

AUTHOR OF *THE CHEMISTRY OF LOVE*

# SARIAH WILSON

ALMOST LIKE  
BEING IN

*Love*



A NOVELLA

# PRAISE FOR SARIAH WILSON

## *Cinder-Nanny*

“Diana and Griffin’s slow-burn closed-door passion is authentic.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*Cinder-Nanny* is a definite must-read. This cute play on the age-old fairy tale will surely worm its way into your heart and leave you feeling all warm and fuzzy.”

—*Harlequin Junkie*

“Wilson’s ability to weave a sweet tale of two people, each of whom needs what the other has to offer, is magical.”

—Bookreporter

## *The Paid Bridesmaid*

“Combining a fast-paced plot with a slow-burning romance, this is sure to give readers butterflies.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Wilson’s (*Roommaid*) funny, sweet stand-alone about marriage, friendships, and mistaken identities is full of witty dialogue, endearing characters, and fast-paced narrative. Will appeal to fans of feel-good romances, rom-coms, and plots about weddings and social media.”

—*Library Journal*

## *The Seat Filler*

“Wilson (*Roommaid*) balances the quirky with the heartfelt in this adorable rom-com.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

## *The Friend Zone*

“Wilson scores a touchdown with this engaging contemporary romance that delivers plenty of electric sexual chemistry and zingy banter while still being romantically sweet at its core.”

—*Booklist*

“Snappy banter, palpable sexual tension, and a lively sense of fun combine with deeply felt emotional issues in a sweet, upbeat romance that will appeal to both the YA and new adult markets.”

—*Library Journal*

## The #Lovestruck Novels

“Wilson has mastered the art of creating a romance that manages to be both sexy and sweet, and her novel’s skillfully drawn characters, deliciously snarky sense of humor, and vividly evoked music-business settings add up to a supremely satisfying love story that will be music to romance readers’ ears.”

—*Booklist* (starred review), *#Moonstruck*

“Making excellent use of sassy banter, hilarious texts, and a breezy style, Wilson’s energetic story brims with sexual tension and takes readers on a musical road trip that will leave them smiling. Perfect as well for YA and new adult collections.”

—*Library Journal*, *#Moonstruck*

“*#Starstruck* is oh so funny! Sariah Wilson created an entertaining story with great banter that I didn’t want to put down. Ms. Wilson provided a diverse cast of characters in their friends and family. Fans of *Sweet Cheeks* by K. Bromberg and Ruthie Knox will enjoy *#Starstruck*.”

—*Harlequin Junkie* (4.5 stars), *#Starstruck*

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# OTHER TITLES BY SARIAH WILSON

## Stand-Alone Novels

*Hypnotized by Love*

*The Hollywood Jinx*

*The Chemistry of Love*

*Cinder-Nanny*

*The Paid Bridesmaid*

*The Seat Filler*

*Roommaid*

*Once Upon a Time Travel*

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*The Friend Zone*

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## The #Lovestruck Novels

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*Royal Date*

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*The Ugly Stepsister Strikes Back*

*The Promposal*

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*For my Stewart Scottish ancestors,  
and for Alison, who loves Brigadoon even more  
than I do*

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# CHAPTER ONE

“Maren, do you have service?” my best friend, Penny, asked as she held up her cell phone, swinging it left to right in an attempt to make a connection. The rental car I was driving badly continued to feel out of control. As it turned out, I wasn’t so great with a stick, and driving on the wrong side of the road in Scotland still felt completely unnatural.

“I should have paid for the upgrade to an automatic,” I muttered. It had been years since I’d driven manual, and it was showing.

The heavy, sprang-up-out-of-nowhere snowfall wasn’t helping matters.

Especially since Scottish roads were terrifying. Once you left the highway, there were small one-lane roads that were somehow supposed to accommodate traffic going both directions. The speed limit was ridiculously high, and there were so many blind corners—we’d nearly been flattened by a truck just five minutes ago.

And that was when the road was clear.

Now the snow was thick and sticking to the ground.

Penny reached for my phone and studied the screen. “You don’t have any bars, either.”

Right then, my app announced, “GPS signal lost.”

“I don’t even know how long we’re supposed to stay on this road,” I said. There might be a turn or a crossroads just up ahead, and without the GPS, I wouldn’t know it.

“Why don’t you pull over and I’ll check the map?” she asked. At my mom’s insistence we had stopped in at the Park Authority station when we entered the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park. We’d shared our plans with an older ranger clad in a green coat, who solemnly informed us that this was the wrong season to be heading up into the Highlands.

“You might be caught in a sudden storm,” he’d said. “We’ve had a great deal of rain that can sometimes turn to snow. There’s a reason we dinnae have many visitors this time of year in that particular area. I’d advise against it.”

“Thank you . . .” I looked down at his nameplate. “Callum. But we’re still going.”

“I tried to warn you,” he said with a shrug and handed us a paper map. “You’ll need this. Best of luck to you.”

Turned out he was right. About the map and about the storm.

And the luck, apparently.

Navigating off the road was difficult. The roads didn’t have a shoulder like I was used to in America. I fervently hoped that I wouldn’t puncture the tires because in addition to not springing for automatic, I hadn’t paid for extra coverage, and I wasn’t sure if my auto insurance from back home would cover any damage.

It was odd pulling off to the left side of the road, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I navigated the terrain successfully while keeping all of the tires intact.

Penny had the map opened up and was using her phone as a flashlight to read it. “Your uncle was headed here,” she said to the spot the ranger had marked. “It looks like it’s a few miles up the road. We keep going straight.”

The snow seemed to be getting heavier and thicker by the minute. I didn’t want to slide all over these dangerous roads. “Maybe we should turn around.”

She frowned. “That’s a shame given that we’re so close. But you might be right. Let’s head back to the inn and we can try again tomorrow.”

At that exact moment, the car died.

One minute the engine was purring and hot air was pouring in through the vents, and the next, silence.

Penny and I exchanged confused glances, and I tried to start it up. Again. A third time.

Nothing.

“That’s not good,” I said.

“And I still don’t have any service. What’s the emergency number here?”

“Nine-nine-nine,” I told her. Another thing my mother had made sure I knew before traveling internationally for the first time.

Penny tried dialing and sending the call through, but her phone just beeped at her several times.

“Now what?” she asked.

“I guess we sit here and wait for somebody to pass by,” I said, trying to fight off the rising sense of panic that currently threatened to engulf me. I didn’t know anything about fixing cars and knew even less about potentially surviving a serious snowstorm.

“Do you think the ranger will come looking for us?” she asked as she pulled out the guidebook she had purchased from the gas, er, *petrol* station, along with some snacks. She took those from her bag and handed one to me. I wasn’t sure what it was exactly. One was called oat cakes, and the other had chips that were haggis- and black-pepper-flavored.

“Callum? I hope so. We should wait here until the snow dies down.” I didn’t know, though. Would we have to be missing for a certain amount of time before they’d search for us? I usually prided myself on my ability to stay calm in a crisis. It certainly helped in my chosen field—I was going to graduate from veterinary school in a few months—but those were situations that involved my expertise. I knew how to care for wounded and sick animals. I did not know what to do about being stranded on the side of the road in a foreign country during a freak snowstorm.

We ate the oat cakes first, and Penny made a face. “These are so bland. They taste like beige. Do they not have sugar here?”

“I think they’re fine.” Not the worst thing I’d ever had.

“You and your cast-iron stomach,” she said. It was true. I could eat almost anything and be satisfied. Meanwhile, Penny had been struggling with Scottish cuisine and almost wept when she realized that she could use the Deliveroo app and get McDonald’s delivered to our inn.

We ate all of the snacks she’d purchased and tried to ignore the cold. It was something I’d noticed since we’d arrived—the way that the cold of the Scottish Highlands hit differently. It was a cold that seemed to seep into my bones, like I’d never feel warm again.

Penny read to me from the guidebook, keeping us distracted. “Did you know that the Highlands are one of the most sparsely populated areas in all of Europe? Currently there’s about eight people for every square kilometer.” She read ahead a bit. “Huh. Nobles cleared out or evicted most of their tenants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the population never really rebounded.”

That was not making me feel any better. While historically interesting, it spiked my worry about whether or not a car would pass by us.

Minutes turned into hours, and we were getting colder and colder. Not a single car had appeared. Penny had long stopped reading as her teeth had started to chatter. We huddled together for warmth, both shivering. We tried our phones several times as well as restarting the car. Nothing worked.

I wondered how long it would take to freeze to death as I watched the snow forming into big piles around the car.

Feeling drowsy, I let my eyelids flutter shut. Images of my mom flashed in my head, and I thought about the last time we were together. She had looked so frail and tiny—the chemo was really hard on her.

“I don’t want to go to Scotland without you.” It was a trip we were supposed to take together. I’d held her hand, her skin paper-thin. I was worried I might hurt her if I squeezed too hard.

“You have to go,” she said firmly.

“But what if . . . what if you . . .” I couldn’t finish my sentence. I didn’t even want to think it.

Her eyes were sympathetic and full of love. It had always been me and my mom against the world, and even though I didn’t say the words, I didn’t have to. She knew. “What if I die while you’re gone? I won’t.”

I shook my head, not wanting to cry in front of her. I should be the one comforting her, not the other way around. “You can’t know that.”

“We have done so many amazing things together,” she said. “And the only thing I have left to do is to find out what happened to my brother. You have to go to Scotland for me.” She was far too weak to travel, and the doctor had absolutely forbidden her from taking this trip. It was one of the reasons I was scared to leave. If she passed while I was gone . . . I didn’t think I could live with that. Not being with her for her last moments would haunt me for the rest of my life, and I’d never forgive myself.

Her brother had been missing for more than two decades. I seriously doubted I’d be able to find any clues, but I knew how important this was to her, so I had to go. Even though I didn’t want to.

When I didn’t respond, she asked, “Do you remember the epic tale of how I met your father?”

That got me to smile. My mother had told me the story so many times that it was practically seared into my brain. “You fell into a pool at a party, and he rescued you and it was love at first sight.”

“Even though we’d never met, standing there sopping wet, it was as if I’d always known him. Like we’d been in love in some other life. He saved me in more than one way that night,” she said. “I’d waited my whole life to find someone just like him.”

“But then he died.” I immediately felt bad for bringing that up, but she squeezed my hand to reassure me. He’d been

in a car accident not long after I was born; I'd never even known him.

“He did, but I'll always be grateful for the time we had together. And I'll always be thankful that he gave me you, the world's most perfect daughter.”

I let out a laugh. I was the furthest thing from that.

She gave me a soft smile. “I'm reminding you about your dad because I want you to know that magic is real. And more than anything, I want you to go to Scotland with Penny, and I want you to have laughter and love and to let yourself get caught up in all the magic and whimsy it has to offer. Maybe even find yourself some handsome Highlander to have a fling with. I love you so much, and you deserve to have those experiences. To really live.”

“But I want to stay here with you,” I whispered, trying one last time to get her to change her mind.

“No. Go. Do this for me.” She didn't say it, but I knew this was the last favor she'd ever ask of me, so there was no way I could refuse.

*“Maren!”*

Hearing my mother call my name loudly woke me up. I gasped as my heart pounded hard in my chest and I sat straight up. Penny had nodded off next to me, and I blinked a few times out into the gloom. I tried the car for the millionth time, but it still wouldn't start.

Then I noticed flickering lights in front of us, in the forest. Like flashlights. Hope welled up inside me. Maybe someone was looking for us. I had left the lights of the car on, and I located the horn and honked it. The lights bobbing in the forest held still for a moment and then, inexplicably, seemed to move farther away from us.

I'd been warned repeatedly about fairies playing tricks on people since my arrival in Scotland, but my rational brain told me that wasn't possible. I wasn't going to get sucked into that kind of superstition. My mother had told me to look for the



whimsy and magic of this country, but I didn't have time for either one of those things.

Right now, I just needed to survive and get back home to her. I shook Penny, and she immediately woke up.

"Come on," I told her. "There's lights out there and I'm going to see if they can help us."

"Shouldn't we stay here?" she asked with a yawn.

I didn't tell her how worried I was about staying put. I'd worked part-time as an EMT for a couple of years during college to help put myself through school, and I had seen a person who'd frozen to death. My much-more-experienced colleague had told me that it was a nice way to go—that you would just fall asleep and were unaware. I didn't want that to happen to us.

Especially given just how easily we'd both fallen asleep already. "No. Let's go let those rescuers know we're here." Opening the car door, I started chasing after the lights. "Hello?"

Penny came up behind me, grabbing on to my hand, which was a good plan so that we wouldn't lose each other in this storm. The snow was falling so fast that it made it hard to see. I felt like my eyelashes were going to freeze shut, and I kept my head down as I pressed forward, calling out for help.

We went deep into the forest and the ground started to slope up. Penny and I struggled up the incline, but I was determined to reach the lights, which always appeared to be just beyond the next ridge.

Penny collapsed beside me, and I got onto my knees, shaking her. I called her name several times. After a few moments where my heart nearly stopped from fear, she finally opened her eyes. "We have to keep going!" I told her.

She shook her head. "I can't. I'm so tired. I just want to sleep."

"That's the one thing we're not going to do," I told her. "Let's go."

“Leave me,” she said. “Get help and come back.”

There was no way I was doing that, either. I knew I was going to lose my mom. I was not going to lose my best friend, too. One horrific, unspeakable loss was more than enough. I forced Penny to stand. She was much shorter than me and our height difference made it a bit more difficult to keep her moving.

That bone-destroying cold just kept seeping in, and each step was heavier and harder than the last. Snow clung to me, and I was so frozen that I could no longer feel my toes or my fingers.

I hysterically wondered if this qualified as the magic and whimsy my mom was so desperate for me to find.

“Help!” I called a few more times, and the world grew darker around me. I heard voices, male voices, and the lights moved closer. “Over here!” I tried again, not sure if anyone would hear me, or if I was even making any sounds at that point.

I must have passed out, because the next thing I was vaguely aware of was someone picking me up. He was strong and tall, like a mountain, and cradled me against his chest as if I were as tiny as Penny.

“I have you, lassie,” he said, his Scottish brogue comforting and reassuring. “You are safe now.”

And in a way I couldn't have explained, I knew I was.

Being held by this man felt like coming home.

It was the last thought I had before everything went black.

# CHAPTER TWO

I woke up in a strange room. There was a fire blazing, and I was loaded down with fur blankets. It took me a second to realize that I was in a room that looked very much like it belonged in a castle. Stone walls, a stone fireplace, tapestries.

Was there a castle in the middle of the national park? I supposed it was a possibility. My mind tried to explain what I was seeing. Maybe this was the closest place to seek shelter. A tourist attraction that they were letting me use to warm back up.

A girl came into the room, and if there was one thing I had picked up in my brief time in Scotland, it was their concern about ghosts. Because that was my first thought when I saw her outfit. It was like something out of a period movie. As if she'd died hundreds of years ago and she was angry that I was in her bedroom, so she'd decided to haunt me for it.

Totally irrational, but to be fair, I'd nearly died.

Or maybe I was dead.

"My name is Ainsley. Who are you?" she asked with a soft Scottish burr, and she came over to climb onto the foot of my bed. Her weight pressing down on the mattress convinced me she was alive.

"I'm Maren. Maren Kelly."

"Who is your clan?" she asked.

"My clan?" I repeated. My mom was the only family I had.

And soon, I wouldn't even have that. I quickly pushed that thought out of my head. I wasn't going to dwell on it. I was going to look for my uncle and then get back home as soon as I possibly could.

"I'm of the Clan Campbell," she said with an easy confidence when I didn't answer. "Where are you from?"

“America.”

She blinked slowly, her eyes rounded like an owl’s. She was very pretty. She had black hair that fell in thick waves down her back, and her eyes were light—I couldn’t tell if they were blue or green. “That’s so far away!”

I nodded. Even though I’d been initially jolted by my surroundings when I woke up, there was something about this room, about Ainsley, that felt weirdly familiar. Like I knew this place.

Knew her.

As if I’d been here before.

Like I’d already had this conversation with her.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Twenty-six,” I told her.

“You are the same age as my brother. I’m twelve, and you are both very old,” she said with a haughty look that made me smile. I was sure that I did seem old to her.

“Where are we?” I asked her.

“You are in my brother’s home. He is the chief of our village. The laird. His name is Duncan. He rescued you when he and his men were out fetching the Yule log. Also, I’m not supposed to bother you and let you sleep, but seeing as how you were already awake of your own free will, I’m not doing anything wrong.” She said this in a way like she expected me to back her up if she got in trouble.

“Do you know where my friend Penny is?”

“Oh, aye. She is down in the great hall, having something to eat while the Yule log is prepared. I can take you to her if you’d like.”

“Yes, please.”

Ainsley leaped off the bed and ran over to the door. I followed behind her while checking my fingers and toes. They all appeared to be in working order. That was good.

We walked through stone hallways and down stone steps. There were large, glazed windows all around us, and I could see the snow still swirling and howling, but inside everything was warm. It surprised me—I thought castles were supposed to be dark and damp and freezing, but I didn't feel that way at all.

There was a candle burning in every window. "Why do you have candles out?" I asked. Wasn't there electricity in this place?

"To light the way for the Holy Family. And to welcome visitors and neighbors in from the cold."

Okay, then.

She led me into a big open room with a fireplace large enough to stand up in. A huge birch tree lay on the floor, with only the base of the trunk in the fire. Women were tying ribbons and greenery to the bare branches, and a large man was carving something into it.

It was such a bizarre sight that I asked, "What's that man doing?"

"He's carving the Cailleach. She's the witch of winter. When the Yule log finishes burning, she'll be banished." Ainsley said this matter-of-factly, while I was at a complete loss as to how to process what I was seeing.

This room had massive windows, and women and men decorated with more greenery. Their clothing stood out to me. Old-fashioned. Kilts. It was like I'd wandered onto a movie set.

Only there weren't any cameras.

Not to mention the fact that they were apparently decorating for Christmas, which made everything more bizarre, given that it was the first week of January.

Christmas was over.

Penny was seated at a long table eating out of a wooden bowl. Her eyes went wide when she saw me. "Maren!"

I ran over and hugged her. "Are you okay?"

“Are you okay?” she asked me at the exact same time, and we both laughed.

It was a temporary moment of comfort and realness that quickly faded as I realized that everyone was staring at us and whispering to one another.

“Do you know what’s going on?” I leaned in to ask Penny. Everything in here felt off—like I’d stumbled into some alternate universe.

“No idea. I’m thinking either a Renaissance fair thing, which you’ll love, or it’s some kind of *Outlander* role-playing group. I’m leaning more toward the second because somebody did call me sassenach.”

I’d been obsessed with Renaissance fairs growing up. We had a permanent one near my childhood home in Ohio, and my mom and I had season passes and attended all summer long. I’d loved getting dressed up in a costume, eating a giant turkey leg, watching the jousting. Even though I knew it was all pretend, I’d adored the feeling of stepping into another world.

But this was different. This wasn’t a facade. These people weren’t pretending. The clothing looked real. Authentic. I’d been around the fake stuff often enough to tell the difference.

Ainsley had run off as soon as I’d reunited with Penny, and I wished she were here. She had answers. The people around me presumably did, too, but I was a bit intimidated by them. I wondered if someone could drive us back to our car and help us get it started.

But even as I thought it, some part of me instinctively knew that there were no cars here.

“Maren Kelly, may I introduce you to my brother, Duncan Campbell?” Ainsley’s voice sounded behind me, and I turned.

There stood the most incredible-looking man I’d ever seen in my entire life.

He was tall, broad. He had the same dark hair and light eyes as his little sister. He looked to be in his mid to late

twenties and was muscled in places that I wasn't aware muscle could grow.

There was also something so familiar about him. Like I wasn't *meeting* him; I was *recognizing* him. As if I'd always known him.

We stood there and stared at each other, and with each passing moment, my heart rate slowly increased until it was so loud and so hard that I was convinced every person in this room could hear it.

How did I know him?

He was the person who had carried me here; I was sure about that. I remembered the way it had felt to be in his arms. But that experience wasn't what I was dealing with at the moment.

The words *meant to be* echoed inside my head.

This was too weird.

And the strangest thing of all? Given the way he was staring at me, it was like he felt exactly the same way.

Penny made a sound, and my brain couldn't register what she was trying to convey, but it was enough to get him talking.

"Miss Kelly, 'tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance." His voice was deep, and his brogue far too charming. He bowed slightly, and I just stood there. His voice was like warm honey, sweet and rich, and in that moment, I wanted to kiss him more than I had ever wanted to kiss anybody in my entire life.

"Maren," I said. "Please call me Maren."

This seemed to amuse him, and he had a dimple in his right cheek that I wanted to explore. With my mouth.

"Then you must call me Duncan. Welcome to Highglen."

"This is your castle?" I tried to verify. "Ainsley said you're the chief."

"We dinnae stand on such ceremony here," he said.

That didn't really explain much. "Well, Duncan Not-A-Chief, can you tell me what's going on?"

"You must be a wee bit bewildered," he agreed. "Would you like to come with me so that I may answer all of your questions?"

"We'd like that," I said, but Penny brushed me off with a hand gesture.

"I'm going to stay here and eat my delicious stew." From the way she said it, I could tell she actually hated it. "Ainsley is going to keep me company, won't you?"

"Aye," the girl said, sitting on the bench next to her. Penny asked her about her favorite games, and Ainsley started rattling off a list of activities that I'd never heard of before.

My best friend's schemes were obvious to me—I wondered if they were obvious to everyone else. Ainsley didn't notice, but the sly look on Duncan's face made me think he knew Penny's intentions were to get him and me alone.

Penny and I had met freshman year, the same year she'd met her current boyfriend, Roger Blankenship. She had spent all four years trying to fix me up with someone because she'd wanted us to be able to double-date, but it hadn't ever worked out. And even though college had ended four years ago, she was still bound and determined to help me find the man of my dreams.

Like it was a habit that she couldn't break.

"This way," Duncan said and began to walk away. I scurried to keep up with his long strides and found myself admiring the back of his calves, which were visible under his blue and green tartan.

I'd never really noticed a man's calves before. Or how sexy they could be.

He led me into a room that had a large wooden desk and several shelves with books on them. Old-looking books. Another fireplace with a blazing fire, only this one didn't have a whole tree sticking out of it. There were several lit candles that smelled like beeswax as they burned.



Again, I was struck with a feeling of familiarity. As if I'd been here before.

Duncan indicated a chair for me to use. "You can sit there."

I did as he said and sat, folding my hands in my lap.

He went over to the heavy wooden door, intending to close it when a man nearly as tall as Duncan ducked into the room. He had bright red hair and a beard to match.

"Did you ask her yet?" the man said.

"Maren, this is my brother-in-law, Alasdair MacLean. He's married to my sister Sorcha, and I've never quite understood why she said yes, much less why she's given him two bairns."

So, Duncan had a dry sense of humor. Considering the strange situation I was in, it was probably the last thing I should have been thinking about, but it appealed to me.

"I'm also his best friend. Which lets you ken that his judgment is suspect," Alasdair said with a grin. I found myself immediately liking him and his infectious happiness.

"Nice to meet you," I said. My mom would have been pleased that I was remembering to be polite in the middle of my bizarre, shared fever dream. "What did you want Duncan to ask me?"

"Who's the king of England?" Alasdair asked, as if he couldn't help himself.

"Charles."

The two men exchanged glances. My answer confused them. "How can he still be king—" Alasdair started to say, but Duncan put a hand on his shoulder and said he'd speak to him later.

He shut the door behind Alasdair, leaving us alone, then walked over to sit in the chair next to me. "I know this question will seem a bit strange to you, but I must know. What is the date?"

Everything had a surreal feeling to it. Almost like it was happening to someone else and I was watching from a distance. “January fifth.”

“I meant the year, lass.”

I told him the current year, and his face tightened slightly. He reached for a bunch of old-looking parchments on his desk and pulled them over, along with one of those feather pens that had to be dipped in ink to work. He wrote something down, and that rising sense of panic I’d had in the car came back. Something was wrong. I’d watched enough movies to know that people didn’t ask about heads of state or years unless you were involved in something inexplicable and possibly time travel-y.

“What is the date, Duncan?” My voice was little more than a whisper.

He looked apologetic, as if it brought him no joy to say it. “For me and my kin? December the twenty-fourth, 1647.”

# CHAPTER THREE

If I'd been the passing-out type, this was probably where it would have happened. I did feel a little light-headed, but I wasn't sure if that was due to the information I'd just been given or the extremely attractive man who'd shared it.

