

# Marked BY THE Highlander

HIGHLANDER FOREVER BOOK TWELVE

*A SCOTTISH TIME TRAVEL ROMANCE*

REBECCA PRESTON

MARKED BY THE  
HIGHLANDER

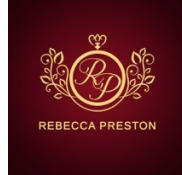
A Scottish Time Travel Romance-Highlander  
Forever Book 12



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## CHAPTER 1



Callie walked up the sidewalk toward the door. This moment was always nerve—wracking for her and the adrenaline rushed through her body. This line of work was what she had chosen and it made for an exciting life. Her blood coursed through her veins with each step never knowing what she was getting into but the income she made off such a dangerous job was too good to pass up.

The bail jumper known as Tony Thorn had been elusive and not easy to track down. She had been to this particular house before when her search began a week earlier only to find his mother living alone, the residence was her home after all.

However, after trying to find him across the state of New Jersey she came back one more time with a new set of questions for his mother. Callie Mercer found that it was best to question friends and family more than once to see if their story changed. She learned a lot by questioning people and gauging their reactions. So on that bright morning she intended to question Tony's mother one more time, in case she had missed something or her story would change.

As she walked up the sidewalk, something didn't sit right with her and her instincts and every bone in her body was telling her to back away. Callie didn't listen, though, she had a job to do and she was going to do it.

She knocked on the door. "Mrs. Thorn. Can I have a word about your son, Tony?"

The silence from within made her think that no one was home or they could not hear. This time she banged on the door louder. “Mrs. Thorn it’s Callie Mercer, the skip—tracer you spoke with last week. I have some—”

The door swung open and all she saw was the barrel end of the weapon pointed at her before hearing the gunfire and feeling an intense burning sensation in her stomach. Callie looked down and saw the bloom of red in her middle, her hands went to it involuntarily, and then nothing. Her eyes fluttered open. A loud siren echoed around her. Two people in blue uniforms hovered over her. One tapped on a syringe. The other held paddles.

“Pulse is dropping.”

“What? What happened?” Callie managed to cough out. The words were accompanied with spats of blood.

“You’ve been shot. Stay with us, stay awake...” the man said, but his eyes seemed to hold grave concern. “Everything is going to be alright. You will be fine. Don’t go to sleep.”

Callie did try to stay awake but her eyelids felt so heavy and her body hurt worse than anything she could ever have imagined. The noise of the sirens echoed deep into the distance and she couldn’t focus, her head felt fuzzy, thoughts just flittered through her mind but she couldn’t capture any of them. After a moment they faded away all together and she suddenly felt as though she was floating. Drifting in a sea of darkness. She felt no more pain and sighed with relief.

A silence fell over her. The dark circled her. She felt weightless and relaxed, then a bright white light burst around her.

A very cold feeling took over her making her shake and it was quite brutal for her. Opening her eyes with surprise, she struggled awake but everything was weird.

There were glowing beings standing around her, their strange hands on her. *Doctors?* she wondered. It seemed like a strange kind of operating room because the only light seemed to come from those standing over her.



the ambulance crashed into a lake? . It was the only thing that made sense. It must have fallen from a bridge or spun out of control into the water. Whatever the reason, it meant that the paramedics and drivers must also be in the water as well or nearby.

“Anyone there? Help!” Callie swam in a circle searching for others who must have landed in the lake with her, but she couldn’t see anything or anyone.

It was then that she noticed just how dark it was. She looked up at the sky which seemed to sparkle unlike anything she had ever seen with stars. It didn’t seem right, not for New Jersey anyway. Where was the light pollution? Where were the passing cars of traffic on the road? For that matter, where was the bridge or road or anything? All she could see was water all around her. She looked out further and could just make out a faint light. She began to swim toward it.

It was a kind of orangish glow, but it seemed quite far away, and Callie was getting tired. Her arms ached from swimming. Her feet felt leaden as she kicked, propelling herself toward the light. Despite her tiredness, she continued on, and the light grew closer. She called out again, “Somebody! Anybody? Help!” She gasped, nearly out of breath.

Everything seemed silent except for the sounds of the water gently lapping against something, but she didn’t know what it was. It was too dark to make anything out.

“Please! Is anyone there? I need help!” she called again.

Then she heard something odd. A rhythmic beating or pounding that sounded not too far off. That sound made her shout out again, “Hey! Can you hear me? I fell in the lake! I need some help!” She treaded water for a moment, hoping beyond hope that the sound had meant someone was nearby. ‘

“I hear you!” ”” a thick burly voice called back.

Callie was astonished to hear such an accent in New Jersey but there was no time to process.

“Here. Help I’m over here!” she shouted over and over coughing as she took in water with her struggle as she tread water.

“I’m coming. Keep talkin’ so I can find you,” the man said as he jumped into the water.

“I’m right here.” She slapped her hands on the surface of the water over and over.

Suddenly the water pushed toward her as a man swam near her. It was too dark for her to see anything but his face as he got close.

“I’m here. I got you, lass,” he said as he put his arm around her, holding her up in the water.

Callie could feel the strength of his arms around her. He pulled her with such ease as he swam. She wondered if the others from the accident were already on shore. She gasped as she remembered something else. She had been shot. Her hand immediately went to her stomach, but she couldn’t feel anything but her torn shirt. The water was so icy that she felt numb all over, though. Her fingers moved over her chest and belly searching for her injury but finding none. Had the doctors repaired her already? If they had, how did they manage that and leave no sutures or anything? And where was everyone that had to have been with her? And the most burning question was, how did they end up in this lake?

## CHAPTER 2



**G**raeme rode hard and fast through the night. No time could be wasted for his mission. Every moment was an important one that could mean life and death.

Having returned from Glasgow only a few hours earlier to find out that his sister had been missing for some time. He was furious.

A week ago, during an invasion of goblins, Graeme Grant's sister Mary disappeared suddenly without so much as a note. Graeme felt sick not knowing where she was.

Graeme's, friend and cousin, Alastair, a goblin hunter, was convinced that the creatures took his sister, either to eat or as a captive and plaything. With his cousin's theory about Mary, Graeme was determined to find the goblins and rescue her.

His cousin Alastair had led a group to find her but so far had turned up emptyhanded. Though Alastair and his men decided to pursue a group of goblins across the region assuming that Mary had been taken by the goblins as had happened many times before with people from the Keep.

The group of Watchmen were tracking the goblins and Graeme knew they would send word back to the Keep if they found Mary, but Graeme couldn't sit idly by and wait for word from them. He decided to pay a visit to Old Maggie to see if she could shed light on the whereabouts of his sister Mary.

Old Maggie had insight like no other because she herself was half Fae on her father's side. She lived in a stone cottage about a mile from Urquhart Castle on the path to the local

village. The villagers all whispered that she was a witch, but they never seemed to mind having her help when they were feeling poorly. Probably because Maggie was gifted with healing poultices and the like.

It was this stone cottage that Graeme was riding toward when he heard the call of a woman shouting for help.

Mary! he thought. He had to get to her. “I hear you!” he shouted, racing toward the shore.”” The sound of splashing water echoed across the water. He knew that the sound was coming from a woman in the water and that woman could very well be his little sister. He nudged his horse into high speed toward the edge of the Loch. Without a thought he jumped off the horse and dove into the ice cold water swimming out toward her, instructing her to continue shouting so that he could find her in the dark. But as he grew closer, he knew that this woman wasn’t his sister. There was no Scottish accent to this woman’s voice and by the time he got to the struggling woman, he knew that she was one of the women from the other realm that appeared sometimes in the Loch.

Now he was bound to save her and take her to the Keep it was the oath of all of the Watchmen.

“Are you alright, lass?” he asked as he laid her on the grassy shore.



CALLIE COUGHED UP WATER, TRYING TO CATCH HER BREATH AS the cold night air pierced her lungs. “I’m... I’m alright. Thank you,” she said between heavy breaths.

Callie watched the man in the darkness barely making out his features, but it seemed to her as though she was looking at a man that was wearing a skirt. He moved to his horse and pulled out a small blanket from his saddlebag and walked back toward her. As he got closer, she realized that the skirt was a kilt and the blanket was a cloak.

“What the hell is going on here? Why are you dressed like that? Where are the others?” she asked.



Graeme wrapped the cloak around her back and she pulled it across her body holding it tightly. The warmth was very welcome. At this point she had the strength back in her legs and she stood up feeling the cold air hit her wet skin and wet hair. It was chilling.

“Others? There were others with you? Is there a young girl? She goes by the name of Mary?”

“Mary? No. I mean the paramedics that were in the ambulance with me. Where is the ambulance did it sink into the lake? Where is the road? I... I think I was being transferred from one hospital to another.”

“I see. I have heard others say that the women who come from the Loch are often confused such as you. I do not know these para-medics or ambulance you speak of. Did you see these others after you surfaced from the water?” he asked.

“No. I...” she hesitated. She couldn’t be sure of anything at all. I was unconscious, I mean, I didn’t see them, I just assumed that was how I ended up in the lake...” She looked around, but nothing at all was familiar to her. I’ve never seen this place before,” she said.

“Then it is as I expected. Those that you speak of are in your old world and in your own time. They have not been born yet. Come now, we must get you back to the Keep or you could catch a death of a cold being wet out in the chill of the night.”

The man went back to the horse and brought it over toward her as Callie processed his words. What was he talking about? Was this some sort of game? Was he actually still in character from some cosplay? He was definitely dressed the part, but why would he keep acting at a moment like this? “In my own world and own time? What the hell are you talking about? You’re not making sense.”

“Let me help you onto the horse. Everything will be explained in time,” he said moving toward her putting his hands on her waist to hoist her up into the saddle.

Callie slapped his hands away. “Don’t touch me. What are you doing? I demand to speak to someone who knows what is going on here. You’re obviously some sort of actor from a renaissance faire or something and I must say congratulations you’re doing very well with keeping character and doing your cosplay thing. But this isn’t funny. I need medical attention! I was shot and being transferred from one hospital to another. We need to find the paramedics and get them out of the water before they drowned. Do you have a phone in your saddle?”

“I do not know what a phone is, lass, or why you would need one to retrieve people from the water. What concerns me is you saying you’ve been injured and you’re in need of medical attention. Where is your wound, lass? I have supplies, I can help you,” he said, looking her over with concern.

“I...” Callie bit her lip as her fingers glided over her middle again. There was nothing but the torn fabric of her shirt over her belly. Her skin beneath it was fine. Not even a scratch as far as she could feel. “Well, I... I suppose I’m not.” She shook her head, not understanding how that was possible..

“Then we need to be off and get you in front of the roaring hearth to warm your bones. Hurry now, on the horse with you or I’ll be picking you up and throwing you over the saddle myself,” he said.

“That’s rude,” Callie said. She was a bounty hunter who didn’t put up with talk like that, especially not by men. And she did not appreciate being talked down to like she was some delicate flower even if this man had rescued her. However as she looked around again, she realized that there was nothing even remotely familiar, not even a streetlight. This man was her only way to get to a warm place and out of the wet clothes she was in. And the horse seemed to be the only mode of transportation he had. What choice did she have?

“Fine. I’ll get on the horse, but only because I don’t have any other choice.” Callie grabbed the pommel, ready to hoist herself up, but then she stopped and turned back to the man who she could barely see in the darkness, simply the outline of his figure and softly said, “Thank you by the way. Thank you

for coming out to get me in the cold water. I owe you one. My name is Callie Mercer.”

“I am Graeme Grant, and I’m just doing my duty as a Watchmen. What kind of man would I be to let a wee lass drown? Now up with you,” he said as he grabbed her waist and hoisted her onto the horse, in front of the saddle with ease.

Callie released a small involuntary squeal that she felt immediately embarrassed about. Why was this man able to make her feel so girly and incapable? It wasn’t like her at all. She was a hardened chaser of criminals. She was a tall, athletic woman with a military brat background and it was unusual for any man to make her feel as though she were a delicate flower. This intrigued her, of course.

Graeme easily hoisted himself onto the horse and into the saddle, which wasn’t very big. Callie was astonished even more so that he pressed his chest against her back as he wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her in place, but the warmth radiating off of him was inviting, even though he was soaking wet as well.

“Hold onto his mane,” he directed, “I will not allow you to fall off, I promise.”

Callie did as he directed.

He shifted the reins in his hands and the horse bolted forward at his command. Callie held on, surprised that they could travel so fast with the two of them on the horse. It was so fast that she wasn’t able to ask any more questions as the wind whipped around them. But she was able to take in her surroundings.

There were no lights anywhere, just darkness and trees on either side of the dirt road they were traveling on. She tried hard, staring off into the depths of the trees, looking for a fairgrounds because surely if this man was an actor of some sort from a Renaissance Faire there was no faire anywhere in sight that she could see, nor the hum of a crowd, nor tents. There was just nothing but trees and bushes.

Her heart pounded with anxiety because she didn't like not knowing what was going on in her environment. Why had he said that the others like her would tell her what was going on? What did he mean by others? The only name he mentioned was Mary, but it seemed she was missing and he was searching for her. She guessed that was something they had in common. Searching for people.

