



Where the Soul Belongs (Pict By Time)

Author: *Mia Pride*

Category: Historical

Description: When the magic of Scotland melds with the mystery of Halloween, nothing—not even death—can stop true love.

Growing up on the site of an ancient Pictish hillfort always held a particular magic for Callum, but lately, that magic has turned into a reality he struggles to comprehend. The cave just a mile east of town allows certain people to pass through time, and he'd met one not so long ago, forcing him to consider the truth: Scotland truly was a place full of mystery and magic. But nothing could shake him more than discovering the spirit of a bonny lass living in the basement of the visitor center where he works—nothing except being trapped in the room with her for hours on Halloween. Her name is Sorcha, she died nearly 1,500 years ago, and he's quite certain he fell in love with her in those few hours—before she disappeared on him, leaving him confused and heartbroken.

Total Pages (Source): 7

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

“Come on, Soph! Stay and have a few drinks. It’s Halloween!” Becky begged, jumping up and down in her bunny costume, floppy white ears bouncing around her jovial face.

“I would, but I promised my aunt I’d attend a book signing event at her job tomorrow. You know the archaeology program I was accepted into? The program director and his wife recently wrote a book. They are visiting, and I want to meet them. Which means I need to be up early.” In truth, Sophia felt out of place at this party. Her friends were wonderful, but Sophia always had a sense that she was different and never quite belonged.

“Nerd.” Becky stuck her tongue out at Sophia, who rolled her eyes and leaned in to kiss Becky on the cheek.

“Well, this nerd needs to pay rent and behave. My mom is shelling out a fortune for my tuition. The least I can do is deserve it.” Sophia adjusted her tall, white wig as it tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa for the dozenth time that night. She thought being Marie Antoinette would be a great costume, but she hadn’t anticipated the wig issues—or the French foreign exchange student who kept pretending to cut off her head all night.

“Wait.” Becky held up a finger and narrowed her eyes. “Doesn’t that guy work there? The one your aunt keeps trying to set you up with?”

“Yeah, but that has nothing to do with it. I’ve never seen his face. In fact, I can’t even remember his name. Anyway—gotta go. Bye, everyone. Love you! See you soon.” Sophia blew her friends kisses as she grabbed her purse and pulled out the keys. Her

small, yellow sedan was a mild nightmare with shuddering brakes and a radio that only worked on its own terms, but it was all she could afford. Besides, it was just temporary. Soon, she'd be leaving her temporary flat in Moray and living near the University of Aberdeen's campus, so she wouldn't need the car.

Hopefully, this new stage of Sophia's life would help her discover her true self, the part of her that always felt like something was missing. She couldn't explain why, but she felt deep in her bones that the missing piece resided at the university. So, she'd left San Francisco and everything she knew to come to Scotland. She knew without a doubt that something life-changing awaited her.

Kids ran through the streets carrying bags of candy and wearing a variety of costumes, from monsters to princesses, while parents followed and reminded them constantly to stay off the lawns. A group of teenagers gathered in the parking lot just outside Becky's flat, laughing as they held bottles of alcohol.

Sophia didn't want to be the old lady telling them how to behave. After all, she was only 20, but she saw keys hanging from one of the boy's hands as he opened a silver SUV and tossed a bottle of whiskey into the passenger side. To hell with minding her own business, she decided. This boy couldn't be older than 17. He was going to kill himself or someone else, and her conscience told her to speak up.

"Excuse me," she said nicely as she walked over. "You clearly have been drinking, and there are a lot of people out tonight. You can hurt yourself or someone else if you drive."

"Aye, Mum," the kid snickered.

Sophia rolled her eyes and decided to speak with someone possibly more reasonable. Pinning her gaze on a young woman dressed like Frankenstein's bride, Sophia said, "You're going to let your friend drive off drunk and get killed? Is that how much you

value your friend's life?"

The girl blanched and looked from Sophia to the boy behind the driver's seat. "Give me yer keys, Daniel. Shite, ye are goin' ta kill yerself or some wee child." She held out her hand, and Daniel, flashing Sophia a dirty look, relinquished the keys.

"Ye should mind yer own business, lady. Now I'm goin' ta be late to the party."

"Better late than dead. Have a nice night."

Sophia shook her head and walked toward her car. She hated confrontation, but maybe she'd saved a life tonight. As she slowly drove through the crowded neighborhood and entered the main road, silence and darkness replaced the bright, noisy streets she'd left behind.

When her radio popped on unexpectedly as usual, and her favorite Halloween song blared through her speakers, Sophia smiled and sang along, looking up in the rearview mirror to squint at the bright lights that suddenly began flashing behind her.

"What the...?" The same car had been on her tail since she'd left Becky's, but now its brights blinded her.

Ahead, the light turned from yellow to red, and Sophia stopped. But the blinding lights from the car behind her seemed to speed up, get closer, and flood her car's interior with a blinding brightness that made her tremble as adrenaline pumped through her veins.

The car wasn't stopping.

In a panic, Sophia laid on her horn, hoping to get the driver's attention and make them stop, but they continued to barrel forward. It was a matter of seconds, though it

felt like an eternity, as she turned her wheels toward the side rail, hoping to move out of the way and avoid the oncoming car. But she felt the jolting impact as a loud crash rang in her ears, metal crunched, and glass shattered. Her body flew forward, and her face smacked against her steering wheel.

Her car plowed into the side rail, rolled down an embankment, and something warm and fluid ran down her brow as the Marie Antoinette wig slid off her head. Figures the airbags are as faulty as the radio, she thought, and then, everything went black.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

“W here do ye want me to put these?” Callum asked, lifting the box of dusty pamphlets with a grunt.

His supervisor, Thelma, tore her gaze from the table she’d been fussing over all day to look at him from across the room. “Ye can place those down in the basement for the night. Everything is looking great in here. I know ye are anxious to join the festivities tonight, but I’m just so nervous about tomorrow!”

Callum shifted the box in his arms and smiled at the older woman, whose gray hair frizzed around her reddened face. “Everything will be just fine, Thelma. Murielle and Samuel have been here for book signings before. It gets packed, but we have enough books to sell. Once these pamphlets are out of the way, I think everything will be ready.”

Thelma nodded and took a deep breath. “Ye are right, lad. It’s just that their work has truly inspired this village. They are celebrities! Everything must be perfect.” She tittered to herself as she shifted a stack of books toward the center of the signing table, stepped back, cocked her head to the left, then moved them back where they had been.

Callum had become close friends with Murielle and Samuel, the couple who had discovered an ancient book about Pictish life in the caves just below their shores. Before that discovery, little was known about the people whose ruins now rested beneath Burghead’s paved roads. This visitor center stood upon the ancient hillfort’s ruins. He valued Murielle and Samuel’s work as much as the next person, but he knew they’d never fuss because a stack of books wasn’t perfectly centered on the table.

Thelma's phone buzzed in her pocket, and frowning, she slipped her readers on and squinted at her screen. "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no..."

Callum watched as Thelma's face blanched, and she leaned against the table, knocking her perfect stack askew. "Is everything okay?" Had Sam and Murielle canceled their signing tomorrow? He couldn't figure out what else could make his boss turn as white as a ghost.

"I wish it was something so trivial. Ye ken how I told ye my great-niece from San Francisco moved here to start at university?"

Callum creased his brow and nodded. Thelma had talked his ear off about her "beautiful" great-niece she hoped to set him up with soon. Their family had been in or around Burghead as long as his, but her sister's family had moved to California two decades ago when Sophia was a baby.

"I... she... I need to go." Thelma grabbed her purse from the counter and ran toward the door, talking as she moved. "She is in hospital. A damned drunk driver plowed into her and ran her off the road. She... well, the text I received from Sophia's mother said I needed to hurry. It doesnae look good. Once that last box is stored away, just lock up behind ye, aye?" Thelma's voice shook, and she didn't wait for him to speak before heading out the door.

Callum stood as still as a statue for a few moments as he processed what had just occurred. His heart ached for Thelma. Having no children of her own, it had seemed that her great-niece, Sophia, was like a daughter to Thelma. He silently prayed that Sophia would pull through whatever injuries she'd sustained as he walked toward the stairs leading down to the basement.

As he carefully traversed the stairs, Callum recalled his first meeting with Murielle when she had visited the Burghead Visitor Centre and appeared quite distressed.

Callum had called Samuel to pick her up, but before Sam had arrived, Callum had learned that Murielle was not from this time. She had lived in the year 686, right here in this village.

