigh, Grey answered. "Shug."

"Where the bloody hell are ye?"

"On a train."

"Headed where?"

Grey looked out the window again. "South."

"South? That's all ye've got to say? South?"

"I've got some ghosts that need puttin' to rest."

There was a long pause. "Are ye certain they're south?"

"They are."

"And what about the very lively one ye've left with us?"

"She's hardly a ghost. And don't you dare go tossin' her off some roof, will ye?"

"Ye're mad."

"Listen, my friend. She has no more need of a protector. You or me. Yer Wren needs ye now. Yer weans and yer farm need ye back. But I'm grateful ye answered the call."

Another pause. "About these ghosties. Ye're talkin' in riddles, man."

"Aye, well. That's all I've got at the moment."

"When will ye be back?"

Grey watched a flock of birds wheel across the sky. "I dinnae ken if I will be." That was what a leap of faith was all about—the not knowing.

"But—"

"Let her go, Shug." He exhaled carefully. "I have."

He ended the call and turned off his phone. Let them think what they would.

The entire world stretched out before him. He could go anywhere, do anything. The thought should have terrified him—a man out of time, with only a few years of modern life under his belt. But something stirred in his chest, something he hadn't felt since that day on Culloden Moor while he waited for the order to charge.

An invitation to adventure?

Maybe that's what he needed. Maybe that's what would finally help him put all his ghosts to rest—the ghost of the warrior he'd been, the ghost of the man who'd loved Aries Muir Strachan with everything he had, the ghost of the life they might have shared.

The train rounded a bend and the sun broke through the clouds, painting the hills in gold. Grey settled back in his seat and let the rhythm of the rails carry him forward.

Into whatever came next.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The car pulled up to Gran's cottage just as the afternoon sun broke through the clouds over Inverness. Aries hadn't spoken much on the plane, and the men hadn't pushed her. Maybe they sensed her raw edges after waking up alone. Maybe they just didn't know what to say to a woman who'd driven away the best man she could ever find.

While she climbed out of the car, Wyndham carried her bags to the door. She felt like her shoes were made of lead and moved slower than usual. The events of the past few days—her kidnapping, the trip to Glasgow, the pool, the kiss, and the goodbye—had drained her completely.

Wyndham dropped a kiss on Gran's cheek, then turned and did the same to her. "Ye have all our numbers. Call if ye need anythin'." His eyes held hers. "Anythin' at all."

She nodded, touched by the loyalty of a bunch of men who never judged her harshly, despite the fact that she'd been tormenting one of their own for so long.

The cars drove away and Gran ushered her inside. The smell of coal and peat suggested the old woman's fire had been working overtime, and Aries was glad for the embrace of a warm familiar house.

"Sit," Gran ordered. "I'll fix us something to eat."

"I can help?—"

"Ye can barely stand. Rest."

Aries sank onto a kitchen chair and let out a long breath.

"How long do I have ye for this time?"

"I don't know. Grey is done with me, so..."

That got her attention. "Done with ye? Did he say as much?"

"He did. Just before he...up and left. Packed a bag. Said he won't be back to Inverness. Said...I could have the house."

"Sounds like..."

"Like he finally saw the light?"

Gran chuckled. "I was goin' to suggest he's found someone else."

"I asked him. He said there was no one. But he's done chasing me. I'm free to do as I please."

The woman pulled out a pan and set it on the stove, then rifled in the fridge, so Aries couldn't see her face. After cracking a few eggs, she finally spoke. "So? What do ye please? Will ye go back to yer hidey hole then?"

Aries' chest deflated as she exhaled. What did it matter now if she kept her life secret? Grey wouldn't be tracking her down anymore. The thought should have brought relief, but instead it left her hollow.

"I honestly don't know."

She watched Gran move around the kitchen, pulling bread and cheese from the cupboard, finding plates and tending the eggs. Her movements were slow and stiff, but still graceful. "Before we eat," she said, "I think we both need a wee dram." She pulled a bottle from a low cupboard, set two glasses on the table, and poured a finger of amber liquid into each. "It's been a rough few days."