All these thoughts moved through her head, but she wasn't prepared for what she saw next. It was the glowing orange light she'd seen from the water. Not only that, but that it was attached to a grand building looming in the distance with tall towers and the very dim light seemed to be coming from torches on the walls. If this was the Renaissance Faire then they had definitely outdone themselves building some sort of replica medieval building, she thought.

The horse reached part of the shoreline, and then onto a land bridge that led to the massive building which stunned her. An iron gate lifted and suddenly Callie realized it wasn't just a massive building. It was a castle. Seeing that, Callie knew she was no longer in New Jersey, but where exactly she was now, she had no idea, and the thought scared her.



GRAEME WONDERED WHAT THIS WOMAN IN HIS ARMS HAD GONE through. He had heard the stories before of the women who had come from a different time and place. Brought here by the Seelie Fae through the gate at the bottom of the Loch. Even his own cousin Alastair had had an experience with one of these women and now he himself was having one as well.

Though he had no intentions of getting involved with her as Alastair had Amanda. He simply was going to do his duty and take her to the Laird, Donal Grant, who was a second cousin of theirs, as was expected of him and any other Watchman who came across one of these women. Which oddly enough usually meant that Watchman somehow became entangled with the woman, but he wouldn't.

But as she shivered against his body, he found that there was a stirring within him that he could not explain. He rarely had any sort of reaction to women especially when he was in a different mind—set. When he was set to take a bar wench to bed, then he responded accordingly, but when out on a mission, women did not interest him in the least. It was the last thing on his mind to take a woman to bed while dealing with a responsibility. This time would be no different. He had a sister to rescue and he was not going to allow any woman to distract him from that.

## CHAPTER 3



**I**t was astonishing to see the stonework of the castle and the massive iron gate as it raised and it reminded her of the kind of gate that one would see on an old European castle, only this one didn't appear to be old at all. It was hard to believe that such intricate detail would be given to a re-enactment not to mention that it had to be quite dangerous for actors to be around such a contraption.

“We’re going in there?” she asked.

“Aye, we are lass.”

“But that looks dangerous.”

“It is the safest place in the world” he said.

Graeme nudged his horse forward and they rode toward through the open gate. Callie looked up at it as they passed underneath. The metal was at a point for each of the bars that would come down and hit the ground. No doubt it was meant to trap whoever was not welcome underneath it. She closed her eyes tight going under expecting it to fall on them at any moment. It didn't and they made their way through and under it.

“What is this place?” she asked as the horse entered the courtyard.

“All will be explained to you in time, lass,” Graeme said as he dismounted the horse. Then he put his hands on Callie's waist and hoisted her down as though she weighed nothing.

Callie looked at the man who had rescued her in the light for the first time. She gazed directly into his deep blue eyes that seemed to see down to her soul. His dark blond, shaggy, short hair shimmered in the light from the torches. His narrow face slimmed down to a strong broad jaw and short upper lip. His jaw seemed to be locked open as he looked at her. In the light she was very aware of his strength and long lean muscular stature. She had never seen any man like him, and not simply because of how he was dressed, there was a roughness to him she had never encountered before.

Graeme too stared down at her; his hands still wrapped around her waist. Callie noted she was a few inches shorter than him, which was odd because half the time she towered over men. She had always been told she was very tall for a woman and she knew she was quite as capable as any man. She'd never been the dainty, weak damsel in distress, choosing rather to show her strength. She shoved her wet, auburn hair from her cheek as she continued to process him and his appearance, and how he made her feel, which was not at all like anything she'd ever felt before.

Her pale gray eyes locked with his vivid blue ones and it seemed as though they were locked in this bubble of awareness that was going to last an eternity. Graeme was different than any man she had ever met in her life and she could see in his gaze that he was thinking the same of her. He blinked then, breaking the spell they were under as though he had just realized where they were.

“You are in need of heat and dry clothing,” he murmured softly as he released her waist.

Callie was dismayed by the removal of his hands. She'd wanted to stay like that longer, but his words brought her back to her senses and she shivered with the chill of the air. “Yes.” She nodded.

“You there, fetch Lady Elena. She's one of her kind,” Graeme said.

Callie knew that she was forming an instant crush on this man but the moment he said those words she pushed her lust

aside.

“One of her kind? What do you mean by that? And what is this place? Some sort of reenactment theater? Like a medieval times?”

“I told you, lass, that all will be explained. I truly have no time to spare. I’m back out into the night, as it were, once I’ve dried myself. Good night to you, lass,” Graeme said as he grabbed the reins of his horse and led it to the stables.

“But? Wait! You’re just going to leave me here?” Callie shouted after him.

“Oh my. You are soaking wet, let’s get you inside, then,” a voice said.

Callie turned to see a woman coming out from the huge wooden doors at the top of the stone steps she was standing near. She felt relieved to hear a voice like hers, one without the Scottish accent, but this woman was dressed in period clothing, just like the man who had rescued her. Long red hair lay in a braid over her shoulder, and her tall lean figure moved in a manner that Callie related to. Not a dainty walk, but more on the masculine side, the same that Callie used herself.

“Inside? Where am I? Who are you?” Callie asked.

“I understand those questions all too well. I’m Elena Grant. Hi,” the woman said.

“Elena, I’m Callie Mercer. Listen, it’s really nice for you all to help me like this. But I’m pretty sure that I was in an ambulance on my way to another hospital and I don’t know where the paramedics are. I woke up in a lake. And more than that, my bounty is probably getting away as we speak,” Callie said as Elena gently pushed her toward the doors.

“Bounty? As in...?”

“As in I was on the trail of a criminal. I’m a skip tracer,” Callie said.

Elena stopped. “Wow that’s cool. I’m a detective from Baltimore, well... I was back in our world. Come on, I’ll



explain everything inside but you can't stay wet in this night cold or you'll get pneumonia."

"Our world? What is going on here?" Callie stopped walking not budging an inch in her stubbornness.

"I know you have questions and I do have answers but I'm not giving you any answers until you come inside. Now you can stay out here wet and alone or follow me." Elena turned on her heels and went inside.

Callie was astonished by the treatment from this woman. She watched her vanish through thick wooden double doors into the stone building. She looked around at the courtyard where no one was milling about except for men stationed along the roof who had opened the gates on their arrival. She didn't want to go inside this strange castle, but what choice did she have and honestly, she was shivering now that the adrenaline from being in the lake had worn off.

Callie followed Elena inside. As soon as she entered, Elena was waiting for her with a thick blanket and wrapped it around her. Then Elena quietly turned and moved across the stone floor through the stone wall corridors. Callie looked around in wide-eyed wonderment at the dim place lit only by torches hanging from the wall. This really was a re-enactment place that was fully committed to setting the mood. Callie decided she would take whatever help was offered and dry clothes and then use the telephone to be on her way. A few more twists and turns and stairs that lead up to another floor finally landed Callie at the end of a hallway. Elena opened the door.

"These are my rooms that I share with my husband and my son who is sleeping in the next room, so if you would be quiet, I would appreciate it," Elena said leading Callie inside.

"Of course. Thank you for helping me."

"Go sit there by the fire and I'll fetch you some dry clothes. Don't worry, my husband is out on the watch tonight, so he won't be entering the room anytime soon if you want to get out of those wet clothes and dry off," Elena said as she vanished into a back room.

Callie stepped closer to the large roaring fire and immediately peeled off the wet layers of her clothes and shoes, then wrapped herself in the blanket again fully enjoying the heat that was radiating from the blazing fire. Elena re—emerged with a bundle of clothing and set it on a chair next to Callie.

Callie picked up the dress unfolding it and saw that it was much like the one that Elena wore a very thick long period clothing dress.

“Uh do you have anything modern day? Some jeans and a t—shirt will do alright.”

“I don’t. That’s all I have these days. I promise it’s not uncomfortable, and pretty warm. Like wearing a blanket,” Elena said as she pushed an iron kettle over the fire to boil.

“Okay, I guess it’s better than my torn wet shirt and jeans,” Callie said as she began to put it on with the help of Elena.

“I’ll make us some tea with a bit of whisky. You’re going to need it for what I have to tell you,” Elena said.

“Thank you, I could use a hot drink and a strong one,” Callie said.

## CHAPTER 4



Callie was amused by all the trouble these people were going to simply to trick her. It had to be a trick after all because there was no other explanation for it. This must be one of those strange reality shows or something, she thought. Sometimes she watched one of these reality shows and wondered how people could put themselves in those situations but now she understood that they just did it and got permission on the back end. Well, they were going to be surprised because she wasn't going to sign any agreement to show the world her being made a fool of. She didn't care how good the money they offered would be.

Elena sat down with Callie and began to tell her about all the women who had come before her. "Now what I'm about to tell you is going to sound absolutely insane. But please allow me to get through it and tell you what I know."

"I'm ready." Callie drank her spiked tea.

"Eleven women have come before you, including myself. We've been brought to this time and place for a reason. You have traveled to the past, but not just the past as you think of it. In this past well, it is a magical sort of different reality than what we've learned in the history books. You're in Scotland, it's the middle of the sixteenth century, and we have a Laird. But also this time period is one of sorcery and magic unlike anything that you would have been taught in history class."

Callie scoffed. "You have got to be kidding me with this." She rolled her eyes.

“Let me finish. We do know that a group of Seelie Fae are responsible for our arrival. It appears that they take injured women from our time and heal them. Then once they are healed, they set them free here in this realm through a gate at the bottom of the Loch. That has been the same for each of us. We all have arrived through the Loch.”

Callie listened with complete shock and disbelief.

“I know it’s hard to believe and we’re not exactly sure why they have brought women from other times and places into this world, but it seems that it’s for us to help the men of Clan Grant at this particular Sept or castle, if you will. Eleven others have come before you including myself. We all have skills that seem to be needed at the time of our arrival and somehow we also seemed to have found our place here in other ways as well,” Elena said.

“Fae, as in fairies?” Callie said.

“Yes, precisely.”

“Give me a break. Fairies? No, I don’t believe it. This is ridiculous, you have got to be messing with me,” Callie said.

“I know how it sounds. I’m not insane, I promise,” Elena said.

“This isn’t possible. What’s really going on here? I would expect better behavior from a cop. Can you just let me use your phone and I’ll be on my way?” Callie said.

“Your reaction is normal. I was the same way. I don’t have a phone anymore. It wouldn’t work here, there are no cell towers, there’s no electricity, there’s no landline. I’m trying to tell you that you’re in a different time period. We still don’t know the whole story here, if this world is the same one that we left, just in the past, or if we’re in a different realm all together. What I can tell you is that it’s the sixteenth century, we’re in Scotland, you got here through Loch Ness, via the burgh gate at the bottom of it, and the Fae exist.”

“I don’t believe it and I don’t believe you,” Callie said, pacing the room.

“You should get some rest. You can sleep here for tonight. I’ll make a pallet for you here on the rug by the fire. Not the most comfortable, but the castle staff are still abed, and a room hasn’t been prepared for you. Anyway, I know you’ll probably sleep deeply and probably quickly., Something about the transition. In the morning, the Laird will see to this and give you a room of your own here at the Keep.”

“The Laird... this is so crazy,” Callie said.

“Yes, I know how weird this all sounds to you, I’ve been in your shoes, but I promise you, it’s real,” Elena said as she left the room to gather blankets and a pillow for Callie’s makeshift bed.

Callie felt completely annoyed. She moved to the window to look out ready to take matters in her own hands. She wasn’t a prisoner and there was no reason why she couldn’t just walk out of this room and go find a phone herself. Looking out the window she saw nothing but darkness in the distance and below was the rocky shore of the massive lake she’d fallen into. It was completely out of character scenery for New Jersey, even if she were in the dark suburbs, which she doubted, there would still be streetlights and cars and real roads. There was a none of that here.

Elena re—entered the room and began to lay several blankets on the rug near the fire and a pillow. “I know this all seems very crazy, but I’m not lying to you. You can leave if that’s what you’re thinking, but you should know that out there is very dangerous. There are things you have never heard of or seen in anything but books and movies. You won’t find a phone anywhere and there’s no one to call anyway.”

Callie frowned. “I could call the cops.”

Elena laughed softly and shook her head. “Honey, I hate to break it to you, but those men out there on the wall, they are the cops. Or what passes for the law around here. You’re welcome to go out there and speak to them yourself, if you’d like, but they’ll tell you the same. You’re truly better off here at the moment.”

Callie looked outside again; she could just make out the corner of the wall at the front of the building where she had come through. “This has to be illegal.”

“I promise it will all make much more sense soon. And you are safe here. However, if you still wish to go out and explore for yourself, you’re welcome to, but you should at least get some rest and make a decision about it in the morning when the sun is up and you can actually see where you’re going. If you need anything, I’ll be just through there,” Elena said, pointing as she moved back to her own bedroom. “Good night.”