It was rumored that the caves along the Moray coast held ancient secrets and served as a portal between times, but Callum had never believed such nonsense—until he met Murielle. Now, the scared and lonely Pictish Princess he had met last year had embraced her place in this time with her new husband, Samuel, a professor of archaeology and a man from this time.

Though Callum was excited to see them again tomorrow, he was anxious to lock up the visitor center for the night and join his village in their annual Samhain fire festival. Reaching the basement, Callum carefully placed the box onto the last step and pulled his keys from his jeans pocket to unlock the spring-loaded basement door. When the keys became jammed in the old lock as they sometimes did, Callum jiggled them futilely before giving up and using a nearby stool to prop the door open. He'd have to remind Thelma to change this lock again, though he'd reminded her many times already. Grabbing the box from the step, Callum walked into the musty room. He crinkled his nose, always put off by the damp smell that permeated the walls.

A stack of boxes littered an old folding table in the corner, and Callum plopped the pamphlets atop the others. They'd all need to be set out again once the signing was over, so he made a mental note to keep everything in one place for easy retrieval.

When an earthy-herbal scent suddenly overpowered the usual musk, Callum sniffed the air and looked around the room for its source. It wasn't the first time the distinct scent had caught his attention in the basement, but he'd yet to find the source. Though it was similar to sage and wholly more pleasant than the smell of what he suspected was mold, Callum was a man who preferred not to ignore odd things but to seek answers.

Bending over, Callum opened a box that appeared to have been forgotten beneath the table for long enough to gather a thick layer of dust. Torn books and old office supplies filled the box, but there was nothing that would produce such a scent.

“Och, ye do have a nice arse, Callum.”

With a startled yelp, Callum smacked the back of his head on the table as he attempted to jolt upright. Then he spun around, looking around the dark room, wincing as he held his head with one hand as he scrambled to pull the string hanging from the mounted light overhead. When the light flickered to life, Callum looked around the room, finding himself alone.

“Who said that?” he whispered, looking beneath the table again.

A disembodied gasp echoed off the walls, like a startled woman, though he saw nothing. “Hello?” He wouldn’t be surprised if the visitor center was haunted, for it quite literally rested on the remains of the old Pictish hillfort where Murielle’s brother once ruled over many centuries ago. Still, he’d never seen or heard anything while down here.

And certainly, never anything that complimented his arse, of all things.

Turning in a circle again, Callum saw nothing but the peeling white paint on the walls, old periodicals, and a broken diorama he still needed to repair. Illustrated posters of Pictish villagers plowing fields, dying cloths, and tending to cattle were pinned to the wall, their yellowing corners curling at the edges. But, he was sure the only living creature in this basement was him, and perhaps that wee rodent that he’d seen periodically popping its whiskered nose out of the hole behind the desk.

Pulling out his cell phone and checking the time, Callum realized that the Samhain festivities in town were well on their way. His people took All Hallow’s Eve

seriously, as did he. Deciding he could investigate the basement another day when he had more time, Callum walked toward the door, where the keys still dangled inside the lock. As he reached for them, the stool holding the door open flew to the side, crashing against the wall. Callum yelped.

And the cursed spring-loaded door slammed closed, locking him inside.

Shaking the knob lock, Callum cursed. The herbal scent hung heavily in the air, and the single overhead light flickered as if it were deciding whether or not to give up on life. He knew the feeling.

When the room's temperature dropped, and the hackles on his neck stood on end, Callum straightened his spine and closed his eyes. The way that stool had flown into the wall? That was not normal.

"Ye have my attention, whoever ye are," he whispered as he turned around, only to be met with sad hazel eyes framed in thick black lashes.

"Ballocks!" he shouted and jumped back, his heart beating wildly as he looked at the slim, pink-cheeked young woman standing before him with waves of rusty hair floating about her round face. "Who the bloody hell are ye? How did ye get in here without me noticing?"

She blinked and opened her mouth slowly, only to snap it shut and take a step back. She was bonnie, he'd give her that. But the shock in her eyes left him uneasy. Wasn't he the one who was supposed to be frightened?

"Ye can see me?"

"Aye. I see ye. Do ye know what ye've done? We cannae get out of here now!" he grouched. "It's locked from the outside, and there aren't windows down here!" Pulling

out his phone, Callum cursed when he saw the dreaded “x” beside the signal bars. “Of course. Why would I get reception down here?”

Looking back up at the lass, Callum scanned her length and frowned when he took in her dark blue tunic with long sleeves and a wide neckline—much like those the Picts once wore. Was she some history fan-girl who arrived a day early for Sam and Murielle’s presentation? She wouldn’t be the first to arrive in historical clothing.

“Are ye here for the book signing and presentation? It isnae until tomorrow.”

She shook her head and took a step closer to him. He almost stepped back but decided to stand his ground and get some answers. “Ye do realize we are now stuck down here, aye? ’Tis AllHallow’s Eve. Nobody will be coming back ’til morning.”

“I have been stuck down here for... ages...” she said. “Ye can see me. Ye heard me!”

“Aye and aye. Why wouldnae I?” He narrowed his eyes. “What do ye mean ye’ve been stuck down here for ages? I’ve been in and out of this room many times and never seen ye.”

“I’ve seen ye , Callum,” she responded, stepping closer, holding out a pale hand. When her fingers grazed his arm, the chill of her flesh made him shiver. She appeared healthy and hale, yet she felt as clammy and cold as death. Maybe she had been down here all day with the frigid air chilling her bones, and he simply hadn’t noticed.

Then, he remembered the words she’d spoken that had caused him to hit his head. Was that what this was? A hallucination? Had he cracked his head that hard? Nay, he knew he hadn’t. “Why did ye say I have a nice arse? And...how do ye know my name?” He looked at his shirt to verify that he wasn’t wearing his name tag, which still sat on his nightstand. He wasn’t meant to work today but had to come by to set up for tomorrow.

She shrugged and raised her brows. “I have watched ye come and go many times over the past year when ye first arrived. It used to be only auld people before ye showed up. Yer name is Callum. I’ve heard it spoken. But ye look like Ronan.” She tilted her head curiously, and his heart stopped before it began beating wildly and thundering in his ears. Ronan! He’d heard that name before from Murielle.

Another time-traveler? Had she come through the cave, like Murielle had? “Do ye know where ye are?” he asked her slowly.

“Aye. The Burghead Visitor Centre’s basement. That is what it is today.”

“What was it before today?” he asked slowly, afraid he didn’t wish to know.

“It was our home. Me and Father’s.” Her voice grew soft and whimsical as if she conjured a distant memory. “Before... before he killed me.”

She was killed? A sick feeling fell over him. It was not every day a woman stared you in the eyes and told you she’d been murdered. “Your father murdered ye?”

She shook her head. “The new cleric. He called me a heathen for believing in the old gods. Said we survived the illness in our home because I worked for the Devil. I dinnae understand this new religion or why they wish to destroy us. Tell me, Callum. What year is it, and does the new religion still exist?”

“It’s the year 2023, and if ye speak of Christianity, aye, it still exists.”

She nodded sadly. “I wasnae evil, ye ken. Truly, I wasnae! I tried to tell him that Queen Caitriona healed Father. He came home with a terrible illness after his journey, but the new queen knew how to help him. He wouldnae listen. He accused me of praying to the heathen gods—which I had done, of course, but I needed to save Father! The cleric burned mugwort to repel my evil, but when nothing happened, he

drowned me.” She shuddered when the memory became too much, and Callum noticed her cheeks reddening.

Mugwort. He knew that herbs were often used to repel evil spirits in her time and even in this era. That explained the herbal scent wafting through the basement.

She appeared as alive as any lass. But she’d mentioned Queen Caitriona, Murielle’s brother’s wife. In the year 685, King Brodyn married a time traveler from modern days named Caitriona, who’d passed through the cave in early 2023. He knew this from his talks with Murielle. He also knew that he looked very similar to his ancestor, Ronan, a well-respected warrior of King Brodyn’s and Murielle’s guard. Murielle had mistaken Callum for Ronan when they first met here and believed Callum to be a reincarnation of him.

“I believe ye,” he said. And he did. “Did ye know Ronan well? Murielle says I look like him. He is my ancestor.”

The lass’s eyes widened, and she nodded. “Aye! Ronan was a great man but always too busy fighting for King Brodyn or guarding Princess Murielle to pay me much mind. I cannae tell ye how relieved I am that ye can finally see me. I have seen ye walk past me many times and always longed to talk to ye. Why can ye suddenly see me?”