"Did you say 1647?" I tried to verify. Could extreme cold damage hearing? Maybe I'd misheard.

"Aye."

"Are you saying I've . . . time traveled?" That idea was so far-fetched that I didn't even know how to wrap my mind around it.

"Nae."

That made me feel a bit better.

Right up until he added, "We are the ones doing the traveling."

None of this made any sense. "I don't understand."

"To be quite honest, neither do we. I can share what we do know. It starts with my great-great-grandparents, if you'd like to hear the tale."

I wanted to know what was going on and I was happy to have an excuse to stare at Duncan without being rude, so I said, "I'd love to."

He smiled again, and I noticed that he had very nice teeth for somebody supposedly from 1647.

"Fiona MacDonald and Malcolm Campbell met at the court of King James during the Christmastide celebrations. They fell in love at first sight, despite the feud between their clans. Things had begun to change in Scotland—people were moving away from Catholicism and becoming Protestant. The government agreed that Christmas had become too loud, too papish, too extravagant, and celebrations were shut down. People began to be arrested for celebrating Christmas. Put in

jail for baking mince pies. Hanging holly and ivy were punishable offenses. Fiona and Malcolm loved each other and the holiday that had brought them together, and so they eloped and started a new home here, at Highglen.”

I couldn't help but sigh. “That's romantic.”

“Aye. Highglen became a haven for those who loved and married against their parents' wishes, for those tired of going to war, for anyone who wanted to hold on to a different way of life. But especially for those who still wished to celebrate Christmas. They built this home, this family, this village. And they passed along their love for their holiday to the next generation and the next.”

So far, none of this was explaining the time travel, but since it meant I got to be alone with Duncan, our knees so close together they were practically touching, I'd take it.

“Nothing can remain untouched, though. The years passed, and in 1640, there were new laws and acts that outlawed Christmas itself. There were more arrests and executions for those who kept the Christmas traditions, and then there were wars. Not over Christmas, mind, but over politics and kingdoms. My da knew we'd be called upon to fight. The peace of our home was threatened, so it seems he took matters into his own hands. We're not sure what happened or what bargain he struck. Some say the fairies, some say Father Christmas, others the Christ Child. All we know is he set out two days before Yuletide during a fierce storm, determined to protect us, and he didnae come home. Everything changed. A miracle happened.”

I could hear the pain in his voice, and I leaned forward, putting my hand over his. He was so warm and strong that it felt a bit silly to imagine that I could comfort him. But his other hand went on top of mine, as if he were grateful for the gesture. “I'm so sorry that you lost your father,” I said. “My dad died right after I was born.”

He gave me a half smile, as if trying to cover up his pain. “As the head of the family, it was my responsibility to go looking for him. But my cousin Archibald convinced me that

he should go in my stead, and I should stay here and look after my mam and my sisters. We waited two months for Archie to return and when he did . . . he was an old man.”

Much as I wanted to keep holding Duncan’s hands, that made me straighten up and pull away from him. “What do you mean?”

“Two months had passed for us, but for Archie, it had been twenty-one years. He had married and had a family. He came to tell us that when he’d left, Highglen had disappeared. Not sure what to do, he built his home nearby. Years later, he had a dream that told him to wait until the snows returned, and that he was to look for us when they did. When a bad snowstorm appeared, he came into the village and told us all that had transpired. He didnae stay with us, but returned to his family after he delivered his message.”

Dream visions and a magical village. Okay. “So every twenty years, your village just shows up during a snowstorm?”

“I havenae been able to find a pattern. Our days dinnae always correspond to the outside world’s, such as now, where it is January the fifth for you and December the twenty-fourth for us. Sometimes we appear and only five years have passed. Sometimes it is as many as fifty. Mam thinks that we come back whenever the world is most in need of the Christmas spirit. We stay for exactly one week, and when the bells ring midnight on the last day, we disappear for another decade or two.”

“How does time pass for you when the town is gone? Do you go to bed the night it disappears, and then when you wake up you’re back in the real world but fifty years have passed?”

“Nae, time passes here, just slowly in comparison to the rest of the world, and as I’ve said, I cannae find a pattern to it. We only seem to appear during Christmastide, though. We’ve never had a visitor during the other seasons of the year. Again, I havenae been able to figure out how it all works, and I’ve had seven years to puzzle it out.”

Technically, it had been a lot longer than seven years. Almost four hundred. This was making my head hurt. Maybe I

should have paid more attention in college when we talked about Einstein's theory of relativity.

"Do you ever think about leaving?" I asked him. Obviously, it could be done, if his cousin had come and gone.

"I suppose we could, but this is our home and all we've ever known. Everyone we love is here. Not to mention that I've been led to understand that it might be a wee bit difficult to move hundreds of people into the modern world without anyone noticing. And I suppose it might be ungrateful to walk away from this miracle we've been granted."

I sat back in my chair, feeling a bit like someone had hit me over the head. If anyone else had told me this story, I'd already be halfway out the door. It was unfathomable.

But I believed every word coming out of Duncan's mouth. I instinctively trusted him in a way I'd never trusted anyone else. I wasn't sure why that was, but I knew this man wouldn't lie to me.

I was the type of person who didn't trust anybody easily. So why did I trust this man?

And why was he so familiar to me?

"'Tis a lot to take in," he observed, and I nodded. The magic vanishing village wasn't the only thing that concerned me currently.

"Why do I feel like I know you?" I asked him.

"Me?" He said it in a way that made me think he knew exactly what I was asking, even if he was playing dumb.

"There's this . . . connection. To you. To this place. I can't explain it." I felt foolish even saying the words and suddenly realized the position I'd just put myself in. He could reject me entirely and I'd be standing out here, vulnerable and exposed after admitting that I sensed a connection to him even though we'd just met.

For the very first time in my life, I understood what my mom had experienced after she'd met my dad. I'd always

known love at first sight was possible, but I had never expected anything like it to happen to me.

“I dreamed of you.” He said the words so softly that for a moment I thought I’d misheard him. “Before I found you in the woods, I dreamed of you. Saw you as clearly as I see you now.”

My heart sped up in response to that, and my nerve endings caught fire. “What does that mean?”

“I dinnae ken.”

It took me a second to remember that *ken* meant *know* for Scots. And I didn’t ken what this all meant, either.

He dreamed of me? Was this some sort of prophecy kind of thing? I’d never believed in that kind of stuff.

But to be fair, I’d never believed in vanishing villages, either, and I believed in this one.

My uncle Bobby had been right.

“Have you lost your joy in Christmas?” Duncan asked, and the question was so surprising and so far from where our conversation had been headed that it took me a moment to respond.

“My joy?” My mom’s admonitions were back in my head: how she wanted me to have fun and enjoy this trip. “Two months before Christmas, my mother found out she has terminal cancer. The doctors gave her eight months. There’s nothing that can be done. We had planned this trip to Scotland together, but her doctor said he didn’t want her to come, so Penny came with me instead.” So, no, I’d had no joy at all this past Christmas.

“Och, m’annsachd.” He said the words so sweetly that I immediately wondered what he meant. “Such sadness. I am so sorry to hear about your mother. It certainly would ruin your Yuletide to have such grievous news. My mam told me years ago that my da had also known that he would soon pass away, which is why he made sure the village would live on without him here to protect it.”

He understood. Penny was sympathetic and kind about my situation, but her parents had just celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

Duncan got it. He knew what it was like to lose a parent, someone you loved more than anyone else.

Now he was the one reaching out to hold my hand, and I loved the calloused feel of his fingertips against my skin. Somehow it managed to be a touch full of affection and sympathy, but also lit exploding fireworks in my stomach.

“Thank you,” I said.

He squeezed my hand gently and then withdrew. I realized that if it was 1647 for him, there were probably all kinds of rules about this sort of stuff, and I wondered how many of them I had already accidentally broken.

Never mind the others that I wanted to deliberately break with him at some point in the near future.

“Why did you want to visit Highglen?” He asked me the question with a tone that made me think he already knew why.

Maybe he’d dreamed that, too. “My uncle was doing his PhD . . . er, he was in the middle of earning a doctorate degree from a university that focused on Renaissance manuscripts. He found a forgotten text in a British archive that spoke about a village out of time in the Argyll lands in Scotland, and he came here looking for it twenty-five years ago. No one has heard from him since. My mom and I planned this trip to see if we could find anything out about him. It’s her last wish for me to try and find him.”

“I see. That must be difficult, not knowing what happened to him.”

I nodded. And if anyone understood that, it would be Duncan, who lost not only his father that way but the entire world outside Highglen. “I don’t really remember him. I was only a year old when he left, but my mom says that I adored him.”

He considered this and then leaned forward. “I suppose you would like to continue your search, but it willnae be safe



to travel away from Highglen until Hogmanay.” At my expression to that word, he added, “I believe you call it New Year’s Eve. The village will disappear when the bells stop ringing that night. If you would like, you and your friend are welcome to stay with us until then. At the end of the week, the storm will subside, and you can be escorted back to your world. My family and I would welcome you here happily to celebrate with us while you wait, if you are so inclined.”

“How do you know the storm will stop and it’ll be safe to travel?”

“’Tis not the first time I’ve done this.”

That made me pause. *This?* Did he mean having strangers from the outside world come into his village?

Or was it something he meant in a romantic way? A different woman every time he zapped into this reality?

Why did that bother me so much? I’d just met the man. I wasn’t allowed to be so possessive over him.

A week. I could stay here for a week and then go back to graduate from school and help my mom with the impossible road she had in front of her.

It wasn’t as if we had much of a choice. I wasn’t keen to go back out into that storm.

“I’ll have to talk to Penny, but I’d like to stay.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

Duncan grinned, and I barely resisted the impulse to climb into his lap and wrap myself around him. He was undeniably attractive, and I was discovering that I was very weak-willed.

“We have a tradition that we observe tonight, should you like to join us,” he said as he stood up. “It will be cold, but I have seven younger sisters. Between the lot of them, they will have things you and your friend can borrow to keep warm.”

“Yes.” I didn’t even know what he was planning on doing, but I was in. I didn’t want to be parted from him. I would go stand out in that miserable Scottish snow for hours if it meant I got to stay close to his side.

This felt more than a little pathetic, but I didn’t care. Okay, I did care. Which is why I said, “Seven sisters? That’s a big family. I’m an only child. Every year for Christmas, I used to ask Santa for a brother or sister.” It had been my fondest wish as a kid. I’d watched some movie where there were, like, nine kids and their Christmas morning had been noisy and happy, and for some reason I’d fixated on that. I stopped asking as the years went by and my mom never remarried, but I found myself gravitating toward friends in school who had large families. I loved the noise and chaos of their homes, so different from the quiet of my own.

“I’d gladly give you one of mine,” he teased. “They will be the very death of me, if they get their way.”

I smiled at him. “So . . . what are the plans tonight?”

“There will be a candlelight procession and the first footing. There will also be a midnight Mass for those who wish to celebrate that way.”

I was about to ask him what a first footing was when the heavy wooden door swung open. I jumped, as if we’d been caught doing something we shouldn’t have, even though we were only talking. Ainsley stood there with a knowing look on her face.

“Here’s their ringleader now,” he said, smiling at his sister. “Come to bedevil me, have you?”

“Mam is looking for you, Duncan.”

“I dinnae dare to hesitate when my mother has summoned me,” he said with an irresistible wink that made my spine feel like it was about to collapse in on itself. “I will leave you in Ainsley’s capable hands to make sure you’re kitted out for this evening. Until then, sweet Maren.”

He reached for my hand, and I thought he meant to shake it. But he turned it over so that he could press his warm lips to the back of it, and I literally gasped. The heat from that small touch shot straight up my arm and zinged around until it settled in my stomach and radiated out from there.

The sound that I made had him smiling against my skin, and then he was gone. Meanwhile, I was a Maren puddle and worried I might not be able to stand upright ever again.

I’d never, ever had a physical reaction like this to a man before. Heck, I’d never, ever had this kind of instant emotional connection, either. I couldn’t have explained it to anyone else, but there was something special going on with this Duncan Campbell fella.

He’d dreamed of me. That felt significant.

The smart thing to do would have been to hide out in the guest room he’d offered me and wait the week out until the storm subsided and Penny and I could safely leave. I’d never been a big fan of Christmas, so that part didn’t really appeal to me.

But more importantly, I didn’t need more heartbreak beyond that which was waiting for me at home.

Because I knew that I could fall hard for Duncan.

Correction, *would* fall hard for him.

Or, further correction, somehow already had.

I really hated it when my mom was right. Magic, whimsy, love at first sight. It was all happening, even though I didn’t want it to.

“Are you coming on the processional with us?” Ainsley asked.

“Yes, and Duncan said you and your sisters could help us with whatever clothes we need.”

“Aye, I will bring some things back to your room if you’d like to meet me there.”

I stood up. “I don’t remember exactly how to get there.”

Ainsley basically rolled her eyes at me. “This way.”

She led me back up the stairs and told me where we were in proximity to other rooms of the castle so that I could find my way back on my own. “The guest rooms are close to the great hall, and there’s always someone there who can help you find your way,” she said.

I wondered how close my room was to Duncan’s. As if she could read my mind, she offered, “My room is two doors down from yours, and Duncan’s is next to mine. He should be at the end of the hallway, but he let my mother keep the biggest room.”

That was so sweet. He was so sweet. I wanted to gush about him, and I was relieved when I opened my door and found Penny in the room. Ainsley said she’d return soon with some clothing, and I shut the door behind her.

“We’re going to be sharing this room,” Penny said. “Apparently, the family has come here from their homes out in the village for the Christmas celebration, and they’re pretty full up.”

I waved my hand. That was fine. Penny and I had shared a bedroom all through college. I also liked the idea of her being close by, given how bizarre our current circumstances were. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“I’m glad I’m here, too. I never would have believed any of this if you tried to tell me about it after.”

“What did they tell you?” I asked, sitting on the bed.

She repeated a story very close to the one Duncan had shared with me, just without the personal details about his life.

“And as far-fetched as it sounds, I have to believe it. Because either they’re telling the truth, or they’re psychotically devoted to living like people from the seventeenth century, and not a single person has broken character so far.”

“Agreed. Duncan invited us to stay, if you want. He said we could enjoy the holiday with him and his family. Not that there’s much of an alternative. I don’t think it’d be safe for us to try and find our car until after this storm passes.”

Penny used a poker to push one of the logs on the fire, and sparks flew up into the air before settling back down. She said, “You’re right. We should stay put. I checked my phone. Still no bars.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine that there’s a lot of cell service in Christmas Brigadoon.” Huh. Now I knew where the writers of that show had gotten their idea from.

My observation made her smile. “I wish I could contact Roger, though. He’s going to be so worried.”

Roger and Penny had been together for eight years now, and Penny was getting frustrated by his inability to move forward. She wanted marriage and children, and Roger had been dragging his feet for a long time.

One of the reasons she had agreed to come on this trip with me was to let him see what life would be like without her around. He adored her so much that I had a hard time imagining that he was doing okay without her, and I knew he had to miss her terribly. It frustrated me that he let his fear of commitment override everything else.

“He probably is worried,” I agreed.

She frowned at the fire, but when she turned to face me again, she had a smile on her face. I recognized what she was doing. She was putting her fears about Roger aside by focusing on something else. “Why is Ainsley getting us clothes? What’s happening?”

“Something about candles and a first footer?” It was possible I had been more focused on the man speaking than the information he’d been trying to convey.

“That sounds familiar. Hang on.” She grabbed her guidebook and thumbed through it. “Right. Here it is. First footing is a ceremony that usually takes place on Hogmanay —”

“That’s New Year’s Eve,” I said helpfully.

“You’re right.” She looked impressed. “A tall, dark-haired, handsome man crosses the threshold right after midnight, bringing gifts of coal or wood, a coin, something edible, and a shot of whisky. They symbolize warmth, prosperity, and good fortune for the following year.”

“So, tall, dark, and handsome?” I asked. That fit Duncan perfectly. “With all that whisky, I bet everybody starts to look handsome after a while. Why does he have to have dark hair?”

“With the constant Viking invasions, I can’t imagine they’d be happy to have a tall blond-haired man show up on their doorstep. That would definitely seem like bad luck.” She read a bit more. “It says historians aren’t sure whether first footing used to take place on Christmas Eve or New Year’s Eve, as Christmas was basically banned in Scotland from 1640 to 1958! Can you imagine? 1958! That wasn’t that long ago. Anyway, Scottish people shifted their big celebrations and traditions from Christmas to New Year’s, which is why New Year’s continues to be their biggest holiday even now.”

“Duncan’s doing the first footing tonight, so I guess that settles the debate for me,” I said. “He’s probably the dark-haired guest who will be going into people’s homes and bringing them good luck.” I wouldn’t have minded him bringing me a bit of his good luck.

Or kissing me.

Either one.

Penny closed her guidebook with an expression that made me wary.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just noticed that you and Duncan are, um, hitting it off rather well.”

“I guess.” My feelings were so new and confusing that I didn’t really have the words yet to express them to anyone, let alone my best friend, who could see right through me.

Much as she did when she said, “You like him. *Like* like him.”

“Yes, and I don’t know why because I just met him, but he’s so familiar to me. Like I’ve known him my entire life. Which, as I’m saying it out loud, I realize how bonkers it sounds, but it’s true.” I’d secretly thought my mom had been lying to me whenever she told me about how she’d fallen in love instantly with my father, but I had become a believer.

Penny nodded. “I’m sure it doesn’t hurt that he looks like somebody wished for a sculpture to come to life.”

“It does not,” I agreed.

“If you want my advice, I think you should climb that boulder of a man.”

“I did bring my hiking shoes,” I said, and we both started to laugh. When our laughter subsided, I added, “I’ve never thought love at first sight existed outside of movies or my parents’ relationship, but I’m starting to think it might have some merit.”

“That happened with me and Roger,” she said. “That first night we met, I knew he was the person I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with. I never told anyone else because I knew how it would sound. So I know for a fact that it’s possible.”

I was a little bummed that she’d never shared that with me before, but I got it. “When Duncan says my name I kind of want to faint. The way he rolls that *R* . . .” I trailed off, feeling a bit embarrassed. I’d never much cared for my name growing up—my mom had taken it from some book she loved—but hearing it from Duncan’s mouth with that delightful burr?

Wow.

“Just wait until he kisses you,” Penny teased. “I might have to rush you to a hospital after.”

She was not wrong.

Ainsley knocked and then entered the room before we could answer. She had all kinds of outerwear and shawls and hats and offered us some dresses and layers that went underneath, like petticoats. “These are my sister Fia’s, but she’s pregnant and they dinnae fit, and she says somebody should be wearing them. She’s tall like you, Maren, so I think it’ll work. My sister Margaret is more your height, Penny, so here you are.”

The dresses she offered us were so pretty—they were in shades of blue and green, much like the tartan kilts we’d seen on the men. I couldn’t wait to get them on. This was like the Renaissance fair but on steroids.

Ainsley told us to meet everyone down in the great hall, and I hurried to get dressed. Penny helped me and then I helped her. We giggled when we saw each other. Especially since our modern hiking boots did not quite go with our new Scottish cottagecore aesthetic.

“You’re an authentic Scottish lass!” she told me.

“So are you!”

Then she said the words that were running around in my head, as if I’d spoken them aloud. “I wonder what Duncan will think when he sees you?”

“Let’s go find out,” I told her, feeling braver than I had in a long time. It hadn’t been that long since Duncan and I had been separated, but I actually missed him. I was desperate to see him again.

We went into the great hall, and there were dozens of people milling around. It was easy enough to find Duncan; he was a head taller than everyone else there. He grinned when he saw me and made his way over to me.

“Miss Maren, look at you. Arenae you a fine, bonnie lassie?”

This felt like high praise, and my face warmed under his compliment.



He moved in closer to me so that I was the only one who heard his next words. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," I confessed, so relieved that I wasn't alone in what I was feeling.

"I willnae make you come out into the cold for long, but there is someone I want you to meet. Come with me."

He took me by the hand, and I followed along behind him. My hand fit his perfectly, like we were two pieces of a puzzle being snapped into place. The warmth of his skin gave me goose bumps.

Those goose bumps turned into goose mountains as we stepped out into a courtyard where the snow was falling fast and furious. Someone had cleared a path. There was a raging bonfire that somehow managed to stay alight despite the snow. I noticed an evergreen tree at the center of the courtyard, just beyond the bonfire, and it was decorated with apples.

"A Christmas tree?" I asked in surprise. Wasn't that a German thing? I thought it wasn't supposed to show up for a couple more centuries.

"We have Catholic villagers who celebrated the feast day for Adam and Eve, which takes place on December the twenty-fourth. The paradise tree represents the Tree of Life, and they do a paradise play to tell the story of creation. That isnae what I wanted you to see, though," he said.

We went through the courtyard and across a bridge. It looked like a frozen moat surrounded the castle. The wind blew hard, and Duncan instinctively tucked me against his side so that he could take the brunt of it.

I felt warm, sheltered, safe.

People had lined up and were trying to light candles to accompany him on his way, but the wind kept blowing the candles out and eventually, they gave up.

As we were walking, the bells began to sound. It was midnight, so there were twelve in total.

We went to a cozy thatched cottage. It was made out of white stone with a dark roof, and smoke curled up from a chimney. Someone gave Duncan a small bag, which he took with a nod. Then he knocked on the door, and it was thrown open.

“You are most welcome here! I invite you in!” a man said. His accent didn’t sound Scottish. Odd.

“Nollaig Chrìdheil, and good tidings to you and yours,” Duncan said, handing the man the gift as he crossed the threshold.

As we entered the cottage, Duncan took the drink the man offered him and knocked it back quickly. Didn’t he say there were hundreds of people in this village? He was going to get very drunk before the night was over.

“Tis good luck,” he explained, noticing me watching him. “It would bring bad luck on this home if I were to refuse. By inviting me in, Robert has invited in good luck and prosperity for the upcoming year.”

As my eyes adjusted to the low light, I had that same sense of recognition that I’d had with Duncan.

Different, but somehow I knew this man.

“Maren Kelly, please allow me the honor of reintroducing you to your uncle, Robert Milligan.”

“Uncle Bobby?” I asked, shocked.

# CHAPTER FIVE

“Maren?” The man in front of me looked to be around my age. He was my mother’s older brother and had been twenty-seven years old when he disappeared.

This couldn’t be my uncle.

“How . . . how are you so old?” he asked. “You were a baby when I left for Scotland!”

A beautiful woman with dark red hair entered the cottage. She took off her scarf and shawl, placing them on a hook. Then she kissed Robert on the cheek. “You ken well enough how it is possible.”

The man Duncan said was my uncle looked as dazed as I felt. But he managed to say, “I’m sorry, this is rude of me. Maren, this is Niamh Campbell. Duncan’s sister and my betrothed. Er, I mean, my fiancée,” he clarified, probably to make sure I understood what he meant.

“You’re Duncan’s sister?” I asked, noticing Duncan’s amused smile out of the corner of my eye.

“Aye, and I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. I’ve heard so many good things about you,” she said.

From who? I wanted to ask. Not my uncle. He had barely known me. So Duncan was the one saying good things, but how would she know that? Had somebody run to tell her all about me?

Actually, I could totally picture Ainsley doing just that.

But . . . Duncan’s sister was going to marry my uncle? That was inexplicably weird.

Uncle Bobby looked at me, his eyes misty. “You look so much like your mother. I can’t even tell you how much I’ve missed her. Will you stay and visit with me?”

I glanced over at Duncan. He had obviously expected this as he said, “I’ll be back later to collect you.”

I nodded, and a charged moment passed between us. I wanted to hug him or kiss him or . . . something, but then he was gone, off to the next house with his merry band from the castle, including Penny, still carrying their unlit candles.

“Come, have a seat,” Bobby said, pulling out a chair from a table. I sat down, and he sat across from me. “I’m sorry if I’m staring. I can’t get over how much you look like your mother. How is she?”

There was no easy way to say this to him. It was still hard for me to say it out loud. I took a deep breath, steeling myself. I wished there were a way to cushion this blow. “Not well. She was just diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer.”

At that, Bobby’s face crumpled. Niamh wrapped her arms around him and I wasn’t sure what to do. He was my family. Soon, he’d be the only family I had in the whole world, but I didn’t know him and wasn’t sure how to comfort him.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, feeling a bit useless. “I know that’s not what you wanted to hear.”

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t there. That she’s going through this alone.”

“She’s not alone. She has me.”