Aries wrapped her hands around the glass but didn't drink. "I've been living in the south of France," she said suddenly. "Never stayed in one place too long. Never got too close to anyone. Other than a few boxes of books and things, I don't really need to go back."

Gran hummed thoughtfully while she plated the eggs. "I suppose ye can go off and see the world too, then, can't ye? Now that there's nothin' to run from?"

"I don't know." Aries took a sip of whisky and felt it burn all the way down. "Too tired to think it through. Maybe."

They ate in comfortable silence for a while, but the whisky and the fact that she didn't have to keep looking out the window did something to loosen more than just her tongue.

"We were happy here," she said softly. "Grey and I. Those first two years."

"Aye, I remember." Gran pushed her plate aside and poured them each another dram. "I haven't seen those smiles for a long, long while now. What do ye suppose changed?"

"We were too happy. I was too happy." The words spilled out before she could stop them, so she took another drink to wash them back down again. But it didn't work. "One day I realized why—because my family was dead. They had to die so I could find my dragon. And suddenly I had him. And I was happy about it. "

"That's not how prophecy works, mo chridhe ."

"Isn't it?" The glass trembled in her hand. "You think it was coincidence that I found him right after Leo's funeral? The prophecy said I would find the dragon alone. So Fate made me alone." Her voice cracked. "If I still had my family, Grey and I would never have met. Don't you see? To stay with him was to celebrate their deaths!"

Gran reached for her hand, but Aries pulled away and stood. The whisky made her movements less steady than she'd like.

"I tried to put it out of my head for a while." She began to pace, slowly at first. "Tried to convince myself it wasn't true. That I could be happy with Grey and still honor their memory. Tried to pretend the loss of them had nothing to do with him." She pressed a hand to her chest where the pain lived. "But every time he made me laugh, every time I felt joy, this voice in my head would whisper, This is why they had to die. So you could have this. And one day, I couldn't bear to listen anymore."

Gran watched her with those knowing eyes. "So, what about Italy?"

"Italy." Aries laughed bitterly. "He found me on that beach and... Oh, heaven help me, I so wanted to be happy again. I was tired of hiding from him. Tired of being alone. I thought maybe I'd mourned them enough, you know? Maybe I'd paid the price I was meant to pay. I hoped I could have my dragon back without..." She shook her head. "But the voice came back. After two days, I was right back to celebrating, right back to being happy, right back to being a monster who danced on her family's graves!"

Her voice broke on a sob, and she pressed her hands to her face. "I couldn't stand to look in the mirror. Then, I thought, since Grey was used to living without me, the sooner I left, the sooner he could go back to that. And maybe, after a second betrayal, he would give up."

"Oh, mo chridhe ." Gran's voice was gentle but firm. "Come sit. Let me explain prophecy."

"It won't matter?—"

"Sit!"

Aries returned to her chair feeling like a spoiled, petulant child. When the old woman held out her hands, however, she willingly took them and allowed her gran to pull her closer and look deep into her eyes.

"Prophecy... does not dictate what will come to pass. I'll say it again. Prophecy does not dictate what will come to pass. Rather, it tells what has happened as if looking back on it . Yer family didn't die so ye could be with Grey. They died because their time had come, just as it will for each of us. Prophecy, my dear child, is just a newspaper reporter from the future, telling us what has been . Blameless. Powerless to change a thing. Holding onto Grey—and cherishing that happiness—doesnae mean ye didn't love yer family and wouldn't give anythin' and everythin' to have them back again."

Aries leaned forward to press her stomach against her legs, to control the tornado of emotions spinning out of control inside her. Was her grandmother right? Dare she hope?

Gran released one of her hands to pat her head. "Listen well, and no mistake, Aries. That voice in yer head...is yers and yers alone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The therapist's office was in an old stone building near the river. Aries had walked there, needing the time to gather her thoughts. She'd called that morning, expecting to wait weeks for an appointment, but they'd had a cancellation.

Dr. MacDonald was younger than Aries expected, with kind eyes and a quiet manner that put her at ease. The woman didn't push when Aries stumbled over explanations, didn't question the gaps in her story. She simply listened.

"So you see," Aries concluded, "I've spent years believing I didn't deserve to be happy...when my family couldn't be."