Callum looked at her curiously. “Maybe because it’s Halloween? Or Samhain, as ye may call it?” He shrugged. “They say the veil between the living and dead is lifted on this day.”

“Aye, that makes sense!”

“As much sense as the fact that I’m locked inside the basement with a woman who died well over a millennium ago,” Callum said, looking around the room for any way

out. There wasn't one.

"Ye aren't afraid of me." The woman stepped closer and looked at him with those hazel eyes. She looked so real—so alive. Wee freckles dotted her nose, and flecks of gold reflected in her irises. She was absolutely beautiful.

"When ye grow up in a village built on ruins, ye see things. However, I've never seen a ghost as real as ye. 'Tis hard to believe ye aren't alive. I've also never heard a ghost talk about my arse." Callum pursed his lips but couldn't prevent the smile from gracing his lips.

Her pale cheeks pinkened as if blood still coursed through her veins. "Ye weren't meant to hear that." She looked away shyly, and he found himself thoroughly intrigued by this woman. Bold one minute and shy the next. "When nobody can see ye, ye speak yer mind freely and frequently."

So, she thought he had a nice arse, eh? Callum shouldn't be flattered that a dead woman was attracted to him, but something about her made his heart beat erratically, and not from fear. He was as attracted to her as if she were a warm, living human woman, and he found he needed to learn all he could about her.

"Well, if we're stuck in here, we may as well get to know one another," Callum said, sitting on the creaky wooden floorboards. Nodding, she sat beside him and tucked her red waves of hair behind her ears.

"What is yer name? Tell me about yerself."

"My name is... or was... Sorcha."

"Is," Callum said with a smile. "Yer still here, aye?"

She smiled and nodded. “I was nineteen summers old when Queen Caitriona arrived. As I said, she saved my father from certain death, and I was eternally grateful. She and Murielle both helped me greatly.”

“So, ye know Murielle?” Callum asked. “She will be arriving tomorrow. Do ye know she lives in this time now?”

“Aye, I have heard what I can from here.”

Callum filled her in on the cave’s odd portal through time and those, including Queen Caitriona, who had passed through it. “’Tis how she knew how to save yer father,” Callum said.

Sorcha listened with rapture to everything he said, smiling, laughing, and tilting her head back as she did so. Callum took a secret moment to observe her while she spoke of her life in Pinnata Castra as a merchant’s daughter. She’d lit up with joy with her recollections, and Callum found himself wishing to touch her again—just her hand—to see if she still felt cold. She looked so pink and healthy now.

Still, he dared not cross such a boundary, even if their connection felt natural. After all, they had known one another in his former life. They spoke freely to one another, and her years spent trapped in this place had taught her a thing or two about modern times. Aside from her thick brogue, her ability to speak their language was impressive. He knew Picts spoke a combination of Celtic, Gaelic, and Latin—a language lost until recently when Samuel and Murielle had discovered an ancient book created by monks that explained the Picts in great detail, including their language.

Though Callum had done well enough with the lassies in his short twenty-one years, he’d never met one he felt so drawn to. Was it because she was unavailable? He’d heard that men only want what they can’t have. But that didn’t feel right—because

she felt right—different.

“May I speak honestly, Callum?” He nodded and looked into her eyes, a nervous smile forming on her pink lips. “When Father Emmitt began accusing me of consorting with dark powers, I tried to tell him that Pa and I survived the illness due to Queen Caitriona’s healing. He said she was also wicked and that he would come for her next, then her sister, Emilie. He says they are like us. They are sent from the Devil. When I tried to warn them, he...”

Callum’s throat constricted as the mood darkened in the basement, and any remaining warmth vanished. It was as if her life force diminished when she spoke of her death. Her features dimmed, and her eyes, still beautiful, lost all their sparkle. “He... what, Sorch?” Reflexively, Callum placed a hand on Sorch’s knee to both support and encourage her while she spoke. A spark of strange energy shocked his fingertips, and he hissed, pulling back. But it didn’t truly hurt. No, he was simply startled, not only by the sensation but the images it provoked.

Suddenly, no words were necessary. Sorch didn’t need to tell Callum what had happened, for he saw her memory in his own mind. Sorch, bending over near a stream, collecting a green-leafed plant with blooming white buds, was suddenly pushed from behind. With a yelp, she landed face down in the water. Water flooded her—no, his lungs. He began to cough and struggle for air. An angry voice shouted at him from the surface, accusing him of conspiring with the evil spirits who saved her from God’s wrath. For, in Father Emmitt’s mind, the illness Sorch and her father had evaded was a punishment from the Almighty for worshipping heathen gods.

Callum thrashed and kicked, struggling for air as cruel accusations filled his ears. “I shall rid this place of yer kind! Ye will be first, but ye shall be the last! ’Tis God’s will!”

A final desperate gasp left his lips as his lungs filled with water, and everything went

black.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

“C allum!” His body shook as Sorchas voice called to him, and when he opened his eyes, she leaned over him, shaking his shoulders and crying. Were those real tears streaming down her cheeks? “Callum! Wake up!”

Gasping, he sat up and clutched at Sorchas, pulling her down atop him as he caught his breath. The familiar musty-floral scent surrounded him, pulling him back into the present. He was still inside the basement, even if he’d somehow transported through her memories. He wasn’t sure why he felt this intense need to cling to her other than personally experiencing her final moments and feeling her terror.

“Sorchas...” he croaked as he wrapped his arms around her, feeling her heartbeat against his. “How...”

Silently, Sorchas clung to him. She was real. Her tears soaked through his plain white tee shirt. Her breath fanned his chest. Her heart beat wildly in rhythm with his, and her skin was now warm and soft. “How is this happening? I... felt it.”

“Felt what?” she asked, propping herself up with confusion glazing her eyes.

“Your... your death. When I touched ye, I saw it through yer eyes. I felt yer fear. Och, Sorchas.” Callum sat up and, overcome by emotion, pulled her into his lap, wrapped his arms around her, and held her while silence surrounded them. She rested her cheek against his chest and curled up so that his chin rested on the top of her head. Her arms curled around his waist.

“It was long ago, Callum. I’m only sorry ye had to experience that. I havenae interacted with another person since that day. I didnae ken touching me would cause

such a thing.”

Sorrow creased her face, and Callum’s stomach twisted as an odd fluttering gripped his belly. The desire to lean in and take her lips with his was strong... too strong.

So, he did. Gripping the back of her neck gently, Callum leaned closer, slowly placing his lips on hers. She audibly swallowed, and her breathing hitched before she gave herself over to his kiss. Her lips were warm and soft, as was all of her. She felt so good in his arms, so right in his lap. He could imagine himself with her, laughing, loving, and sharing memories... then, he realized what he was doing, where they were. Had he been too forward, too aggressive? He pushed away.

“I’m sorry, Sorcha. I dinnae know what came over me.”

“Dinnae apologize, or ye shall break my heart,” she whispered, looking down at the floor. Her dark lashes fluttered before she spoke again. “I have been so alone. I’ve watched ye come and go from this place for so long, unable to speak to ye. Unable to tell ye that my heart and stomach hurt whenever ye are near. Now, ye can see me. I can... I am... here .” She looked around the room with wonder as she ran a finger along the wooden floor’s grain. “I can feel the world around me for the first time since my death. I dinnae ken why, but ye gave me this gift. Please, Callum, dinnae take it away. I havenae felt the touch of a man. I died before I had such a chance. And I’ve longed to speak to ye for many moons. Now, ye can see me. Ye can feel me. If this is the only time I shall ever feel yer touch, please dinnae deny me the simple pleasure of it.”

Overcome by her plea, Callum pulled her closer as he sat on the floor, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing her with a fever he’d never experienced. He wasn’t sure if it was the strangeness of the encounter that drove him wild or simply the beautiful woman in his lap, begging to experience a wee jot of affection before she lost the chance forever. Deep down, Callum knew it was more. So much more. There

was something between them that he'd never experience again if she disappeared.

Sorcha simpered and tugged at his hair as his tongue slid into her warm, sweet mouth. If she appeared to him exactly as she had the day she died, then Sorcha had truly been the bonniest lass in all of Pinnata Castra, and he wondered how she could have remained untouched for so long during a time when girls married quite young. Either way, she was here now, solid and whole. She wanted to feel alive, and he'd gladly oblige her.

His cock throbbed painfully in his jeans, but he did his best to ignore it. He'd not push his luck and take advantage of the lass, even if she was technically nothing but a manifestation. To him, she was real, and she deserved his respect.

But when Sorcha began to shift atop him, Callum groaned and pulled away from her lips, trailing his tongue down the creamy column of her throat, nipping her sweet flesh as she wriggled in his arms.