Callie looked at the bundle of blankets on the ground and thought it did look quite cozy and comfortable after her long ordeal in the lake. The makeshift bed seemed very inviting in front of the warm fire. She decided to just get some rest and figure this out in the morning.

“Maybe it’s all a bad dream,” she said as she moved to the pile of blankets and drew back the top cover pushing herself deep into the cocoon of material. Within minutes she was sound asleep in a deep slumber.

The next morning Callie awoke expecting to find herself in a hospital bed. Instead she was still on the floor in Elena’s room. She sat up in complete disbelief that nothing had changed from the night before and that it wasn’t a bad dream or hallucinations caused by painkillers in the hospital. For a full minute she was in shock, not able to speak as her thoughts rushed through her mind realizing that this had to be real and it was her reality.

“Good morning,” Elena said from somewhere to her left.

Callie turned to see Elena sitting at the table drinking from a small cup.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“I did. I slept hard, actually. So this is real? This is really happening? You weren’t lying or fooling around, were you?”

“No I truly wasn’t. This is all real. I know it’s a lot to take in. It was the same for me when I first arrived. I came the

same way that you did, through the lake, in fact we all did.”

“The others? You said there were others, where are they?”

“They’re here at the castle mostly. Some of us live in the closest village, or nearby. You’ll meet everyone today, if you’d like, but if you aren’t ready, you don’t have to. The Laird has been alerted of your arrival and it’s likely you’ll be summoned to meet him sometime today.”

“This Laird? An actual Laird, like a King?” Callie asked.

“Yes exactly. He’s a strong and kind man so there’s no reason to be frightened. This has all become routine at this point with so many of us coming through.”

At that moment, a baby began to cry. Elena stood up and moved to her bedroom and emerged with a crying infant as she cooed to them, and the child slowly quieted down.

“Callie meet my son. This is Brandon Jr. My sweet little boy,” Elena said proudly.

“He’s adorable. Congratulations,” Callie murmured as she gazed at the infant. “You mentioned your husband last night. Did he also come through the lake like we did?” Callie asked.

“No. He’s a Grant. I met him here when I arrived. We fell in love and got married. And obviously, Brandon Jr. is the outcome.” She grinned.

Callie was in shock to hear this news. Not only had Elena acclimated to her circumstance, but she had made a life here and had fallen in love. “I’m glad for you,” she murmured. Her thoughts immediately went to Graeme and how attracted she was to him upon their first meeting, but there was no way that she could see herself being his wife.

“Thanks,” Elena replied, as she watched Callie. “You still don’t believe you’re in the past, do you?”

Callie shrugged. “I don’t know. And if I am, I really need to get back to my time, because I have a bounty to catch,” she said. She needed to return to her own life and though the others had not found a way she knew that she could and would.

“That’s going to be impossible, Callie. The one thing we all know, those of us who have come through the burgh gate, is that we died in our timeline. The Fae who brought us here, got to us just at the point of death. That life is gone.” Elena gave her a compassionate look, urging her to believe her.

Callie wasn’t sure what to believe at this point. Elena seemed so adamant about what had happened, but Callie couldn’t believe her. She didn’t want to believe her.

“Come on, I will take you to your room.”

“My room?”

“Yes, it is yours for as long as you want it. You are welcome here at the castle for as long as you live and you will always have a place to stay.” Elena smiled as she opened the door to the hallway.

She led Callie through the maze of hallways to an open door. Callie peered inside to see a single bed, a wooden nightstand, a small table with two chairs which sat under the window, a wooden wardrobe, and a fireplace. A maid stood up and dusted off her hands, and Callie could see that she’d been tending the fire.

“Everything is ready, my lady.” She dipped a curtsy and then scurried past them and down the hall.

Graeme had found himself thinking about the young woman he had rescued throughout the entire night. Doing so wasn’t good because he didn’t need any sort of distractions while he was very busy trying to find his sister. It could mean life or death for Mary and he wasn’t going to allow himself to be sidetracked by any sort of situation that didn’t immediately help him find her. Still, he thought he would be able to set his mind at ease if he knew the woman was taken care of, then he could continue his work to find Mary. So he went to go find the woman that he had rescued during the night from the middle of Loch Ness.

He found them standing just inside the open doorway of a small bedchamber. “All settled in, lass?” he asked.



Both of them turned at the sound of his voice. Elena smiled and he noticed she held her infant son on her shoulder. “Graeme, very good to see you. I heard you were the one who discovered Callie in Loch Ness,” Elena said.

Callie’s bright eyes turned to his, catching his gaze. She was even more beautiful than he remembered from last night. She was dressed as Elena was now, in a gown instead of the torn tunic and pants that had been soaked through and her hair was unbound. She was breathtaking. “Aye, I found her in the middle of Loch Ness, as you said, as I was headed to see Maggie. I’ve just come by to see if she were still here or if she’d run off into the night,” he said chuckling.

“She did speak of doing such a thing, but I managed to talk her into staying at least for the night,” Elena teased.

“I am glad to hear it,” Graeme replied, offering a smile at the two beautiful women. “I—” He started but was interrupted by the arrival of one of the castle servants.

“I’m so sorry, my lady, sir, but the Laird is asking to see you, Lady Elena.”

“Ah, I had wondered when he’d summon me. I’m sure this is about you, Callie. Um, everything should be in order, here...” she looked into the room, “I can show you where everything is—”

“You need to go down to the Laird,” Graeme interjected. “I am happy to show Lady Callie anything here that she needs.”

“OH, THANK YOU, GRAEME, I’D APPRECIATE THAT,” ELENA smiled and patted his arm. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, Callie, and I promise, the bed is much more comfortable than the pallet you slept on last night.”

“I’m sure it will be fine. I’ve slept in cars before for my job so any room with a bed is great,” Callie said.

“Okay then. I’ll go see the Laird.” Elena waved, then turned and followed the maid down the hallway.

Graeme didn't know why he offered to show Callie around her room. He had only expected to spend a small amount of time checking in on her as was his responsibility since he was the one who had found her. But something else took hold inside of him and he now entered the small room behind her. Perhaps it was because he wanted to know where he could find her if he needed to speak with her later. At least that was what he told himself.

## CHAPTER 5



**C**allie was secretly thrilled at this turn of events. Not that she didn't appreciate Elena, but Graeme was an attractive man and she hadn't been on a date in ages. Not that this was a date. Not by a long shot. Still, it had been a good while since she'd spent any time with a guy who wasn't her bounty. And those guys certainly weren't potential boyfriends. Not that Graeme was either, since he lived in this time period and she lived in the future. But he sure would be fun to get to know while she was here.

She had to wonder if he was thinking along the same lines she was and if that was why he offered to show her around the small room, which was distinctly smaller now that he was standing in it. He was massive. She took a deep breath and couldn't help but notice his masculine scent mixed with smells of the forest and horse. It was rather attractive to her. She'd never thought a guy could look as good as he did in his plaid, kilt, and white tunic. On his waist he wore a belt that held a huge sword which looked very sharp.

It was obvious the sword was real and so was the man. This was no actor playing a part. He really was a Scottish Highlander. Or as close to one as she'd ever seen in real life. Still it was a bizarre thought to imagine she'd gone back in time and somehow ended up in sixteenth century Scotland. She moved to the window and looked out, expecting to see signs of the modern world or hear an airplane, but there was nothing. The sky was a bright clear blue and all she could hear were the sounds of men working and the lap of the water hitting the shore of the lake.

She glanced back at him and smiled as he reached a hand up to the back of his neck and looked around the room.

“I’m not sure what it is I need to show you about the room, lass, everything is here. I suppose perhaps you do things differently where you come from?” A confused look passed over his face as he looked about the tiny room. “The cabinet is for your clothing, that over there is the wash basin and pitcher for washing up...”

“We do actually do things a bit differently where I’m from,” she answered, following his gaze. “I take it there is no bathroom?”

His cheeks turned a bit pink and he studiously looked away from her. “If you’re wanting a bath, the servants can bring up the bathing tub for you.”

“Oh, um, not exactly what I meant, but thank you. I meant the um...” Callie searched her brain for an old fashioned word she could use that wasn’t offensive, “where I can take care of...”

“The privy?” he asked, his cheeks coloring even more.

“Yes?” Callie nearly laughed.

“There is a chamber pot,” he murmured, pointing under the bed. “The servants will clear them in the mornings.”

“I see...” Callie said, appalled. She’d never imagined she’d have to do something like that.

“I should go—”

“Wait.” Callie grabbed onto his forearm. “I never got to thank you properly for saving my life. I just want to say that I’m very grateful for what you did. Jumping in that cold water like that and swimming out to rescue me. If there’s anything I can do in return just name it.” She batted her eyelashes up and down at him, inviting him to make a move on her.

“I do not require anything in return, lass. I would do it for anyone stuck in the middle of Loch Ness. Now, if you will excuse me, I have much work to do in trying to find my missing sister.”

“Yes, I remembered you mentioning last night that she was missing. Please, tell me more. Perhaps I can help.”

“I don’t think there is much that you can do, lass. My sister went to the village to visit friends and vanished without a trace on the road. This happened to be at the same time we were under attack, an ambush, actually, and I’m afraid she was taken in the chaos. I was in Glasgow at the time, on a mission for the Laird, so that is as much as I know. Now I am searching high and low for her and have come up with nothing. I am heavy with worry.”

Callie perked up. She was made for finding people. It was her profession after all and she had been quite successful at it up until the moment she got shot, but she didn’t want to dwell on that. She was eager to let Graeme know that she could help but also excited to find a way to spend more time with him because there was something about him that drew her in.

“Well that is exactly what I did as my field of work in the place I came from. I’m what you would call a bounty hunter where I come from. I look for clues and track people down. I can help you find your sister. It will give me something to focus on while I am here.”

“That is very kind, lass, but it is far too dangerous out there because of bandits and goblins. I cannot search for my sister while also looking after you,” he said.

“Goblins? You cannot be serious.” Callie frowned at him. Elena had mentioned some nonsense about monsters she’d never seen before, except in movies and books, but she hadn’t taken her seriously.

“Ah, I see Elena has not told you all there is to tell,” he said.

“She did, but I don’t believe her. Goblins are fairy tales. Whoever took your sister, I assure you is of the human variety. Not a made up monster.”

Graeme laughed a hearty laugh. “Already untrusting of me, Like most women. I assure you, lass, goblins are real, as

are various other Fae creatures, like the ones who brought you through the burgh.”

Callie shook her head. “Alright, fine. Let’s say they are real. That still doesn’t mean I can’t help you. How about we start by you showing me your sister’s rooms. I can search for evidence there and clues to where she might be.”

“Clues? There is nothing there, no sign of struggle. There are many who saw her leave to go into the village. There is nothing in her room to look at.” His expression was serious, but Callie could see the skepticism in his eyes.

“You might think so, but I see things differently. I have an eye for it.” Callie was confident that she could help if only he’d allow her to.

“Things are quite different here, lass. Now if you will excuse me, I have to put in a request to speak with the Laird. I’ve spent too much time here as it is,” he said, turning sharply on his heels and walking through her doorway.

Callie was disappointed that she couldn’t get him to take her seriously. People actually paid her good money to use her skills to find people and this man clearly didn’t feel she was capable of it simply because she was a woman. Frustration moved through her and she moved inside the room and slammed the door behind her.

She headed for the window and looked out. She had a better view of the courtyard now. Below she could see people, mostly men, moving about, carrying things into the castle proper, heading toward the stables, practicing with their swords... and there were men on the wall that surrounded the courtyard as well. Some had bows and arrows, all had swords on their hips. Not one had a phone in their hand. There were no modern vehicles, or modern boats on the water. No planes in the very clear sky. No one was taking selfies and no one was dressed in jeans and sneakers or carrying guns... she was definitely not in the twenty-first century.

—Sighing, Callie sank down on the mattress and noticed it wasn’t like what she was used to. It wasn’t made of cotton and

coils and whatever else she was used to, this felt like straw. Not that it was uncomfortable, it wasn't. It was just different.

She wished she'd have asked Elena or Graeme where she could get something to eat. Her stomach was grumbling and she felt like she hadn't eaten in days. She giggled thinking, technically, according to Elena and Graeme, it had been hundreds of years since she'd last eaten.

She was still debating leaving the small room an hour later, when there was a knock at the door.

"Callie, it's Elena."

"Come in," Callie answered, happy for some company. She hoped Elena was going to show her to the kitchen so she could get some food finally.

Elena entered carrying a tray of food and drink.

"That smells amazing," Callie said, jumping up. "I'm starving!"

Elena set the tray on the small wooden table and Callie moved to one of the chairs. The steaming bowl of stew and roll of bread made her stomach growl louder as she unceremoniously dipped into it.

"I thought you might be hungry," Elena said, laughing.

"I am. I had been debating going searching for the kitchen." She smiled as she took another bite. "So tell me what the Laird said about me, am I to be interrogated like a criminal?"

Elena laughed. "He's not that bad. I promise it's more of meet and greet than an interrogation. You'll be fine when you meet him. He'll ask you some questions, of course, and assure you that you're welcome here, probably explain a bit more about the Fae."