“Then why are you here and not back in Ohio?” There was a slightly accusing tone that made me feel defensive. I tamped that emotion back—he had just found out that his sister was dying.

“Because I’m looking for you. The only thing left on Mom’s bucket list was finding out what happened to you. We didn’t have much to go on, just a map with a circle on it and an email you sent her. I certainly didn’t expect to find any of this.”

He nodded. “Her dying wish was to find me?” His voice broke, and I could see that he was fighting back tears. “It breaks my heart that she would be thinking of me at a time like this. I’ve missed her so much—but it’s only been a year for me. It’s been . . . how old are you now?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Twenty-five years for her that I’ve been gone. I feel terrible. I was planning on sending a message before the village disappeared again.”

“You’re staying here?” I asked, in surprise. I hadn’t considered the possibility that my uncle was in Highglen, but now that I’d found him, I’d assumed that he would come back to Ohio with me.

To say goodbye to my mother.

“My life is here,” he said. “Duncan has an extensive library, and there’s nothing more appealing to an academic than primary sources. You can’t get much more primary than the originals. But much more importantly, I’ve fallen in love.” He put his hand over Niamh’s, and she smiled at him the way Duncan smiled at me.

Maybe he wasn’t getting how serious this was. “But Mom is sick. And she’s your sister.”

“I will be a man out of time. I’m guessing the world has changed a lot in the last twenty-five years. Not to mention the fact that I can’t go back to my old life. All of my documentation will say that I’m in my fifties.”

I hadn’t even considered that. How would he get a job? A new license or a birth certificate? How would he explain having been missing for so many years? Or why he still looked so young?

“The woman I love is here,” he reiterated. “I want to build a family with her. And this place has become my home.”

I knew that I could argue that Niamh could leave with him, but this was her home as well. Her whole family was here. I realized that Uncle Bobby had made his decision a long time ago. He could have left Highglen when he’d first arrived, before it had disappeared, but he had chosen to stay.

There was nothing I could say to him that was going to change his mind.

I needed to respect that decision. I hoped it would be enough for my mom to know that he was alive and happy and

in love and would stay that way for probably hundreds of years.

“Will you tell me about your mother? About your life?” he asked. “I would like to hear everything.”

I took out my cell phone and went to the gallery and handed it to him. “Here’s some pictures.”

“Will you look at that!” he exclaimed. “Phones have come a long way, haven’t they? Such high quality. I remember how excited I was to get my BlackBerry.” He scrolled through the photos and asked me where they’d taken place, and I started to fill him in on my life, on everything he’d missed.

We talked for what felt like hours.

And it must have been, because next thing I knew there was a knock on the front door. Niamh answered it, and Duncan stood there with Alasdair.

“We’ve come to collect Miss Kelly, and Duncan’s a wee bit drunk,” he said specifically to me. “I’m to walk you both home and make sure he finds his bed and doesnae end up on the tables in the kitchens again. Chef Pierre was furious when that happened last year.”

“I need to go,” I said as I stood up. I was torn—part of me wanted to stay and keep reminiscing with my uncle. Talking to him made me feel like my mom was here with us, sharing in the experience.

But I also wanted to spend more time with Duncan.

“Are you staying for the full week?” Bobby asked, and I nodded. “Then our paths will cross again. I’m so glad you came and that I’ll have a chance to say goodbye to your mother, even if it’s just a letter.”

That made my eyes fill up with tears, and I nodded at him. I grabbed my things and quickly put them on. Niamh did the same, kissed my uncle on the cheek, and then followed after us.

“We’re to be wed the day after tomorrow,” she said, raising her voice over the howling wind. “I do hope you’ll

come.”

“Of course I’ll be there.” Not only because I’d love the chance to see my uncle get married so that I could share that memory with my mother, but also because for the first time in a very long time, I literally had nothing else going on.

We got back to the castle, and when we approached the outer courtyard, Niamh went straight ahead, breaking off from our group.

Duncan managed to tuck me back into his side again, and I loved how warm he was. He smelled amazing. Like soap, but I didn’t see how that was possible. I wrapped one of my arms around him as we walked. I didn’t care if it was allowed.

“M’annsachd.” He said the word against my ear, and I wasn’t sure if I was shivering from the snow swirling around us or from the faint sensation of his lips ghosting along my lobe.

“What does that mean?”

He reached for my hand and tugged it. “Come with me,” he said.

“Do you have another missing family member of mine that you want to show me?” I asked.

Alasdair followed closely behind us as Duncan led me to a building. He had some problems with the front door, and Alasdair had to step up and open it.

“How drunk are you?” I asked Duncan.

He grinned at me. “Very.” But he slurred his words so that it sounded like *verra*.

When Alasdair got the heavy wooden door open, Duncan led me inside. “I wanted to show you the chapel.”

“And I’m to be your chaperone!” Alasdair exclaimed with so much enthusiasm that I couldn’t help but grin at him.

“We need a chaperone?” I asked Duncan.

“Oh, aye. You are too tempting when I’m not drunk. He’s here to ensure that I behave. Even if I dinnae want to.”

His words sent spirals of heat and longing through me, and I wondered what Alasdair would do if I told him to take a hike.

Still holding my hand, Duncan led me to the front pew, and we sat. Alasdair stayed at the back, by the door. Some candles had been lit, and I could tell that there were several stained-glass windows. I wondered what they looked like with sunlight streaming through them.

It was beautiful, quiet, with the snow falling just beyond the colored glass. A safe haven decorated with the same greenery we'd seen earlier—holly, ivy, evergreen boughs.

“We've a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister here,” he said. “We allow the people of Highglen to worship as they may, especially at Christmas. We all share the chapel.”

“It's beautiful,” I told him. Again, I was struck with a wave of how right it felt to be here with him, and how familiar. As if I'd been here with him, in this very spot, before.

He looked ahead, toward the altar. “Aye. Six months ago, I came here to find refuge. Solace. I had been given a great responsibility to be leader of this community, and I dealt with it as best I could. I took sacred vows to protect this people, an oath to always watch over them. It started to weigh on me, though. I found myself wishing that I had someone to share it with. A partner I could confide in and rely on. Someone to have children with. I wanted a wife.”

He fell quiet, and his thumb was brushing against the back of my hand, causing tingles of delight.

“I came here and prayed. I asked God to send me that woman. And he sent me you. You asked me what ‘m'annsachd’ means and why I call you that. It means ‘my blessing.’ Because you are a literal answer to my prayer.”

His full gaze fell on me, and there was so much emotion there that I wasn't sure how to process his declaration. I didn't know how to tell him what his words meant to me, and how much I felt the same, as bizarre as that was. Like I'd been fated to come here and fall in love with him.



“Duncan,” I whispered, my own gaze dropping down to his lips. If I couldn’t say it, maybe I could show him.

He reached over to cup my face, his expression so tender and so sweet that I could have drowned in it. In him. He ran his thumb across my lower lip, which tingled in anticipation, and I let out a sound that was a mixture of a sigh and a slight moan. His eyes darkened, and his jaw clenched. He leaned his head forward, as if he intended to replace his thumb with his mouth.

Which I was all for.

“Alasdair! Turn around!” he ordered, not taking his eyes from me.

“Nae, your sister and your mother would have my head, and I’m not willing to risk their wrath just so you can kiss your lass,” he called back.

“I am your laird,” Duncan reminded him.

“I fear my wife more.”

Duncan considered this and then said, “Fair point. We should go then, as I’m finding I cannae resist your considerable charms, Maren.”

“I love when you say my name,” I confessed.

“Then I shall say it often. And every time I do, take it as a token and reminder of how much I want to kiss you.”

He was the most romantic man I’d ever met.

Duncan helped me to stand up. I didn’t need the help, but I was more than willing to take any excuse to touch him and have him hold my hands.

As we got to the back of the chapel, Alasdair announced, “That was too close. The two of you are begging for trouble.”

“Alasdair, I think you need to step up your chaperoning game,” I chided him teasingly.

“You may be right. I fear I will need to be more vigilant,” he quickly responded.

“I could probably just behead him and be done with it,” Duncan jumped in, playing along. “I do have that right.”

“You ken that I’d haunt you every day for the rest of your life if you laid a hand on my perfect head,” he responded. “Not to mention your sister would murder you in your sleep.”

“Aye, she would.”

We walked back out into the courtyard and headed toward the castle. I wished the night didn’t have to end but consoled myself with the fact that I’d be seeing Duncan again in the morning.

The three of us went to my bedroom door, and this time Alasdair didn’t give us any privacy.

It almost didn’t matter. I only had eyes for Duncan.

“I already had to be parted from you earlier this evening and despised every minute that kept me from your side. I wish we didnae have to be parted again so soon,” he said.

“Me too,” I said. “When will I see you next?”

“As soon as we wake. I want to spend every moment with you.”

I was seriously melting inside. “Considering how drunk you are, you might be embarrassed tomorrow when you realize everything you’ve said to me.”

“’Tis possible,” he considered and then abruptly changed his mind. “Nae, I’ll not regret telling you how I feel. You already have my heart, Maren Kelly. And I’m happy to surrender any other part of my body you wish to lay claim to.”

Romantic and unbelievably flirtatious. I would be thrilled to take him up on that offer.

Alasdair put his arm around Duncan’s shoulders. “Och, that’s enough. Off to bed with you before you start spouting poetry. The lass doesnae need to hear it. You want her to still like you tomorrow.”

He practically had to drag Duncan away, with Duncan protesting the whole way. I stood in the hallway watching as

Alasdair wrestled Duncan into his room.

I had my hand over my chest and couldn't keep the grin off my face.

Duncan had nothing to worry about. I would definitely still like him tomorrow.

And every other day after that.

# CHAPTER SIX

Penny and I were woken up the next morning by a slight woman with dark red hair shot through with strands of silver. She loudly announced, “I am Ailin Campbell. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I’ve had the servants bring in things to wash up with, and then I need you downstairs with me, please and thank you.”

I sat up in my bed, staring after her as she exited the room as quickly as she’d entered. She had to be Duncan’s mother. No wonder Alasdair was afraid of her. She seemed formidable.

A maid came in with a tray, and I noticed a tube of toothpaste and two toothbrushes. “How do you have those kinds of things?” I asked, bewildered.

“You are not the first outsiders to visit us,” the maid said and placed the tray down by a screen. “You can wash up here. I’ve also laid out two dresses for you to use today.”

I thanked her and got up to look at the tray after she left. A hairbrush, a comb, actual soap, and was that floss? What? No wonder Duncan had such great teeth. Who had brought dental hygiene to Highglen?

Penny, predictably enough, had slept through all of this. I had to go and shake her awake. “What is it?” she grumbled.

“It’s morning,” I told her. “They want us to go downstairs. And judging by the dresses they put out, it’s not going to be to celebrate Christmas.” The brown dresses looked like the kind of clothes you’d wear for cleaning.

I turned out to be right. All of Duncan’s sisters were in the great hall, and Ailin quickly introduced me, oldest to youngest. There was Sorcha, the one married to Alasdair, followed by the pregnant Fia; Niamh, who I already knew; Margaret; Elizabeth; Jean; and then Ainsley.

Ailin announced that we were going to work in the kitchens to help prepare the feast for tonight.

“We’re not supposed to be working today. The king outlawed it,” Jean muttered, quietly enough so that her mother wouldn’t overhear. “The Daft Days are for celebrating, not for working.”

“Daft Days?” I asked.

“Aye, the Twelve Days of Christmas,” Margaret added.

“You celebrate those?” I asked. “Are there a lot of birds involved?”

At this, the girls looked confused. “Nae,” Margaret said. “We start celebrating on Christmas Day and then the revels go to Epiphany on January the sixth.”

“That’s the day the wise men visited the baby Jesus,” Ainsley said helpfully.

All this time, and I had just thought it was a song. I hadn’t known that it was an actual event that people celebrated.

“I cannae believe Mam is making us work on an empty stomach,” Jean said, still determined to grumble.

“We have to fast during Advent,” Ainsley said when she saw my questioning look, ever the helpful font of knowledge. “No meat or dairy or eggs. We cannae have them until the Christmas feast. But we can sneak some morsels while we work in the kitchen.”

I met the very French Chef Pierre, and Ainsley told me that he had come to Highglen sometime during the 1800s and stayed because their food was, in his words, abysmal.

There was apparently an actual metric ton of food that had to be prepared, and Penny and I had been drafted to help out the rest of the family. We did whatever we were told—kneaded dough, stirred, cut, minced, and anything else that had to be done to prepare for the celebration.

And I enjoyed myself. My mom and I had always been takeout kind of people—I didn’t even really know how to cook. But among the camaraderie of these women, these sisters, who all dearly loved each other and teased and helped

one another out, I again found myself wishing that I had something like this in my real life.

Because they made me feel a part of things. Like I belonged with them. I wondered what Duncan was doing and whether he missed me.

I smiled to myself because I knew he did.

We had a lunch break, and then it was back to work. Chef Pierre was creating something with spun sugar that no one was allowed to see until the Christmas party.

I asked Ainsley about exchanging presents and Santa Claus. At her blank expression I added, “Or Father Christmas. Saint Nicholas?”

“Nae, we dinnae have any of those folk. Others have told us about him, but we exchange gifts on the first day of the new year.”

I wondered why that was, considering that the day the wise men came wasn't until the sixth, but before I could ask, Ainsley produced a rolled-up parchment for me. “What's this?”

“’Tis a list of all the upcoming events. We have celebrations nearly every day, and I thought it might make things easier if I listed them all for you and why we celebrate.”

I unrolled the parchment and took in her careful but childlike scribble. There were blotches and spills around the edges, and it had taken her a long time to make up her schedule. I read the first one. “Tonight we'll have dancing and feasting to celebrate Christmas Day—”

Impatient, Ainsley interrupted. “Aye, then tomorrow we have Niamh's wedding celebration, and the day after that, we're to go wassailing because Duncan has decreed it to be so.”

“Wassailing?” I repeated. “That's an actual thing?”

“Aye, 'tis mostly drinking and singing,” she said, looking a tad annoyed that I'd interrupted her. “Then the next day we celebrate Childermas.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“’Tis from when we used to have the Feast of the Holy Innocents, where we remember all of the children killed by the evil King Herod in Jerusalem. The children are in charge!”

How did those two things relate to each other? I decided not to ask. I wasn’t sure I would have liked the answer. “In charge of what?”

“Everything! The adults have to do whatever we say.”

Oh, there was no way that could go badly.

“Then we’re going to have an early masquerade ball, and then the day after that it will be Hogmanay.”

December 31. That was when Highglen would disappear, and I would have to go home. I put a hand over my stomach, trying to settle the nervous and disappointed flutters.

All my worries and fears disappeared when Duncan came into the kitchen. He found me immediately and grinned at me, and I returned his grin.

“Out with you! We dinnae need you in the way,” Ailin ordered, and I could see that Duncan wasn’t about to countermand his mother. But I could also see that he wanted to.

“Fine, I’ll be on my way.” Then he inclined his head toward me. “Maren.”

I remembered his words that it meant he wanted to kiss me and could feel my face burning up as he left. Jean noticed. “I think Maren has feelings for our brother.”

“Oh, aye,” Ainsley said, as if this were common knowledge. “He wants to marry her and give Mam more grandchildren. I’m doing my best to help things along.”

Margaret leaned over to me and said, “Ainsley has become obsessed with fairy tales lately and thinks everyone should fall in love and live happily ever after.”

I wasn’t too opposed to that idea myself.

But then Duncan and I became the new topic of conversation, and his sisters discussed us as if I weren't in the room. Whether or not Duncan had fallen for me and if I'd be a good wife for him, and if I'd fit into the family.

"Don't I get a say in it?" I whispered to Penny.

"I don't think so," she said back. "These women get things done. I wouldn't want to cross any of them."

"These are my favorite," Ainsley said as she pointed to the pies we were making. "Mince pies. They have thirteen ingredients to symbolize Christ and his apostles."

"And they always have cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg to represent the gifts of the wise men," Margaret added.

"Dinnae forget the minced lamb's meat to represent the shepherds!" Elizabeth said.

"In my day, they were large pies served on Christmas Day, shaped like a crib, but when the holiday began to be outlawed, they made them small so that they could be hidden in pockets without the authorities knowing," Ailin said as she brought us more ingredients.

"A lamb pie with tons of spices?" Penny said. She'd been vegetarian for a long time. "I'm very grossed out right now."

"I think it smells good," I told her. I was looking forward to trying it.

After everything was finished to Chef Pierre's and Ailin's satisfaction, we were all dismissed to go back to our rooms to get ready for the feast. Penny collapsed on our bed. "I think I'm going to fade away into oblivion. I can't remember the last time I worked that hard."

I didn't say it out loud, but I'd had fun. I'd liked feeling a part of something, that we were all working toward a common goal and enjoying each other's company. The whole thing had energized me. I couldn't wait for tonight's festivities.

And to see Duncan again.

I couldn't help but smile as I thought of him, and my best friend noticed.



“What is going on with you?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I just feel really . . . happy.” I wasn’t sure how to describe it. “I should be tired, but I’m not. Instead, I’m energized. Excited. Kind of giddy. It’s almost like . . .”

“Being in love?” she offered, and I just shook my head, unable to confirm her suspicion. It was too big, too scary to say out loud.

She waited a moment for me to respond, and when I stayed silent, she, thankfully, changed the subject. “If I skipped dinner, do you think that would be okay? I really want to sleep, and nothing we were working on sounds very appetizing to me.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “It could be a lot of fun.” I was so looking forward to it that I had a hard time imagining how she could want to pass on it.

“I’m sure.”

“I’ll grab you some stuff I know you’ll eat and bring it up to you,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said with a yawn.

I had put on a red dress, and in the burnished mirror, I could see that it went well with my dark hair. I even looked a little like Snow White. I pulled the front part of my hair back and tied it with a red ribbon that had been left with the dress.

She lolled her head to the side to look at me. “You look amazing. Are you trying to give Duncan a heart attack?”

“I know you’re my best friend and so by law you’re obligated to say kind things to me, but thank you.”

She gave me a thumbs-up. “That’s what I’m here for. Now, go get that Scot of yours.”

I wondered if there was some kind of protocol or if it was okay to just show up. Before I could think too much about it, Jean and Ainsley were at the door to escort me to dinner.

The great hall looked just as it had that morning—decorated with greenery, and the Yule log/tree had been moved

a bit farther into the fire. I did not understand why the whole thing didn't burn up at once, and when I said as much, Ainsley told me that it was just how it worked and that as long as we still had a Yule log to burn, we could feast. Which was why the log had to burn all twelve days of Christmas.

No wonder they chopped down an entire tree.

Duncan was already seated at the head of a table that was up on a dais, along with most of his family. There were dozens of tables set up and so many people in the great hall—the entire village must have come.

And the food? They brought out dish after dish after dish. I felt proud of the fact that I had helped to make so many of them. The food was rich and heavy, but it tasted amazing. Especially after working so hard all day, this was the best kind of reward.

I could feel Duncan's gaze on me the whole night. I wished that we were seated closer together, but Sorcha and Alasdair sat between us.

As if to make up for it, Duncan used my name all through dinner.

“What do you think of the venison, Maren?”

“Maren, have you tried the mince pies?”

“Did you like the mead, Maren? It's made with honey.”

Alasdair knew exactly what was going on and smiled to himself every time Duncan deliberately said, “Maren.”

I just loved the constant reminder that Duncan was thinking of me and wishing he could kiss me.

Chef Pierre brought out his *pièce de résistance*—a recreation of the castle made from sugar and something Sorcha called marchpane. He set it in front of Duncan, and everyone cheered. Chef Pierre personally oversaw it being handed out for people to eat. It melted on my tongue, the sweetness exploding across my taste buds.

Duncan was watching me carefully. “What say you, Maren?”

“It’s delicious,” I said and watched as he had a bite. He didn’t seem to notice the sugar, though, his gaze fixed on me.

It couldn’t have been easy for him to focus on me as often as he did. Everyone wanted his attention, including his young niece and nephew, who climbed in and out of his lap. I watched the way he crooned to them and cuddled them, and my ovaries very nearly exploded.

He also laughed and joked with everyone who stopped by the table to greet him. He was so dynamic and charming, and people couldn’t help but respond to it. He drew the eye and attention of every person in the room.

I completely understood why.

When everyone had had their fill of dessert, it was time for the dancing to begin. Musicians set up in one corner, and there were some instruments I didn’t even recognize. Tables were moved to the walls, out of the way. Someone laid swords on the floor, creating four quadrants.

The musicians began to play, and the people called Duncan’s name. He smiled and stood, waving to everyone. He gestured for Alasdair to dance with him and he jumped up, as if he’d been waiting for that invitation.

They went over to the swords and began to move in between the quadrants, leaping and dancing, never landing on the swords or harming themselves. They were both laughing, and it was the most graceful, powerful thing I’d ever witnessed.

There was so much strength and raw masculinity in what they were doing. Like a battle they were waging with their feet.

I was totally mesmerized.

The music went faster and faster, and somehow Duncan and Alasdair kept up. I held my breath, expecting that they would cut themselves on the blades at any moment, that they would make a mistake and sever a tendon or something.

It didn’t happen.

The crowd cheered for them, whistling and clapping along to the music, until the music came to a halt and both men slammed their feet down hard, cheering along with everyone else.

I clapped as loud as I could.

The swords were cleared out, and some kind of country dance started as couples began to line up. I wished that I could join in, but I didn't know any of the steps. Instead, I took the chance to get a tray together for Penny, grabbing things I knew she would like to eat. The mead in particular had been very good.

When I got to our room, she was fast asleep. I put the tray on the nightstand next to her. I wondered whether or not I should wake her but decided to let her sleep.

Ainsley accosted me in the hallway, a very solemn look on her face. "You must come with me. Right now."

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

"'Tis quite serious and needs your immediate attention."

I wondered what could have happened in the few minutes I'd been gone, but she wasn't responding to my questions. Instead, she led me by the hand to a hallway outside the great hall, over to an alcove that had a window seat. It had probably been a place that archers used to protect the castle.

"Stay here," she told me. I did as she instructed and sat on the window seat, looking out at the falling snow.

"Maren?"

Duncan approached with Ainsley grinning at me from behind his back, and he came to join me in the alcove.

She ran off.

I stood up quickly. There wasn't really enough room for both of us, but I was fine with that. It meant I got to touch him, feeling his tall, strong body pressed against mine.

"I believe we have fallen prey to my youngest sister's schemes," he told me, running his fingers along the length of

my hair.

“Schemes?” I repeated, my throat feeling a bit too tight, my heart beating a bit too hard.

He pointed up with one finger.

I looked up. “Is that mistletoe?” I asked incredulously.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

“Aye, ’tis mistletoe.”

“What does mistletoe mean here?” I asked, suddenly feeling very, very hopeful.

“It is a plant that grows in the darkness. Like the Yule log and the bonfires, or the holly, ivy, bay, and evergreen boughs we decorate with, it reminds us that although we are in the twelve darkest days of the year, life and light will return again. Spring will come.”

“Why does everything you say sound so poetic?” I sighed.

He smiled and reached up to put his hands gently on my waist. He didn’t pull me in tighter like I had hoped, but it was enough to have him touching me. I rested my hands on his arms, and it was like holding on to a warm piece of stone.

“I’m no poet,” he disagreed with me. “But that isnae all that mistletoe means. A man must steal a kiss if he finds himself under mistletoe with a beautiful woman.”

Excitement lit up my nerve endings. This was excellent news. “That’s what it means where I’m from, too.”

“Then it would be bad luck for both of us if I didnae kiss you,” he said, teasing.

“We definitely don’t want to have any bad luck,” I said as I ran my hands up his arms and then wrapped them around his neck.

“Have you kissed many men under mistletoe?” he asked, his mouth hovering above mine, breathing into my breath.

“I’ve never been kissed under mistletoe before.” I wasn’t really the Christmas party type, so I’d never encountered it outside of watching it in movies or reading about it in books. I was thrilled that the first time I’d experience it would be with Duncan. “Do you think Alasdair’s Spidey senses are tingling?”

At his very confused look, I laughed. “Let me rephrase that. Do you think that somewhere Alasdair is realizing that he’s failing miserably at his chaperone duties and won’t be protecting my honor?”

“I could go fetch him.”

“Don’t you dare,” I quickly responded, and now he was the one laughing.

“I wouldnae think of it.” His fingers pressed gently into my back, as if I were something special and precious that he had to be careful with.

“My guess is Ainsley is keeping him busy. Given how dedicated your youngest sister is to getting you a girlfriend.”