"Callum." She sighed his name, and he clenched his fists into her tunic's fabric to prevent his hands from wandering to her small, perky breasts or even lower beneath her tunic. Lord, he'd never had to use so much restraint. The energy surrounding them crackled in his ears and buzzed through his bones, sending currents of desire through his every cell.

Releasing her tight grip on his shoulders, Sorcha leaned back and looked into his eyes. Her chest rose and fell as she slowly pushed her tunic down her shoulders, exposing her breasts. Callum watched as her nipples puckered, responding to the chill in the room. How was this happening? It may be Samhain, but he'd never thought such a thing was possible.

Sorcha straightened her spine and took a fortifying breath. "I want ye to touch me, Callum."

He wanted to do that more than he'd ever wanted anything in this world. But it didn't feel right. She was untouched by a man. Moreover, she was a ghost. He had to remind himself that she wasn't real, even if she very much was at the moment.

"I... I want to, but I cannae." He shook his head and closed his eyes.

"Is it because I'm dead?"

That made him open his eyes and look at her. "From where I am sitting, Sorch, ye arenae dead. It's about honor. Ye are untouched by a man. I dinnae want to take advantage."

"When I was alive, I had to fight lads off with a stick. Now, I've found the one man I wish to touch me, and he willnae. Callum, I have been stuck here for... what year is it again?"

"2023."

"I cannae even count that high. How long have I been here, Callum?"

He swallowed hard and felt his stomach tighten as he did the math. "About 1,337 years... approximately."

"Do ye ken what it's like to be stuck in one place that long? Of course, ye dinnae. One has nothing but time to ponder their life, death, and all they never accomplished. One day, ye showed up, and I have never been the same. Callum, ye arnae a stranger to me, and I am not a young lass—not truly. I ken what I want, and I want ye. If this is too hard for ye, I understand. I will leave ye be."

Sorch began climbing off his lap with dejection in her eyes, and Callum growled in frustration, grabbing onto her tunic skirt to tug her back into his lap. The fabric tore

just above her knee, and then her slim, silky legs encircled him as she heaved for breath, making her breasts rise and fall before his gaze.

“Ye cannae know how badly I want ye,” he said through gritted teeth. “But then what? Ye disappear, and I’m left with nothing of ye but memories of this moment?”

“Aye,” she whispered. “Mayhap tonight is all we have. Perhaps once a year on Samhain, ye will see me again. I cannae say. Does that change anything? I want to feel alive while I can, Callum!” she said with frustration. “I want ye and nobody else!”

He’d heard enough. Gripping the back of Sorcha’s neck again, he pulled her in, slashing his lips across hers until she gasped, opening her mouth so he could slip his tongue inside and taste her. She was warm, soft, and womanly in his arms. His hands slid up her smooth arms to cradle her breasts, making her arch into his palms.

When he rolled her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, Sorcha cried out and gripped his shoulders as her hips began to move. He knew exactly what that meant. She wanted more... and he desperately wished to give it, though he wasn’t sure how far to take this. Slipping one hand beneath her torn tunic skirt, he sought out her core, swallowing his groan when he felt her slick heat against his finger.

Sorcha mewled against his lips and shifted, seeking his touch. His fingers explored, grazing her nub and making her cry out for more. When her hands slid down his chest and stomach to finally rest on his restrained erection pressing against the front of his jeans, she growled in frustration. “Where is yer trouser string? I dinnae ken how to undo this odd fastener!”

With a chuckle, Callum unbuttoned his jeans and dragged down the zipper, allowing Sorcha to reach in and take him in hand. Her hot palm clenched him, and he groaned as he leaned in to nip at her ear. Dear God, she was a temptress.

“I admit that I dinnae ken what to do next,” she whispered as her fingers explored his manhood. “I have never seen a man’s...” her voice trailed off, and he saw her cheeks redden.

“Cock?” he asked with a raised brow. She nodded shyly.

“Aye... cock.” She giggled as she said the word and something about her innocence only drove him over the edge.

“Are ye certain ye want this?”

“More than anything, Callum. I’ve wanted ye for so long. Make me feel alive again.”

Her plea was genuine, and Callum pushed aside his reservation. Aye, she was a ghost. Dead. Dust. Yet, by some miracle, she was here now in his arms, begging him to give her something no man had ever given her before. On any other day and with any other woman, Callum would refuse. This was madness. Yet, she had appeared to him for a reason. Moreover, he sensed a connection with her on a level deeper than just the flesh. After all, if all that was left of Sorchha was her soul, then it connected with his on a level he simply couldn’t explain, and his body reacted to her in a way he’d never experienced.

A powerful sense of possession washed over him as he looked into her eyes, pushed his jeans down to his knees, and slowly guided her down onto his throbbing erection. She slid her arms around his neck as she straddled his lap, though she didn’t know what to do, so Callum gently gripped her hips and urged her to move as he pushed deeper into her, careful not to hurt her.

To his surprise, Sorchha sighed and tilted her head back as she got comfortable with the movements, with no sign of pain or discomfort on her face. Only pure pleasure shone in her eyes as her cheeks pinkened, and she gripped his neck.

Callum groaned and slipped his hands beneath her skirts, cupping her backside as she moved against him. She felt more real than any woman he'd ever been with. Responsive, pure, confident, and eager. All of his reservations left as he became caught up in the moment—caught up in making love to a woman who died over 1,300 years ago.

No. He pushed that thought away. He may never see Sorcha again, and that thought stabbed his heart but only made him even more determined to treasure her every movement and breathy sigh.

Leaning in, Callum took her lips with his, slipping his tongue into her mouth as she moaned and moved against him with a heightening fervor that matched his own. For a lass who'd never done this, she had a natural talent that drove Callum to the brink. But he didn't want her first time to end without her finding pleasure, so he slipped a finger between them and stroked her nub, making her gasp and quiver at the new sensation. Within moments, Sorcha cried out and tensed around him, making him reach his boiling point just as she went slack in his arms.

Panting, Callum held her against him, wrapping his arms around her back and pressing her against his heaving chest, terrified she'd disappear into a puff of smoke.

But with each breath, she remained in his arms, her chest rising and falling with his.

“Ye havenae idea how much this meant to me, Callum.” Sorcha rested her head on his shoulder and nuzzled into him. The intense need to hold onto her was relentless, but they were still on the hard wooden floors. Callum looked around the room for something to lay upon. Spotting an extra tablecloth sticking out from a nearby box, Callum reached to the side, pulled it out, and carefully laid her down upon it, wrapping his limbs around her, wanting nothing more than to relish this moment.

“Ye arenae going to disappear on me, are ye?” he asked. He wanted it to sound

lighthearted, but a sense of dread laced his words. He knew she wouldn't stay—couldn't stay. He wasn't sure how she'd been able to show herself in this manner as it was, but it couldn't last... could it?

“I dinnae want to leave... but I fear I shall. I cannae control it.”

A thought came to Callum. “Ye can manipulate yer environment.” When she scrunched her nose and lowered her brow in confusion, Callum clarified. “Ye pushed the stool away from the door so I couldnae leave. Ye knew ye could do that.”

She shook her head. “I didnae ken I could do that. I never have before. I’ve never been seen. Never been heard. But when ye heard me, I panicked and kicked the stool away from the door. All I could think about was ye running away in fright after I’d spent 1,300 years alone and invisible. Mayhap, the pure fear of ye running away from me gave me some unexpected strength. I hope ye arenae angry that I trapped ye. I didnae ken the door would lock.”

He nodded his understanding. “I am not angry at all, Sorcha. But I was never frightened. I was shocked, confused, and perhaps shaken, but I wouldnae have run from ye. I have seen other spirits. Ye know Anya McLean?”

Sorcha’s eyes lit up, and she smiled. “Aye! She was the auld healer in our village. She lived nearly 100 years, rest her soul. She passed away last year. Ye have seen her?”

“Och, she is a well-known spirit in these parts. We see her dressed from many eras. Her soul has lived many lives. I am her descendant.”

“And Ronan’s,” Sorcha added.

“Aye. My family has never lived anywhere else but the surrounding areas.” Callum

looked at Sorchia and gently scooped a red tendril of hair behind her ear. “I’m going to save ye.”

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed. “I dinnae understand.”

“In the morning, when I get out of this basement, I am heading for the cave. I will find ye in yer time. And I will save ye.”

Sorchia smiled and opened her mouth to respond but paused as terror washed over her features. She gripped his arm and pushed herself up to a seated position. “I... I grow weak. Callum...”