"Speaking of the Fae, Graeme said there are goblins. He's making that up to try and keep me here in the castle, right?"

"Nope, afraid not. I did try to warn you that there were monsters here."

“But I thought you were being... I don’t know, not serious?” Callie bit her lip and then frowned. “I mean figured you meant like human monsters, bad guys, worse than the regular criminals I go after because of the time period. Not goblins.”

“Afraid not. Well, of course, we have the rape and pillage type bandits too, but the goblins are worse.”

“What do you mean? How can they be worse?”

Elena pressed her lips in a flat line as she thought of how to answer. “So these goblins aren’t like cute and fuzzy... There are a few, of course, that aren’t too bad, but the ones that we’re currently having trouble with, they’re the ones who like to eat human flesh.”

Callie looked at her stew and pushed it away from her, instead pouring herself some tea and sipping on that. “That’s unbelievable.”

“Is it really though? Considering how you were brought here by unusual creatures to this time and place it’s not too far off really, right? The sooner you accept that this world is nothing like the one you left, the sooner you’ll learn to understand your surroundings here.”

“Graeme believes that these goblins took his sister.”

“It’s possible.” Elena nodded, but she didn’t look pleased about the idea. “We’ve been having a problem with large, organized groups of bandits — human ones — from the south, well, basically they’re English, and you have to know that there is a lot of animosity between the Scots and the English. Anyway, these bandits are causing trouble for the villagers and the traders who visit. Our men absolutely loathe the English especially the nobility, but the bandits aren’t of that class. Still they are English and that is enough of a mark against them for our men to fight ruthlessly against them.”

Callie didn’t know a great deal about the Scottish, English or even Europeans for that matter. What she knew was criminals. “Does it really matter what race they are if they’re criminals?”



“To you and me, probably not, to those men out there protecting us, you’re damn right it does and believe me when I tell you they have their reasons for feeling that way.” Elena smiled. “Just trust me, it matters.”

She’d have to take Elena’s word for it, still that didn’t mean it was goblins that took Graeme’s sister. “Do you think it’s possible that it’s goblins who took his sister? Come on you must have an opinion. You’re a cop after all,” Callie asked.

Elena considered the possibility for a moment. “I do think it’s a possibility, just as I think it’s possible it might be bandits who took her. Anything is possible here, but always remember that each possibility is worth looking into no matter how bizarre it might seem to you at the moment,” Elena said.

“I understand.” Elena had given her a lot to think about. “So when do I see this Laird person?” Callie asked.

“Tonight before supper. I believe he wants to formally welcome you to the Keep when everyone, well everyone except those on duty, is here to welcome you. He often spends the days seeing to various issues with the residence of the Keep, the village and local farming communities that are on Grant lands.”

“How very formal.” Callie smiled at her own sarcastic remark which made Elena laugh.

Callie was grateful that Elena was the one to have taken her in because they were very much alike. Not only were their professions similar but they seemed to have the same sort of humor and Callie did enjoy having a smart mouth. Sometimes she couldn’t help it and it even got her into trouble in the past. In this foreign environment she knew that she would have to keep her sarcastic remarks to herself around those that were from this particular time so it was a relief to be able to speak freely in front of Elena.

“So what is there to do in this joint?” Callie asked.

“There is plenty to do and once you find your footing in this place you’ll see that the chores never end. But for today let’s walk around the Keep so I can show you around and you

can meet some of the other women who were brought here in the same way that you and I were.”

“I’d like that very much,” Callie replied. It would be a relief to speak to others who had her own accent instead of the Scottish one that so many here had.

She wondered if she’d be able to catch one of them off guard and using a cell phone thus proving everything was fake here, but deep down, she knew that it wasn’t. She really was in sixteenth century Scotland and for the moment, she was stuck here without a way back to her own time.

## CHAPTER 6



**T**hat evening, Callie stood in front of the Laird with apprehension but she wasn't frightened. Someone in her profession didn't frighten easy. She had to be thick—skinned in order to hunt down criminals, but one thing was for certain. After spending the day speaking with the other women who had come from her own time and now standing in front of this Laird there was absolutely no doubt in her mind that all of this was real.

This feeling went through her like a shockwave with each passing moment that she took in the grounds of the Keep, met the other women, and was presented to the Laird with such formality.

Each of the women had a story much like her own and it matched quite perfectly. She asked each woman the same questions over and over waiting for them to misstep or say something that would let her in on the secret around her. But none of them did and now she stood before the Laird and it was all culminating into a big panic attack that she was restraining.

The dining hall in which she a stood was also one that had gone through great lengths to be of such detail. It was shocking to her. There was a roaring fire in the giant hearth in the middle of the room. It smelled of old ale and food and something else, history. This room has been used for centuries and you couldn't fake that.

She stood before the head table where a confident looking man sat. Next to him was one of the women like her, Anna

was her name as Callie recalled. Anna was smiling at her now and Callie smiled back.

“Welcome, Lady Callie to the Sept of Loch Ness. I am Laird Donal Grant. I believe you met my wife, Anna earlier this afternoon?” he said.

Callie nodded. “I did.”

“Can you tell me a bit about your journey here?” the Laird asked.

Callie told him of what she was doing prior to coming here, mainly the part about hunting down Tony, and getting shot, then being worked on by glowing beings, which seemed to be exactly the same thing that the other women had been through. Well, not the hunting down of Tony part, but the rest. She told him of waking up in the lake and being rescued by Graeme.

“WELL, LADY CALLIE, IT SEEMS THAT YOUR STORY MATCHES those of all the ladies who have come before you,” the Laird said with a gentle smile.

“I’d have to agree after hearing their stories myself earlier,” she said.

“You are welcome to stay with us here and call this your home. We know that the Sidhe Fae have blessed us by bring you ladies through the burgh to us. Each of you have contributed in some manner to the betterment of our lives, as I am sure you will as well,” he said.

“Thank you. I appreciate your kindness and for thinking such of me as well,” she replied.

“It is my pleasure, now, I think it is time that we all take part in the evening meal, please join us at the head table,” the Laird said. He nodded to the staff who began to fill tables with food.

Callie stepped away from her position in front of the Laird and moved to the side of the dining hall and around the table to sit near Elena. Then she noticed Graeme had taken her

former position in front of the Laird. She was surprised to see him because she had not seen him since they'd last spoken. Walking around the Keep earlier that day she had kept a sharp eye out for him but hadn't seen him. The moment she saw him she felt her attraction for him activate once more. Quietly, she listened as he spoke.

“What can I do for you, Graeme?” the Laird said to Graeme.

“I have come to ask for aid in finding my sister, Laird Donal. I have done all that I can on my own and need more men to cover more ground. She could be in grave danger,” he said.

“All of our men are engaged in stopping the goblins from reaching the village and fighting these English bandits, Graeme. We cannot spare more men to search for your sister right now, especially since there is no evidence that she has been taken. We cannot know for certain that she was abducted by any sort of creature or the English. There is no trail to follow. For all we know she left of her own accord. You know that the watchmen are on the lookout for her and should they find her with either the bandits or the goblins, they will alert you, but we simply cannot spare any men for a search party at this time.”

Callie watched Graeme flinch. She noticed that his hands rolled into fists at his side as he trembled with anger. However he kept his voice very still and at the same volume.

“I understand, Laird Donal. May I have your word that if any man should become available to me that they will join me in my search?” he asked.

“Of course, Graeme. We all wish for your sister to be found safely,” the Laird agreed.

“Thank you, my Laird.” Graeme respectfully stepped aside to the edge of the table.

Callie watched his every move; she could not take her eyes off of him. She could see his frustration and pain on his face even though he kept a stern look. She could read people well;

it was what made her very good at her job. A moment later, Graeme skirted around the outer edges of the room, but instead of sitting down at one of the tables to eat, he simply continued on through the doorway and out to the great hall.

“I’ll be right back,” Callie whispered to Elena who sat at her side. Then she followed Graeme down the corridor.

“Wait. Graeme, please wait a moment,” she said.

Graeme turned, a look of surprise on his face. “Yes, lass? What might you want from me? You should be enjoying your evening meal.” Though his words were not unkind, his tone was one of annoyance.

“I heard what you asked of the Laird. For help with your sister,” she said.

“Yes, I did. Why do bring it up?” He started to walk again.

She followed at his side. “It’s just that it doesn’t seem fair, that’s all. All of these men here, guarding this place and in out and out all the time. I saw groups of them arriving on horseback and others leaving after. So many, it does not seem right that some can’t be spared to help you find your sister,” she said.

“Everyone has their duties here, and I can understand not wishing to take men away from fighting the scourge of English bandits or the goblins. My sister is a low priority for the Keep, however a high one for me. I know they think she has merely run off, but I do not believe that to be the case.” “Then let me help you,” Callie urged.

“Why? You have nothing you can offer in way of finding her, you’ve only just arrived here,” he said.

“Yes, I do. I’ve told you that in my own world I tracked down criminals. I hunted them and found them. I search for people until I find them, I don’t give up and I’m good at it. You asked the Laird for another body to help you, well here I am,” she said.

He stopped and looked her up and down. His expression told her he thought she was a capable woman, but that she would be no match for a bandit or goblin.

“It’s too dangerous. I cannot watch over you while I search for Mary. I turn my back and you will be snatched away as well. I cannot have that. The Laird would not forgive something like that happening,” he said as he started to walk again. “I have to get close to these goblins for I know they took her.”

Callie didn’t give up so easily. “How do you know that? What about the English bandits, how do you know she has not been taken by them?”

“No, it is the goblins. I am sure of it,” he said stubbornly.

Callie quickened her pace as she walked alongside him, understanding that he didn’t want to hear her theories on the matter of his sister. However with her infatuation for him growing, she really did want to do something for him and tried once more to persuade him.

“Look, just give me a chance. If I’m not helpful then I will stop helping you and leave you be. It can’t hurt to have me helping you, can it?”

He sighed a heavy sigh. Graeme was clearly starting to understand that she was just as stubborn as he was, and she wasn’t going to give in so easily.

“Fine then. I accept your help, lass. But if you get in the way, our deal is off,” he said.

“I agree,” she said, putting her hand out for him to shake it.

He looked at her hand for a moment and smiled before taking it in his own. It seemed to amuse him that she was shaking his hand in such a way, but Callie didn’t care about that. All she cared about was that he had finally agreed to let her help him.

“Meet me in the courtyard at first light. Now you should get back to supper, you will be needing your strength,” he said, before walking away from her.

Callie felt that he was always walking away from her, leaving her to only crave more of his company. Still, she did feel glad to have broken through his icy demeanor and get him to agree to let her help him. This was a step in the right

direction to seeing more of him and would at least give her something to do while she was stuck in this place.

It was exactly what she needed in order to get her mind off of the crazy situation that was being spoon—fed to her. Having a job like the one that she had before as a skip tracer would give her an anchor to rely on in these unusual circumstances.

Callie went back to the dining hall to find her new friend Elena. She was still seated where she left her at the high table. She looked over the platters of food in the middle of the table in amazement.

“This is like Renaissance Faire,” Callie said.

“I can’t say I ever went to one. I guess I’m glad that I didn’t since I’m now living inside it,” Elena joked.

Callie filled her plate from the heaping platters of food that had been brought out by servants. Each table had several platters placed upon it and people served themselves generous helpings. Platters of roasted game hen were set in the middle followed by roasted vegetables. It all smelled delicious and she couldn’t wait to try everything.

Large pots of a grain porridge and bowls of ripe fruit sat upon the tables as well. Callie was astonished by it all. She ate some of the game hen and roasted potatoes until she thought she would burst and perhaps drank a bit too much of something Nancy called *Heather Ale*. It seemed it was a type of mead or beer and was really quite tasty. If every meal was going to be like this, Callie would have to get a larger waist size in her pants, but then she supposed here it wouldn’t be a problem since everyone wore skirts, even the me. The thought made her giggle.

“What’s so funny?” Elena asked.

“I was just thinking I’ll have to get bigger jeans, but then realized we’re all wearing dresses, or skirts, even the men and who’d be able to tell if I went up in size?”

Elena grinned. “True, but trust me, you’ll be burning all these calories off in no time with all the walking we do. Hell,



the stairs alone are a fantastic workout.”

“Oh, God, I’m going to have to climb the stairs after eating all this?”

Everyone laughed and the evening continued on in merriment.

## CHAPTER 7



Callie awoke to a knock at the door. She jumped out of bed and wrapped a blanket around her, very nervous that Graeme was at her door. She didn't understand why he would be there because they were supposed to meet in the courtyard of the Keep, but maybe he had changed his mind or had new information about Mary. She quickly pushed her hair behind her ears trying to make herself somewhat decent.

She opened the door to see that Elena was standing on the other side. A sense of relief rushed through her that it wasn't Graeme and she still had time to make herself presentable before meeting him.

"Good morning. I thought we could have breakfast together." Elena entered carrying a tray.

"Yes, I would like that. Good morning to you as well," Callie said, allowing Elena to enter and then closing the door.