More confusion. “I have many friends that are women.”

“What do you call them here? A sweetheart?”

That delight returned to his eyes. “Ainsley has the curse of too much romance in her blood, as so many Campbells do. She must have noticed that you’re the only woman I’ve ever looked at this way.”

My pulse leapt in response to his words. “Do you have too much romance in your blood?” I already knew the answer.

“Aye,” he confirmed, this time pulling me a bit closer so that our chests were pressed together. His feet shifted so that they were closer to mine, and it made me think of him dancing earlier.

“I enjoyed watching you dance tonight,” I said. “You were . . . dexterous. Nimble. You’re so good with your feet.”

“I’m even better with my hands.” He practically purred the words, and my insides turned to molten liquid. “I saw you, as well.”

Duh, he saw me. He kept asking me about the food all evening. “I know you did.”

“Nae, I mean I *saw* you today, Maren. I saw when you slipped away with food for your friend. You are considerate.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say to his revelation. Plus, he’d started dragging his fingers slowly up and down my spine, and my brain was turning into mush.

“I saw the way you helped my family today without a word of complaint, how well you fit in with them. Niamh told me how happy you made your uncle by respecting his decision to stay. You are thoughtful and kind and everything good in this world.”

He made me wish that I could see myself the way he saw me. “I don’t know if that’s true.”

“I’ve declared it, so it must be so.”

“Your word has to be obeyed?” I asked, arching one eyebrow.

“Oh, aye. No one dare cross me here,” he teased.

“Other than every woman I’ve met so far who’s related to you,” I reminded him.

“Other than that,” he agreed with a devilish gleam in his eyes. “And I suspect I wouldnae mind it if you were to disobey me.”

“That’s good, because where I’m from, women don’t do the whole obedience thing anymore.”

“I believe we have established that they dinnae do it in Highglen, either.”

We both grinned at each other. I loved bantering with him.

I suspected I’d love kissing him even more. I leaned into him and decided to press my case. “Someone is going to notice that we’re gone soon. And we don’t want to bring any bad luck on the castle.”

“Aye, we wouldnae want that,” he murmured, his lips coming closer to mine. “I must confess that I am afraid that if I start to kiss you, I willnae be able to stop, and I would never wish to dishonor you in that way.”

Was there a proper way to ask him to please dishonor me as much as he’d like? I settled on, “I think it would be okay to



dishonor me just a little bit.”

This was all the encouragement he needed. His mouth descended swiftly on mine, and I realized I was not at all prepared for what it would be like to kiss Duncan Campbell.

I’d been wanting it for what felt like an eternity, and I had imagined it more than once, but this wasn’t what I’d expected.

I had imagined a very chaste, proper, formal kind of kiss. Something simple and sweet given that he was from the seventeenth century.

This was none of those things.

Growing up, so many of my friends had described kissing like it was some kind of religious phenomenon. That hadn’t really ever been my experience—usually, it was too sloppy, and there was too much teeth. One guy had nearly broken my nose when he’d gone in at a weird angle.

But I was suddenly understanding why everyone else made such a big deal of it. Duncan’s warm lips against mine were possessive and strong. I felt his hunger that he kept in check, but there was no denying that he wanted me every bit as much as I wanted him.

And it was definitely religious. I was pretty sure I heard an angel choir singing the “Hallelujah” chorus. It was like sitting in that chapel—there was a peace here, a safety, a surety that I belonged in Duncan’s arms, in his embrace.

It was transcendent.

There was certainly rapture and ecstasy, too. He kissed with so much confidence, so much sureness, that it was overwhelming me. I trembled in response to the power of what he was doing.

His kisses were fervent, deep, demanding. I went fluid and pliant against him, hanging on to him for dear life. My entire body buzzed, like it was going to shatter from tension and pleasure.

More than that, he was creating an emotional connection between us. Like his kisses were stitching our very souls

together, binding them into one so that being away from him would be like being torn from half of myself.

As if he were telling me a secret that could only be conveyed through his lips on mine.

I was the one who deepened the kiss, and he groaned softly, low in his throat, and my knees buckled at the sound. He tasted like sugar and mead. He crushed me to him, like he was afraid to lose me.

He met me stroke for stroke, his mouth sliding against mine, setting me ablaze, like those bonfires outside. Roaring and raging, ready to burn everything down.

Wanting to.

He backed me into a corner of the alcove, putting one of his hands over my head, as if he had to steady himself, holding me tight against him with the other.

“Maren,” he growled against my mouth. I could feel his heart hammering in his chest against mine. “We need to stop.”

“I don’t really want to,” I said, my voice breathy and strained.

“Nor do I,” he confessed. “But we will be discovered, and then we’d have to—”

“What?” I interrupted him. I’d seen enough historical romance movies to guess at what he was about to say. “Then you’d have to marry me?”

“Aye.”

I wasn’t really opposed to this idea, and I could see that he wasn’t, either.

And as much as I wanted to deny what was coming at the end of this week, I knew how things would be.

I was going back home. To spend every moment with my mother in the time she had left.

Duncan was going to stay here.

Even if some fanciful part of my brain imagined marrying him and staying, I knew it couldn't be.

He was right to stop things.

I stepped away from him, and it was just as bad as I had imagined it might be, like painfully tearing out threads with each step. I wanted to stay close to him.

He reached up and picked a single white berry from the mistletoe and put it in his pocket.

"What are you doing?" I asked after we'd both calmed down, our breathing returning to normal.

"'Tis tradition. When all the berries are gone, the mistletoe no longer has any luck. And I enjoy the idea that I'll have a small token to remind myself of kissing you."

"You are the sweetest man . . ." My voice trailed off. He said so many kind things about me, but he was the most perfect man who had ever lived. He seemed too good to be true.

Another electrically charged moment passed between us, making it difficult for me to breathe again.

But before he could pick any more berries off that mistletoe, he asked, "Would you like to go and join in the dancing?"

"I don't know how to dance the way you all are doing it."

He held out his hand to me, a charming smile lighting up his features. "I'll show you the steps."

I put my hand in his without hesitation. I was willing to follow him anywhere.

We returned to the great hall, and Alasdair immediately approached us. He gave us an assessing look, as if he knew exactly what we'd been up to. He didn't comment on it, though. "Jock was looking for you, Duncan. There is a problem with some of the sheep. He wanted you to meet him in the barn right away."

Duncan turned toward me, apologetic. “We rely heavily on those sheep. I must go.”

“Let me come with you,” I said. “This is actually my area of expertise.”

“It is?” he asked in surprise.

“I can help.”

“Then come with me,” he said. And much as I’d already decided, I’d go wherever he led me. We went into a foyer-type area, where there were coats, blankets, shawls, and hats.

Duncan threw something on casually, but then he made sure to help me bundle up. I couldn’t help but shiver with anticipation every time his fingertips brushed against my skin as he tucked a large woolen shawl into place.

“If you keep trembling that way, I cannae be responsible for my actions,” he murmured, and I could both hear the tightness in his voice and see it in the way he held his body. As if he could only barely restrain himself from kissing me again.

Because things were definitely worse now that I knew exactly what he was capable of, how skilled he was and how he seemed to know precisely how I wanted to be touched and kissed.

The way that our souls connected, as if they were two halves of a whole.

“I’m okay with you losing control,” I said.

“I ken that you are,” he said with a groan and then took me out into the freezing winter night.

There weren’t any cold showers in his castle, so I supposed a cold walk in the snow would have to do.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

The barns weren't too far from the main building. A path had been cleared through the snow, and we hurried along until we reached a warm building where the sheep were staying during the storm. There were no walls and the roof was low, with piles of hay scattered around.

"Jock?" Duncan called out.

"Who is Jock?" I asked.

"He is my sister Fia's husband and is in charge of the flocks."

There was a noise next to one of the hay piles, and two figures stepped out. In the low light it took me a second to realize that it was my uncle and Niamh.

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing because they both looked so guilty and worried.

And then, given the fury I could feel rolling off Duncan, I realized why they looked that way.

"I guess it's a good thing Bobby is marrying her," I whispered to Duncan, trying to ease the tension.

He squeezed my hand and through gritted teeth said, "'Tis a very good thing." At this point, it was probably the only thing that was going to keep my uncle alive.

Before Bobby or Niamh could explain or apologize, the door opened again, letting the cold swirl inside. A tall man with light brown hair came into the room.

"There you are, Jock."

He nodded by way of greeting. "Duncan, I stepped outside to look for you. I was inspecting the sheep tonight and noticed a few that were limping. I found something concerning."

Jock was carrying a lantern and went over to a small cluster of sheep in the corner. He spoke soothingly to the nearest one and then carefully lifted a hoof to show us the

bottom. I could see that the skin between the toes was a bright pink color. It looked inflamed. To confirm my suspicion, I reached out and touched the spot gently, and the poor ewe definitely flinched.

“It’s foot rot,” I said. “Have they been walking across wet pastures and muddy soil?”

“Aye, before the snowstorm hit, we had rains for weeks.”

“That’ll do it.” I turned toward Duncan and explained. “It’s caused by *fusobacterium necrophorum*, which is a pathogen that lives in the soil.” I stopped short when I realized that they weren’t going to have any idea what I meant by that. How was I supposed to describe a pathogen to someone from the seventeenth century? Instead, I switched gears. “It’s pretty common.”

“Do you know how to treat it?” Jock asked, sounding impressed.

“I do.” But they weren’t going to have any of the right medications here. No vaccinations, no antibiotics. “You need to isolate the infected animals from the rest of the flock; keep their hooves dry and the barn clean. If you don’t mind, I could help trim their hooves to keep the infected area exposed so that it can heal more quickly. The best thing to do would be to bathe their hooves in a copper sulfate mixture, but I’m guessing you don’t have that here.”

“Blue vitriol!” my uncle loudly exclaimed after a beat. “It’s an ingredient that is often used to create ink for writing manuscripts. Blue vitriol is copper sulfate. I happen to know that the priest has some on hand. I’ll go get it.”

He left with Niamh while Duncan glared at them.

I elbowed him. “You were doing the same thing ten minutes ago.”

From his expression, I could see that he wanted to argue that that was different, but quickly realized that he couldn’t. I was glad he didn’t have a double standard. “At least I wasnae rolling you about in the hay!”

I started to laugh, only he didn't join in. "In my time, a roll in the hay means . . . never mind." I definitely wanted to lighten the mood a bit, so I asked, "Is Alasdair their chaperone, too? If he is, he should be fired."

"I dinnae ken what that means precisely."

"He needs a new job because he's bad at this one."

Duncan rewarded me with his smile as he agreed. "Aye."

Jock located a bucket for me and put some water in it. I wasn't going to be able to measure anything properly, so I was just going to have to make my best guess.

Bobby returned alone with the blue vitriol and handed it to me. He quickly exited, probably not wanting to incur Duncan's wrath, and I couldn't blame him. Duncan could most definitely pound him into the ground. I poured the copper sulfate into the bucket, doing my best to eyeball the correct proportions, and stirred it with a stick. "I think that's it."

We coaxed each of the infected sheep into the foot bath long enough for them to absorb the mixture into their hooves and then released them. Jock was a good shepherd. All of the sheep calmed in his presence at his soft words, and they did just what he asked of them.

After we'd finished, I looked around at the hay. I had smelled the mold when we first entered but took Jock's lantern so that I could inspect it more closely. I definitely saw strands in shades of gray and black.

"Do you have issues with the pregnant cattle and sheep losing their babies too early?" I asked.

Jock looked surprised. "Aye, and it's been happening more frequently over the last couple of seasons."

Duncan nodded, as if he already knew this information.

"You have moldy hay. It's pretty common in areas like this where it rains so much. The hay gets rained on after you've cut it, or you bale it before it's had the chance to dry out completely from the last rainstorm. The problem is that it

can make the cattle and sheep sick, and it can lead to them spontaneously losing their calves and lambs.”

I turned toward Duncan. “Horses are the most susceptible to moldy hay, so you want to limit their exposure as much as you can. You’ve got good hay mixed in here, which helps, but it’s not enough.”

“Perhaps we should put dry hay on the list,” Jock said, and Duncan nodded. I wondered what list they were talking about, but Jock went back over to the infected sheep, getting them into a separate pen away from the rest of the herd as I’d recommended.

I was a little surprised that he’d listened to me so easily—I’d thought that there might be some pushback given that I was a woman and they were from hundreds of years ago, but everyone took me seriously. I was glad because I knew exactly what I was talking about.

“We could use someone like you with your expertise here at Highglen,” Jock said.

My brain latched on to his suggestion. *Look! Highglen needs a vet.* They depended so much on their animals. Wouldn’t it be great if someone were here to help take care of them? To keep them healthy?

“Let’s head back,” Duncan said, interrupting me trying to convince myself that I should stay. “So that you can tell me all about how you knew how to fix the sheep.”

I explained about veterinary school as we went back to the castle and how I was working toward graduating with my degree. “I’m guessing ‘veterinarian’ is not a word you’ve encountered before. Basically, I’m about to become a doctor for animals.”

“You went to university?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes. I’ve actually already graduated from my university with a degree—veterinary school is an additional program.”

“So, in addition to all of your other magical qualities, you are highly intelligent as well,” he said approvingly, and again I



liked the way that he made me feel about myself. “Why did you decide to become an animal doctor?”

I told him about how much I’d always loved animals growing up but hadn’t been able to ever have a pet because my mother was deeply allergic to almost every kind of animal dander. That led to him telling me about the many pets he had owned over the years, which made sense, given how agricultural his upbringing had been.

We went back into the foyer, took off our outer layers, and rejoined the party in the great hall. It was still going strong, and everyone was dancing.

True to his word, Duncan showed me every step of every dance, and it was actually fairly easy to pick up. They had the same patterns repeated over and over, and once you mastered the basics, it was simple.

We danced with his village until the wee hours of the morning, nobody wanting to leave. But finally, people started to become tired and/or too drunk, and they began saying their goodbyes. Much like earlier, everyone wanted to wish Duncan a Nollaig Chridheil or Merry Christmas until they were all gone and it was just me, Duncan, and his teenage sisters.

Somebody had brought some couches and placed them in front of the fire. It was so cozy, and the room smelled of evergreens from the garland that had been hung up. I sat as close to him as I dared. Ainsley was on my other side, reading a book of fairy tales that looked very modern. I asked where she’d gotten it, and without even looking up, she said, “From your uncle.”

I made a mental note to ask him about it.

Duncan reached for my hand, and it was as if his sisters weren’t even in the room. And at some point, one by one, they all fell asleep. But he and I stayed up the rest of the night, talking, sharing our life stories.

And to someone else, it might have seemed like we had nothing in common. We didn’t even come from the same century.

But he understood me. Could commiserate with me over the loss of loved ones. We shared a love and zest for life, although mine felt more newly discovered. He wanted to learn about the modern world and listened to me go on and on about things like airplanes and cars and televisions. He looked at me like everything I said was utterly fascinating.

And I was just as mesmerized by him, by the education and schooling he'd received in the village, the books he'd collected over the years, how his father had set up a storehouse that he'd stocked full before he'd vanished, what it was like to fight in combat and to go to the court of the king of Scotland.

*I could fit in here*, I thought. If someone had told me a week ago that I would even consider such a thing, I would have denied it.

Because obviously, there were things that I would miss. I had a particular fondness for electricity and refrigeration and indoor plumbing. Not to mention modern medicines and grocery stores and cell phones.

I never would have thought that I could have gone this long without being constantly online. Usually, my phone was never far from me, and I spent most of my free time scrolling through social media, sucked into those platforms.

But I didn't even miss it. I kind of liked this being-off-the-grid thing. There was a lot of life to live, and I'd been missing out on so much of it by ignoring the real world.

As Duncan and I talked, he stole quite a few sweet and tender kisses that still managed to thrill and excite me. Things couldn't go beyond that point because we didn't want to wake up any of his sisters, and he apparently had some pesky moral code about kissing and other fun activities.

While I loved the physical connection, I found that I was enjoying the emotional one even more. I had often wondered what it was that made people spark to each other, to like someone so much that you wanted to be with them all of the time and how it made you fall in love.

But it was becoming entirely clear to me now.

Maybe it was Christmas, maybe it was Duncan, but Highglen was a place of pure magic. For the first time, I understood why my mother had told me to search for it.

I didn't want to let it go.

# CHAPTER NINE

Early the next morning, Duncan walked me back to my bedroom, where, to my dismay, he behaved like a gentleman.

“Are you sure I can’t tempt you?” I asked him, holding on to his shirt and tugging at it gently.

He put his hands around my wrists and pulled my hands up to kiss both of them, then turned them over to press delicate kisses to the inside of my wrists, which made me gasp. “You always tempt me, Maren. I will see you later at the wedding.”

Right. Niamh and Bobby were getting married today.

When I went to open the door, I heard an “oof” sound, and something was blocking my way.

It turned out to be Penny.

“Were you listening at the door?” I asked her.

“This is just as good as a TV show,” she said. “Maren and Duncan falling love. I noticed that you stayed out all night.”

She waggled her eyebrows at me suggestively, and I laughed.

“We were accompanied by his sisters the whole time. We just talked.”

“Oh, that is the best.” She sighed, sinking onto her bed. “Roger and I did that the first night we met. Stayed up until the morning and talked and talked. It is so romantic. It helps you to really get to know someone.”

“It does,” I agreed, heading over to brush my teeth. They were definitely in need of a good scrubbing after all the sugar I’d eaten the previous night. “But I already feel like I know him. Like I always have.”

“I guess that happens when you’re actual soulmates.”

“Soulmates?” I stopped mid-scrub to stare at her. “That just happened to be born in different centuries?”

“And fate found a way to bring you together! I am on board with this ship, just so you know.”

I let out a short laugh. “I appreciate your support, but you know as well as I do that this can’t go anywhere.”

“Why not?”

“What’s going to happen? I’m going to stay and let my mom deal with everything alone? I’d never do that to her.”

Penny frowned. “I would explain everything to her if you wanted me to, but I understand. I just think it’s a shame. Can’t he come back with us?”

“He told me that he took vows when he became leader. I can’t imagine that he’s the kind of man who would break those. You weren’t at the Christmas party last night, so you didn’t get to see it, but he really is in charge at Highglen. Everyone looks to him to lead them, and his entire family is here. He grew up with all of these people, and they all love him.”

“You love him.”

Another statement that had me pausing, and after last night, it no longer felt scary to admit it. “Is it weird if I say that I do?”

“No. But like I said, I believe that it can happen at first sight. Have you told him?”

“I—” I wasn’t sure why I was so hesitant to discuss it with my best friend. It was like this personal thing between me and him. “No, I haven’t told him.” I couldn’t really imagine telling him about my feelings, especially given that we’d just met.

But I wanted to.

The realization that I wanted to tell him I loved him disrupted my balance, and I sat down in my chair, feeling defeated. What was I doing? There was no way that I could say those words. This couldn’t lead anywhere.

As if she knew exactly what I was thinking, Penny came over to me and put her arms around me. “You don’t have to marry this guy. You found someone that you really connected

with, and while you're here, you should take advantage of that. Experience what it's like because it can be pretty great to be in love."

"But what about the heartache at the end?"

"Love always ends in heartache. Even when you spend sixty years with someone, you'll either die or break up. But I've never met anyone who regrets loving another person with their whole heart, no matter what the outcome may be. Forgive my English major showing here, but I have to quote Tennyson at you because it is definitely better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all."

She was right. Duncan wasn't the only person I loved that I was going to have to say goodbye to soon. Maybe I should protect my heart better, but why? I would rather have the memories of this week than deny myself something I wanted and needed just so that I wouldn't hurt later.

"You're right," I said.

"I usually am," she agreed as she stood up. "What's on the agenda for today? Are we again whipping up enough food to feed a small army?"

"Apparently a lot of the stuff we worked on yesterday was for today's wedding. Chef Pierre was able to store it in containers outside with the whole natural refrigeration thing going on due to the snowstorm."

"Good," she said. "I would like to relax at some point during this holiday."

She left, presumably to use what passed for a toilet here, and I looked at my reflection.

I had come to a decision, and I was going to stick with it. I would love Duncan and spend every moment that I could with him, taking whatever parts of himself he wanted to share with me, and then I would go back home.

This might all feel like a dream someday, but I would rather have that pain than miss out on the opportunity to have this time with him.

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I slept most of the morning but was woken up by Duncan's mother when she informed me that Penny, Ainsley, and I had been put on decorating duties. The inside of the chapel was already done up pretty well, and we just ran some more evergreen garlands along a few beams and around a couple of columns. I suggested we decorate the pews, but Ainsley told me that they would be moved out of the way for the wedding. All of the guests would stand around the couple in a circle.

"I've often thought about having a Christmas wedding," Penny said. "I love the color scheme."

Ainsley said, "Most brides dinnae choose to be married in the winter. Weddings take place in the spring, and there are usually lots of flowers and heather, and it is gorgeous. But Robert and Niamh didnae want to wait until then."

After what I'd witnessed in the barn last night, I figured that was probably a good idea.

All three of us went back to the room Penny and I shared. Penny and I got ready for the wedding while Ainsley lay on our bed, reading her fairy-tale book. I guessed she was also hiding from her mother because someone had mentioned a bath, and it turned out she was highly opposed to them.

I personally would have killed for a warm bath. I had to make do with scrubbing myself with soap and a washcloth behind a screen, though.

After I'd put on a dark green dress, there was a knock at the door. I hoped it would be Duncan, but it turned out to be my uncle. I shouldn't have been surprised that I hadn't been able to see Duncan that morning—with everything going on, there was probably a lot for him to do.

Penny invited my uncle in, and he said, "Maren! I'm glad I found you. I have a favor to ask."

"Sure thing. What's up?"

"Will you be my best man?"

"You want me to be your best man?" My face broke into a smile.

“You’re my only family, and I would love for you to be a part of my wedding. What do you say?”

“I say yes! But you’re getting married in, like, half an hour. What am I supposed to do as far as best man duties go? A bachelor party is obviously out of the question.” I was joking, but honestly, given how strict everyone was just about kissing, I couldn’t imagine more, um, explicit forms of entertainment going over too well.

“I just want you to stand up with me.”

Ainsley wrinkled her nose at me, and it made me ask, “Do you think the Campbells will be okay with it?” It was fairly untraditional for our own time, let alone this one.

“I’ll explain to Ailin that the customs in America are different. They already think America is a lawless land full of heathens and puritans, so I’m sure they’ll understand,” he said with a grin. “Thank you!”

Ainsley ran off behind him when he left, presumably to share this change of events with her sure-to-be-disapproving mother.

When we were finished getting ready, Penny and I went down to the chapel. Bagpipes played, and it sounded haunting and beautiful against the winter storm.

“I wonder if Roger or I have any Scottish heritage,” she said. “Bagpipes are actually amazing, and he would look hot in a kilt.”

Roger wasn’t the only one who would look hot in a kilt. Somehow, Duncan had grown infinitely more attractive in the few hours I’d been away from him. He was up near the altar with my uncle. I was giddy to see Duncan. Positively giddy. It should have been embarrassing, but I loved him too much to care.

I joined them, and Duncan grinned at me. “Maren.”

“Duncan.”

“Maren,” he said again, and I was glad Alasdair wasn’t around to roll his eyes at us.



“I hear you’re to be the best man,” Duncan added, and I nodded. “I hope you take your responsibilities seriously.”

“Responsibilities?” I echoed.

“Aye. I’ve a sword for you. Are you right-handed?” I nodded, and he helped me put on a belt with a sword hanging down on my left.

“Oof. It’s heavy,” I told him.

“Aye. We dinnae have a smaller one that would be of a better size for someone as wee as you,” he said. I liked that he saw me as dainty even though I was taller than every woman I’d met in Highglen so far. “But ’tis your responsibility to fight off any invaders who might try to kidnap my sister.”

“Have a big issue with kidnappings in your magic village protected from the outside world, do you?”

“Weesht,” he said teasingly, and I figured that meant *Be quiet*. “It was long ago that it happened, but sometimes warring clan members would marry one another, and things would happen at weddings.”

“Like your great-grandparents.”

“Aye. But no one was kidnapped or died at their wedding, to my knowledge.”

Good thing Highglen was such a safe place. Because if I had to stab somebody with this sword to protect the bride, Niamh was definitely getting kidnapped today.

“’Tis why the bride stands to the left of the groom,” he explained as he checked the belt to make sure it wouldn’t slide off me. “He has to have his sword hand ready in case he must protect her.”