The doctor nodded thoughtfully. "That's a heavy burden to carry alone."

"I thought...I thought if I could just stay away from the things that made me happy, I could honor their memory better."

"And did that work?"

"No." Aries' voice cracked. "I was miserable. And being miserable only tamped down the guilt. It didn't get rid of it."

The doctor nodded. "So, tell me, if your sister were here now, what would she say about you denying yourself?"

The question hit Aries funny. She could see Gemi's face clearly, could hear her voice:

"Ye daft cow, what are ye thinkin'?"

"She'd be furious, would probably smack me on the back of my head."

"And your parents?"

"The same. Only they wouldn't smack me." She swallowed hard at the next thought.

"They would have loved Grey."

"So by denying yourself joy, you're actually going against their wishes."

Aries sat back, surprised by the simple reasoning. All these years, she'd thought she was honoring them.

"It's not your fault they died, but you're a smart woman. You know that." The doctor smiled. "But you'd be surprised how common it is for people to feel guilt after a loss. And you've had that times four . I suggest you give yourself a little grace."

"Speaking of grace..." She told the woman a slightly toned-down version of the kidnapping and her rescue. "I guess it will take a little time before I stop slipping salt into my pockets when I walk through the kitchen. And I keep finding the cooking spray in my purse."

The doctor laughed lightly. "Look on the bright side. It will give us something to work on."

The session was over before Aries knew it, and she promised to be back. "Thank you. I should have done this years ago."

"Better late than never."

The walk home seemed shorter, easier, as if a substantial weight had been lifted off her shoulders. The late afternoon sun sparkled on the river, and for the first time in years, Aries felt like she could breathe properly.

Gran was in her garden when Aries returned, carefully deadheading her roses. She looked up and must have seen something in Aries' face because she straightened immediately. "Well?"

"I've made a terrible mistake."

"Which is?"

"I...I want Grey back. I don't deserve him, but I want him anyway."

"And what do ye plan to do about it?"

"I don't know if I can fix it. He's gone. Really gone."

"Is he?" The old woman's eyes sparkled. "Maybe this was meant to be."

"Gran!"

"Maybe he was meant to stop chasin'...so you could start."

Culloden's 79 were surprisingly unhelpful.

She called Shug first, believing the man would be eager to see Grey and her get back together, but he simply said, "I cannae say where he might be. Is there anythin' else I can do fer ye?"

Duncan Houser claimed the same inability, as did Wallace, Tristan, and McHenish.

She didn't intend on making 78 phone calls, primarily because she only had so many Highlanders on her new phone, and also, because they'd probably been given the same instructions. But she hoped her last call would pan out.

When she ended the call, Gran passed her some tea in one of the new floral cups Grey had given her. "Who was that?"

"Wyndham. He was my last hope."

"I cannae believe Wyndham wouldn't want to help."

"Oh, I think they all want to, but they've been sworn to secrecy."

"But Wyndham. Of all people."

"Right? But if it makes you feel any better, he was a lot more squirrely about it. He's a horrible liar."

"Men are just silly about vows and such. What you need is a fairy godmother." Gran's eyes crinkled above the rim of her cup. "Or two."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Ligurian coast stretched out before Grey in sunny splendor, just as it had that day two years ago when he'd found his wife here. The Grand Hotel Alassio rose behind him, its pale-yellow facade reminding him of The Grand in Brighton. Maybe that's why she'd chosen the latter, to trigger his memory of this place.

The private beach had emptied as dinner approached, leaving Grey alone with his thoughts and the waves that kept on coming whether he was happy or not.

He'd booked the same room they'd had, ordered the same wine, and watched two ghosts dance and laugh and walk the same stretch of beach, just as oblivious as the waves were to his current existence. They had no clue what would soon follow. Or at least he hadn't. Aries might have been planning to leave him from the moment she was caught. While she looked out at the boats on the water, had she wished she could jump on one and leave straight away?

He'd systematically pulled every ghost from its hiding place and stared it down until it faded. Some took longer than others. The memory of her sleeping form in the morning light had been particularly stubborn.

He'd been a fool to come. He'd been asking for torture and gotten just what he'd asked for.