"Good because I have quite the bounty here. I brought some hot porridge, slices of fruit and some berries, and of course a pot of tea." Elena set the tray down on the table.

"That sounds like a hearty breakfast and I am all for it. I'm going to need my energy for today," Callie said.

"Why is that?" Elena said pushing a bowl in front of Callie with a bit of berries on top.

"I've finally convinced Graeme to allow me to help him in his search for his sister. I am to meet him in the courtyard this morning after we eat," Callie said as she scooped a spoonful of

hot porridge in her mouth. The flavors danced around her tongue and her eyes grew wide at just how delicious it was.

“Graeme? That’s surprising. That man is like a stone wall. Nothing gets through to him. Very stubborn that one. I’m surprised that he wants your input. So far, he just wants bodies to go and search the region for his sister, so I’m surprised that he is allowing a woman to help him. He’s not as enlightened as some of the other men, you know?” Elena said.

“I have noticed that, and I’m not shocked, honestly. If anything, I’m more shocked by how enlightened the Laird and many of the others are. Anyway, if I can get Graeme to understand my way of working, then I might be able to actually help. For the moment, I’m taking it one step at a time.”

“And perhaps you are also enjoying spending time with him?” Elena asked, giving her a curious look.

Callie looked up in surprise. Her cheeks heated and she felt that heat move through her. Was it that obvious? she thought.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Callie lied.

“I think you do.” Elena grinned. “Keep it to yourself if you like. I’m glad that you’re settling in and making friends. It’s really the key to not going insane after what we’ve been through,” Elena said.

Callie was glad that Elena wasn’t going to push on questioning her about her feelings for Graeme. However, she did wonder if it was that obvious to Elena, then was it also obvious to Graeme?

Later, this thought was heavy on her mind as she waited in the courtyard for Graeme to meet with her. She did have a sense of nervousness wondering if he saw right through her the way that Elena did; that she enjoyed spending time with him. But her feelings were also of excitement to be able to put her mind to work and do some of the type of skills that she had used as a skip tracer. The job was thrilling to her and she enjoyed putting clues together and solving mysteries and this was definitely a mystery.

“Raise the gate rider coming through,” a guard on the tower shouted.

This drew her attention to the gate as she hadn’t seen it raised since the time that she arrived herself.

The loud clanking and sound of metal and wood creaking filled the courtyard as the gate was raised. A rider on horseback trotted into the courtyard.

“What?” Callie whispered in shock.

The rider was Graeme, and Callie was shocked to see him enter through the gate instead of from the left of the Keep where the watchman office was. He dismounted his horse and grabbed the reins.

“Graeme, where are you coming from?” she asked as she approached.

“Where do you think, lass? I was out all night searching for Mary,” he said.

“But I was supposed to help you and go with you,” she said walking alongside him as he made his way to the stables.

“I said no such thing. I said you may help me, but I never said you could ride with me at night. It is too dangerous,” he said.

Callie grew frustrated that he wasn’t taking her seriously.

“Look if I’m going to be of any help, you have to let me in a little. I can handle it,” she said.

“I agreed did I not, already?” he said.

“Fine.” Callie sighed, gathering her thoughts. “I would like to start with some questions. Where does Mary live? Does she stay here in the castle?” Callie asked.

“No, she’s in one of the cottages with a family down near the shore of the Loch. Not everyone lives in the castle. Several of those who fish the Loch or man the boats, live in those cottages, Mary likes being closer to the shore.”

“I see. Let’s start there. Does she have her own room in the cottage? I would like to look at the evidence, search her room

for clues to where she has gone,” Callie said as Graeme partially paid attention to her while guiding his horse into a stall to remove the saddle.

“Clues? Evidence? There is nothing there, and it is not necessary. She went into the village and did not return. That means she was taken. There is no sign of struggle in her room and anyone here would have noticed a band of goblins raiding us. You are in over your head, lass.”

Callie sighed in frustration. She wasn't getting through to him, and since it was her first day working with him, she didn't want to push it, but she was determined that she would eventually investigate Mary's room. “Fine. If you aren't going to allow me to investigate the way I know how, then what is it you suggest we do?” she asked.

“There is nothing for us to do at the moment, lass. We have to wait for the watchmen to return from hunting down the goblins. They are due back tonight some time. I'm awaiting their report. If they have found a goblin camp, then I will ride out to it and search for Mary there, or of some sign of her,” he said.

“Fine, I'll follow your lead on this, for the moment, we'll wait,” she said, but was extremely frustrated with him. She wanted to be actively doing something, not sitting around waiting.

“I have been out all night. I need to eat and sleep,” he said in a dismissive way as he strode toward the castle doors.

Callie didn't know why but the way he wasn't paying attention to her, only made her want him more. He seemed completely indifferent to her, unlike the men from her time, who spent every second trying to impress her. She didn't want to bug him, but she was determined to help him, whether he wanted it or not and to do that, she needed information.

“While you eat, why don't you tell me more about these goblins,” she said, keeping stride with him, even though his was nearly twice the length of hers.

“This way,” he said, leading her toward the dining hall.

It wasn't exactly how she wanted things to go but at least they were going. In fact she didn't mind spending time in the company of this man at all. He was quite attractive to look at and she enjoyed hearing his accent which made every word he said sound quite sexy. However the main reason was because she really needed the work. It was a good distraction for her and as long as she had the work and this mystery to try and solve of the missing girl, then at least her mind would be occupied. Then it wouldn't have a chance to really process and think about the situation that she was in, which was absolute insanity and she didn't want to lose her mind.

## CHAPTER 8



Callie walked around the Keep after leaving Graeme to head up to bed with a promise that he would meet up with her in the early evening before supper. She walked around aimlessly, for she had thought that her morning would be filled with work, finally putting her skills to use. But the only work she was able to do was sitting with Graeme while he told her about the goblins as he ate his breakfast before sleeping. It was a very swift breakfast though, because he ate so quickly and she learned very little about the goblins..

As she wandered around, she started thinking about what Elena had said before; that there were plenty of chores to be had around the Keep and she wondered what she could do in order to put herself to use. She had never been a woman who could sit in idleness and be content; she needed work and activity.

Callie walked to the stables and inquired within if there was anything she could do to help. But the men who tend to the horses were quite standoffish and didn't want the help of someone who had never worked with horses before because it was very specific work. However they did offer to allow her to shovel horse manure out of the stables, to which she quickly declined and walked out while the men laughed at her.

She then found herself walking by the blacksmith and admired his skills. The hot iron was glowing red and he managed to hammer it into shapes she didn't think iron could make. It was wondrous to behold and she watched as he created an entire sword. But it wasn't long before he was

giving her a strange look and she realize that she had overstayed her welcome.

It wasn't long after that she found her mind beginning to slip back over everything that Elena had told her about the Fae and goblins and how she wound up in this new world. She didn't like the feeling of anxiety that was growing inside her again as she thought about the day that she got sent to the hospital.

“No, don't think about it. You have to keep your mind off of that. Maybe there are some books to be read somewhere and I can learn something,” she said making her way back across the courtyard toward the entrance of the Keep. She would need to find Elena and asked if there were any books that she could borrow.

“Callie, there you are,” a soft voice said.

Callie turned to see Nancy headed her way with a skip in her step. Callie had met the woman before, one of the youngest among the women who had been brought to this time, and one who liked to socialize.

“Nancy, how are you?”

“I'm just fine. I should be the one asking you that, though. Since you're the new arrival and all. I know being here takes a lot of getting used to. Are you doing alright?” She smiled and touched her arm.

“As well as can be expected, I think. For the most part I'm fascinated by everything I see around me, only I'm a very active person and I was constantly busy in our world — that is just so weird to say — anyway, my point is that I need to be doing something.”

“I know that feeling,” Nancy replied.

“I'm meeting up with Graeme later to help with the search for his sister but until then I find myself wandering aimlessly around the Keep looking at the beautiful architecture and taking in the lovely people here because I just don't know what else to do.” Callie sighed as she gazed about the courtyard.



“I’m on my way to fetch some fabric from the storage house to take to the dressmaker upstairs. Would you like to help me? We can have her make a few dresses for you as well,” Nancy asked.

“I absolutely would love to. Lead the way,” Callie replied. She followed Nancy to one of the small outer buildings in the courtyard that stood opposite the stables.

As they walked, Nancy rambled on, sometimes talking so fast that Callie could barely keep up or get a word in but she enjoyed Nancy’s energy, who seemed to be in good spirits at all times. That was a lesson that Callie decided she would learn from and make the best of her situation.

“And I’m absolutely fascinated by the creatures here; I’m sure you’ve heard all about them. But have you seen any?”

“I don’t think so.”

Nancy smiled, but it was like she was trying not to laugh. “You arrived in the middle of the night, didn’t you?” Nancy asked her.

“Yes, why?” Callie questioned, wondering what Nancy was getting at.

Before answering, Nancy opened a door. “The material is kept here. Right this way.” Inside were shelves stacked with bolts of cloth on them.

“As to your question, I know you’ve seen some of the creatures I’m talking about, but maybe you just haven’t realized it yet.”

“Seriously? I’m pretty sure I would know if I saw something like that.” Callie said, holding her arms out while Nancy placed bolts of cloth in them.

Nancy eyed her then turned back to the shelves. “When you were in the Loch, right before you felt the rush of water hit you, what do you remember?” ” Nancy asked with a mischievous smile.

“I was in the hospital; the doctors were working on me. It was dark except for the light that surrounded them.”

“Yeah, those weren’t human doctors.” She giggled. “The light was coming from the beings surrounding you, right?”

Callie thought back to that moment and was startled to realize that Nancy was right. She did remember thinking she was in a hospital bed being operated on as doctors loomed over her, but the light had emanated from their bodies. At the time she’d thought she was hallucinating from the anesthesia but now she thought differently.

“Oh my. Those were the Fae Elena was talking about? The ones to took me from certain death?”

“Yes. Those are the creatures who brought you here, who brought us all here. We call them the Sidhe, or Seelie Fae. They are the good ones, you see. They do have an agenda that we aren’t quite sure of, but they’re helpful to us and really do seem to like humans, though there are some who like to play tricks. The ones you can’t trust are the Unseelie, like the goblins. Well, not all of the goblins, Darter is on our side. He’s the goblin who helped us turn the tide against the bad goblins when I got here.”

“That is incredible and hard to believe, but I did say that I wouldn’t believe it until I saw it with my own eyes and I guess I have but didn’t realize it until now..” She thought about what Nancy was saying and then asked, “Darter? You made friends with a goblin?”

Nancy laughed. “Yes, actually. He lives with Maggie about a half mile from here. I’m sure you’ll meet her and Darter eventually.”

“Can you tell me about these goblins? Graeme wasn’t very forthcoming about them.”

“Sure. There are several kinds of goblins actually. Redcaps, Glashtyns, Bogeys... all different. Darter is a Glashtyn, which means he’s one that can swim, has similarities to a sea horse. Redcaps are ruthless, you don’t want to run into those, Bogeys or Bogans are really mischievous. On their own they aren’t too bad but put them with a Redcap and you’ve got trouble. All of them are Unseelie though, so we tend to hunt

them down when they show up and send them back to the burgh for the Seelie to deal with.”

“Wow. That’s kind of crazy. What other Fae have you seen?”

Nancy looked toward the Loch, not that they could see it from inside the storage room, but she smiled wistfully. “Have you seen Nellie?”

“Nellie?”

“The Monster? She’s Seelie, by the way.”

Nancy waited, her smile growing as Callie figured out what she was saying.

“Wait, are you talking about the Loch Ness Monster?”

“None other.” Nancy nodded. “She likes meat, by the way, if you want to take a snack down to her.”

“No way.” Callie stared at her in disbelief.

“Yep. She’s carnivorous, and a huge help around here, as long as you treat her kindly.” A look of disgust passed over her face briefly, but she shook it off. “Okay, I think this will do it. Should make us some nice dresses.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought... I can’t pay for anything; I don’t have any money...” Callie fretted.

“No problem. The Laird actually provides us with whatever we need. Perk of being from the future, I guess. Now let’s get these upstairs to the dressmaker and then we can go down to the dining hall for lunch. I cannot wait to hear more about you and your life in New Jersey. I want to know everything that happened in the world before you left. I miss it sometimes, you know?” Nancy said walking out of the storage room with Callie following.

“Sure,” she replied. Callie, though, couldn’t stop thinking about her realization that she had seen the creatures and how startling it all was.

After being fitted for new dresses, they returned downstairs to the dining hall for lunch. As they ate, Callie

filled Nancy in on major events taking place in the far future that they'd come from, as well as the plotlines of a few shows that they had both enjoyed. As they conversed, Callie kept an eye on the light through the window, knowing she was to meet Graeme shortly before dinner. He was never far from her thoughts these days.



“DID YOU SLEEP WELL?”