I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that if someone ever came to kidnap me or prevent my wedding, Duncan would destroy them, and while that probably shouldn’t have given me a secret, feminine thrill, it totally did.

“What are you thinking about?” he teased.

“How you would protect me if somebody tried to steal me from you.”

His face sobered, and he said, “Aye, I would give up my own life if it meant you would be safe.”

I made a noise at the back of my throat. I loved him so much. Why was he the most romantic man who had ever lived? Having never dated a man who even knew what romance was, let alone ever did anything romantic, I didn’t know what to do with someone like Duncan, who always had the romance flowing, like a lawn sprinkler.

He glanced at the back of the chapel. “Come. ’Tis time for the wedding to begin. You’ll have to escort Elizabeth down the aisle, as she’s a bridesmaid.”

I tried taking a step forward, and the sword made it almost impossible. I could see that Duncan wanted to laugh, and I pointed a finger at him. “Don’t. I have this.”

“I ken that you do, m’annsachd.”

He was not going to use endearments to get out of this.

Even though it kind of worked.

A piper led the processional as everyone in the wedding party lined up to walk down the aisle of the chapel. Robert went first, escorting Margaret, the maid of honor. I came next with Elizabeth. We took our places at the front, near the altar.

Then everyone stood as Niamh came in, escorted by Duncan. I supposed that traditionally her father would have been the one to give her away, but Duncan was the head of their family now, and it made sense that it would be him.

I watched him walk down the aisle, and I was struck with a vision so vivid that it took me a second to figure out it wasn’t reality.

I was the one wearing the blue and green tartan of Clan Campbell, walking down the aisle, escorted by Robert.

With Duncan waiting for me at the altar.

# CHAPTER TEN

Admittedly, I had never actually experienced a hallucination before. What I was seeing felt so real, as if it had already happened.

Not as if it were something that would happen.

It was like a memory.

Weren't visions meant to be for the future? Because it would have to be my future as it hadn't happened yet.

Or maybe it had, because Highglen was four hundred years behind the rest of the world.

This time-loop thing was weird and obviously messing with my brain. I shook my head, forcing myself to come back to reality.

Niamh was radiant, beaming at everyone. She carried a bouquet that matched the garland—holly, ivy, evergreen boughs, and dried white heather, which I guessed was for luck, like nearly every other tradition I'd come across.

I only looked at her for a moment, though, because she was being escorted by Duncan. I could see how pleased he was with this day, that he was happy for and proud of his sister, and then his gaze was on me, and everything else melted away.

Duncan passed Niamh over to Robert, and then he came to stand close to me. His fingers brushed against mine, and I wished that I could hold his hand. It was enough to be standing close to him, though.

The minister told everyone to gather round in a circle. "I welcome you, Robert and Niamh, into the circle of your people. Your clan, your family, your neighbors, all gathered round to support and love you both."

The ceremony passed by quickly. The minister spoke about love and commitment, the sacredness of marriage,

quoted some Bible verses. Vows were said, and they were familiar, so similar to the things people said in my time.

But then things veered off in a direction I was unfamiliar with.

“Take your bride by the hand, Robert,” the minister said.

Robert smiled at Niamh and took her by the right hand. The priest picked up a piece of cloth. It was tartan, the same blue and green that Duncan and his men wore. The priest tied it in a knot around Robert’s and Niamh’s joined wrists.

“They’re literally tying the knot,” I mused to myself.

Duncan overheard. “Aye. ’Tis called handfasting.”

That sounded romantic.

The minister told them what to say, and they repeated his words.

“I, Niamh Campbell, take thee, Robert Milligan, to be my husband and thereto plight thee my troth.”

“I, Robert Milligan, take thee, Niamh Campbell, to be my wife and thereto plight thee my troth.”

The minister smiled at them and said, “As your hands are now bound together, so, too, are your lives bound together as one. Hold tight to one another, and let no one unbind it. May this knot remain tied for as long as you both shall live, drawing you close, remembering that the threads represent the support and strength of your clan and loved ones and your hopes and dreams for a happy life together.”

“You’re crying,” Duncan murmured.

I reached up to my face in surprise. I was crying, and I hadn’t even realized it. “This is so beautiful. All these words and traditions.”

“Aye,” he said, looking directly at me. “Beautiful.”

My heart fluttered in my chest at his expression, and I swallowed back the emotion I was feeling. This wasn’t the time or place. “I’m so glad I’m here to see it. My mom is going to be so happy when I tell her.”

“Maren, I wish . . .” But Duncan’s voice trailed off, and whatever he wanted to whisper to me, he kept it to himself.

Uncle Bobby gave Niamh a ring, and she gave him half a gold coin. The minister then offered them something called the Quaich, a silver cup with two handles on it. Niamh and Roger each drank from it, and then they passed it on to Duncan for him to have a drink.

He then handed it to me. “You are supposed to drink.”

“Remind me to tell you about germs,” I said, taking a quick sip of the whisky, which burned my lips and throat.

“Pass it to the person behind you,” he said, and I handed it over to Penny.

“Let me guess. It’s good luck,” I said to him.

He grinned at me. “Aye. ’Tis good luck to drink whisky at a wedding, and everyone drinking from it shares in the happiness of the bride and groom. It also symbolizes the two families being united. The Quaich has two handles because you must use both hands to drink, which means you cannae be holding a weapon at the same time.”

“There are a lot of things at your weddings that are about weapons and not killing people.”

“And luck,” he reminded me.

“Right. Can’t forget about luck.”

The Quaich was passed around until it made its way back up to the minister, who returned it to the altar. Then Robert and Niamh exchanged brooches that they put on each other’s shoulders.

“’Tis a symbol of the Campbells, and it signifies that they accept one another into their clans,” Duncan told me. “Niamh will wear hers next to her Luckenbooth.”

“Her what now?”

“Luckenbooth,” he repeated. “’Tis a special brooch given from a bridegroom to his bride before the wedding. Two hearts

intertwined to symbolize their love topped by a crown to symbolize loyalty.”

“You may now kiss your bride!” the minister declared, and the entire room erupted into applause as Robert sweetly kissed Niamh.

“Och, do it like you mean it, laddie!” Alasdair yelled, and that prompted Robert to take Niamh in his arms, dipping her back to the crowd’s delight.

The bagpiper started up again, leading everyone back to the castle. This time Robert escorted Niamh. I was probably supposed to walk with a bridesmaid, but instead Duncan put my hand through his arm. I leaned on him to help counterbalance the heavy weight of the sword.

When we got to the great hall, he helped me remove the sword and scabbard, and I let out a sigh of relief. “Much better,” I told him. The great hall was not quite as full as it had been on Christmas Day. “Where are the rest of the villagers?”

“Today is the Feast of Saint Stephen, and some are celebrating that.”

That sounded familiar, and I had to rack my brain for a moment. “Like in ‘Good King Wenceslas’?”

“I dinnae ken, but it is a feasting day where we are to give alms and charity to the poor. At Highglen it is unnecessary as we all share with each other and work together. But a feast is a feast.”

If I’d learned anything in my time here, it was that Scottish people would take any opportunity to have a party.

A reel started, and without even asking, Duncan took me by the hand and led me into the dance. There was so much exuberance and joy in the dances they did, and I loved every second of it. I felt like we had really lost out on something in the twenty-first century by not having these kinds of communal dances.

Nightclubs didn’t really compare.

There were toasts to be made and a cake that needed to be cut, and Duncan was called on to oversee the events.

Penny came over and gave me a side hug. “You’re certainly enjoying yourself. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“In love. Free. Happy.”

All three of those things were true.

“This time thing is weird,” she mused. “If you married Duncan, then Niamh and Robert’s children would be your nieces and nephews and your cousins.”

Part of me wished it could be true. That I could stay here like Robert had and marry Duncan and be part of this family.

I couldn’t dwell on it, though. Thinking about it too much would break my heart. I wanted to enjoy the time I had in Highglen without being sad.

“Are you okay?” she asked, picking up on my mood shift.

“I am. I’m just going to be so miserable when I have to go.”

Robert joined us then, carrying something in his hands. “It’s not tradition here, but it is back home. I got you a gift to thank you for being my best man.”

“You didn’t have to give me anything,” I told him, but I was touched by the gesture.

“It meant a lot to me to have you here today—I certainly hadn’t expected it. But it was wonderful to have a member of my family standing by my side.”

“Ready to stab someone for you,” I reminded him, and he laughed.

“Yes, ready to stop any would-be kidnappers or angry clan members. Open it.”

I removed the string, and the covering fabric slid away. It was a book. The fairy-tale book I kept seeing Ainsley reading.

I looked at him questioningly.

“This was your grandmother’s favorite book. She used to read it to me and your mother every night before bed. It’s one of the few things I have from her, and now I want you to have it.”

My eyes immediately filled with tears. “I couldn’t. Ainsley loves it.”

“She’s pretty much memorized it by this point,” he reassured me. “She’s happy for you to take it. I always kept this book in my bag, carrying it with me everywhere I went as a reminder of home. It would make me happy to know that you will take it back with you to Ohio. And when you show it to your mother, she’ll know for sure that you found me.”

That touched me as well. I had imagined trying to tell my mother all about everything that had happened to me. My cell phone had died, and it hadn’t occurred to me the first night here that I should take a picture of Bobby because I was so overwhelmed by everything that was happening. I regretted that now.

So without any photographic evidence, I knew she would want to believe me, but this story would be so fantastic, how could she?

The book would prove that I was telling the truth, and I was thankful he’d helped me in that regard as well.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll treasure it always.”

“You’re welcome. Would it be okay for me to hug you?”

“Yes!” He grabbed me up in a big bear hug, and then the tears did fall. He was my extended family, my mother’s only brother, and I was going to leave him behind. I had missed a lifetime of this, and I was consigning myself to another lifetime without it.

It all felt so unfair.

Robert kissed me on the forehead and left to rejoin his bride. Duncan was there immediately beside me, looking worried.



“Are you well?” he asked.

“I am. I just need to put this away.” I held up the book. I didn’t want to leave it in the great hall and have something happen to it. Not that I thought anyone would steal it, but I was worried about it being misplaced.

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

We walked into the hallway and up the stairs. “Come with me, huh? Is this a ploy to get me alone?”

“Maren, we both ken that I wouldnae have to resort to ploys or tricks to get you to be alone with me.”

He was right. I would go very willingly.

When we got to my room, I left the door open as an invitation.

“Care to join me?” I asked, my heart beating hard in my chest. I knew what he was going to say, but a part of me hoped he would say yes.

If for no other reason than I wanted to have that memory of him.

“You ken that I cannae,” he said, sounding very regretful and staying at the threshold.

I nodded, putting the book on my nightstand. I came back over to him and closed the door, and I could see the way it made him visibly relax.

He had been fighting an internal battle that I wasn’t even aware of, and it gave me a surge of confidence.

“We won’t be missed for at least a few minutes. Do you think we could find some mistletoe?” I asked.

He grinned and took me in his arms. “I dinnae need mistletoe to kiss you.”

“Good.”

He leaned his head in, and just before his lips met mine, he said, “I’ve never kissed a best man before.”

“Neither have I,” I told him, putting my hand on the back of his neck to pull him all the way down to my lips.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day was a blur. Ailin claimed Penny and me for more cleaning, as the castle had to be scrubbed tip to tail, as she said it, to prepare for Hogmanay. To absolutely no one's surprise, it turned out to be bad luck for the house to be dirty when the new year started.

Duncan worked with the men. I got glimpses of him through the day but didn't get to spend any time with him. I missed him, but again I enjoyed the camaraderie and closeness of his sisters, especially the way Sorcha and Fia were teasing a blushing Niamh mercilessly.

"Feeling a wee bit sore today?" Fia asked, blinking innocently at her newly married sister.

"Aye, my feet are worn out. From the dancing and from that sixpence I had in my shoe for luck," Niamh said.

"It wasnae your feet I was referring to," Fia said while grinning, and Niamh made a sound of embarrassment.

"Did you get any sleep last night? Or were you awake all night long?" Sorcha added, and Niamh's skin flushed. The youngest two sisters looked very confused, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"You can laugh all you want now," Niamh said to me, "but soon enough, it'll be your turn, m'annsachd."

That made me immediately stop. "How do you know about that?"

Sorcha said, "Alasdair couldnae keep a secret from me if his very life depended upon it. What are your intentions with our eldest brother?"

"Weesht, all of you, back to work!" Ailin said as she breezed into the room. "This castle willnae clean itself!"

I'd never been so grateful to see Duncan's mother as I was at that moment. With her staying nearby, the teasing stopped.

So did the questions, which was good because I didn't have an answer for them. I didn't know what my intentions were beyond living in the moment.

We cleaned until Ailin told us we'd finished for the day and to get ready for that evening's festivities.

"Remind me what's happening tonight," I said to Margaret.

"Wassailing. Normally, we dinnae do it until Twelfth Night, or Uphalieday, but Duncan wanted to do it tonight because you willnae be here when . . ." She let her voice trail off and looked at her sisters desperately, but no one made eye contact with her. So she just cleared her throat and proceeded on as if she hadn't hinted at the fact that I would be leaving soon. "Today is also the feast of Saint John, who drank a glass of poisoned wine and didnae become sick. It has always been a day devoted to drinking, so it makes sense to wassail today. And Duncan loves wassailing, and he was determined to share it with you."

There were tiny knives pricking my heart. The pain was bearable, but it was there. Constant and unrelenting, reminding me that I would be going home and that this would all be over soon while Duncan tried to fill our time together with wonderful memories.

I tried to ignore those feelings, but it was hard to do.

While I already knew how much Scots loved to dance, drink, and feast, that night I was properly introduced to another pastime they adored—singing.

As Ainsley had told me, wassailing was just singing and drinking. They sang a lot of songs I didn't know, some of them in Gaelic. But they also had Christmas carols that I was familiar with, including "Here We Come A-Wassailing," a song I'd never much understood before I actually participated in it.

Ainsley held my hand while we waited to venture out into the cold. I already loved her and her sisters so much—it

wasn't just Duncan that I was going to leave, but his entire family that I had come to care so much about.

“With you having the Twelve Days of Christmas, I'm a little surprised that you don't sing that song about it.”

“You know a song?” she asked.

I started to run through “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” but she stopped me at the fourth day.

“What are calling birds?” she asked.

“I don't know. Birds that call, I guess?”

She seemed puzzled by this. “Mayhap you meant colly birds. ‘Colly’ means ‘black.’”

Huh. That actually made more sense.

“We have a song like that, but it is a bit different. It has thirteen days of Yule.”

Ainsley then sang me the last verse of the Scottish version of “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” which included all of the days.

The king sent his lady on the thirteenth Yule day,  
Three stalks o' merry corn,  
Three maids a-merry dancing,  
Three hinds a-merry hunting,  
An Arabian baboon,  
Three swans a-merry swimming,  
Three ducks a-merry laying,  
A bull that was brown,  
Three goldspinks,  
Three starlings,  
A goose that was grey,  
Three plovers,  
Three partridges,

A pippin-go-aye;

Wha' learns my carol and carries it away?

“That has to be hard to remember,” I said. “At least mine goes in numerical order. Although everybody messes up numbers eight through twelve.” Even now, I wasn't sure if I could have placed them in the correct order. “What are goldspinks? And a pippin-go-aye?”

It was Duncan who answered, coming up to take my free hand and pressing a kiss against it. “A goldspink is a goldfinch, and a pippin-go-aye is a peacock.”

“Hi,” I said to him, feeling breathless and giddy all over again.

“Maren, Maren, Maren,” he said with a nod, his gaze intense on me, and I heard Alasdair laughing somewhere behind us.

I didn't care that it was at our expense.

Now that Duncan had arrived, the people in the castle went out into the snowstorm to carol from door to door at the village. At each house, we were invited in to drink from the wassail bowl, which was like a big wooden punch bowl that was passed around.

Everybody was supposed to drink out of it, then raise the bowl above their heads and call out either “Wassail!” or “Drinkhail!”

I was sure this activity was about good luck, too.

And I needed all the good luck I could get.

Wassail turned out to be some mixture of hot ale, spices, and sugar, with another flavor. I thought I tasted apples, like cider.

At the first house we went to, the host fished out a hardened crust of bread from the bottom of the bowl and offered it to Duncan. “The toast to Duncan Campbell! Wassail, wassail, wassail!” the host called out.

“Drinkhail!” the crowd responded, cheering for Duncan, and then everybody broke into a song.

I didn’t understand any of what had just happened. Penny and I exchanged confused but happy glances. We were both having a great time, caught up in the celebration, and clapped along. I only wished that I knew more of the songs.

Duncan, as I could have predicted if someone had asked me, had a gorgeous singing voice, strong and loud. He always hit the right note.

As we moved to each cottage, I noticed how the storm had started to wane. It wasn’t nearly as intense as it had been when we’d first arrived—every day, the snow was a bit lighter, the wind lessened, the daylight lasted longer. Duncan had told me that the snow would clear, and that would be a sign that Highglen was going to disappear again when the bells rang. We’d have to be outside the borders so that we wouldn’t be trapped.

Duncan didn’t mention the changing weather, and neither did I.

He did manage to lie to me for the first time, though.

“You have the voice of an angel,” he told me as he tucked my hand through the crook of his arm.

“I do not, and you are lying.”

“Aye, but my da always said a wee lie was fine as long as it was for a good cause.”

“And what’s the good cause?” I asked.

“Making you happy.” If we hadn’t been surrounded by a group of people, I knew he would have kissed me then.

“You don’t have to lie to me to make me happy,” I said. “Just being with you does that. And you have an incredible voice, and that’s not a lie.”

He pondered that for a moment and then said, “Thank you. I treasure all of the kind words that you give to me. I also appreciate the way you leap right into things, how you are

eager to participate, even if the activity isnae your . . . greatest gift.”

I shook my head. Even when he was insulting my singing, he was still being sweet about it.

“’Tis a weakness of mine,” he confessed.

“You have a weakness? I find that hard to believe.”

“I have a great many, Maren.”

I wondered if the tingles I experienced every time he said my name would ever go away. “And what weakness are you referring to?”

“I dinnae like to do things unless I know I’ll do them well.”

A perfectionist? “Oh. Is that why you don’t kiss me?”

His eyes gleamed at my teasing. “Nae, you have no cause to complain about that. I am quite good at it.”

If he had been anybody else, I probably would have tried to take his ego down a notch or two, but Duncan was only speaking the truth. “Is it weird that it makes me like you more to know that you’re human?”

“Does it? Shall I also tell you how sometimes I belch at the dinner table after eating? Or how I dinnae clean up after myself and make messes in my rooms? Or that I am overprotective of the people I love?”

“Sorry.” I shrugged. “I keep thinking that eventually you’ll say something that will make me like you less, but it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Aye, every new thing I learn about you is more wonderful than the last,” he agreed.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

He paused and then said, “If I was not leader of this village, I would have liked to try my hand at carpentry.”

“Really?”



“Aye, I enjoy carving and whittling when I have a spare moment. Which isnae often during Yuletide.”

I could see that. I’d been kept busy the entire time I’d been here. “Can I see some of the things you’ve made?”

“They’re not very good,” he said, sounding embarrassed. “I keep them in my wardrobe in my room so as to not be subjected to scrutiny.”

If I were a betting woman, I would have laid down good money that everything he made was exceptional. “So, you have a secret talent that I didn’t know about. Again, I like you more for it.”

“Tell me something about you then. Something you’re embarrassed by.”

I didn’t know what else there was to tell him about me. I felt like I’d already shared everything. “I have sort of broken the law sometimes. Back home we have a lot of unwanted pets, and the local government cares for them in shelters. On weekends, I go over and help out, and sometimes I give medical recommendations if the volunteer veterinarian hasn’t made it in that week. Which technically I shouldn’t be doing, as I haven’t graduated yet, and I would probably get in trouble if anyone found out, but I can’t help myself. I don’t like to see animals suffer.”

He came to a stop. “I already knew that you were selfless and tenderhearted, and you just confirmed it. You failed as well. I like you all the more for your lawlessness.”

I wished we weren’t surrounded by so many people. That we were alone so that I could kiss him.

“We didnae speak of my greatest weakness,” he said in a voice so low that I had to lean in to hear him better.

“What is that?” I asked.

“’Tis you, Maren Kelly.”

# CHAPTER TWELVE

The next morning, Ainsley woke me up. “It’s Childermas!” she exclaimed.

I tried to remember what that word meant, but I was so groggy. I hadn’t been this hungover in a long time. The end of the evening was a blur—Penny told me that she’d managed to hide behind other people during the wassailing, and I vaguely remembered her helping me up to bed. But I was still in my clothes from last night, and my head was pounding. Ainsley was much too cheery and way too loud.

Childermas. That was the day where little kids were in charge. I propped myself up on my elbow. I would have done anything for some aspirin. I wondered if there was a seventeenth-century equivalent.

Jean stuck her head in the door. “You’re too old for Childermas, Ainsley.”

“I am not!” Then, as if to prove her point, she stuck her tongue out at her older sister.

In true teenage fashion, Jean just rolled her eyes and left. It was then that I realized Penny must have already woken up and gone downstairs.

“So I have to do whatever you say?” I asked Ainsley, who was thrilled by this prospect.

“Aye! And my first command is that you get changed and come break your fast with us.”

She bounded out of the room with so much energy that it made my head hurt worse.

I had a terrible hangover and had probably contracted the plague from drinking from so many communal bowls of wassail. It took me a lot longer to get ready than it normally did, and I was so grateful that I had toothpaste and a toothbrush, as my tongue felt like it had been wrapped in a gross, green furry material.

Penny was in the great hall, eating her breakfast with Duncan's teen sisters. Ainsley was sitting at the head of the table, in Duncan's spot. I wondered if he was still sleeping—he'd had to drink almost twice as much as I did because everyone wanted to honor him.

I sat down next to Penny. She was eating porridge, which I normally enjoyed, but right now it looked like vomit and made me queasy.

"Hungover?" she asked.

I held up my thumb and index finger. "Little bit."

"Poor thing. My mom always says to eat something greasy. They have bacon and eggs."

Again, a wave of nausea swelled up inside me, and I shook my head violently.

"Did you hear about Childermas?" Penny asked. "Ainsley's been filling me in."

"I did." With the condition I was currently in, the last thing I needed was to have a little mini tyrant telling me how to spend my day. I needed water. Robert had told me that before his arrival, everyone mostly drank weak ale, as the water made them sick. The ale-making process included boiling water, something they hadn't realized. Once he'd told them that boiling water was the key to killing off germs and parasites, they'd made drinking water available.

Which was good, because I could drink enough water to fill a loch. After I'd gulped down my second glass, Penny said, "I have ibuprofen in my bag upstairs."

"You do?" I hugged her. "You are my favorite person in the whole world."

"That's pretty big praise considering how in love you are with Duncan."

I hushed her, hoping his sisters hadn't overheard. Especially Ainsley. Who knew what scheme she might concoct now that she had power over the household?

“I’ll be right back,” I said. I practically ran up the stairs to our room, found Penny’s bag, and grabbed the medicine. I drank directly from the water pitcher in our room, not wanting to wait until I was back downstairs.

I let out a sigh of relief that my headache would abate. I slipped the bottle into one of my pockets in case I needed more in a few hours.

When I came back down to breakfast, Penny said, “You already look better.”

“It’s the anticipation that I’m going to feel somewhat like myself again soon. Being here has given me a whole new appreciation for medicine.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “That’s one of the reasons I can’t wait to get out of Highglen and back home.”

“Really?” I’d been having such a great time that it made me feel bad for not checking in with my best friend. I hadn’t realized she was so eager to leave.

“I’m over this.” She held up her spoon, letting the porridge drip down into the bowl. “I mean, it was fun for a couple of days, but I can’t imagine living this way on a permanent basis. There are too many things I would miss.”

“Obviously, but hasn’t it been kind of nice being off the grid?”

“Not really. I miss my family and Roger, and I want to go back to modern civilization.”

“What if Roger got really into camping and wanted you to go camping with him months at a time?” I asked. “You’d get used to it, right?”

“I guess.” She nodded thoughtfully. “But I would also know that at the end of it, we would go back home to our life and conveniences.”

“True. I just think that you can get accustomed to anything, given enough time.” Why was I trying to convince her that living this way could be a viable option? Or was I trying to convince myself? Either way, I couldn’t stay.

“Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say you could get accustomed to anything, given you had the right person by your side? My grandma used to say that even hell could be a heaven so long as you had your soulmate with you.”

As if on cue, Duncan entered the great hall, making a beeline toward me.