The wooden clock on the wall began to ding, and Callum realized it was midnight. All Hallow’s Eve had ended, and her spirit was fading. One...two... Her hand began to fade before his eyes.

“Sorchia!”

Then, she became translucent. Three...four...

“Callum...” she whispered. “I want ye to ken... that I love ye...” Her bright curls dimmed, grew almost pink, and then he could see through her. Five...six...

“I will find ye, Sorchia! I promise! I will save ye!” Seven...eight...

She smiled and put a hand out to him, and her lips formed the words again. Nine...ten... “I love ye,” Eleven. No sound came out. The only thing Callum heard was the last strike of the clock. Twelve.

“Sorchia!” He yelled and dove forward.

But Sorcha was gone.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

Murmuring voices made Callum's ears perk up, and he ceased his relentless pacing as he ran toward the basement door. Seven hours had passed since Sorcha disappeared, but Callum hadn't slept or even sat down. All he'd done was consider ways to save her, things to say when he'd meet her in her time. His pulse quickened when he realized that someone had finally arrived at the visitor center. Desperation and adrenaline shot through every cell in his body as he called out for help.

"It's Callum! Can ye hear me?" he shouted as he banged on the heavy wooden door and rattled the knob to make more noise.

The voices stopped just before the doors swung open. Luckily, he stepped back in time to avoid being hit by the door. When Murielle and Samuel stood on the other side, he sighed with relief and rushed toward them. He'd not slept a wink or done anything but ponder his encounter with Sorcha, determined to find her again.

"Callum?" Murielle asked, her sleek blond hair catching the light as she stepped closer. "Are ye all right?"

Callum shook his head. "Ye know a lass named Sorcha, aye?"

Murielle frowned and looked at Samuel with concern in her eyes.

Samuel shook his head as he regarded Callum. "We do know a lass named Sorcha, yes. But surely not the one you are referring to."

"From Pinnata Castra. Red hair...Queen Caitriona saved her father from a smallpox outbreak in 685?"

Murielle stepped forward, and for the first time, Callum noticed her red-rimmed blue eyes and shaking hands. “How do ye ken this, Callum?”

“She was here! Last night, I came down to the basement to store some pamphlets and heard a voice. When I reacted to it, the stool I used to prop the door open flew across the room.” He pointed to the black metal stool near the wall. “It was Sorcha! She told me she’d been stuck down here since her death! Murielle, there is a clergy member... a priest, or a monk, who will come to Pinnata Castra. He will accuse Sorcha of being a witch... or whatever the equivalent of a witch is at that time. He drowns her, claiming she used some dark force to survive a plague. Sorcha said that, just before she died, he threatened to go after Queen Cairiona and her sister, Emilie. I need to get to her! I need to save her!”

Panic overcame him. Now that he was free to leave the basement, he wanted to run full speed toward the cave and save Sorcha.

“Callum.” Murielle put a hand on his shoulder and looked at Samuel before speaking.

Samuel cleared his throat and closed his eyes. “You cannot save her, Callum.”

“Sure, I can! I know all the stories! Emilie saved Wee Lucas! Why cannae I save Sorcha? I have to try! I... I love her...” His voice trailed off as the words slipped through his lips so naturally that he hadn’t even had to consider the truth of them. How could he be in love with a woman who died so long ago... a woman he’d spent only a few hours with? He couldn’t explain it, but he had to find her.

“Callum, she is gone. She died a week ago. Murielle and I were visiting when it happened. She is likely the first case of what is now considered a witch hunt in Scottish history. Only, they didn’t call it that back then. We apprehended the priest, and he is currently being dealt with. King Brodyn had to lock him away and send a messenger to seek a church official. Only they can determine his punishment. He

cannot hurt Cait or Emilie now. But Sorcha is lost to us. I'm so sorry."

"No." Callum backed away and clenched his fist.

A tear slid down Murielle's face. "I loved Sorcha, Callum," Murielle croaked. "She was a great friend. I was there when her father fell ill, and she sought help. Cait was able to help because she was vaccinated against smallpox, which I dinnae ken at the time, of course. I havenae slept a wink since it happened. We almost canceled this book signing, but Burghead is home to us, and I didnae want to disappoint the people."

Samuel looked around the basement and rubbed his freshly shaven chin. "Murielle... this building... isn't it built pretty close to where Sorcha's home was?"

"Aye." Murielle nodded. "Now that ye mention it, I believe this may have been the exact location of her home." She looked at Callum with sorrow in her gaze, but the twisting, gnawing ache in his stomach made him break eye contact. He couldn't bear the pain. All he'd thought about all night was how to save Sorcha.

"It was AllHallow's Eve. I suppose the veil was thin enough for her spirit to be seen," Samuel added.

"It wasnae just her spirit," Callum whispered as he looked around the room. "She was whole. Real. Solid. We talked all night, but at midnight, she disappeared." Talked, fell in love, and made love...

"The veil had closed," Murielle murmured with understanding. "To think that Sorcha has been trapped here all this time... my poor sweet friend." Murielle clutched her chest as tears ran down her cheeks. "Ye couldnae have saved her, even if ye tried, Callum. Ye cannae cross the veil of time."

“How can ye possibly know that?” he asked with frustration. He wasn’t angry at Murielle or Samuel, of course. He was angry at the universe for bringing Sorcha to him, only to rip her from him immediately without any hope of saving her.

“A soul can only exist within one body at a time. You and Ronan share a soul. He couldn’t cross over with Murielle, and I suspect it’s because his soul is occupying your body now. Ronan is occupying your soul in the year 687. If you crossed over, God only knows the catastrophic consequences,” Samuel explained.

“Furthermore,” Murielle said, gently taking his hand. “Sorcha’s line died with her. If ye saved her... then what? She cannae have children, or else the timeline would be altered. I believe, if ye were meant to save her, she wouldnae have appeared to ye a week—and a few thousand years—after her death.”

“And, Callum, what would you say to her? That you met her spirit in the year 2023 and traveled back in time to save her?” Samuel shook his head. “I know how painful this is. I really do, but I see no scenario where you were ever meant to save her. I’m so sorry, Callum.”

Callum couldn’t respond. What was there to say? He’d spent the night holding her, loving her, getting to know her in a soul-searing way he’d never experienced. And for what? Just to be left empty, aching, and broken.

Murielle looked from Callum to Sam, then back again. “I have something I’d like to give ye.”

“Murielle... are you sure? It means a great deal to you,” Sam questioned.

She nodded and smiled. “I’m sure. He needs it more than I do.”

Callum wrinkled his brow as he watched Murielle unclasp a small brooch from her

purple blouse. “Cait gave this to me after Sorcha died. It’s her cloak pin. She wore it every time she left the house on cold days. Here.”

Callum observed the small silver brooch in Murielle’s palm. A crescent shape with intricate swirls intersected with a V-rod—a prevalent Pictish symbol. Slowly, Callum put out his hand, and Murielle gently placed the clasp into his palm.

“I cannae take this from ye.”

“Then we can share it,” she said with a smile. “Ye keep it for now. I think it will help ye heal. Sorcha was a verra special lass. I amnae surprised she had such an effect on ye after all these years. And I dinnae ken what happened between ye both down here, but I assume ye had as great an impact on her as she had on ye.”

What did it matter? She was gone, and Callum was left here alone to suffer the loss of a woman who never existed in his time.

Clearing his throat, Callum placed the brooch in his pocket. “Yer signing is starting soon. Do ye need help setting up?”

Samuel shook his head and patted Callum on the shoulder. “No, we can handle this. You have been trapped down here for what I assume is several hours. Go home, eat, shower, sleep—whatever you need to do. We will be all right.” Samuel slipped on a smile. “Hey, just think. In January, you’re joining our archaeology program at the university. We’ll get to spend much more time together. Soon, you’ll be helping us excavate the cave.”

Callum nodded. Maybe they were right. After all, they knew more about the limitations of traveling through time than he did. His excitement to start at the university was stunted by the pain of losing Sorcha, but perhaps it was good timing. After this experience, how would he continue to work here? He’d languish away in

this basement, hoping for any sign of the woman who stormed his heart, consumed his body, and then left him with nothing but her memory.

When Murielle and Samuel grabbed the boxes of their books and ascended the stairs, Callum remained. He wasn't quite ready to walk away, nor was he certain that Sorchas was gone. After all, she'd been able to see him for years, even if he couldn't see her.