Graeme looked up at the sound of her voice. Lady Callie. The melodic tone of her voice had a strange feeling move through him. She was an attractive woman, after all, and it had been a long time for him. This time however, there was something else to his feelings; he was glad to see her, which surprised him. His interest for her was growing the more persistent she was. Her strong will, determination, and inability to give up intrigued him. When she'd first begun to ask to help him, he'd thought that he would be able to brush off her interest by avoiding her, but she was not so easily pushed away.

“I did sleep well, thank you. I see you are back. You are rather insistent upon helping me, are you not?” He smiled as he pushed aside his meal.

She grinned at him. “I don't give up easily, if at all, if that is what you are asking,” she said sitting down next to him.

“I can see that.” He eyed her for a moment, wondering what if anything he was going to do with her. He knew from her statement she wasn't going to give up. Not until Mary was found, which was rather touching, considering she didn't even know her. Finally, he decided that if she was indeed going to be of help to him, she would need to know how to ride. “Come along then, we have work to do.”

Her eyes lit up and her smile grew stronger. “Great. Where should we start? Should we interview the people who talked to Mary last?” she asked, standing up.

“We start at the stables,” he replied as they left the dining hall.

“The stables? Whatever for?”

He paused his steps. “If you are going to help me, then you are going to need to learn to ride. I cannot constantly be assisting you or making sure that you’re safe and able to get away from danger while also fighting anyone who might come along to harm us when we are out there. Therefore you need to learn to ride. From the night I pulled you from the Loch, I think it is safe to say that you are not familiar with horses?”

“You’re right, I’m not really. But I learn fast so let’s go,” Callie said, her voice filled with bravado and determination.

Graeme had to admire her spirit. “Good I am glad to hear it. Then let’s put those learning skills to the test,” he said.

“Wait, you’re going to actually put me on a horse right now?”

“Would you rather wait for a different season?” he said, teasing her.

“Is that supposed to be a joke?” Her eyes narrowed at him and her bottom lip stuck out in an adorable pout.

“Perhaps,” he replied, giving her a grin. “Come on, there isn’t much daylight left to the day.”

“I’m coming,” she answered, her steps quickening to keep up with his own stride.

## CHAPTER 9



**C**allie stood beside a horse named Thunder. It was a magnificent horse, jet black like a raven. It was more muscular than she would have imagined, and had thick legs and the hair was silky soft. It hung rather shaggily around his hooves. She had never seen a horse like him before. He was a formidable creature and not one she would have gone near on her own in the past.

“He is a very beautiful horse, but...” Her thoughts took in his height, he was very massive. “Isn’t there a more suitable mount for me? I mean, I’m kind of new to this.”

“I know he is intimidating, and that is the point. If you can learn to ride Thunder, you will be able to ride any horse in this stable or any other for that matter, lass. Thunder is not only smart, he blends into the darkness at night, and if you are going to be riding with me, it is crucial for us to stay as hidden as possible, not only from the goblins, but from the bandits as well. On top of that, he is one of the fastest horses I own and I trust him with your life as well as mine.”

His words took her aback. She hadn’t heard him say so much at one time ever, and goodness, what he was saying. He wanted her to be safe and to ride with him at night. She was determined not to let him down. “All right. I trust you,” she answered.

“Let’s get you on that saddle. Do not worry, the reins are still tied to the post. First step is to get you on the horse,” Graeme said.

Callie put her left foot in the stirrup as she held onto the pommel, and felt strong hands wrapped around her waist. A part of her wanted to stay right in this position and not move at all just to feel the warmth of him on her because it felt very good.

“Ready?” he asked.

“I’m ready.”

“Okay, raise up and swing your right leg up and over his back.” With that he held her steady around the waist, helping her lift herself up. Thunder stood still until he felt her seat herself, then he took a step forward and back, as though dancing in place..

Callie wiggled a little in the seat.

“Now I am going to give you a moment to settle in. Then I will grab the reins and lead Thunder around the courtyard so that you can get a feel for being in the saddle. We’ll take this slowly. After that, I will hand you the reins and show you how to control him,” Graeme said as he untied the reins from the post.

Callie thought that perhaps there was a way to control another beast, him. She smiled at the thought but said nothing. Within moments, Graeme had the reins of the horse in his hands as he led it around the courtyard. Callie felt quite safe with him leading the way. However she knew that she had to take this lesson very seriously if she was going to ride out with him on his next search for Mary, if he indeed allowed her to accompany him. She paid attention to every single word he said as she soaked in how to guide the horse.

“You’re doing well,” he complimented. “Let’s see if you can put him through a few paces on your own now. You remember what I said about how to guide him?”

“I do.” Callie nodded. She took the reins from him and once he was clear, she gently nudged the horse into a walk. She used the reins to guide him in the direction she wanted him to go, but she never yanked them hard. Everything was gentle.

“Excellent. Try to move to a canter now,” Graeme suggested.

She knew from his lesson that he meant something between a walk and a full on gallop. She nudged Thunder and whispered, “A little faster now, boy,” to the horse.

Thunder nickered and picked up his pace. They rode around the courtyard, making loops, as they’d done when Graeme had been guiding them. Thunder seemed to know exactly what to do and as long as she stayed confident in the saddle, he didn’t hesitate.

“Alright, bring him to a halt next to the stables and I will grab my mount. Then we can ride out across the land bridge to the mainland and see how you do with a bit more speed.”

Callie did as he asked, halting Thunder next to the stables. She was nervous about getting the horse to run, but she was determined not to show it. Graeme returned a few moments later already mounted.

“Let’s go.” They rode through the already raised gate and across the land bridge to the dirt road. “Alright, remember, keep your knees tight against his body, dig your heels in a little hard to get him to run. Not the gentle nudge to walk. Above all, stay calm.”

“Got it,” Callie said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt.

“Well go about a half mile north, then you can rein him in to slow him and we’ll walk for a few minutes.”

“Ready.” She nodded and then did everything he said.

Thunder took off like a shot and they flew down the dirt path. Her hair flew out behind her as the wind whipped against her face. It was not quite like riding a motor scooter or motorcycle, but just as exhilarating. She laughed as they neared the distance Graeme had set for them and they both slowed, reining in their horses. Thunder’s pace slowed and after a moment he settled into a gentle walk.

“That was amazing!” Callie exclaimed.



Graeme met her gaze, a look of what Callie thought might be desire in his eyes, but then he smiled and the look disappeared, as though he'd shut down the desire with a thought. "You did well, lass. Even though it has merely been a few hours of lessons, I think you are capable enough to join me now in my evening rides."

His words had Callie's heart swelling with pride.

"We should head back now. Supper will be ready soon and you'll want to freshen yourself, I am sure."

They returned to the stables and left the horses in the care of the groomsmen, who would brush them down and give them food and water. Callie and Graeme parted ways in the great hall and she took the opportunity to have a hot tub of water sent to her room so that she could sit and bathe the dirt and dust off of her. She thought that she smelled like horse and sweat from the effort she put into learning how to ride but she was quite pleased with herself.

At supper she was disappointed to find that Graeme wasn't there eating with the others in the dining hall, and she found herself looking for him out in the courtyard of the Keep. She found him sitting on the castle steps. His expression was heavy with worry.

"What's wrong? I thought that I would see you at supper but obviously you're not in there. Why is that?" she asked.

"The watchmen have yet to return. They were expected just after sundown. These things cannot be timed, of course, but usually they arrive within the hour of when they are expected. If they have come across the goblins though, then perhaps they have given chase further away from the Keep," he said.

"I see. So you're just going to sit out here and wait?" she asked.

"Yes, lass," he said.

"Then I'll wait with you." She slid her hand along the back of her skirt and joined him on the steps as they gazed at the castle gate..

“It is not necessary for you to sit with me, lass,” he said.

“I know, but I want to. Beside it’s a nice night and the dining hall is filled with smoky air from the hearth,” she said, not that it was true, the hearth rarely smoked badly.

“If you insist,” he said.

They sat in silence for a while. Callie truly had nothing to say but just wanted to enjoy the night air. Then she leaned back against the stone step with her back flush against the stone. She looked up at the sky and gasped at the beauty of the dark night. It was so dark that it made the stars very bright and there were millions and millions of them. More than she could ever have seen in New Jersey. She remembered seeing such a sky the night that Graeme had rescued her and how she had come to accept that this was her new reality something that she still couldn’t quite stomach, but the beauty of the sky and the man next to her was making it more tolerable.

She didn’t know when it happened but her eyelids drooped at some point and she began to dose. Suddenly there was a loud cranking sound that woke her up. She sat straight up to find that she was wrapped in a cloak and realized that she’d had her head pillowed on her arms which were now a bit sore. Looking around she noticed Graeme standing nearby.

The sun was just about to rise, as the golden hue of the sky was orange and yellow. She couldn’t believe that she’d fallen asleep outside even though she had spent many nights sleeping in her car when searching for a suspect. It was completely different to sleep in the open air and trust another human to watch over her. But she had no time to process this feeling because a party of watchmen rode into the courtyard. Graeme rushed over to them and Callie followed.

“What news do you bring?” he asked.

“We found an abandoned goblin camp. Probably no more than two days old. But I am afraid we found there was no sign that Mary had been there. The goblins have moved on, but we haven’t located their new camp as of yet.”

“Tell me where this abandoned camp is and I will ride out to investigate it more,” Graeme said.

“Come, I will show you on the map,” the man said dismounting his horse.

Graeme turned to Callie and quietly said, “Get yourself some breakfast and change your attire, we leave within the hour.”

Callie grinned. “I won’t be late.” She ran inside to get changed. How she longed for a pair of blue jeans and boots. She knew that wasn’t going to be possible, but maybe Elena knew of something that would be suitable for a long ride.

“Elena, I’m so sorry, but do you have a moment?”

“Of course, what do you need?” Elena asked, rising from the table.

“I’m to go with Graeme to the abandoned goblin camp, I think we’ll be riding some distance, any suggestions on what I should wear?”

“I’ve got some loose trousers you can borrow to put on under your skirts, I’d go with one of the heavy cotton dresses, it’s sturdier. A dark color would be best. And a cloak too.” They hurried up to Elena’s room.

“That will work, thank you.”

“And there’s this,” Elena said, holding up a small leather sheath. “Do you know how to use it?”

“It’s a dagger, right?,” Callie said, grabbing it from her.

“It’s iron, so it will burn the goblins if you come across any.”

She pulled a dagger from the sheath feeling it’s weight in her hand. “Yeah, this will work, I can handle it fine. Mind if I dress here? I need to go down to the kitchens still before we leave and I don’t want Graeme leaving without me.”

Elena chuckled. “No I wouldn’t either.”

Callie dressed and attached the dagger to her waist so she’d have it at hand. “Thanks, Elena.”

“Good luck out there. Remember, these goblins don’t play around so if you come across one you fight til it lets you go and run, understand?” Elena said.

“Completely understand. See ya later,” Callie headed for the door.

“I hope you find that girl,” Elena hollered after her.

After making a stop in the kitchens, Callie made her way back out to the stables to find Graeme. Adrenaline rushed through her, ready to take on a case and get out of the Keep for the first time since she arrived.

“I’m ready,” she said entering as Graeme placed a saddle on Thunder.

“Good. We’re leaving now,” he said.

“I’m ready.”

“Let’s be off, lass,” he said, hoisting her onto the saddle, only this time, his hands lingered on her hips and they locked eyes.

## CHAPTER 10



The sun was bright and hitting her face. It felt good to be in the sunlight but it also felt very good to have the wind whipping through her hair as she rode the horse. The rural countryside of the mainland was indeed beautiful. Once they were across the land bridge, and past the forested area, they hit the moors and it was very lovely to see. There was heather growing on several of the moors and it seemed to wave in the breeze. Their purple flowers made the greens of the hills almost disappear.

“I’ve never done this before,” Graeme said as they rode.

“Done what?”

“Worked with a woman.”

Callie laughed. “I wouldn’t have expected you had, given the time period.”

“So what of your own time then?” he asked.

“What of it?”

“Do women often go out on patrols with men? Serve as protectors?”

Callie took a moment to consider her answer. She had to wonder if saying anything would mess with the time continuum, but then decided her being here was already doing that and it wouldn’t really matter. “Yes actually. We have law enforcement officers who are women; soldiers, leaders of countries... pretty much anything a man can do, a woman can too in my time.”

“Is there much need for law enforcement in the future then?”

“Definitely. Criminals are running rampant in my time. Murder, rape, theft, assault, all that kind of thing.”

“And you used to hunt these criminals?”

Callie grinned at the question. “I did. And I was good at it too, well... I was, until I ended up here.” Suddenly her thoughts about her former job turned depressing. “I should have listened to my gut,” she muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“Just that my last job is why I ended up here. I was shot by a gun.”

Graeme was silent for a bit. “Sounds like it might have been more dangerous there than here, with the exception of the goblins.”

“Yes, you could be right,” Callie agreed.

“Let’s pick up the pace,” he said, encouraging his horse to pull ahead.

Callie rode behind Graeme, holding onto the reins as Thunder darted after his horse. She held on tight with her thighs, just as he had shown her, but she didn’t need to steer the horse very much because Thunder instinctively followed Graeme’s horse, which she was glad for because it was still so new to be riding a horse.