“Maren,” he said, looking very pleased to be seeing me. “You are looking particularly beautiful this morning.”

His sister Elizabeth sighed happily while Jean made a gagging noise.

“Exhibit A, Your Honor,” Penny said as she stood up, grabbing her bowl to return it to the kitchen. Duncan greeted her, and she returned it with a secret, knowing smile.

“How is your head?” he asked me after she’d left.

“Throbbing. Yours?”

“Likewise.”

“Here.” I grabbed the ibuprofen bottle in my pocket and took out a couple of pills. I added an extra one because he was a very large person and handed them to him. I let my fingers graze the inside of his palm, and his eyes turned heated. He curled his fingers upward so that as I pulled my hand away, his fingertips lightly danced along my palm. I tried very hard not to react to the trails of fire he created with his touch.

“What am I do to with these?” he asked.

“It’s medicine. You swallow them with water. It will help with your headache.”

“Like magic?” he asked.

“Science.”

“That’s miraculous.” He swallowed the pills and washed them down.

“I guess it is the season.”

“Aye, Christmas is the time for miracles. Will they work immediately?”

“It takes a bit of time,” I said.

“These must be special and cost you a king’s ransom.”

“No, you can find them everywhere, and they’re pretty cheap.”

The smile fell off his face slowly. “I cannae begin to imagine what your world is like, to have access to such marvels. You must be anxious to return to it.”

“I—”

Before I could say anything else further, Ainsley had stood up in Duncan’s regular chair. “As my first act as head of Clan Campbell, I am commanding Duncan and Alasdair to gather up rowan twigs!”

I raised both of my eyebrows at Duncan, questioning. “‘Tis tradition to burn rowan twigs in the Yule fire to clear any bad feelings that may exist between family members.”

“Maybe you should grab some extra ones for Jean.” I thought I’d said it quietly, but she protested loudly from the other end of the table.

Duncan kissed my hand, grinning. “I’ll see you soon, m’annsachd.”

From someone else, it would have been a casual way to say goodbye. But the way Duncan said it?

It sounded like a promise.

I watched as he left the great hall and thought about what he’d said a minute ago—commenting that I must be in a rush to get back home.

It was a good thing Ainsley had sent him away because I didn’t know what I’d been about to say in response to his statement.

Was I about to say that, of course, I was returning home?

Or had I been ready to tell him that I was willing to give everything up for him, if he would only ask?

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We did the rowan twig–burning ceremony, and Ailin said a few words about kinship and good feelings and family bonds.

Then Ainsley wanted everyone to play games. They had all kinds of card decks and games to go along with them—some were slightly familiar, but most of them were not. They had to teach me and Penny how to play, and Margaret in particular was not above cheating and giving us wrong information so that she could win.

At one point, I was in a two-player card game called piquet with Ailin. She took her card playing as seriously as she seemed to take everything else. I wondered how Duncan had turned out so charming and romantic, as his mother appeared to be the exact opposite.

She yawned and then said, “Beg your pardon.”

“Tired?” I asked.

“Aye, I have reached a time in my life when I am ready to hand over my duties to another. I would rather spend my days looking after my grandchildren than running this castle. But I cannae put those responsibilities aside until Duncan takes a wife.”

She gave me a pointed look, which surprised me.

Not the marriage part. Because if there was one thing I had learned since arriving in Highglen, it was that people here didn’t wait when it came to marriage. My uncle had courted Niamh for only a few weeks before proposing, and apparently, she had complained to her sisters on more than one occasion about how he had been dragging his feet.

Penny had overheard Niamh commenting on her frustration on being made to wait and had to look away. I’d wondered what Niamh would say if I told her about Roger and his eight-year wait.

So it wasn't the length of time, but rather that Ailin would even consider me as a viable partner for her son.

"Me?" I squeaked, wanting to make sure that I was understanding her implication correctly.

"Aye. Why have you not accepted him?"

"Uh, accepted him? He hasn't asked."

She looked annoyed by that, and it made me wonder if I had done something wrong.

Ailin muttered something under her breath about "fool boy," "wasting time," and some other Gaelic phrases that I assumed were curse words, given her current temperament.

I didn't know if she was mad that I was the only current option or if she was just generally aggravated by her life.

Although she had softened a little when she'd mentioned her grandchildren.

"Would you accept him were he to ask?" she demanded.

I felt a spike of concern that she was about to try and run interference in my relationship with him. "What?"

"'Tis obvious to everyone here how much the two of you care for each other. Why not make it official? I can sit my fool of a son down and tell him—"

"No!" I practically shouted the word and then immediately worried that it might come across as impolite or disrespectful. "I'm sorry. But no, thank you. Duncan and I will work this out on our own."

She looked surprised, and if I was reading her correctly, there was even a tiny bit of respect in her eyes. "If that is your desire, I'll say nothing to him."

Ainsley said it was time to switch up games and partners, and Elizabeth came into the room carrying an armload of board games. She laid them down on the main table, and I went over to inspect them. They were all handmade. One of them was kind of like backgammon, another like checkers, and



there was also a chessboard. I picked the last one and grabbed Duncan by the hand.

“You’re playing with me,” I told him, sitting him down at one of the tables far away from everyone else. I didn’t know what his mother might do, but I wasn’t willing to find out.

“Aye, your wish is my command.” He started to set up the pieces. “Are you good at chess?”

“I have no idea how to play.”

He laughed. “Then why did you choose it?”

“So I could be alone with you.”

“Now I’m seeing the wisdom of your scheme,” he said. “Are you enjoying Childermas?”

“I know Ainsley is.”

“Aye, I believe it is her favorite part of the holidays. Other than the gift-giving.”

The gift-giving was going to take place on New Year’s Day. I would be gone by then. My heart felt like an anvil, sinking down sadly into my stomach.

I had to change the subject. My leaving wasn’t something I was ready to talk about with him yet. “Did you like Childermas growing up?”

“Aye. My father engaged a schoolmaster to teach the boys in the village when I was young, and on Childermas, we locked him out of the school and told him that he would have to lengthen our holidays and lessen our workload if he wanted to be let back inside. My cousin Archie was chosen to be the priest for the day because he was the kindest of all the boys and took the responsibility very seriously. The rest of us would have just damaged something sacred and been excommunicated for blasphemy, I’m sure. Especially Alasdair.”

It took me a second to remember that Archie was the cousin who’d left Highglen by accident when it had first disappeared. “You and Alasdair as boys? I can only imagine. It’s a wonder your mothers survived you.”

“Aye, we were holy terrors,” he agreed cheerfully. “My mam cursed me because of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you never heard of a mother’s curse? It’s when she looks you dead in the eye and tells you that someday, she hopes you have a child just like yourself so that you will understand the grief you caused her.”

That made me laugh. “In that case, I have been cursed, too. When I was six, I cut all of my hair off with scissors and glued it onto my doll because I wanted us to have the same color hair. My mother was furious with me, and I remember her saying that she hoped I had a kid like me.”

“I can imagine.” He reached across the table to run his fingers along a lock of my hair. “What a shame to cut it all off. Such a dark, luxurious color. Like the darkest midnight sky, when all the world is quiet and peaceful, in those moments just before the moon rises.”

That made my breath hitch and my heart slam hard against my chest. “You can’t say that kind of stuff to me.”

“Why not? When it is the truth?”

That was the problem, wasn’t it? We couldn’t talk about truth or reality. We were living in this Christmas bubble where everything was happy and cozy and magical, but this bubble was going to burst.

I couldn’t help the tears that sprang up.

“Och, m’annsachd, what did I say?”

I put my head down, and I felt his hand on the top of my scalp, trying to soothe me, and it made everything worse. I dragged in a couple of deep breaths. “You didn’t say anything wrong. It’s just that this . . . we can’t . . . it’s not going to last. And it makes me sad.”

He withdrew his hand and said dejectedly, “Aye.”

When I had composed myself, I looked up at him. “So, what do we do?”

“Can we not just enjoy ourselves in the time that we have left? I want to be with you while you’re in Highglen.”

“I want that too, but . . .” How was I supposed to tell him that I was so worried about the heartache when I left? “Can we just agree that we will keep things light between us?”

“We could do that.” But he said it in a measured tone that made me think he didn’t actually agree with me.

“And you could tamp down that whole romantic poetry and charming thing you do?”

“I’ll do my best, but there’s only so much I can control.” He said it playfully, but it was probably true.

Ainsley stood up in her chair again, interrupting us. “Now it is time for the parlor games!”

I was thankful for the interruption.

Parlor games turned out to be the kind of stuff we’d played in elementary school when we had a rainy or snowy day. One was blindfolding a person and having them try to tag other people until they’d caught everyone in the room. After a few rounds of that, we played musical chairs. Alasdair hit a drum for the music, doing his best to make sure that Duncan lost and Sorcha would win, which she did.

Ainsley then called for us all to play hide-and-seek, choosing Duncan as seeker since he’d lost musical chairs.

“I’ll find you first, Maren,” he promised me.

“You will not! I’m good at this game.”

“We’ll see. I would be able to find you anywhere.”

Annoyed at his implication that he knew me oh so well, I was determined to make sure that he wouldn’t find me. Admittedly, I did not know the castle as well as he did.

“The only rule is that you must stay in the castle proper,” Duncan told the group, immediately shutting down my plan to go hide out in the barn or stables.

I was determined to outsmart him. He turned his back on us, covered his eyes, and started to count.

So I ran upstairs to the one place that I thought he'd never look. A place he wouldn't have been able to imagine that I would ever go.

His bedroom.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At first, I felt a little bit guilty, like I was invading his privacy.

On the other hand, Duncan had never said I couldn't go in his room. And if that was some seventeenth-century rule, well, he couldn't expect me to know it.

He was the one making boundaries for himself, not coming into my bedroom. Which he was more than welcome to do but chose not to. Given the boundaries he'd drawn, I had to imagine that he'd never think to look for me here.

There was a large bed, and the headboard and footboard were carved with intricate knots and nature scenes. I saw the table next to the privacy screen where he had toothpaste and Irish Spring soap. No wonder he always smelled so good. The sight of the soap made me smile. I wondered if the irony was lost on him. My favorite Scotsman smelled like an Irishman.

He had a large dark wooden armoire that had similar carvings as his bed. I opened the doors, and it was like a big closet—this had to be the wardrobe he'd mentioned. There was plenty of room to hide in here. There was a shelf along the top, and I saw several wood carvings. I picked up the closest one.

It was a carving of a bird. I didn't know what kind, but if I'd had even a passing familiarity with Scotland's native species, I probably would have recognized it because it looked like it was about to come alive in my hands.

*Not very good.* That was what he'd said, wasn't it? Of course he was a master artisan. I heard a noise in the hallway, and I put the bird back on the shelf and climbed inside the giant cabinet, pulling the doors shut behind me. I scooted down to the floor so that I was sitting in the corner, behind one of his tartans.

I heard his bedroom door creak open, and I held my breath. A few beats passed, and then the door shut again. He

must have come in, looked around, and left. I let out a sigh of relief, and then the wardrobe doors opened suddenly.

There stood Duncan. “Found you,” he said with a grin.

I wanted to mock him a little but discovered that I couldn’t. He’d done exactly what he’d said he would—found me immediately.

His next move surprised me. I expected him to offer me his hand and help me out of the wardrobe, but instead he climbed in next to me and closed the doors.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Did they change the game to sardines?”

“Sardines?” he repeated, sounding confused. We were jammed together, our legs pressed against each other. I loved being this close to him, touching him.

“It’s like reverse hide-and-seek, where one person hides and then everybody else looks for them, but when you find them, you stay in the same spot with them. Packing in like sardines.”

“No, I found Ainsley first. She always hides in the same spot in the larder in the kitchen. Rather than gather up everyone, we just decided that she’s the new seeker, and I came to find you. I did go in your room first, though. When you weren’t there, I knew you had to be here.”

“How did you know that?”

“I know you, Maren Kelly.”

He did know me. I reached out to put my hand on the side of his face. He hadn’t shaved yet today, and the stubble on his jaw was rough beneath my palm. He turned his face slightly so that he could press a soft, warm kiss onto my skin.

“It’s too dark in here,” I said, mostly because I wanted to see him. I loved looking at his perfect face.

“Like the night I found you in the woods and my entire life changed.”

That caused a lump of emotion in my throat, and I had to swallow it down. “I never thanked you for rescuing me.”

“No, m’annsachd, you were the one who rescued me.”

And even though I couldn’t see his expression, from his words, from his tone, I knew he was going to kiss me. Anticipation began to build inside me with each word he spoke.

“Didn’t we just agree to keep things light between us?” I asked him.

“Aye, but that was before we were in a wardrobe together with you being so beautiful and feeling so soft, and you’ve made me forget my own name.”

“It’s Duncan,” I offered, moving my torso closer to him.

“What was that?” he teased, as if he hadn’t heard.

Now my face was close to his. “Duncan.”

“Oh, aye. Thank you for keeping my name safe for me.”

He didn’t seem to be taking the hint, though. I tried a third time. “Duncan.” That attempt came out breathy and desperate. I needed him to kiss me.

“When you say my name that way, I would give you anything you desire,” he said as he moved his head forward, ghosting his lips over mine, letting his warm words and breath caress my face.

“Anything?”

“Aye, anything.”

My breath gathered in a tight knot at the base of my stomach. “Would you kiss—”

But he didn’t let me finish my sentence.

His mouth was on mine, kissing me like his life depended on this connection between us. As if he wouldn’t be able to draw another breath except for the ones he stole from me.

I let out a sigh of delight that was mixed with desire and felt his reaction to it.

His kiss ignited something deep inside me, setting it aflame, melting my bones in a slow, delicious burn.

We stayed locked together, kissing, pressed as close as we could get, him crushing my softness against the hard planes of his body.

And, as always, Duncan had to remember himself. He pulled away with a reluctant groan.

I couldn't help but follow after him, pressing kisses along his jaw. He threaded his fingers through my hair, moving them down to the back of my neck, kneading, pressing as he went.

"I cannae keep my wits about me when I'm alone with you," he confessed.

"Wits are overrated," I said and sucked at the pulse point at the base of his throat.

He tugged my head back slightly, and now he was the one running his lips across my throat. "Maren, you are my worst temptation and my saving grace."

His words sent shudders running along my veins until they exploded like dazzling fireworks, sparkling and tingling inside me.

Duncan murmured words along my skin, stopping only long enough to gift me a hot kiss in a different location, leaving me a mindless mess. So it took me a bit to register that he wasn't speaking English.

"You're talking in Gaelic," I told him, running my fingertips along his scalp, rewarded with a growl that reverberated from deep in his chest. "What are you saying?"

"A prayer to the Almighty," he said before he nipped at my earlobe.

Now? "What are you praying for?"

"I cannae say, or it might not come true."

Laughing, I lightly slapped his strong shoulder. "That's wishes, not prayers!" I loved that we were having this moment. I'd never been with someone that I wanted this



desperately who could also make me laugh while my brain was foggy with desire.

He had been leaving lingering kisses along my cheeks, but that made him stop. “’Tis both a prayer and a wish.”

Without him explaining, I knew what he had prayed and wished for.

He wanted me to stay.

And in that moment, encircled in his arms, being kissed into blissful oblivion, if he had asked me, I would have said yes.

Maybe that was why he didn’t ask.

“At the wedding,” I said, “you mentioned that you wished for something, but you didn’t tell me what it was.”

Although he still held me tight, he stopped kissing me completely. He didn’t say anything for the space of a few heartbeats, and I thought that he was going to stay silent. But then he spoke. “I wished that I could see you in my colors. Wearing my tartan. I would drape you in it, and then the world would know you were mine.”

“I am yours,” I whispered, desperately wishing myself that his dream could become reality.

“And I am yours. Yours, and no other’s. For as long as I live.”

Love for him filled every inch of me, making me feel light and slightly delirious. I reached for him, pulling him into a kiss, needing to share with him everything I was feeling and couldn’t say.

He was every bit as desperate as I was, pouring his emotions into our kiss as well. Pleasure radiated out from the base of my spine, making my entire body throb and ache for him.

Not content to kiss only my lips, he went back to his exploration of the exposed skin that he could reach. My collarbone, my neck, my face. And as if he were trying to

recall himself, his kisses now were gentle and lingering. Soft and loving in a way that I'd never experienced.

I marveled that he was such a mixture of sheer masculinity and tenderness all at the same time. That he could wax poetic about my hair in one breath and would easily run an enemy invader through in the next to protect his loved ones.

"How are you like this?" I asked. "Strong and sweet all at the same time. Like some kind of warrior-poet. I've never met anyone like you because there are no men like you in the twenty-first century."

He smiled against the underside of my jaw. "Then 'tis a good thing you found me here."

I made a sound then that had him digging his fingers into me. "I wish I could kiss you for forever," I told him. I couldn't tell him that I was glad I had found him, too, and that I wished I could stay.

"I want to explore you," he said in a low, sexy voice that made all of my nerve endings light up. "Touch, taste, kiss every bit of your soft skin."

"Sounds like a good plan."

He stopped kissing me and pulled his head back. "We cannae, not unless you are my wife."

"Then—"

I had to stop myself. I'd been about to tell him to make me his wife.

Another long pause from him. "If you could, I would ask you to stay. I would ask you to marry me."

His declaration thrilled me in a way I'd never experienced, and before I could stop myself, my feelings started rushing out of my mouth. "And if I could stay, I would say yes. Even though this whole thing is bonkers, and it is way too soon to marry someone I just met, I would say yes."

"As would I. Because I love you," he said.

It was like somebody had just sucked all of the oxygen out of the room, and I couldn't breathe. The only thing I could do was sit there, trembling. Why did it feel so shocking? I already knew I loved him, and he wouldn't have wanted to marry me if he didn't share those feelings, too.

It was probably because I'd never been in love before, and to have a man like Duncan tell me that he loved me . . . well, I currently didn't have any way to deal with that beyond shock.

"I understand from Robert that this is not how things work in your world," he said. "But I must tell you what's in my heart. I loved you afore I ever met you. I love you so much now that it destroys my very soul to think I will soon be parted from you. I have been given the gift of time, but I would trade it all away to have even one more day with you."

Tears started to fall. "Duncan, I love you, too."

"I ken, my Maren," he said, kissing the tears that fell on my cheeks. "Did you know that Maren is a Latin name? It means 'star of the sea.' When you've returned to your life and I am adrift in the sea of time, lost without you, you will always be my star, guiding me. My home, my true north."

That just made me cry harder.

"I've never told a lassie that I loved her before. I didnae realize there would be so much crying involved," he teased.

That made me laugh, and I threw my arms around him. "I've never said it to anyone else, either, but I really do love you so much."

He buried his face against my neck, holding me tightly to him. "M'annsachd, how am I ever going to let you go?"

The doors of the wardrobe were thrown open.

I gasped. We'd been caught!

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When my eyes adjusted, I saw Alasdair looking down at us. I didn't know if this was going to be a good thing or a bad thing. Was he in chaperone mode or not?

He let out a heavy sigh. "I'll not tell your sister, but you owe me."

"A debt that can never be repaid," Duncan said.

"Aye. And if Sorcha finds out, I will say it was all your fault, and you forced me to stay quiet against my will."

"I accept your terms," Duncan responded as he and I stood up.

Alasdair walked over to the bedroom door and then said, "For future reference, 'tis more enjoyable if you dinnae make the lassie cry."

Duncan made a threatening noise, and Alasdair just laughed, going out into the hallway. Duncan followed behind him, sticking his head out, presumably to make sure the coast was clear. He gestured me over. I ran to the hallway and he joined me, shutting his door behind him.

I put my arm through the crook of his arm, and we walked back toward the great hall, like nothing had just happened. As if we hadn't just been completely vulnerable and intimate with each other in a way I'd never experienced before. I hadn't ever shared my heart like that with any man before him.

Probably because I'd never loved anyone the way that I loved him.

"I want you to know that I meant every word I said," I told him. I at least needed him to know this. "That my mind wasn't just clouded by your excellent kisses. I love you, and I always will."

"Your mind wasnae clouded? Then I wasnae doing it right," he teased, kissing me on the cheek, very daring for us

being in semi-public like this. Anyone could have walked these halls and seen us.

“If you did it any more right, I would be dead,” I told him. I found his self-satisfied smirk endearing. Which was just more proof of how much I loved him because it should have annoyed me. “I don’t think I’ve ever been kissed quite so thoroughly or so well before.”

“I have to treat you properly. You must have the best of everything. I cannae risk angering whoever sent me such a gift,” he said.

That made me think about him praying in the wardrobe. “So, when you pray, you speak to God in Gaelic?”

“Aye. Because he’s Scottish.” When I laughed, he added, “Why else would Scotland be the best place on all the earth?”

“You’ve never been anyplace else.”

“But you have. Isnae Scotland superior to all other lands?”

“It is.” Scotland was the best.

Especially Highglen.

We reached the great hall, where the family was gathering for another round of hide-and-seek.

“Found them!” Alasdair called out and then immediately corrected himself. “I found Duncan first, and then together we found Maren.”

He shot me an exaggerated “I almost blew it!” look, and given the knowing expressions on Ailin’s and Sorcha’s faces, Alasdair wasn’t nearly as slick as he thought he was. I just shook my head at him.

I started to walk toward everyone else, but Duncan tugged me lightly so that I would stop.

“We only have a few days left. We will have to make them count,” he said.

“You’re right.” I nodded. I didn’t want to think about it, because I was going to start crying all over again.

I didn't want to leave him.

"Please know that I would rather have this week with you than a thousand lifetimes without having met you," he said, very serious, his voice full of unspoken emotion.

"I want this week and a thousand lifetimes with you," I told him.

"As do I, m'annsachd. As do I."

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We had a big family dinner that night, with Ainsley directing the menu. Which meant it was almost entirely desserts. Chef Pierre outdid himself. Ainsley practically went into sugar shock, running around the table until she crashed. Duncan had to carry her upstairs to bed.

The next day was spent cleaning again, to get ready for Hogmanay, and I only saw Duncan sporadically. That night we had what they called a cèilidh—which was an informal gathering where they had music, dancing, and shared stories. I heard all about kelpies, supernatural horselike creatures that lived near lochs and rivers, and selkies, which apparently were seals that could shed their skins and be human, along with tales of dragons being slain, fairies playing tricks on unsuspecting humans, and more than one story about the great Robert the Bruce and William Wallace.

I could have listened to Duncan tell stories all night. He was so dramatic and had the younger kids on the edge of their seats, even though they'd heard these stories a million times. When he roared like a dragon, his nephew started to cry.

Duncan stopped his tale immediately and went over to comfort little Liam until he was ready for Duncan to continue.

Every time I thought I couldn't possibly love him more than I already did, he did something else to prove me wrong.

The following day, the day before Hogmanay, Margaret came into my bedroom with two elaborate dresses.

"Good morning to you! The masked ball is tonight. Normally, we'd save this for Twelfth Night, but . . ." Again, she couldn't bring herself to say the reason why Duncan had

moved a celebration to a different day. “I’ve brought you some dresses to wear. They belonged to my grandmother, and she wore them to the royal courts of both Scotland and England. Not quite the fashion now, but we dinnae care too much about what is fashionable these days.”

“Yeah, because you’d be wrong,” Penny said so only I could hear. It was true. No modern women were wearing the kind of dresses the Campbell women enjoyed.

“My mam added a layer of golden lace on the bottom of this one so that it would fit you better,” Margaret said, holding a dark green dress made of silk or satin out to me. It was shiny and soft. The skirt cut open in the middle to reveal a panel of blue.

It was Campbell colors.

Duncan was going to get his wish.

“Your mom made it longer for me?” My heart inexplicably lurched, surprised by Ailin’s kindness.

“Aye, she did.”

That was so thoughtful. She already had so much on her plate, and I knew that women weren’t supposed to be sewing or spinning during Yuletide, so it meant so much that she was willing to break that rule so that I would look nice tonight at the ball.

Margaret gave us corsets and petticoats and stockings. “You’ll also need a mask, and these will match.”

She said she’d see us at the ball and left.

“Look at the detail on these dresses,” Penny said, and I was just as in awe. Penny had been given a dusky rose dress that had a slash of lighter pink in the middle of the skirt with silver laces that crisscrossed up the length of the sleeves.

My dress was edged in golden flowers, and on closer inspection I saw that they were thistles and heather.

It also had a high collar on it in the back, so Penny put my hair up and then helped me to get my dress on over the corset

and petticoats. I looked at myself in the mirror, and I felt like a princess out of a fairy tale.