Pulling her brooch out of his pocket, Callum ran a thumb across the cool metal's surface, knowing that just a week ago, Sorchas had worn this clip. It was almost 1,400 years old, and yet it wasn't. The entire concept was mind-boggling, and though he'd pondered time travel since the day he'd met Murielle, he'd never had the urge to try it until last night.

But, he had to heed Samuel's warnings. Sorchas was gone. He couldn't save her. And he'd be risking a possible catastrophe if he crossed over. He shuddered to think what would become of his and Ronan's soul if their bodies occupied the same time or space.

Still, it wasn't fair. He was doing just fine until Sorchas showed up, and part of him wanted to shout at her for leaving him, even if he knew it was ridiculous.

"Are ye here, Sorchas?" he asked, looking around the room. "I wish I knew if ye could hear me. I was going to save you. I wanted to run to that cave, pass through, save ye, and bring ye back here to live with me." He chuckled at his foolishness. It had never been an option. What had he been thinking? Murielle was right. If he'd found Sorchas in her time and told her the truth, she'd have run away in fear. Nay, they were meant to have one night together and nothing more. Though, he couldn't understand why. What was the purpose of any of it?

Sighing, Callum held up her brooch. "If this is all I have of ye, I shall cherish it forever, along with your memory. Just know that ye are loved. I cannae explain it. I

just know ye and I were meant to be together, even if just for one night. Ye've changed my life. I love ye and pray ye aren't stuck here. I hope that ye have moved on and found peace."

With an achy pit of anguish settling in his belly, Callum left the basement where her home had once stood, where he'd lost his heart to a woman who didn't exist, and felt a shot of pain through his heart when the door slammed behind him. He knew today was his last day working here. If he stayed, he'd languish away, spending time in the dark, lonely basement, hoping for another glimpse of a woman he'd never have.

Nay, life was for the living, and he had to go on, even if he'd never forget Sorcha—a woman lost to the pages of history. But to him, she'd live on forever in his heart.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

Water filled her lungs as she struggled to break free. She screamed and swung her arms at her attacker, but just like always, her body went limp, and darkness overcame her for what felt like a thousand years. Then, his face swam before her. Brown hair and blue eyes, like always. “Callum!” She reached for him, hoping this time he’d not slip through her desperate fingers. But just like he did every time, he vanished.

Her alarm rang beside her ear, and Sophia sat up in bed with a gasp. Sweat covered her body, making her cotton pajama pants stick to her thighs and her hair cling to her nape.

Ever since her near-death experience nine weeks ago, the same dream had plagued Sophia, leaving her empty and aching for something she couldn’t place. A man with a familiar face and name but nothing more. And the heaviness of water flooding her lungs still weighed her down. Were dreams meant to feel this visceral?

She’d spoken to her therapist about the dream, but so far, Sophia couldn’t unlock what buried trauma her therapist believed resided in her subconscious. Aside from the reoccurring dreams, she’d been getting glimpses of a time long ago and faces of people she felt like she knew. She had all her memories, yet it seemed she had many more that belonged entirely to someone else. Was that even possible?

According to the doctors, she’d died the night of her accident. Her heart had stopped beating. Her lungs had stopped breathing. Her brain had stopped synapsing. Sophia’s death was called at 11:59 p.m. on October 31st. Though she’d heard of out-of-body experiences, she’d never believed in such things. But Sophia had floated above herself, watching as they covered her with a white sheet. Peace had washed over her as bright white light warmed her with a comforting embrace. A voice called to her,

telling her it was time to go home, and promised that everything would be as it was meant to be.

Then, Sophia had come to life with a gasp just before they wheeled her body down to the morgue. Doctors, nurses, and staff ran around in a frenzy, calling for help as machines began beeping again.

“She came back to life at midnight, exactly!” one of the nurses said to a doctor, who ran over to shine a light in her eyes.

“Incredible,” he muttered. “She was dead.”

“Well, she isn’t dead now!” a nurse said in a shaky voice. “Get the neurologist!”

“Callum,” Sophia had croaked in a weak voice, making the doctor frown in confusion.

Callum . The name had been the first thought that whispered in her mind when she returned to life. But who was Callum?

From that day forward, these dreams had consumed her, almost glimpses of a past life through someone else’s eyes. She could vaguely recall a man named Callum, even though she’d never met him. Her family and therapist had decided it was a side effect of her trauma, perhaps a coping mechanism to replace the memory of the crash, which remained hazy in her mind.

But Sophia knew there was more to it, somehow.

The first day of her new archaeology program had arrived, and despite her life-altering accident and her parents’ encouragement to return home, Sophia was determined to stay the course. Her future awaited, shining brighter than ever. More

than anything, she treasured every new breath she took. Life was fragile, but she was stronger than ever.

Sophia showered and slipped on a pair of dark blue skinny jeans, a purple, cable-knit sweater, and brown boots before grabbing her book bag and looking into the mirror. Her hazel eyes shone with excitement, and she tucked her wild red waves of hair behind her ear, a gift from her Scottish grandmother—Sophia's inspiration to return to her highland roots and study the past.

The University of Aberdeen was only fifteen minutes from her new flat, and though the early January air was frigid, and she required a puffy coat and beanie to keep warm, she enjoyed the walk to the first class of her new life. Her professor, Samuel Sullivan, was a world-famous archaeologist who'd recently discovered the first written records of the Pictish people. He'd translated it with his wife, and together, they traveled for book signings and lectures. She was beyond grateful to have been accepted into this prestigious program. More importantly, she did it independently even though her aunt Thelma had worked closely with him at the Burghead Visitor Centre. Sophia knew that this was the beginning of a new life for her.

Wisps of breath drifted from her lips as she walked onto campus, and Sophia looked around in awe at the ancient building with bright red foliage climbing up its stone walls. She had survived that awful accident for a reason, and this was it. Whatever her future held, it would come to fruition here. Never had she felt a greater connection to anything. She'd heard about Americans feeling an odd connection to their ancestral lands, but Sophia knew, deep in her bones, that she belonged here, maybe even lived in Scotland in a past life.

Callum. The name whispered in her mind again. Callum. Who was Callum? Why did that name keep running through her head, and why did it make her insides ache with a sense of loss and longing? It was as if she'd lost something—no, some one—dear to her heart, yet she hadn't a clue who Callum was. Blue eyes and brown hair swam

through her mind again, much like in her dreams.

Students rushed by from every direction, likely just as anxious to start the new Winter term as she was. As excited as Sophia was to start her new journey, a sense of panic began to wash over her. “Oh, no...” she whispered as the feeling of being held underwater and slowly drowning transported her back to her traumatic accident and subsequent death. It was as if she’d died twice. Once from the car accident and once from drowning—which was impossible, for there hadn’t been any water near the crash site.

Gripping her aching temples, Sophia closed her eyes and tried to drown out the chatter around her, focusing on her breathing. “You’re not dead. You’re not drowning,” she whispered to herself. She had to get a grip. Now was not the time for another episode.

Callum.

Shaking her head and gritting her teeth against the surmounting pulsing pain, Sophia opened her eyes and took a few steps on the slick cobblestones, yelping when she barreled into someone. Familiar blue eyes stared down at her, making her suddenly lose her balance. Her feet slipped from beneath her, but his arms gripped hers to hold her upright.

Callum. The pesky inner voice spoke.

“S-Sorcha?” The man looked at her with a mixture of pain, hope, and horror.

That name... she knew that name. Looking up, she saw him, and if her brain had stopped synapsing when she died, it made up for it now as thousands of electrical pulses sparked in her head. A tunnel opened in her mind’s eye, flooding her with images, voices, and memories that were not hers—yet they were hers entirely.

“Callum?” She gripped his arm when the sensations overwhelmed her, and he guided her toward a bench away from prying eyes and swiftly moving bodies. Class was starting, and within minutes, the courtyard was nearly empty.

“It’s you,” she whispered. “I... I know you.”

“Aye. Ye know me. How... I dinnae understand. How are ye here?” He looked her up and down, frowning, when he saw a small scar on her forehead from her accident. She touched it and wondered how she could be two women at once. She was Sophia. She had Sophia’s memories and personality, but she also was Sorcha. She remembered it all now. It was as if running into Callum had knocked the cobwebs off some repressed memories.

Images of being drowned flashed in her mind, and she gripped the collar of Callum’s brown coat as panic overwhelmed her. “Queen Caitriona! Her sister, Emilie! He was coming for them next! Callum! Ye must warn them! How am I here? I... I dinnae ken what is happening!” When her American accent began to morph into a Scottish burr, she slapped a hand over her mouth.