The tide was turning now, leaving a wet shine on the sand that reflected the painfully bright sky. Damn, but he missed Scotland.

He stooped to pick up another shell, tested its weight. The action reminded him of skipping stones with her on that first afternoon, when she'd finally allowed him to catch her and carry her into the water. When she'd claimed she was tired of being alone.

Lies. All of it lies.

He hurled the shell as hard as he could, nearly wrenching his shoulder. The wee thing hadn't been substantial enough to make a splash. And neither had he...

"Ye're a damned fool," he muttered.

He'd known exactly what he was doing when he told Shug he intended to put old ghosts to bed. Where else would he have ghosts waiting for him? He'd dropped that breadcrumb deliberately, hoping she might follow. Hoping she would want what she was finally denied.

But he'd been wrong. His little experiment had failed utterly.

At least she wasn't running anymore. Shug's daily texts confirmed she was still in Inverness, settling in, finding her feet. Maybe he'd done the right thing after all. Maybe letting her go had been exactly what she'd needed.

And if that were true, the best thing he could do now was stay away. Let her build whatever life she wanted without his shadow falling across it.

It was time. Time to check out of this beautiful prison of memories. Time to stop imagining her walking toward him, barefoot, down the beach...as he was doing now.

He blinked hard, but the mirage didn't fade. He'd seen her ghost a hundred times this week, but never painted her in a cable knit sweater with green pant legs rolled up. His

imagination wasn't that keen.

The mirage neared enough so he could see her grin. Then she broke into a run, stumbled, and fell in a spectacular disaster—a high-pitched squeal and a spray of hair and sand.

His imagination definitely couldn't have conjured that.

Aries pushed herself up to a seated position, laughing at her epic failure to take Grey by surprise. Sand clung to her sweater and dripped from her hair. She unrolled her pant legs to free the damp mess that got caught there. She'd imagined this moment a hundred times on the flight from Scotland to Genoa, but none of those scenarios had involved a faceplant on the beach.

"I had this whole dramatic entrance planned," she called out.

At the very least, she'd stunned him. He stood frozen twenty feet away like he didn't dare come close.

He suddenly frowned and focused on something behind her. She turned to follow his gaze and saw two Italian police officers striding purposefully up the beach. At least they looked like they might be police. Their light blue pants and dark blue shirts looked official enough, but their hats and tall dark boots reminded her of the cop in *The Village People*.

She stood and brushed her hands together as they neared. Grey started toward her but one of the officers held up a hand to stop him.

"Signora Aries Strachan?" The taller officer's accent was thick but his English clear enough.

"Yes?"

"You are under arrest." He pulled out a pair of handcuffs while his partner read her rights in careful English, their Italian accents made her feel like she was in some sort of skit. She couldn't stop smiling.

"There must be some mistake," she said as the cold metal closed around her wrists.

"No mistake," the shorter one said. He took her arm firmly but not unkindly. "Come with us, per favore."

When Grey tried to intervene, the taller officer blocked his path. "Sir, please stay back."

"The cuffs aren't necessary," Grey insisted. "She won't run."

The officer smiled apologetically. "We would be fools to trust a tourist not to flee, signore. "

They led her up the beach to where their motorcycles gleamed in the sun. She bit back a laugh. Of course they were motorcycle cops. But she stopped thinking everything was funny when a police car pulled up, its blue lights flashing.

She wasn't seriously worried, though. Clearly, they had her mixed up with someone else. Grey would sort it out. He had pretty clever friends who had made it nearly impossible to hide from them all these years. Now, she figured they owed her one.

She was carefully guided into the back seat of the car. When the door snapped shut, she twisted to look through the rear window. Grey stood a wary distance from the motorcycles with one hand raised. He was telling her she wasn't alone. She gave him a big grin to let him know she was okay while the car pulled away, leaving him

diminishing in the distance.

She settled back against the seat as well as she could with her hands behind her. It wasn't exactly the reunion she'd planned, but at least she'd found him. At least she had a chance to explain everything.

Just a little delay, a little bump in the road. Nothing to freak out about. After all, how scary could the jails be in a pretty place like this?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The cell was chilly, poorly lit, and small as a nun's quarters. A narrow cot with a thin mattress sat against one wall, and a stainless-steel toilet occupied one corner, partially hidden by a low barrier that did little for privacy. And near the bars, a simple wood chair. But at least Aries had the space to herself.