“All you need is some glass slippers,” she told me. “Hang on, though.”

She rummaged through her bag and came out of it with some makeup. “I don’t have magic shoes, but I do have mascara, eyeliner, blush, and lip gloss. Which in my opinion is even better. I bet Duncan’s never seen anything like that before.”

He probably hadn’t, and I put everything on that she handed to me. While I was finishing up my makeup, Penny stood behind me and said, “Thank heavens they have deodorant. We are going to sweat in these dresses. I’m so glad we live in a time without petticoats.”

“I kind of like them,” I said, swishing from side to side.

“You would,” she said. Before I could ask her what she meant by that, she asked if I was ready to go downstairs.

“Do you think they’ll announce us? Like in the movies?” I asked.

“I think that’s a royal court kind of thing. This is just the village again.”

Penny slipped her mask on but stopped me from doing the same thing.

“Put it on later,” she said. “Let him see you first and get the full effect.”

I did what she suggested and carried the mask with me. When we entered the great hall, Duncan was clearly waiting for me near the fireplace. He didn’t have a mask on. When he saw me, he just stood there. As if he were unable to move.

He looked so handsome. He had on his kilt along with a crisp, white linen shirt and a black formal jacket.

“Have fun tonight,” Penny said. “Please do everything I would and wouldn’t do.”



I told her to hush, but she just laughed and went to join the reel that was about to start.

Duncan finally came over to me, with an expression that I couldn't quite identify. "You are a vision," he told me, his voice sounding shaky. "Sent by the fairies to vex and torment me with what I cannae have."

"I'm yours," I reminded him.

"Aye," he said, but I could hear the aching in his voice, what he left unspoken.

That I was only his for the next twenty-four hours, and then I would be leaving. I told him something I hadn't been expecting to say. "If you asked me to stay, I would."

"If you asked me to go, I would." He paused. "But I ken that you wouldnae ask."

"And I know you wouldn't ask, either. Too bad we're not more selfish."

"Aye, more's the pity. But I love you all the more for it."

"So do I."

"Should we dance?" he asked, gesturing toward the dance floor.

"Not yet. I just want to talk to you," I told him.

"Let me help you with your mask first," he offered. I handed it to him, and he stood behind me and put the mask in front of my eyes, then fixed it into place, tying the strings at the back of my head.

He stood close, probably closer than was allowed. It sent goose bumps along the back of my neck, making me feel shivery.

Those feelings intensified when he let his fingers drift along the back of my neck, along my spine. I hadn't known it was possible to burn from both heat and cold at the same time.

Then he pressed his lips where his fingers had been, and those burning shivers turned into tiny atom bombs. I gasped. "Duncan!" I looked around to see if anyone had been

watching, but everybody else was caught up in what they were doing.

Had he done it deliberately?

Was he trying to make a public statement?

Or was he attempting to force my hand?

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I felt guilty as soon as that thought entered my head and pushed it away. We'd just told each other that we were being too honorable for that kind of thing.

Which he confirmed when he immediately apologized. "I beg your pardon, Maren. You are irresistible, and my willpower and common sense where you are concerned seems to be weakening."

"I don't think anyone saw," I told him. "I wouldn't care if they did, but I know that kind of thing matters to you."

"Thank you for thinking of me."

"I always think of you," I confessed. "I'm not sure that's a good thing. I don't think I've been a very good friend to Penny while we've been here, and I haven't thought about my mom hardly at all. That makes me feel like a bad daughter."

He made a sound at the back of his throat, and I could tell that he wanted to hug and comfort me, but he couldn't.

Instead, he led me over to a couch, away from the music and dancing. Still respectable, but we could talk. We sat down, probably closer to each other than we should be.

"You are a wonderful person, and I willnae allow you to disparage the love of my life in front of me," he said, and I smiled at him.

"It's true, though."

"Why would you feel that way?"

I shrugged. "Because of how much I want to stay here with you."

He took my hand and gently kissed the back of it. But instead of releasing me, he put our hands between us and continued to hold on to me, lacing our fingers together. "You must go home to your mother. She will need you, and you

would never forgive yourself for missing the time she has left.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t.” That didn’t mean that I hadn’t considered doing just that, and it made me feel ashamed. “And your people need you here. You’re the center of everything. Their leader. Their brother and son. Their friend. They all look to you, rely on you. You’d never forgive yourself if you left them behind.”

“Aye.”

Which left us in this stalemate. I couldn’t stay; he couldn’t go.

“And with that storm raging and your transportation broken, you couldnae have left earlier. It wasnae selfish of you to stay here for the week. I know that you are worried about your mother, but tomorrow night will be your first chance to leave. The storm will clear, and there will be someone coming to give you a ride.”

“A ride?” I asked, surprised by his terminology.

“Aye. We have an outside contact who watches for the storms and shows up the last day with items we’ve requested.”

I flashed back to that night in the barn when Jock had mentioned a list. “And you give them a list for the next time you appear?”

“Aye, and they pass it along, father to son. They are my cousin Archie’s descendants, tasked with watching over the village and bringing us the supplies that we will need. Sugar, toiletries, spices, seeds, feed for the animals.”

“Medicine,” I told him, excited. “You’ll have to get lots of different kinds of medicines. For people and for animals. If you get me a pen and paper, I’ll write them down. Er, a quill and parchment, I mean. And books! There are so many books about sciences and history, and you could really teach the kids here in town so that they could acclimate to the outside world if they chose to leave.”

“We should sit down and create that list together.”

“That’s kind of amazing that Archie’s family has been watching over you all for the last four hundred years.”

Duncan’s right dimple deepened. “They aren’t doing it only out of the goodness of their hearts. We always pay them well in silver coin that becomes more valuable as the years pass. Coins from our era in ‘mint condition,’ as they’ve been called, are worth quite a bit in your world.”

I could only imagine. Archie’s descendants were probably really wealthy. I wondered who they were. “It’s too bad someone didn’t stop by earlier. I would have liked to have sent a note to my mom. She must be really worried. I’ve been missing for days, and I usually call her every day. I’m here playing in Fantasyland while she’s dealing with her diagnosis and having to worry about me. She’s already lost her brother and her husband. I can’t bear the thought that she might be thinking she’s lost me, too.”

“The storm doesn’t allow for traveling until the seventh night, when it clears. There was no way for you to leave safely until tomorrow night.” He crooned the words to me, soothing me the same way he’d soothed his nephew last night. “You will be reunited with her soon, and all will be well.”

“I don’t know if all will be well ever again,” I told him truthfully.

He looked at our joined hands and then said, “When you go . . .” His voice caught on the word, as if it were difficult for him to say. “When you go, you have to know that you have brought me so much joy. Carry that home with you. When you think of me, I hope they are happy memories.”

“They will be,” I said, trying to ignore the way my heart was shattering into a thousand tiny pieces. “I didn’t know Christmas could be like this. Thank you for letting me share it with you and your family.”

“Thank you for staying. I didn’t know that Christmas could be like this, either. When you share it with the woman you love, it takes on new meaning.”

“I love you,” I said, as if I were worried he would forget. Like I needed to say it a certain number of times so that I wouldn’t regret not having said it enough.

“Aye, and I love you. We were meant to be, but fate is conspiring to tear us apart.”

We sat in silence then. A comfortable one, but it was charged by the emotions we were both feeling. The love we had for each other, and the heartache that waited for us tomorrow night.

I watched everyone dancing, and it seemed a little silly to me that Highglen was having a masked ball because everybody here knew everyone else, but people were having a good time.

Alasdair and Sorcha were dancing not too far from us. Alasdair joked about being afraid of Sorcha, but it was obvious to anyone watching that they were deeply in love. If they kept staring at each other the way that they currently were, they were going to make a third baby. He looked at her like she hung the moon every night just for him, and she gazed at him like he was personally responsible for causing the sun to rise each day.

I smiled to myself. Duncan had had a major effect on me if I was going to start waxing poetic about other people’s love.

“A penny for your thoughts,” he said.

“Your sisters appear to be very happy with their husbands.”

“Aye, only a love match will do for a Campbell of Highglen.”

I frowned. “Is that not typical?”

“When we were still part of the world, no. Most people married for other reasons. Alliances, politics, money, uniting clans. Love matches are rare.”

“Not here.”

“Nae, not here.” He squeezed my hand.

“It’s why people marry back home, too. I’d say most marriages are based on love.” Again, there were those words we left unspoken. That our love match was about to end.

We sat in silence until I noticed Duncan reaching into his jacket pocket. “I was going to wait until later to give this to you, but I want you to have it now.”

He held out two presents, both wrapped in Campbell tartan.

“What is this?”

“Early gifts. You willnae be here on New Year’s Day, and I want you to have them. Open them.”

Flutters of excitement made my heart climb up in my chest. This was entirely unexpected. I opened the bigger one first, undoing the string and unwrapping the tartan to find a perfectly carved sheep. I let out a happy sound. “The sheep I helped in the barn!”

He’d made this for me. No one had ever made me a present before.

“Aye,” he said, clearly pleased that I liked it so much.

I touched the perfectly smoothed edges. “Thank you. It’s perfect. You are so talented.”

“In more ways than one,” he teased and urged me to open the smaller gift. From the look in his eyes, I figured out that this was the more important one, and I opened it slowly, just to torment him a tiny bit.

Which seemed to be working. “We dinnae have all the time in the world, m’annsachd.”

I unwrapped it and found a silver pin with two hearts intertwined, a crown with green emeralds embedded in it.

My mouth dropped open, and my heart started pounding like a jackhammer in my chest. “This . . .”

“’Tis a Luckenbooth,” he verified, taking it from my hands so that he could pin it to my shoulder. “This one belonged to my great-great-grandparents.”

“Fiona and Malcolm?” The couple who had started Highglen?

“Aye. And I willnae be able to give it to you on our wedding day, and there will never be another woman that I would want to give it to. It is yours.”

My throat ached, and my heart pounded hard in my chest, like it wanted to break free and stay here with him. I ran my fingertips over the outline of the pin. When I finally spoke, it took everything I had not to cry. “I really wish I could kiss you right now to thank you.”

“Let’s dance instead,” he suggested, his own voice tight with restraint. “Then I’ll be able to hold you in my arms without censure.”

I nodded. “You’ve given me things that I will always treasure, and I feel bad that I didn’t get you anything.”

“M’annsachd, you have given me the most priceless gift. You have given me the chance to know and love you, and I couldnae ask for anything more. Now, let’s dance.”

That sounded good to me because otherwise I was going to sit here on this couch in the middle of the ball and sob my heart out. I let him lead me to the rest of the dancers, and we joined the couples in the midst of a country dance.

I was going to dance this night away with him, until we were the last people on the dance floor.

I would spend every single minute with him from now until I had to leave.



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After the masked ball ended, Penny agreed to be our chaperone and stayed with us in the great hall. She fell asleep quickly on one of the couches while Duncan and I had another night where we stayed up talking. The words spilled out of us, as if we were trying to say everything we had to say before we were parted so that there would be no regrets.

We'd both lost loved ones, and we knew what it was like to not be able to say goodbye.

There was a good deal of kissing, too, but only up to a point as Duncan stayed true to his rules of propriety.

The sun rose far too quickly, and I woke Penny up so that we could go and get changed into the clothes we'd arrived in, which someone had laundered for us. It was odd to be putting my jeans and sweater back on. Like this wasn't my life any longer.

Highglen felt more like home to me than Ohio ever did, and I didn't know how to explain that.

I also packed up the sheep Duncan had carved for me, along with the tartan he'd wrapped it in. I was wearing the Luckenbooth and planned on wearing it every day for the rest of my life.

Despite my desire that the day pass by slowly, it did the opposite. There was a sword hanging over our heads, and much as I wanted to make time stop, to smash every clock that I came across, it didn't make a difference. We were barreling toward the inevitable end.

Even Duncan's sisters were subdued, and Ainsley kept hugging me. The snow cleared so that it was bright and sunny outside. Duncan suggested that we all go out and play in the snow, but nobody wanted to.

I just wanted to sit with him on the couch and hold his hand.

We did manage to eat, but every bite was like sawdust in my mouth. I couldn't taste anything.

Penny sat next to me at dinner. "I will tell you this: things are going to change in a big way for me and Mr. Roger Blankenship."

"How?" I asked.

"People here fall in love and get married after knowing each other for, like, a couple of weeks and are happy, so Roger can suck it up and get over whatever his commitment issues are. Either we get married or he lets me go so that I can find someone else. I'm not going to stay in some limbo state forever."

I reached over and squeezed her hand, happy for her. At least one of us had a plan for what they were going to do when we got home.

Night fell much too quickly. The birch tree they burned as a Yule log was more than halfway gone now.

It was all happening too fast.

Then I heard it—the sound of a truck horn. There was no mistaking it. Realizing that this was it, Penny and I went to our room to gather our things. I took one last sad look around, and then went back down to the great hall. The whole family came out with us as we headed into the courtyard, and I saw a man standing there in a green jacket. I gasped when I realized that I recognized him.

It was the ranger we'd spoken to on our way into Highglen, with a young boy.

He waved to Penny and me. "I told you it was dangerous to be up here this time of year."

Duncan walked over to shake his hand. "Duncan Campbell."

"Callum Campbell. And this is my grandson, Ian. Someday, it will be his turn to bring you the supplies."

"I remember you, Callum. Your father brought you here."

“Aye, that he did. I was a much younger man then.”

“Thank you for coming,” Duncan said.

“It is our sacred duty. We are Campbells of Highglen, too, and it is an honor to watch over our kin. I’ve detached the trailer just inside the border.”

Duncan then took out a small bag that jingled and handed it to Callum. Callum tucked it into his green jacket.

“Time to go,” Callum said to Penny and me. “I’ll be down the hill, waiting in my truck. The Park Authority has already organized search parties for the both of you, and I would like to let your loved ones know that you are safe.”

I hadn’t even considered that our families would have gotten the local authorities involved in trying to find us.

Penny started saying her goodbyes, smiling, hugging, thanking the Campbell clan for hosting us in their castle. I started to do the same, but all of Duncan’s sisters held on to me for a bit longer than they should have, each asking me to stay.

“I’ve never seen him so happy.”

“I know your mother needs you, but I fear that Duncan might need you more.”

“Dinnae go. We want you to be part of our family.”

“Highglen could be your home.”

“You’re one of us.”

“Please stay,” Ainsley begged, which absolutely destroyed me.

I had to fight back tears, murmuring my apologies to each of them, letting them know how much I’d loved getting to know them and being in Highglen. I couldn’t even remember what I said, trying to soothe them as I tried to soothe myself. It was like being in shock, as if I were detached from my body. I had come to love these women like my own sisters, and in that moment I couldn’t deal with the fact that I wouldn’t see them again. Ainsley didn’t continue trying to convince me. She just

wept against my neck, and it took everything in my power not to do the same.

Ailin had to tug Ainsley away, handing her over to Fia, who hugged her youngest sister. Then, to my surprise, Ailin hugged me. “I understand why you must go. You are a good daughter. But please know that you would have made a fine daughter-in-law, and I would have been happy to welcome you into my family.”

It was the nicest thing his mother had ever said to me, and then I couldn’t help it. I did start to cry. “Thank you,” I said.

Alasdair was next, and he folded me up into a big bear hug. “I’ll not be there to chaperone you, so make sure you dinnae get yourself into too much trouble.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised against his shoulder, and he released me.

Then it was time to say goodbye to Robert. His eyes were also full of tears.

“We’ve always been such an emotional family,” he said with a laugh, and I nodded. He hugged me tightly. “I’ll always be grateful that I got to meet you all grown up, and that you gave me the chance to tell my sister goodbye. Please tell your mom how much I love her and that I will think of her, always.”

“I will.” I had to choke the words out, because there wasn’t much more I could say beyond that to him. I had carefully packed his book and the letter he’d written. I knew it was going to bring my mom a lot of peace.

Penny started walking down the hill, following the path Callum and his grandson had made through the snow.

Then it was just me and Duncan alone. He took me by the hand, and we walked away from the others.

We came to a stop, and he reached for my other hand and held them up to his lips so that he could kiss each of them. “I had a speech prepared,” he said. “But now that it’s time, I dinnae ken what to say to you other than that I love you.”

“I love you. And I have a gift for you.” I took in a big breath, and I hoped my pronunciation was okay—Elizabeth had told me that she despaired of me ever being able to say it correctly. “Tha goal agam ort, a sheòid.”

I heard his sharp intake of breath, and I saw from the expression on his face how much it meant to him that I spoke to him in his native language. Hopefully, I had told him, “I love you, my valiant warrior.”

He responded, “Till thugam mo cridhe, mo ghràdh.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, ‘Return to me, my heart, my love.’”

I blinked quickly at him. “What?”

He shook his head and swore in Gaelic. “If I were a better man, I would tell you to go home and find another. To live a happy life loving and being loved, to give birth to bairns of your own. But I cannae do that. Come back to me.”

“What?” I asked again, feeling like a parrot who could only speak a single word. In all the times that we’d talked about me leaving, not once had he said anything like this.

“Stay in contact with Callum. He knows when the village reappears because of the storm. When it does, return to me. I will wait for you.”

“What if Highglen doesn’t appear for another fifty years?”

“Come home to me in fifty years, then.”

He was being irrational. “When I’m old and wrinkled?”

“I will love you all the more for a life well lived. I will love you then as I love you now, and the passing of time will not matter.”

Penny yelled my name. I knew that the clock was ticking down. I had to go. But I didn’t want to.

Duncan kissed me then, not caring that we had his entire family as an audience. He imprinted his soul on mine, searing it in place with his kiss. I didn’t want to let him go.

He was the one who put his hands on my shoulders and gently pushed me away. “You must go, or else it will be too late.”

I nodded and took a step back. Then another.

“I will dream of you every night and spend my waking days praying for your return,” he said. “Christmastide is the time for miracles, and I’ve learned that love is the greatest miracle of them all.”

“Maren!” Penny called again.

Then I heard Callum. “It is almost midnight! Hurry, lass!”

“I love you,” I told Duncan.

“Haste ye back,” he said. “And I vow to you, here and now, that I will always love you, Maren Kelly.”

“And I will come back to you, Duncan Campbell. Wait for me.”

At that, I turned and trudged my way down the hill. I could feel his gaze on me the whole way, and there were at least three times that I came to a complete stop, intending to turn around and go back to him, even though I knew I couldn’t.

I would return to him. I’d move to Scotland, if I had to. Just to make sure that I was nearby if the village reappeared.

When I had arrived at Highglen, I had thought I was going to die. I felt that way now, only it wasn’t a physical death. It was as if my heart were breaking, and every step I took dropped a piece of it to the ground, as if it were determined to stay here with Duncan.

It was like wading through quicksand, each step harder than the last. I couldn’t leave him. This was madness, and every part of my body resisted what my brain was trying to make it do.

By the time I reached the truck, none of my heart was left. There was just a huge, gaping, sucking chest wound where my heart was supposed to be.

Penny practically pulled me into the truck, and Callum took off immediately, driving much faster than was safe on these snow-covered roads.

It was then that I heard the first bell. Callum swore and drove faster.

Part of me hoped he was unsuccessful at getting across the border. If the choice was taken from me . . .

But then I thought of my poor mom and felt bad that I had even thought it. She needed me.

Penny's and Callum's families needed them as well. I counted the bells as we drove, ticking off each bong on my fingers. Five, six, seven, eight—

“Safe!” Callum called once we passed a large rock, and I noticed that it had green and blue squares painted onto it. He brought the truck to a stop and killed the engine.

I opened the door and climbed out. I could still hear the bells.

Nine, ten, eleven . . .

Then total silence.

The bell didn't strike a twelfth time.

Highglen was gone.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I couldn't remember much about the time between when we left Scotland and arrived back home. I was in an emotional daze—crying constantly. Penny told me that the local authorities had interviewed us, and we'd gone to the hospital to be checked out. The nurses and doctors marveled that we hadn't suffered frostbite or anything else from being lost in the woods for a week in a snowstorm. As soon as she got her hands on a charger, Penny called Roger and my mom and told them that we were fine and would be on our way home soon.

Callum smoothed everything over with the Park Authority, police, and the medical staff, and we were able to go back home on the first flight out. Penny said I spent the entire flight crying or sleeping.

I did remember seeing my mom again for the first time. Opening the door to her apartment and finding her waiting for me on the couch—I was overwhelmed with a sense of relief that she was still there, knowing that I'd made the right decision in returning to her. I was so glad to be with her. She was my rock and the person I'd depended on my whole life, and just looking at her face made me feel more like myself again.

The pain of losing Duncan didn't disappear, but being near her made it hurt less.

She got up slowly and then hugged me tightly. Somehow she had become even more frail, and I tried to be very gentle with her.

"I was so worried about you!" she told me.

My throat felt thick, and I just nodded. "I know. I'm so glad to be back home. There is so much to tell you."

I sat her down and told her the story of Highglen, starting with the car breaking down and how I'd woken up in a real castle in a magical Scottish village. Her face was skeptical, and I knew the best thing to do was to prove that my words



were true. I opened up my backpack and gave her the family fairy-tale book and Robert's letter, and she started to cry as soon as she opened the folded paper.

"He's alive?" she asked in wonder.

"He is, and he's really happy. He married the most amazing woman. You would love her and her family." It destroyed me to know that she never would meet them.

Would never see her brother again.

My mom smiled. "Of all the things I expected you to tell me when you got home, I never would have guessed that a magical, disappearing Christmas village was going to be the explanation for you disappearing for a week."

"I know. It's all pretty fantastic and unbelievable. I'm glad I have proof."

"What else happened?" my mom asked once she had cleared her tears away.

I should have known that she would guess that there was more to this tale than just finding her brother. I'd never been able to hide anything from her. I told her about Duncan. I was sitting next to her on the couch, and at some point she had me lay my head down so that it was in her lap, something I hadn't done since I was a little girl. She stroked my hair and wiped my tears away with tissues.

"You should have stayed," she said when I forced myself to finish talking. I could have talked about Duncan for a month straight and never run out of things to say.

"That wasn't even a consideration. I would never leave you to face this fight alone," I told her.

"It's my fight. If I could have chosen for you, I would have told you to stay. All I want is for you to be happy and loved."

That broke what was left of my heart. It made me doubt the decision I had made until I remembered something she'd said to me once when I was younger—that one of the hardest things for her about my dad dying was that it had been so

sudden. That she'd wished she could have held his hand as he passed from this world to the next so that he wouldn't have died alone.

That wasn't going to be how her story ended. I would be there with her, every moment.

"I never would have left you to deal with this by yourself." I loved her far too much for that.

She kissed me on the forehead. "I can't believe what you gave up for me. How did I get the world's most amazing daughter?"

"Probably by being the world's most amazing mom," I said.

And she was the most amazing mom. She did her absolute best to fight the good fight. I graduated from veterinary school, and she was there cheering for me, though she was barely able to clap.

She didn't make it six months. She died two weeks after my graduation. I was so, so grateful for the time I got to spend with her and that I was there holding her hand when she slipped away.

The days following her death were some of the darkest of my life. Even though I'd had a chance to prepare, to say everything I wanted to say to her, letting her know what a phenomenal mother she'd been to me and how much I loved her, it was still a crushing blow.

I remembered Duncan's words that light and life would return again after the darkest days had passed, and I held on to that hope to help get me through.

Spring would return.

I also held on to memories of him. His smile, his love, his laughter. He was the light and life that guided me through my misery, allowing me to see my way to the other side.

Penny was the other reason that I was able to cope as well as I did. She stayed close to me and didn't let me go through

my grief alone. She was the one who held me while I sobbed and let me talk about my mother for hours, just listening.

She was the best friend I could have asked for, and I was so thankful for her. I wished that there were a way I could repay her, but Roger went and got her what she most wanted.

He married her. She never even got the chance to issue her ultimatum. When she came back to Ohio, he proposed to her in baggage claim at the airport.

“I was so worried that I’d lost you, and I couldn’t imagine living a life without you in it. I’ve been such an immature idiot, and I’ve waited way too long to ask you this,” he said, down on one knee even though he didn’t even have a ring yet. “Will you marry me?”

Penny had squealed, thrown her arms around him, and knocked him to the ground. They were kissing so much that a security guard finally had to come over and tell them to knock it off.

They had eloped to Las Vegas, and although she didn’t say it, part of me wondered if Penny had insisted on it so that he wouldn’t have a chance to change his mind.

I thought of how Duncan said that love was the greatest miracle of all, and he had been right. It was worth every moment of agony and pain that I’d endured. I wouldn’t have given away this pain if it meant I never would have known my mom’s love or Duncan’s.