“They are safe, Sorcha. They are well. Murielle and Professor Sullivan have verified that the man who drowned ye was captured before he hurt anyone else.”

She shook her head as tears swam in her eyes. “I am Sophia Nelson. I am from San Francisco. But I am also Sorcha Mac Bielich from Pinnata Castra. Callum, what is happening?” She shook with fear, and he silently held her, rubbing her back and doing his best to comfort her as she broke down into tears. “I dinnae ken who I am! Why do I remember ye in the basement? I remember us... us...” Sophia looked up at him and remembered everything, especially their night of lovemaking on the basement floor of a visitor center that now resided where her home once stood.

Callum made calming shushing noises and took her hands. The instant their skin

touched, waves of white light pulsed through his fingertips, and glimpses of Sorcha flashed in his eyes, only it wasn't him—at least not him in this lifetime. Ronan. He was seeing her through Ronan's eyes. His stomach flipped, and his heart raced when he looked at her. Ronan had loved her. The pain twisting inside his gut told Callum that Ronan had suffered an unrequited love for Sorcha before he married Eva. Had she known this? Now, as Callum, a feeling of wholeness washed over him, and he just knew in the very depths of his soul that she was the piece of his essence that had always been missing.

“Sorcha... Sophia... I dinnae have the answers, but I think Samuel and Murielle can help.” He paused, and a speculative expression crossed his face. “Wait. Yer name is Sophia Nelson? Do ye have an aunt named Thelma?”

Sophia wiped away a tear and cocked her head. “Aye...I mean... Yes !” She growled with frustration. “I have two languages competing in my head! Why did seeing you trigger Sorcha's memories? And how do ye ken... you know ... my Aunt Thelma?”

“I worked with her at the Burghead Visitor Centre until I met you, or Sorcha—in the basement.”

Things began to click. Wait a second... “Are you the co-worker she always tried to set me up with?”

Callum nodded, and Sophia frowned. This was all too much. She couldn't sort her emotions; worst of all, she simultaneously felt emotions from Sophia—herself—and Sorcha—who was inexplicably familiar and simultaneously mysterious.

All this time, Aunt Thelma had tried to set her up with Callum, the man Sorcha had fallen in love with. And now Sophia held all Sorcha's memories. “I cannae do this.” Standing, Sophia began to walk away from the bench. She had to get to class, but how could she when in this condition? How could she concentrate?

“Wait!” Callum grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward him. “This isnae a coincidence! Ye know it isnae! Yer aunt tried to set us up for months. I was with her the day...” He paused and looked at Sophia with sadness in his blue eyes before reaching out to gently run a finger along the small scar on her forehead. “The day of yer accident. We were working together. She got the text from yer mum that ye were in the hospital here in Scotland. Thelma rushed out the door in a panic. Later that night, I met Sorcha in the basement. She was a spirit, yet she was verra much alive. I couldnae understand. I still dinnae, but things are coming together.”

Sophia shook her head, the knots in her belly tightening as her anxiety increased. Chills ran up her spine as she pondered the situation and listened to Callum try to piece it together. She felt as though she were being pulled in two directions at once.

Callum’s voice was like a lifeline, pulling her back to the present and tying her in place. “Sophia, what time was yer accident? Yer aunt said ye were declared dead but returned to life. Do ye know the times?”

She crinkled her brow and pulled away from him to grab her throbbing temples. “I was run off the road around nine o’clock and remember nothing until I awoke exactly at midnight on November first. The doctors said I’d died. I had no brain waves, pulse, or oxygen for nearly two minutes.” She shivered when she remembered seeing herself on that metal gurney, being prepared to be toe-tagged and stuffed in a freezer. She gripped her belly when it began to roil.

“I saw myself. I floated above my body, drifted away into the light, and heard a voice assure me that I was coming home and everything would be as it should be. That’s all I remember before waking. Then, the dreams of drowning began. I kept seeing you—but just your face. It appeared to me as if behind a veil. I’d wake up in a sweat calling for you, but I didn’t understand who you were until just now. I’m Sorcha, but still Sophia. How?” Her knees weakened, and her vision swam. She swerved again and gripped Callum’s sweater sleeve for purchase.

Callum took her arm again and walked her gently back to the bench. “Sit, please. Ye arenae well.”

“How can I be well? I freaking died , Callum! I was dead! Now I’m here, and I think I’m some woman named Sorchu and see images of people and a place that appears quite old.”

“1,337 years old, to be exact.”

“E-excuse me?” she questioned, raising her brow. “What are ye... you talking about?”

“Does this feel familiar?” Callum reached into his coat pocket and pulled out Sorchu’s silver brooch, holding it out to her.

“My brooch!” she cried, hesitating to touch it. “How do ye have it?” She wished her mind would settle on one dialect or accent, but it seemed to be switching between the two at will.

“Murielle had it. I was devastated when ye disappeared on me, Sorchu. Murielle allowed me to have yer brooch, to feel closer to ye.”

He held the brooch out for her to take, but she shook her head. “I amnae ready to hold the brooch I wore when I died 1,337 years ago. I still need to process my most recent death,” she murmured with a shudder rolling up her spine.

Nodding, Callum tucked the brooch away again and took her hands. “Based on what ye have told me, I have an idea what is happening, but I think we need to speak to Samuel and Murielle right away.”

“As in Professor Samuel Sullivan? I’m supposed to be in his lecture right now. I

didnae understand until just now that Murielle's husband, Samuel, is Samuel Sullivan, my professor. How can they help us, though?"

Callum chuckled and shook his head. "Now, it really cannae be a coincidence. Ye are part of his archaeology program?"

"Yes." She explained how Thelma had encouraged her to apply, and she'd done so on her own merits.

"I am also just joining his program. Do ye recall what I told ye about Murielle traveling through the cave to live in this time with Samuel?"

She nodded. "I do. We were in the basement together. Wait. How can I have been in the hospital as Sophia on that night but have Sorchas memories? Callum, did Sorchas soul replace mine when I died?"

Callum didn't respond immediately, but nausea roiled in her gut when he didn't appear shocked by her question. Instead, he gently cupped her hands between his and shook his head. "I dinnae know, but it crossed my mind. Sorchas appeared to me just after Thelma received the message about yer accident. I'd never seen her before, though she claimed she always saw me."

"She did. Or rather, I did. I can see it in my memories. She tried to get yer attention and believed ye were Ronan at first, but ye didnae see her until that one night. By then, she understood that ye were Callum, though she couldnae understand how ye looked so much alike."

"And, she disappeared at midnight on November first. I went back several times afterward, but she was gone. Sophia," he said, squeezing her hands. "Ye look just like her. Ye share her memories. When yer accident happened, she appeared to me, and then she disappeared right when ye came back to life. I cannae make sense of it, but it

has to be fate. How else is it that ye look like her, even if ye werenae born with her soul? It's as if ye were always meant to join with her."

"I've never heard of such a thing. It doesn't seem possible."

Callum scoffed. "I've recently come to know there is more in this world than we believe, especially around Burghead. Will ye come with me to speak to Professor Sullivan?"

Sophia nodded and, hand in hand, she walked with Callum into the building, and together, they awaited Professor Sullivan outside his office.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

Callum felt like he was floating in his chair as he waited for Samuel to end class and return to his office. He was here, holding Sorchas hand. Sophias hand. He wasn't sure who was who. Had Sorchas possessed Sophias body, or did Sophia share Sorchas soul? Were they two women, or were they one in the same?

He'd seen and heard a lot of strange tales about the cave, of time travel, and even souls living multiple lives. He even shared Ronans soul, or so he had been told several times. But just nine weeks ago, Sorchas soul had been trapped in that basement. Now, she was here, and though it made sense, once he tried to understand it, the whole thing made no sense at all.

"Callum?" Sophia whispered as she rested her head on his shoulder. Already, it was as if they'd known each other their entire lives, just as it had felt in that basement. "I'm scared."

"We will figure this out. Ye have me now. I willnae let anything happen to ye ever again." She nuzzled into his side, and contentment wrapped around him like a blanket.

"Callum?" Murielles voice floated to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. Sophia lifted her head from his shoulder, and Murielle gasped. "Sorchas?" Murielle ran over to them and pulled Sophia into her arms. Samuel stood behind Murielle with confusion morphing his features.

"Murielle!" Sophia cried, hugging a friend she recognized from so very long ago.

"How are ye here?" Murielle asked. "Ye died! I've missed ye terribly. I had

wondered if yer soul existed in this time. How did ye find us?”