She could imagine the plaster walls absorbing centuries of misery only to let it leak out during the night to steal hope from newcomers. She was in no hurry to find out, no hurry for the sun to set, but on the other hand, she needed two days to pass quickly.

The women in the neighboring cells were a rough lot. One kept making kissing noises at Grey whenever he walked past.

"Bello ragazzo," she would call. Pretty boy. "Come sit by me instead!"

Grey ignored them all, staying close to Aries' bars. He'd bribed the guards to let him stay and bribed them well. Besides a folding chair, they brought him an espresso, which he shared with her.

She couldn't complain about dinner. Fine, restaurant quality food went down easily...if you could ignore the ambiance.

"Let me guess, he said," once he was seated. "Shug let it slip that I was heading south to put to bed some ghosts, and you put two and two together?"

Aries shook her head. "Never said a word. Wouldn't tell me anything. None of them would. So don't think for a minute that any of The 79 betrayed you."

"Then why did ye come here? Or was it me ye were lookin' for? Maybe this is just a place ye visit regularly?"

She smiled and shook her head. "I would have never come here again...without you. No, it was Loretta and Lorraine who told me where to find you, in their roundabout way. South and sand, and somewhere with memories for both of us. Nice and cryptic. But it couldn't be anywhere else, could it? I just worried I'd be too late and you'd be gone."

"Very nearly. But I suppose ye could have asked the sisters again."

"No. They warned me to hurry or you'd be lost. I don't know if that meant they wouldn't be able to help, or they wouldn't be willing a second time. I think they're pretty fond of all you Highlanders, and they didn't like ratting you out."

"Auch, dinnae believe it. If those two fear love is on the line, I reckon they'll bend any rule."

The word love kind of lingered in Aries' ears, but she didn't pounce on it like she wanted to. There was a lot more she had to say before she could get around to that. So, she dove in head first.

"Grey, when I left you here, I wasn't thinking straight."

He sat back and stretched his long legs out in front of him as if he was settling in to hear a long story, which she supposed he was." And ye never thought to call later, about the bill?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I figured they'd charge you for it when you went to settle

up for the suite."

"I was in no state to settle anythin'." His voice was carefully neutral. "The lads must have done when they came and collected me."

She winced. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe ye should save yer contrition for the judge. It's a pity he won't see ye until Monday. I wouldnae dare try to bribe him or I'll end up behind bars as well."

She groaned. "Two nights in here. I'll go mad. And what if he won't see me on Monday?" She wrapped her arms around herself. "That officer wasn't very encouraging."

"Aye. I heard him. A judge with troubles at home." Grey's mouth twitched, and she knew a joke was coming. "But worse luck that ye look like the judge's wife. Maybe I can get them to let ye dye yer hair."

She rolled her eyes and got up to resume pacing for the hundredth time, looking for a distraction other than the sight of her mouth-watering ex, who might remain her ex if she couldn't convince him she'd changed.

Happily, a guard appeared with two containers of pineapple gelato. He passed one through the bars and gave her a plastic spoon. "Mangiare," he said with a sympathetic smile. Eat.

She thanked him, and when he moved on to pass more to the other inmates, she lowered her voice. "Gelato? They're being awfully nice."

Grey's lips twisted into a guilty smile. "Maybe Italian prisons are just nicer than most."

The woman in the next cell called out to Grey again in a mix of Italian and English.

Aries glared in her direction. "I swear, if she doesn't shut up..."

"Jealous?" He laughed aloud for the first time in forever. It was music to her ears, but it lit up the rest of her too. She wanted to hear it again, and again, and again. But that would never happen if she screwed up now.

"You're enjoying this."

"Not entirely." He sobered. "But I have to admit, it's nice knowing exactly where ye are for once."

She couldn't argue with that. She'd done this to herself, after all. Running away had consequences, and not just emotional ones.

"I came to find you," she said quietly. "To finally explain."

"I'm not goin' anywhere." He gestured at the cell. "And neither are ye."