Nearly eleven months had passed since we’d come back from Scotland, and each day got a bit easier. I didn’t know if I would ever feel completely like myself again, the person I’d been before I’d suffered two devastating losses in a row, but I was working on finding her.

Only now she was just a bit older and sadly wiser.

Penny had invited me to go Christmas shopping with her at the mall on Black Friday. I’d spent Thanksgiving with her and Roger and her family, and although I knew I was welcome at their celebration, there was this nagging feeling that I didn’t belong there.

I belonged somewhere else.

When we got to the mall, she brought me over to a store I didn't recognize that sold kids clothes.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"I have an announcement," she said, beaming at me. "I'm pregnant!"

"Penny!" I hugged her, and we jumped up and down together. "That's amazing!"

"It's why I wanted you to come shopping with me. I think it's a girl, but obviously it's way too soon to tell. We just found out, and I wanted you to be the first person to know. We're going to tell our families when I'm a bit further along."

"Thank you for that. What a gift!" I was ecstatic that after so much loss, there was going to be a new life and happiness to look forward to.

"Come on!" she said. "Let's go pick out some neutral onesies and jammies. Once I find out if I'm having a boy or girl, it's going to be all over, and I'm going to clean this place out."

I laughed and went with her into the store. We were looking through all the adorably small clothes, and I was struck by a pang that I'd never have any of this. That the man I loved was beyond my reach, and I wasn't going to have his children. It hadn't really been something I'd thought too much about, but being here, surrounded by baby things, I realized how much I wanted to have kids.

I just wanted them with Duncan.

"We Wish You A Merry Christmas" played over the speakers, sparking a memory of singing this song with the Campbells during wassailing. Penny's eyes met mine, and I could see that she'd made the same connection.

I couldn't breathe, like something lay against my chest, compressing my lungs hard.

"I'm going out—" I said, and she nodded. I hurried into the open courtyard in the mall and sat down next to a fountain,

doing my best not to cry. I didn't want to make a scene.

I was having a hard time calming down, though.

"Are you all right then, lassie?" a voice asked, and I looked up to see a man dressed as Santa Claus.

With a Scottish accent.

Of course he would have a Scottish accent. I hadn't heard one since we'd left Scotland, and now that I was trying hard not to spiral, the universe decided to send me a Scotsman to really make my misery the worst that it possibly could be.

"I'm okay," I said.

He sat down on the bench next to me. "That doesnae appear to be the case to me. What's wrong?"

"I love someone that I can't be with."

"Why not?"

"He lives somewhere that I can't get to."

Santa shifted his weight, and I noticed how blue his eyes were. "And why cannae you get to where he lives? Can you not afford to travel?"

I sighed, and decided to blurt out the truth. "He lives in a magical disappearing village, and I don't know when it's going to reappear again. No one does."

Ha. Let him come up with a solution to that. Or make a quick exit from the woman who was, as Alasdair might have put it, a wee bit touched in the head.

"Och," he said in an all-too-familiar way that made my heart twist so hard, I was worried I would start sobbing. "That's a shame."

"Yes. And I love Duncan, and I want to be with him more than anything. I need him."

Santa considered this, nodding. "Then it seems to me you must try to go back. With a love and need that strong, who knows what kinds of things could happen?"

“Sure. Thanks.” I was obviously very pathetic where Duncan was concerned, but I wasn’t going to go camp out in a forest and hope that he’d just reappear because I wanted him to.

Santa smiled at me then and handed me a large candy cane. “Maren Kelly, Christmas is the time for miracles. Haste ye back.”

Goose bumps broke out on my flesh, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up. “What did you say?”

Santa just smiled at me again, got to his feet, and then melted into the crowd. I leapt up, intending to follow him.

There were too many shoppers. “Excuse me, pardon me,” I repeated, trying to elbow my way through.

I couldn’t find him.

I made my way back to the store, where Penny was paying for the clothes she’d bought.

She was beaming. “Isn’t this so cute—”

I interrupted her. “I have to go back to Highglen.”

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

She put her hand against my forehead. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Penny!” I exclaimed. She didn’t understand what had just happened. I was full of adrenaline, my heart beating wildly out of control. “Santa is Scottish, and he just told me that I have to go back to Highglen.”

The cashier shot me a funny look as she gave Penny her card and the bag. Penny steered me out of the store and led me to the food court, where she had me sit down. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

I quickly filled her in on my conversation with Santa Claus, but her disbelieving look didn’t change.

“He said Christmas is the time for miracles. Do you know how many times Duncan said that to me?” It was like a sign.

“A lot of people say that,” Penny responded. “Duncan and Mall Santa aren’t the only ones.”

“But then he said, ‘Haste ye back.’ It was one of the last things Duncan said when I left.”

She looked so sympathetic and reached over to put her hand on mine. “Literally everyone in Scotland says that. Don’t you remember how many shops we went into that had ‘Haste Ye Back’ signs?”

“You don’t understand,” I told her, frustrated. She wasn’t getting it. I had to go. “He knew my name. And I am a hundred percent certain that I didn’t tell him my name.”

“Don’t you text with Callum once a week?” she asked, trying to take a more reasonable approach. “Wouldn’t he tell you if the weather had changed?”

I nodded. Sometimes I texted him more often, which he seemed to be very tolerant of, but he was the only link I had to Highglen. I knew that he would text me if there was any news, but so far, he’d had nothing to report.

And I knew he probably wouldn't have anything to tell me for a very long time. Duncan had said that the shortest gap he'd recorded had been five years, but that had been three hundred years ago.

I knew the odds. Highglen wouldn't show up again for a very long time.

But I felt a sense of urgency that I couldn't explain. I had to return.

If for no other reason than to stand where Highglen had been so that I could prove to myself that it was really and truly gone.

"It doesn't matter what I say, does it? You're going, aren't you?" she asked.

"Aye," I said, smiling at her. She gave me a small, sad smile in return.

"Okay. Well, I'll help you pack and drive you to the airport. After we get something to eat."

She did just as she promised. I was very careful to pack everything that I thought I might possibly need. The fairy-tale book, Duncan's sheep carving, and my Luckenbooth pin. I packed up a bunch of over-the-counter animal antibiotics for animals and massive bottles of acetaminophen and ibuprofen and all the toiletries that I thought I was going to need for the next few months. I packed up photo albums and a couple of toys from my childhood. It was so hard to pick and choose what to take with me and what to leave behind.

I was in such a rush to get back to Scotland that it was difficult to be clever like I should have been. Roger was the one who texted some really good suggestions, like bringing my vet kit, a solar-powered flashlight, and a good pair of hiking boots. I also made up a list for Callum in addition to the one that Duncan had already given him for future supplies.

But honestly, what I brought with me didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the possibility of being reunited with Duncan.



Penny and Roger drove me to the airport. Roger helped me with my one giant carry-on backpack, the one I intended to bring with me to Highglen.

“Good luck,” Roger said. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.” He hugged me.

“Thank you. And please take good care of Penny. She deserves the world.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek before he got back into his car.

Penny hugged me tightly. “If it’s not there, I’ll be here waiting for you. If it is, then I’ll know why you didn’t come home. In that case, I wish you a lifetime of happiness and love, even though I am going to miss you so much. I love you.”

It struck me in that moment what I was doing. If Duncan and Highglen were there, I’d never see Penny again.

Never see her baby.

I reached out to put a hand on her still-flat stomach. “I’ll miss you, too. You’ve been the best friend anyone could ask for. I love you. I wish I could be here and witness what a great mom you’re going to be. Take good care of that baby for me!”

When I saw that she was crying, I couldn’t help it, and my own tears started. We both laughed and cried at the same time.

“Give the Campbells my love. And go get your Highlander,” she told me.

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Callum grumbled the whole way back into the forest. “There’s no storm,” he told me. “And it’s only been a year.”

“I know,” I said. My phone was set to the weather report for the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park area, and I probably knew the forecast better than he did. On our way there, I texted Penny and Roger that my apartment was paid up through the end of the month and asked them to clear it out if I didn’t return, which they agreed to do. I then set up a wire transfer for the following week that would send all of the money in my bank account to them with a note that it was for

the baby's college education. I had a lot, given my mom's life insurance policy, but hopefully, I wasn't going to need it any longer.

But despite him thinking this was all foolish, Callum still drove me to the green-and-blue-painted boulder. He turned off his truck, and we both climbed out.

At the bottom of the hill, he pointed up. "The castle should be that way. Call me when you're ready to go."

"If I don't call you within the next hour, then I'm not coming back," I told him. "Please text Penny, and let her know what happened to me."

He just grumbled some more, but I was too excited.

I walked up the hill and noted that the trailer that Callum had dropped off last year was gone. It had disappeared with Highglen.

My stupid backpack was so heavy, I was worried I wouldn't be able to make it up the hill, but I managed somehow.

When I finally reached the top, the Highland mist surrounded me, making it difficult to see more than a couple of feet. Despite the shroud of mist, I was comforted by the feeling of familiarity.

I held my breath, expecting to see the stone of the outer castle wall.

But there was nothing here. No village.

I was sure I was standing where the courtyard of the castle should be, but there was only the mist.

My heart sank into my stomach, and my throat felt thick. I let my backpack slide off my shoulders, and then I fell to my knees. This had been so stupid of me. Why had I listened to a mall Santa?

Closing my eyes, I wrapped my arms around myself. "Please," I said aloud, not even sure who I was asking. "I need him. I need him so much."

The only response was the howling wind that blew through the tops of the rowan trees.

“M’annsachd.”

This was truly pathetic. I wanted Highglen to be here so badly that I was literally conjuring up Duncan’s voice.

“Maren, are you going to stay there on your knees with your eyes closed, or are you going to get up and kiss me properly?”

My heart started thudding hard in my chest. I opened my eyes slowly, too scared to believe.

Duncan stood over me, beaming, and I watched as the castle walls began to materialize around me. I had been on the dirty ground, but now I was kneeling in snow. “Duncan?”

“Aye, ’tis me, my bride-to-be.”

I launched myself at him, kissing him with all the love I had for him in my heart. I heard someone clearing their throat and stopped kissing him long enough to see his mother giving us a look.

“How is this possible?” I asked.

His light eyes sparkled at me, clearly delighted to be holding me. “I dinnae ken. I only ken that you are here now with me, as you should be.”

“How long has it been?”

“’Tis January the sixth for us. You have been gone for the worst five days of my entire existence.”

“It’s been almost eleven months for me.”

He had his arms around me tightly, hugging me, apparently unwilling to make that concession for his mother. “Are you able to stay with me?”

I understood what he was asking me. I nodded. “She’s gone.”

He made a sympathetic sound as he held me. “My poor Maren. I ken that this time must have been so difficult for

you.”

I nodded and rested my head against his shoulder, so glad that I was back where I belonged. I had so much to share with him about my life while we were apart, but for now, it was enough just to be held by him.

Alasdair came running into the courtyard, carrying Ainsley on his back. “Is it true?” He stopped short and grinned at me. “Oh, I can see for myself that it is.”

“Welcome home, Maren!” Ainsley shouted, absolutely beaming at me. I was thrilled to see her again and so excited that I would get to see her grow up.

It was then that I noticed all of Duncan’s sisters had gathered, waiting for their turn to say hello to me.

But not yet.

“Bride-to-be?” I said to Duncan, leaning back so that I could look him in the eyes. “Is that your idea of a proposal?”

“No, but this is.” He released me and got down on one knee. “Maren Kelly, I pledge to love, protect, and cherish you all the days of my life. Will you stay here in Highglen and do me the honor of becoming my wife? And by that I mean, can we go to the chapel and get married now? I cannae wait another day to tell the world that we belong to each other.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to hold back my smile. “What if I needed to think about it?”

He made a sound at the back of his throat. “The snow is cold, m’annsachd.”

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. “Okay, then, what if I said I wanted to be a Christmas bride like Niamh?”

“You would make me wait?”

“Maybe,” I teased.

But he responded in all seriousness. “I would wait a thousand years for you.”

“You’ve waited almost four hundred, so I guess that’s close enough,” I said.

“Is that an aye or nae?” Alasdair yelled out. “’Tis colder out here than a witch’s t—” Sorcha elbowed him hard in the stomach.

“It’s an aye,” I told Duncan. “And I don’t want to wait. I want to marry you as soon as possible.”

At that, he got up, pulling me up against him and whirling me around. I laughed, happier than I could ever remember feeling.

“I’m going to be a bridesmaid!” Ainsley shouted, running around in the snow in excited circles.

When he put me back down on my feet, he said, “I ken that you’d come back to me. That there had to be a way for us to reunite. You cannae doubt the miracles of Yuletide.”

“Do you think if I ask Santa for a plumber and an electrician, we might get those next Christmas?”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “I suppose it wouldnae hurt to ask. Although I would be afraid to ask for anything further. You’ve returned on Epiphany, the day the wise men brought the Christ Child precious gifts. And you are my most precious gift, my blessing. I would feel ungrateful to ask for anything more.”

Since I was about to become his wife, I kissed him. His mom could be mad about it someplace else. “You’re right. You’re the only present I’ll ever need.”

He was my light in the dark, the reminder that there was so much life and happiness ahead of me, even with the darkness I’d had to travel through to get here.

“Merry Christmas, Maren,” he said.

“Nollaig Chridheil, Duncan.”

# EPILOGUE

“What did I tell you?” I asked my very darling but mischievous son, who had somehow managed to dump an entire bag of flour onto the kitchen floor and was currently rolling around in it. “Murdoch Duncan Campbell! I told you to stay out of the flour. Not to pour it all over the floor!”

“Sorry, Mama,” he said, and my heart melted when he perfectly mimicked his father’s “I’m sorry” expression. He had his dad’s dark curls and light eyes, and I was pretty sure I would have let my little boy get away with actual murder because he was the cutest kid who had ever lived.

“What’s all this?” Duncan asked, coming up behind me and trying to put his arms around me. They didn’t quite reach all the way, though, because I was literally as big as the castle.

I must have said it out loud because he kissed the back of my neck gently. “You are about to give birth, m’annsachd. You are even more beautiful now than you’ve ever been.”

My husband was a very good liar. “If I give birth to another little devil like the one you’ve already given me—” I warned, leaning against him and loving his strength and soft touch.

“You’ll love him or her just as much as you love Murdoch,” he said soothingly, and I knew he was right. I was just exhausted and worn out and very ready for this baby to make their way into the world.

“I’ll not hear any disparaging remarks about my perfect grandson,” Ailin announced, coming into the kitchen and sweeping the dusty Murdoch into her arms. True to her word, she had turned the running of the castle over to me. Now that it was Christmas Eve, I was realizing how easy it had all seemed when she was in charge, but that it was fantastically difficult to help Chef Pierre make all the food and keep everything clean. I was so relieved my sisters-in-law were coming up to the castle to help.

“My apologies,” I said.

“’Tis allowed, given your condition,” she allowed begrudgingly, but I knew she was excited to welcome another Campbell grandbaby. “I’m going to give Master Murdoch a bath.”

At that, my son looked so betrayed and heartbroken, it was all I could do not to snatch him out of his grandmother’s arms. “No bath! Mama! Da!”

But Ailin didn’t let us rescue him and whisked him out of the room.

“Alone at last,” Duncan said, turning me around to face him. He kissed me long and hard, and I was so glad there weren’t any more rules about us not being able to touch each other. He was still careful with his public displays of affection, but his private displays were my favorite things in the whole world.

It was why Murdoch had been born nine months after our wedding.

Ainsley came through the kitchen, reading a book and chewing on an apple. Duncan quickly pulled away, leaving me overheated and desperately wanting him. His youngest sister seemed not to notice us until she reached the threshold and announced, “’Tis a good thing I love you both.”

Which was teenage speak for “You two are so gross.”

Duncan and I both laughed. Then I heard voices in the great hall. “Your sisters and their families are here,” I said with so much relief in my voice that Duncan laughed again.

“Then we should go greet them. After I steal one more kiss.”

He stole more than just one kiss, and I was probably very disheveled when we finally made our way into the great hall. I had gotten all of the Christmas decorations laid out on a couple of tables, because we weren’t allowed to decorate for the season until Christmas Eve. I had tried so many times over the last three years to convince the Campbells that it was actually more fun to put the decorations up at the beginning of

December so that we could enjoy them longer, but nobody listened to me.

The words *bad luck* were extensively thrown around as their reason.

I hugged each of his sisters, their spouses, and all of my nieces and nephews. Alasdair and Sorcha had had two more children, as had Fia and Jock. Robert and Niamh had had a little girl they'd named Stephanie after my mother, and Niamh was currently four months pregnant. There were so many new little ones for our ever-growing Campbell family.

I put a protective hand on my stomach and smiled. Soon I'd be welcoming another Campbell. I secretly hoped it would be a girl.

My uncle hugged me tightly. We had grown really close in the time I had been in Highglen. His laughter reminded me so much of my mother's. At first, it had made me a bit sad, but then it was like having her with us all the time. I had been disappointed that she would never get to meet the Campbells, but in some ways it felt like she was always there in Highglen with me.

A rush of happiness overwhelmed me for a moment. I had everything I could ever possibly want. Everything, except for word from my best friend. I hoped she and Roger were okay. That their little girl had grown up happy. I wondered if they'd had any more children and what they were doing now.

I'd already written my letter to her that I would pass on through Callum the next time we synched back in time. Although now, it might be his son. Or grandson, Ian.

It was a bit jarring sometimes to remember how quickly time was passing outside Highglen.

There was some commotion by the entrance to the great hall, and Duncan went over to investigate. I would have followed, but I couldn't waddle nearly as quickly as he could walk.

I sank down onto the empty bench nearest to me and let out a big sigh. Sorcha sat next to me, tutting sympathetically.



“’Tis almost time.”

“Almost,” I agreed with her.

“Mayhap you will have a bairn born on Christmas Day.”

I smiled back at her. That would be something. The second-best Christmas gift I’d ever receive.

Duncan Campbell was the first.

He came back with Alasdair, and a young man stood between them. He was wearing jeans and a sweater, clearly from the twenty-first century. The first visitor we’d had at Highglen since I’d returned.

How many years had it been? Twenty? Fifty?

Duncan said, “This is Marty. From America.”

Now I understood why he’d brought him over. As a fellow American, I would be in the best position to explain Highglen and all of its accompanying magic. I held out my hand. “Hi, Marty. I’m Maren Campbell. Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” he said, shaking my hand. His eyes sparkled in the low light of the great hall, and something about them felt so familiar to me that for a moment I couldn’t speak.

I knew this man.

But I also knew I’d never met him.

I wasn’t sure I would ever get used to the weird time-glitchy thing that happened in Highglen, where visions of the future were like memories, and vice versa.

“Have we met?” I asked, not able to help myself.

“No.” He paused for a beat and looked around. “I didn’t think any of this was possible, you know. I thought she was making it up.”

“Who was making it up?” I asked, and adrenaline spiked inside me, because I absolutely knew what he was going to say next.

“My mother.”

“Who’s your mother?” I whispered the words, excited and scared all at the same time.

“Penny Blankenship.”

At that, my tears started pouring down my cheeks, and I couldn’t see. Stupid pregnancy hormones. He was just a blurred image in front of me. I felt my husband’s arms around me, holding me, letting me know that he was there with me. “Is she okay? Is she happy?” I finally managed to ask.

“She’s so happy,” Marty told me. “She has been living a great life with my dad. She wanted you to know how much she loves you and misses you, and that she thinks about you every day.”

I couldn’t speak. I had worried so much about Penny over the years, hoping that she was doing well, sad that I couldn’t keep in touch with her. I knew that coming to Highglen was the absolute right decision, that I was meant to live a life with Duncan and the rest of the Campbells, but it still hurt that I couldn’t see her.

“Somehow Mom’s been tracking when this place is supposed to show up,” he said. Penny had probably been keeping an eye on the storms in the area, waiting for a massive snowstorm to indicate the return of Highglen. “She would have come herself, but my sister is about to have her first baby, and Mom wanted to be there with her. So she sent me instead.”

“Sister?” I echoed. Duncan started rubbing my lower back. As if he knew that was exactly what I needed.

“I have two sisters and one brother. She also wanted me to tell you that I’m supposed to thank you. You’re the one who paid for medical school for me.”

“You’re a doctor?”

He nodded, and I was so delighted by this piece of information that I didn’t know what to do with it.

“I’m really glad I got to meet you,” he added. “You’re my namesake.”

“I am?” I asked in surprise, reaching for Duncan’s free hand and holding on to him tightly. He was always right there when I needed him, lifting me up and supporting me.

“My name is Martin. It was either that or Marlon in honor of you.”

The tears were going to start up again, and it was hard to hold them back. I was never going to get through this if I kept weeping uncontrollably.

“Have you been missing the spirit of Christmas?” Duncan asked, and Marty looked a little startled.

“I guess. I’ve been so focused on my studies and on graduating this spring that I haven’t really been able to celebrate this season, and it has made me feel a bit sad, like . . .” His voice trailed off and he went totally still.

Margaret had entered the great hall right then, and I saw the moment it happened.

When they fell in love.

“Penny’s going to be so mad at me,” I whispered to my husband.

“Aye,” he said with the same roguish grin I often saw on our toddler. “But mayhap if you cannae have Penny here in Highglen, you can have the next best thing.”

I would happily take any piece of Penny that I could get. “If our baby’s a girl, what do you think about naming her Penelope Noel?”

Duncan grinned at me. “I cannae think of a better name,” he said before kissing the tip of my nose.

Marty swallowed hard, and it seemed to physically pain him to return his gaze to us, as if he couldn’t bear to stop looking at Margaret. There was a note of awe and disbelief in what he said next. “There is something so familiar about this place. Like I’ve been here before. In some weird way, it feels like coming home.”

I turned toward Duncan, kissing the man I absolutely adored before softly responding, “I know exactly how you

feel.”

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading my story! I hope you liked getting to know Duncan and Maren and enjoyed them falling in love as much as I did. If you'd like to find out when I've written something new, make sure you sign up for my newsletter at [sariahwilson.com](http://sariahwilson.com), where I most definitely will not spam you. (I'm happy when I send out a newsletter once a month!)

And if you feel so inclined, I'd love for you to leave a review on Amazon, on Goodreads, with your hairdresser's cousin's roommate's blog, via a skywriter, in graffiti on the side of a bookstore, on the back of your electric bill, or any other place you want. I would be so grateful. Thanks!

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Dear Alison Dasho—this story only exists because of you. I had a list of Christmas ideas, and of course you chose the one where I had absolutely no idea what would happen in it other than it would be a magical Scottish Brigadoon-type village. It was a total blast writing this novella and just as much fun getting your feedback and hearing the parts that you loved. Thank you so much for your insight and suggestions and for loving this story. I’m so glad it turned out in a way that made us both happy! Maybe we should do this once a year going forward—a Christmas novella about the Campbell sisters falling in love. Special thanks to the entire Montlake team for all of your support and guidance and all that you do to ensure that my books are successful!

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Thanks to [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org)—you sent me an email right after I finished this book that let me know I was related to Winston Churchill. Curious, I found our common ancestor. I knew that I had English and Irish ancestry but discovered that I came from a long line of Scottish Stewarts descended

directly from Robert the Bruce—one of my absolute favorite historical people ever. (I wrote papers about him and William Wallace in college!) Even more amazing: one of my ancestors was married to a Duncan Campbell, and it is such a weird coincidence. I've always been partial to Scottish heroes, and now I know why!

Thank you to Lerner and Loewe for writing *Brigadoon*—a musical I watched constantly growing up. It was so much fun to pay tribute to their wonderful story, and to put in some Easter eggs to honor them!

For my kids—you are the lights of my life, my joy, and I'm thankful for you every day. Baby Hayden—you are the cutest and the sweetest, and I love spending time with you.

And for Kevin—I will love you then as I love you now, and the passing of time will not matter.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Sariah Wilson is the *USA Today* bestselling author of *Hypnotized by Love*, *The Hollywood Jinx*, *The Chemistry of Love*, *The Paid Bridesmaid*, *The Seat Filler*, *Roommaid*, *Just a Boyfriend*, the *Royals of Monterra* series, and the #Lovestruck novels. She happens to be madly, passionately in love with her soulmate and is a fervent believer in happily ever afters—which is why she writes romance. She currently lives with her family and various pets in Utah and harbors a lifelong devotion to ice cream. For more information, visit her website at [www.sariahwilson.com](http://www.sariahwilson.com).