Every now and again, Graeme glanced over his shoulder to look at her. Callie supposed he was checking to see if she was still on the horse. She noticed his eyes stray down her torso to her legs and then he grinned.

“Smart of you to wear trousers under your skirts,” he commented.

THEY RODE HARD AND FAST FOR TWO HOURS STRAIGHT WITH hardly stopping except to slow down across rough terrain crossing rocky creeks and uneven land. Finally, at midday,

Graeme started to slow his horse. Then he turned it around and moved side by side with Callie.

“How are you doing, lass?”

“A little sore but I’m hanging in there. What do you see?” she asked.

“Just beyond that group of trees is where the abandoned camp is but I must warn you it is possible that the goblins have returned to it therefore we should dismount and get as close as we can quietly to take a look to make sure that it is indeed abandoned,” he said.

“I understand. I’ve had to sneak up on many people before in my own time. I will follow your lead,” she said.

“I am glad that you have done this type of work before, it makes things easier.”

He led the horses to a large outcrop of boulders where they could be hidden. They dismounted and tied the horses so that they could eat grass and drink from a small flow of water dripping down from the boulders. Then they were off with Graeme leading the way. They walked slow and low with each step carefully placed to not make noise.

Callie was used to this since she had done it many times before, but never with goblins waiting on the other end and she was partly curious to see what they looked like but also terrified to know that such a thing existed. She forced herself to not think too much on the matter and allow fright to stop her from using her wits.

When they got to the edge of the tree line on the other side, Graeme stopped and they both squatted down as he looked out at the clearing. In that clearing were three old fires that had now turned to ash. No smoke was rising from them and no embers were burning. It was very clear they had been put out days before.

They waited and listened but only the sounds of the forest were all around them and no sounds or signs of the goblins.

Callie watched from her very low position, peeking her eyes over a shrub. She stayed there without so much as

blinking an eye. She didn't want to miss anything if there was anything to actually see.

"I think it is clear," Graeme said softly next to her ear. "The fires look cold for days and I do not hear the sound of any goblins. In fact the forest is bursting with birds singing and when goblins are around, they usually are not. I think it is safe for us to look."

"I'm with you. But I must ask, do goblins have the same footprints as a human? Particularly your sister," she asked.

His thick dark brow raised above his eyes as though in amusement that she would think to ask such a thing. "That is indeed a very smart question. They do not, and that is exactly what we will be looking for. Different goblins have very distinct tracks which I will show you in the clearing. My sister would have small footprints left by lace—up boots like the ones you wear now."

"I understand. Let's have a look then shall we," she said.

Together they searched the campground with Graeme showing her the goblin tracks and the distinctive marks that their feet made. Redcaps, he said, tended to wear heavy boots which sank in the mud and left good impressions. Bogans on the other hand, tended to be barefoot and could be detected by the four toes and thick nearly oblong pad. Glashtyns' footprints were thinner and the toes were webbed, he explained, but they didn't see any of that type out here. However, other than the goblin tracks, there were no other tracks of any kind besides that of horses and no signs of cut rope or ties that might have been used to bind a captive. Callie took her time looking around the ground as well as in the trees. She was used to looking at every single detail available and not letting anything go unnoticed. There were no signs of blood or a struggle. She looked for signs of freshly dug Earth that might hide a grave but there were none. She searched the fires to see if there were any bones that might belong to humans, but there were none. Simply smaller bones from birds and forest creatures that had been eaten by the goblins.



It did her mind very well to have this work in front of her. She felt engaged and alive again searching for clues as well as the possibility to help Graeme find his sister. The poor girl must be very frightened out there having gone missing for so long. But it was obvious that she was not with this group of goblins because there were no signs of a human traveling with them.

“There is nothing here to suggest a human was with this group or was ended here,” she said walking up to Graeme.

“I agree with that observation, lass. To my relief, I am glad that there is no signs of human remains here and no signs of a human traveling with them, but it is also frustrating because this was the only lead that I had on my sister. What will I do now?” he said beginning to pace back and forth on the clearing.

Callie could see his frustration growing.

“The watch said that this group moved into the mountains. I should follow them and see for myself that she is not with them,” he said growing increasingly aggressive with his words and temper.

“Is that wise? It is clear that there is no human with them at all. We have hit a dead end and need to start over. That is obvious here,” she said moving to his side.

He stopped in his tracks and glared at her with anger in his eyes. “Start over? I cannot start over! At least this group of goblins is some sort of lead. It is something to occupy myself so that I am at least trying to find her. I knew I should not have brought you because you would not last me tracking them into the mountains.”

“Don’t you dare take this out on me. I’m helping you and it is obvious to both of us looking at this scene that this group of goblins does not have your sister with them at this moment. Going after them into the mountains will only take up your time when we could go back to the Keep and start from there. We should start from looking at her room as I suggested. Why are you so stubborn to not let me do that?” she said, raising her voice at him.

“Because it is silly. Only a woman would think to go look through a woman’s things for an answer it is just things. Material objects do not give answers,” he said taking a step toward her. There was now only a few inches between them as he glared down at her from his tall frame.

“It is very clear to me what you think of women. But I know what I’m talking about and I will show you if it is the last thing I do. You are stubborn, Graeme,” she said shoving her finger into his strong chest. And here she’d thought he was becoming more enlightened, showed what she knew.

He grabbed her wrist to stop her from poking at him and in that moment touching her lit a fire inside of her. She noticed too that the anger in his eyes had turned to lust and suddenly, he pulled her body against his and planted his lips on hers. He kissed her hard and with an aggressive nature that caught her off guard.

Callie felt the heat inside of her rising and before she knew it her arms were behind his neck pulling his kiss deep into her. There was a mix of emotions of frustration and anger and loss between them in that moment and she could not resist it. She opened her mouth and allowed his tongue to encircle hers.

A soft moan escaped her lips.

They continued to kiss for a moment longer and then he ripped himself away, setting her from him. “What is it? What did I do wrong?” she asked in a panic.

But he just looked at her searing with anger for a long minute. He shook his head and turned from her, heading back toward the horses.

“Let’s get back to the horses so that we can be back to the Keep before nightfall. It’s where you belong,” he said marching toward the tree line.

Her mouth fell open in shock at such a turn of his emotions. First, he was hot then cold. It was enough to give her whiplash. She narrowed her eyes at him in anger. How dare he treat her this way! Yet with his coldness, her lust for him only grew and she hated herself for that.

## CHAPTER 11



Silence was the way of things the entire ride back to the Keep. Callie could feel the tension between them even though she was several feet behind him on a different horse. He had not said another word to her since departing the abandoned goblin camp. She had no idea why he turned cold so quickly, but she did know that it also made her incredibly angry. This man was so stubborn and would not listen to reason. It was no wonder that he had not found his sister yet. However, although they rode in silence she could not stop thinking about the kiss and how his strong body felt underneath her hands as she touched him. It continued to occupy her thoughts until they were riding across the land bridge and the clank of the gate opening drew her attention. Now that they were back, she was ready to go head-to-head with the stubborn man again.

The sun was setting as they dismounted the horses and led them into the stables. Callie didn't want to speak first, as though she was trying to win some bet that had never been made between them but she could not hold her tongue any longer.

“Now that it is confirmed that Mary is not with that group of goblins, we should search her rooms in the cottage,” she said.

Graeme responded without looking at her as though it was a massive inconvenience to look in her direction, which only made her angrier. “I already told you that there is nothing to see there. Get that into your thick skull, lass.”

“I will be searching that room and I’m going to do it whether I have your permission or not.”

This caused him to turn and look at her directly with her hands on her hips in a very stubborn manner. Before he could reply, Elena entered the stable.

“I heard you had returned. I am glad of it as I have been very worried. Any news of Mary?” Elena said going to Callie.

“Hey, I’m fine, we didn’t have any trouble. No news of Mary though. In fact, I was going to ask you to introduce me to the family where she resides, so that I can search her room for clues. Graeme would do it but he has something else to see to at the moment,” Callie said with a smug smile putting her nose in the air at him.

“Yes, of course, I can do that. Let’s get some food and drink first, as I’m sure you’re starved after all that. Then we’ll head over there,” Elena said.

Callie followed Elena, looking backward at Graeme with her smugness on her face. Now it was he who had his hands on his hips in disbelief at her behavior. He wasn’t going to stop her from doing her job this time. Not if she had a say in the matter.

Callie noticed he followed them at a small distance. She knew he thought there was nothing to find there, but she was going to prove him wrong. He had no idea how tracking someone really worked, and she did. Even if there were just a few things in that room, it could tell her so much. It could give her an idea of what Mary had been thinking prior to leaving the Keep to head to the village. Maybe she was meeting up with someone she didn’t want Graeme to know about. Or maybe she’d run away to join the circus, she wouldn’t know until she looked. Callie drank from a tall tankard of water and nibbled on a piece of cold ham while Elena asked her questions about what she saw. When Graeme entered the room a few minutes later, Callie sensed it. It was very easy to sense his presence since he was so manly and took up a great deal of space with his long, lanky body and strength, however she did

not pay any attention to him as he entered because she didn't want to give him that satisfaction.

He poured himself a glass of water and began eating bits of cold meat and fruits from the platter on the counter.

The kitchen staff were busy bustling about making food for the evening meal and they all tried to stay out of their way. Callie watched them in fascination for a few moments. They were all in some sort of well synced ballet of movement, never running into each other, passing things, picking up things, sliding things into the large stone oven. It was very impressive. Her eyes shifted over to Graeme and she noticed him watching her. Her eyes narrowed and she was filled with determination to prove him wrong.

"I'm ready. I can walk and eat," Callie said, grabbing another piece of ham and urging Elena out of the kitchen.

"Alright then, I will take you to see the McGregors. They are very kind people," Elena said. "Mr. McGregor helps with the boats and fishing, which is why they have a cottage down on the shore. He often takes on evening duties, watching over the Loch for Fae activity."

Callie heard Graeme sigh in exasperation, but she ignored him. She and Elena moved through the kitchen and out of the back door to the garden. On the other side of the garden they passed through a gate and followed the path down to the shoreline where several cottages sat. Elena headed for one that was in the middle of the others and knocked on the door. .

"Lady Elena, so nice to see you," Mrs. McGregor said as she opened the door. Then looking over Elena said, "Oh and you too, Graeme. Have you found Mary? We've been so worried."

Callie felt a sense of victory over this moment that she had taken control of the situation and he was forced to follow her lead now. She was going to show him exactly how good at her job she really was.

"Not as of yet but I will, mark my word," he said.

“Mrs. McGregor this is Lady Callie Mercer, a new visitor,” Elena said. “Lady Callie has had good luck in finding missing people and with your permission, we’d like to look at Mary’s room. Would that be all right?”

“Of course. I will show you to Mary’s quarters. Right this way,” Mrs. McGregor said opening the door wider.

As they entered, three small children all under the age of seven, darted about the main room of the cottage rambunctiously playing. Two teenage children sat at the table and Callie could see that it was a full house and the McGregors were very good for taking in another such as Mary in such a cramped space.

“This room in the back is Mary’s space, not much of a room as we all share the cottage in such a way, but this is her bed and these two chests are where she keeps her things and here in this desk, she keeps some writing materials,” the woman said.

Callie could see that if anything was amiss it would be very easy to dismiss it because the entire cottage was quite messy with so many children being kids playing and messing about.

At that moment, one of the children cried out that the other had hit him, and Mrs. McGregor moved to them to scowl and shout.

“See, lass, I told you. There is nothing to see here,” Graeme said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Callie said.

Then she went about her work. First, she lifted up the thin mattress to see if there was anything underneath the bed and found nothing. Then she opened the wooden chest where Mary kept her things and found it to be very bare. There was nothing but a few clothing items; one tunic shirt and one pair of stockings. Then she searched the other chest and found it to be completely empty except for a few hair ribbons and a folded bit of cloth. She searched the entire area that was deemed to be Mary’s and found nothing more.

“How long was Mary set to stay with her friend in the village?” she asked Graeme.

“Three days at most,” he responded.

“Does Mary have many clothing items? Dresses, tunics, stockings all the things that she might need; boots?” she asked.

“She does; it is where many of my earnings go to from being a Watchman. I take care of her. She is my sister after all. The McGregors provide her with room and board in exchange for her work here, but I provide her with clothing and other necessities,” he said.

“Does she have one dress, two dresses, five dresses, twenty dresses?” Callie asked.

“I have lost count but this last year alone I have bought her one every month almost, about twelve dresses, not including the ones that she already had.”

“And yet there is only one tunic here in her trunk. All her stockings are gone and the other chest is completely bare. Why would a girl need twelve or more dresses and all her stockings and shoes to go visit a friend for three days who only lives in the local village?” Callie asked.

“What?” Graeme said in shock. He opened the trunks and looked at the bare contents and then searched the entire area. “Mrs. McGregor, are Mary’s dresses being laundered, then?”