So, between spoonfuls of cheerful icy bliss, she confessed everything just as she'd done with her gran. Then she explained how the woman had helped her view the prophecy differently, without a thick lens of guilt in the way.

"I even started seeing a therapist...in Inverness."

Grey's spoon paused, then lowered back to the container. "Did ye now?"

"Yes. I think it will be good for me." She leaned her head against the bars between them. "I'm done punishing myself for wanting to be happy."

For a long minute, he studied her eyes, her face. "Ye wish to be happy, then, do ye?"

She made sure he was looking her in the eye before she said, "I do."

He set his gelato on the floor and leaned his head against hers, the contact no more than a couple of inches, but it was heaven.

"Every time you made me laugh, every time I felt joy, I was so sure I was dancing on my family's graves..." The secrets came easier now that she'd already shared them.

"Aries—"

"Wait." She straightened to look him in the eye. "I know you can't trust me, and I can't blame you. Maybe no one will ever trust me again. But if you'll take me back...I will try with every fiber of my being to make you not regret it. And maybe someday, you will be able to forgive me."

He sighed. "I forgave ye, love. Each time I saw yer face again, ye were forgiven. Now all that needs tendin' is for ye to forgive yerself."

"I'm working on it. It will be a lot easier to do, though, if you come home with me." Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Grey. Sorry for running, sorry for hurting you. Sorry for not trusting you enough with what was happening in my head."

"Ye're telling me now."

"Because I finally understand it myself. And because I love you. I never stopped loving you, I just couldn't let you know it. It would be harder for you if you knew." She tightened her grip on his fingers. "And as soon as I get out of here, I'll prove?—"

"Hush now." He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. Then, loudly and clearly, he said, "I reckon that will do." Then he stood and stretched.

She blinked the tears away so she could see him clearly. But he wasn't looking at her.

He waved the guard back who had brought the gelato. The man grinned and bobbed his head, then set his hands on his hips as if waiting for orders.

Aries didn't understand. "What's going on?"

"Sorry, lass. I just cannae stand to sit here for two long days, especially when ye've made me so happy, aye? I'm fit to burstin'."

"So, you're going to go get comfortable at the hotel?" She shrugged. "Of course you should. After all, it wasn't you who ran out on a bill."

He handed his chair off to a second officer. "Ye're right there. I didnae run out on my bill, nor on yers."

His biggest fan in the next cell pointed at the container he'd set on the floor. He cheerfully scooped it up and handed it through the bars. The grin on his face proved he was relieved to be getting out, but she couldn't help but feel abandoned. Also, he'd wasted a lot of money on bribes if he didn't intend to stick around and cash in. And without him, she'd probably get mush for breakfast.

He nodded to the first man who then sorted through the keys attached to his belt. She watched in shock as he slipped one in the lock and opened the cell door. His grin matched Grey's, which meant they were in cahoots.

She lowered her voice. "You bribed them into letting me out?"

The men exchanged a look and Grey bit his lips together before ducking his head. "Truth be told, lass, I bribed them into puttin' ye in."

"I don't understand."

"Give it a minute. Auch on second thought, I'll just explain, shall I? I told Shug I was

headin' south to put some ghosts to bed. I thought it would be obvious I'd come to the Alassio. Like ye said, it couldn't be anywhere else, could it? I'd chased ye all over heaven and back again, but this was the only place we were ever together.

"The way Shug had taken on the job of yer protector, I thought for certain he'd let it slip. So I half-expected ye. In truth, I'd prayed ye'd come, and I made arrangements with these fine gentlemen accordingly. But no matter how it came about, it's only important that ye came. And that I caught ye."

"You caught me?"

"Aye. And when we are tellin' the tale to our grandchildren for the fourth time, or the hundredth time, ye'll admit I'm a canny man."

"Grey Strachan, are you telling me I'm not under arrest?!"

"Aye, I am. And I'm sayin' welcome home, Aries. Welcome home."

He pulled her out of the cell and into his arms and kissed the pique right out of her. And all the while, the inmates and guards cheered as if a great race had been won. Which, Aries realized, it had.

"I have a hundred things more to say to ye, Aries Strachan. A thousand maybe. But they must be said in private."

THE END