Samuel stepped forward to unlock his office as students flooded the halls now that classes were ending. “Let’s go into my office,” he said calmly, pushing the door open. They filtered in, and Samuel closed it behind him.

Callum had Sophia sit in one of the seats and addressed Samuel. “I’m sorry we missed our first lecture, Professor Sullivan. Ye know how much this program means to me. But, as ye can see, we have a bit of a situation.”

“So, I see,” he said, sitting behind his desk, looking at the woman who settled beside Callum curiously. “I assume your name is not Sorchia in this time?”

She shook her head. “My name is Sophia Nelson.”

From there, she and Callum took turns explaining the entire situation to Samuel and Murielle, hoping they could help explain the situation.

“Sorchia—I mean, Sophia.” Callum turned to look at her beseechingly. “I want ye to know that, after our night together in the basement, I wanted to go back in time to save ye from yer fate, but Murielle told me ye were already gone. I had no way to save ye.”

Murielle wiped a tear away and moved to stand beside Samuel. “My heart. It verra well may burst. I cannae believe my beloved Sorchia is here with us. I think I understand what happened, but I cannae be certain.”

“I also have an idea, but I’d love to hear yours, Love, and see if it matches mine,” Samuel said, looking up at his wife with a pure love shining in his eyes that Callum understood for the first time in his life, for he felt the same overwhelming emotion every time he looked at Sophia.

“Well,” Murielle said, scratching her head. “I believe Sorcha and Ronan’s—or Sophia and Callum’s—souls were meant to be together, but she was stuck in the in between for so long that her soul couldnae move on. Sophia looks nearly identical to Sorcha, much as Callum looks nearly identical to Ronan. Ronan’s soul moved on, but hers couldnae until she finished whatever business she had. That, and she needed a body. Most souls inhabit a body at birth.”

“But Sorcha couldn’t occupy Sophia’s body because she was stuck,” Callum added.

Murielle nodded. “Precisely. But it all happened exactly the way it was meant to. Callum didn’t see Sorcha until Sophia was in her car wreck at nine o’clock when her soul was preparing to cross over. That’s when Sorcha became temporarily stronger. Her soul was preparing to transition into Sophia’s body. That’s how Callum was finally able to see her. And she disappeared when Sophia was declared dead at midnight. Callum spent those three hours with Sorcha, neither of them knowing that Sophia’s soul was weakening as Sorcha grew stronger. Sorcha could finally move on because Callum—or Ronan—was Sorcha’s unfinished business. Just when he fell in love with her, Sophia died, and Sorcha was pulled into her body.”

Sadness gripped Callum as he listened, gripping Sophia’s hand. “But Sophia had to die for Sorcha to live. I’m so sorry, Sophia. Your soul, it—”

“It was temporary, Callum. It didn’t make me who I am. I am still me. I am still Sophia. I have all my memories, ideas, passions, opinions, and personality. I’m just now who I was always meant to be. I’m whole now. I feel it. It’s all right. Please, do not mourn for what I lost, for I have gained so much more.”

“And her Aunt Thelma kept trying to set us up without even knowing we were meant to be. How is that possible?” Callum asked, tilting his head.

“Because ye were always meant to be,” Murielle said, placing a hand on his shoulder

with a smile. “One way or another, yer souls were going to come together. Once Sorcha inhabited Sophia, it was time.”

Callum was at a loss for words. He was part of some ancient web of events that all led to this moment. Goosebumps broke out across his body as it all sank in.

“There is something I dinnae understand,” Callum said, looking at Murielle. “If my soul is meant to be with Sorcha’s, why weren’t she and Ronan together in their time?”

Sophia cleared her throat and nervously wrung her hands together. “I... well, Sorcha, was in love with Ronan,” she softly admitted, looking from Callum to Murielle. “I never told a soul. I was much too shy, and he was busy guarding Murielle or fighting battles for King Brodyn. Before I could get up the nerve to tell him, he married another woman. A few months later, I died. My unfinished business must have been to express my love for Ronan—or Callum. Once I did, I was free to pass on.”

“And Sophia’s soul left just in time for ye to inhabit the body ye were always meant for,” Murielle said in awe. “And Sophia, I never told ye this because I didnae ken how to ye felt about Ronan, but he was in love with ye, as well. He told me, but he was too busy keeping the royal family safe, and he didnae believe ye cared for him, so he focused on his duties. Then, Eva showed up, and she showed great interest in him, so he married her. Ronan was devastated when ye passed, Sorcha. He locked himself away for nearly a full moon’s cycle while he grieved. He was never quite the same, blaming himself for not protecting ye. Eva wasnae too happy about it.”

“When I touched Sophia’s hand earlier in the courtyard, a shock ran through me, and I felt Ronan’s emotions and saw his memories for the first time ever. Being reunited seems to have sparked some repressed memories. But I felt his intense love for Sorcha. It was actually painful. He believed his love was unrequited, so he lived with the pain of that. Then, Eva arrived, showered him with attention, and he married her.”

Leaning over Sophia while she sat in a chair, Callum kissed the top of her head, thankful she was here and praying she remained by his side for the rest of his days. “It should have been ye,” he whispered in her ear.

“Clearly, you were also both meant to end up in my program together and work with Murielle and me as we research the Picts. And who better to have on our team than a Pictish princess,” he said, gesturing to Murielle, “a man who has passed through both times all his life,” he added, pointing to himself, “and two people who once lived in that time. I lost Caitriona and Emilie on my team, but I have gained you.”

“I think I need to lie down,” Sophia muttered. “This is going to take me a while to adjust to.”

Samuel stood from his chair and walked them toward the door. “Callum, take her back to your flat so she can rest. I will send you today’s lecture notes. Just contact your other professors and tell them you had a family emergency. I will vouch for you, if needed.”

Nodding, Sophia thanked him, hugged Murielle tightly, and then allowed Callum to take her to his place for the night.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:09 am

Soft light filtered through thin blue curtains, and Sophia stretched, jumping with fear when she rolled over to find Callum beside her. She'd completely forgotten that she'd fallen asleep at his flat the night before after hours of talking, sorting out the many pieces of their mystery, and pleasuring one another in ways she had never experienced before.

The soreness between her legs, the ache in her thighs, and the clumsy smile on Callum's face made her feel the heat of a flush as it all rushed back to her. His short, dark hair stood up around his head, and a sexy scruff covered his jaw.

"Good morning, gorgeous," he murmured, pulling her closer and kissing her deeply until she groaned and opened her mouth to him, allowing his tongue to taste hers.

"Good morning," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck and nuzzling closer. When his fingers slid between her thighs beneath the sheets, she eagerly offered herself to him, widening her legs as her pulse rate increased.

"How did ye sleep?" he whispered before leaning down to suck one bared nipple into his mouth. She'd forgotten that they'd both fallen asleep nude, but she was very glad they had. His touch was a balm to her soul, one she had waited centuries for. It was true that, as Sorcha, she'd been too shy to approach the strong, handsome warrior that Ronan had been.

But as Sophia, she was bolder and ready to seize the life and the man she'd loved for so long. Both Sophia and Sorcha's memories drifted through her mind, and she knew it would take a while to adjust. But the only thing that mattered now was accepting the gift she had been given—to be loved by Callum and to share a life together. They

were young and had many years left to grow, travel, and work together with Samuel, but she vowed never to shy away from what she wanted again.

And right now, she wanted Callum. “Make love to me,” she sighed as his fingers stroked along her sensitive, needy flesh.

“I don’t know if we have time,” he said, nibbling on her neck. “Class starts in an hour.”

She groaned and arched when his fingers hit the perfect spot. “Then later. Promise?” she gasped when electric waves of pleasure ran through her body.

“Och, I promise,” he said with a cheeky grin, watching her with rapture as she shuddered and went limp beside him. “I dinnae think there is anything I could ever deny ye,” he added, giving her one more intense, passionate kiss before pulling the sheets off of them. His long, lean muscles flexed as he climbed out of bed, and she watched his perfect arse as it flexed when he picked up his boxers.

Callum turned around and raised a brow at her, knowing she’d been watching. Shamelessly, she shrugged and slid out of bed, perfectly comfortable in her skin, which was an entirely new sensation for her.

“I told you that you have a nice arse,” Sophia said with a wink, making Callum chuckle before pushing her back onto the bed to kiss her senseless as she laughed and squirmed beneath him with delight.

When Sophia’s soul had left, so too had many of her reservations and fears. She had a new lease on life, and Sorcha had waited 1,337 years to finally be here with Callum.

And there was no way she was going to squander one more second of it.

The End