McGregor scurried back over to them. “Being laundered? No, Mary takes care of washing her own clothing. She is a good girl like that. I hardly need to go through her things for she keeps things nice and tidy here, not like my other miscreants,” she said.

Callie gave Elena a look knowing that Elena understood what this meant. Mary had left of her own accord.

“Graeme, I’m sorry to say this, but it looks as though your sister packed up her belongings to be gone for longer than three days. In fact it’s possible she has run away from home,” Callie said.

“Impossible. Mary is a good, lass. She would never,” he said frustrated.

“I think perhaps we should question her friend in the village,” Elena said.

“Right, I agree. Let Elena and I question this poor girl. I’m sure that you frighten her and Elena and I are used to this sort of thing,” Callie said.

Graeme glared at her for a moment and Callie could practically see the steam coming from his ears. She knew he was angry, but she wasn’t sure if he was angry at her or just over her observation. He looked angry enough to do some harm, so it was probably good that he turned on his heel and stomped out of the cottage.



## CHAPTER 12



Callie watched Graeme leave the cottage and gave Elena a look. Elena simply nodded and Callie followed Graeme out, leaving Elena to speak with Mrs. McGregor. When Callie opened the door and stepped out, it was dusk and she could see his lean silhouette as he made his way back up to the Keep. His long strides were able to get him away from the cottage faster than she expected and she began to quickly follow him.

“Wait. Graeme, stop!” Callie said as she caught up to him.

He turned on his heels and stared at her with fury.

“Are you happy then, lass? You have proven yourself right. You were right all along and now you can wallow in your pride and feel good about it that you were right and I was wrong. Good for you that I don’t know my own sister,” he said.

Callie wanted to give him a piece of her mind for his words but even in the dimming light of the evening, she could see that he was in pain and his soft blue eyes were filled with desperation to find his sister. So she swallowed the smugness that she felt because she didn’t want to hurt him more..

“No I’m not going to gloat about it. I really do just want to help you, Graeme, I don’t know why it is so hard for you to see that. I’ve not come after you to say that I was right and rub it in your face. I merely wanted to speak about what to do next. This is a good lead and we should follow it,” she said.

Graeme visibly softened at her words and his shoulders relaxed. "Thank you, lass," he said. "You're right. What matters now is Mary and where she might actually be."

There was a silence between them that seemed to linger on forever as they stared into each other's eyes. Callie wanted nothing more than to kiss him but since that had pushed him away last time, she didn't want to take the chance.

"I should not take this out on you, I apologize. I am bothered because Mary left without so much as a note for me. It is not like her at all to just abandoned people," he said. "She has always been a responsible lass. It just does not make sense."

"Is there any reason that she might leave the Keep without telling you? What if she was having problems with someone? Maybe somebody was mistreating her or making her feel unwelcome here? Any problems that you can think of that would cause her to run away?"

"Nothing that I can think of. I doubt that many would have been a problem to her knowing that I am her brother and would come set them right immediately," he said, his brow furrowed with his thoughts.

"That might be right about men, but women can be very vicious to other women so it is worth looking into," Callie said.

"I suppose you are right again," he said raising his brows in a playful manner that actually took her by surprise.

"We should also consider that if your sister wasn't running away from a problem, then perhaps she is running toward something she considers more valuable than her relationships here with her family and friends. What that could be, I don't know. It would take a lot for a young woman of this time to leave all this safety, I would think" Callie said.

"Aye, that is true, however..." Graeme drifted off into a thought.

"However, what? What have you thought of, Graeme?" she asked.

“My sister is prone to flights of fancy. Always talking about seeing the world and the creatures of magic; the Fae. She is quite envious of me and she has said so on occasion when I’ve gone off as a guard on hunting parties and seen things that she cannot.” His tone was suddenly more worrisome than it had been moments earlier.

“That does change things. If Mary is one to give to fantasy, then it is likely she went off with someone who promised to show her these things.”

“Aye, she has been thoughtless of such things before, but not something as big as this. I can see how she would see it to be a thing to do and not realize how big and dangerous a thing it is to go off like that. She is not malicious, but easily follows her heart and sense of adventure,” he said.

“That is a good start, then. To know this of her and now we have a real lead. Allow Elena and I to question Mary’s friend in the village. It is a good start even if it is going backward from what you have already done,” she said.

There was silence and Callie held her breath wondering what he would say to her.

Graeme stood looking at her for a few moments. Several expressions flittered across his face, but in the dim light of the evening, she couldn’t quite make them out. She thought she detected a look of admiration and one of longing, but it was quickly shut down and he frowned.

Callie noticed Graeme step back from her and her heart sank. Did he really find her that awful to be around? Maybe she’d misread that kiss and it was normal for Scotsman to kiss a woman he argued with. He had always shown disinterest in her from the start and now he’d stepped away from her.

“Aye, I suppose that would be fine. You and Elena question the girl in the village tomorrow in the morning then,” he said.

“Good. I will go back to the McGregors and tell Elena,” she said.

“I will walk with you,” he said.

Together they walked in silence back toward the cottage. Callie wondered what the man was thinking, when she knew that all she could think of was his body on top of hers. Then he broke the silence.

“What does this mean? What you said before, rub it in your face?” he asked.

“What?” she asked confused.

“Before, you said — *I’ve not come after you to say that I was right and rub it in your face,*” he said.

Suddenly Callie burst into laughter. She had not laughed so hard since she arrived and she sorely needed it.

## CHAPTER 13



**G**raeme did not have a good night of sleep. He could not stop thinking about Callie and every time he closed his eyes, he saw her. Graeme could feel what it was like to kiss Callie again and again. He tossed and turned in his bed thinking about her; wanting to touch her. His body ached for her. If it wasn't so obvious that she was from the modern world, he would think that she was a witch who had put a spell on him to make him lust after her.

That morning he found himself in a good mood however, because he was going to spend the entire day riding with her and Elena into the village. It was an easy trip and not one of any danger. Therefore he was relieved and did not feel like he was putting her in a situation that he would regret.

He noticed Callie in the courtyard, waiting for him and Elena. He decided to get the horses ready first before drawing her attention to himself. He entered the stables through the side entrance and headed for his mount. He asked a couple of the stablehands to prepare Thunder as well as Lady Elena's mount. A few minutes later, he led all three horses out to the courtyard, and toward where Callie was waiting. "Good morning to you, lass," he said.

Callie looked up at his voice and smiled. "And to you, sir," she said, grabbing the reins of her horse and giving its nose a scratch which Thunder seemed to appreciate. She hoisted her meager cloth bag over the saddle.

Elena appeared walking out of the large wooden doors carrying a small satchel bag. "I'm very sorry, Callie, but I

won't be able to join you this morning, I'm needed here. I did bring you some snacks for the road, even though it isn't a very long trip," she said handing over the bag.

"What? Why can't you come?" Callie said. She looked very disappointed that her friend wasn't going to be riding with them.

Graeme wasn't though. He enjoyed having Callie to himself, even though he probably shouldn't.

"Brandon Jr. has come down with a cold. At least I hope that is all it is. I need to stay with him," Elena said.

"Of course you do. Thank you for the food items. When we return, I'll let you know what we find," Callie said giving her friend a hug. "I hope the little guy feels better soon."

"Me too." Elena nodded.

"Let's be on our way then to speak with Brigid," Graeme said, he hesitated, waiting to see if Callie needed help mounting Thunder. Callie didn't need any assistance though. He was proud that she was learning fast.

"I'm ready," she said a moment later.

Graeme climbed up on his mount and then they were headed across the land bridge and out on the open road toward the village inn where Brigid worked alongside her family, who were the owners of the inn.

Instead of riding behind Graeme, Callie rode at his side. He was glad of it because he'd started to trust her judgement and greatly enjoyed her company. He wished he could kiss her again, but he knew that Mary needed to come first. He was supposed to protect her, and keep her safe, but he'd failed. Until he made that right, he couldn't think about Callie and her soft lips, and how much he desired to kiss her again.



BY MIDMORNING THEY HAD ARRIVED AT THE VILLAGE AND Callie was feeling extremely elated by the sights and sounds

and smells of the village. She had never seen anything like it but assumed it would be close to traveling abroad in her own time to an English village that had not changed much in modern times.

“This is beautiful,” she said.

“Indeed it is. A small but lively place it is. This way to the inn,” Graeme said, leading the way.

As they rode slowly and carefully down the main street, Callie took in the various homes and businesses of the town. There was a blacksmith, a butcher, a general store, a grainery, and the inn. All of the buildings reminded her of a fairytale village like she’d have seen in Cinderella or Beauty and the Beast.

A few moments later they dismounted in front of the inn and Graeme directed the stable boy. “The name is Graeme Grant take these two and have them watered and fed with a good rest.”

“Aye, sir, right away,” the boy said, pocketing the coin Graeme handed him and then seeing to the horses.

“Come, lass, I could use a pint,” he said to her.

They entered the bustling inn directly into the tavern. Most of the tables were occupied by those eating a midday meal and others standing at the bar deep in their cups. A small table by the fireplace stood empty and Graeme was quick to move toward it. Callie sat down across from him taking in the sights and smells.

“So the girl’s family owns this?” she said.

“Aye, this tavern, the rooms upstairs of the inn, and the stables out back.”

“It is quite the establishment and they should be very proud. Do you see her, Brigid that is?”

Graeme looked around and then nodded his head toward the kitchens. A young woman appeared in the doorway holding a tray of food and drink and carrying it to a table. She was a petite girl with Raven black hair and brown eyes. She

was quite simple to look at and she looked to be around sixteen or seventeen years of age.

“How old is she? She looks much younger than your sister’s age of twenty-three,” Callie asked Graeme.

“Aye, she does. I do not know, lass. Perhaps we should ask her.”

They both watched as Brigid made her way from one table to another attending the customers finally standing with her back to Callie attending a table. Then she turned to them ready to take their order.

“Do you know what you want, then? We have...” Brigid said and then stopped mid-sentence as she noticed Graeme.

“You. I told you I do not know where your sister is, ” she said.

“Good day to you too, lass,” Graeme said, his eyebrow arching at her manner.

Sensing the panic and not wanting to lose her, Callie jumped in, “I would like a bowl of stew and ale, and perhaps some bread.”

“Aye, I’ll have the same,” Graeme said.

“Fine, then.” Brigid turned on her heels and disappeared into the back, toward the kitchen.

“Well she seemed very nervous,” Callie said.

“Yes, but she is a nervous girl. Very much as she was the first time I asked her about Mary’s whereabouts,” Graeme noted.

“Perhaps it is you that makes her nervous. You’re a figure to be reckoned with after all. Maybe after the tavern has emptied out some, you let me speak to her alone, girl to girl sort of thing. She might relax. I believe she is scared of you,” Callie said.

“Aye, maybe you are right, lass.”

They ate a meal of hearty stew, bread, and a few ales between them. Ordering quite a few so that they could occupy



the table for as long as possible while many customers finished their meal and left. It wasn't long before there were only two tables occupied and Callie decided it was time to speak with Brigid.

She made her way through the back into the kitchen where she found Brigid eating some bread with —butter, taking a break. She looked up at Callie.

“More ale? No need to come back here, I will be out in a minute,” she said.

“Actually, I've come back here to speak with you privately. Perhaps we could step outside for a few moments? You do know why we are here and either you speak with me or with Graeme out there.”

“Fine, this way but I already told him everything I know.” Brigid led Callie out of a side door to the outside. She stood her ground with her arms crossed.

“I know that you were the last to see Mary, and I want to know what you think happened to her,” Callie said.

“Me? You what to know what I think?” Brigid was confused.

“Yes, just take a guess.”

“Well I guess it's the goblins that got her, like everyone else is thinking,” Brigid said.

“Hmm. I see. How close were you two?”

“Oh very close, my lady. She is a good friend. Being older than I am and all, she showed me many things my own mam would not tell me,” Brigid said with pride swelling about her friendship.

“That's very sweet. So you were close and that's why she came to stay here with you; had she stayed with you before?”

“Yes, this was the third time. We have lots of fun. Sneaking some ale and brushing our hair and ribbons and what not. In truth, my lady, she is like a sister to me.”

“So you must be devastated then,” Callie said.

“Devastated? Why?”

“Because if the goblins have her as you think they do, then she is in very bad danger, and possibly murdered and eaten. Your very good friend who is like a sister to you is dead,” Callie said.

Brigid shut down immediately. Callie noticed it. She knew that if this girl really thought Mary was dead, she would be crying and a wreck, but she wasn't. That meant she knew something else and she needed more time to get it out of her.

“I need to get back to work before my father give me a talkin' to. I have a lot of work to do before the supper crowd arrives, excuse me, my lady.” Brigid moved inside quickly.

Callie watched the frightened girl walk away. She knew immediately that the girl was lying but she didn't know about what exactly. She was obviously hiding a lot and Callie needed more time with her. She would have to persuade Graeme to stay at the inn at least for a night while she studied this girl and had spoken with her a few more times. It was the only way to get the information they needed. She was sure that Brigid was the lead they had been looking for. It usually was the friend who gave vital Information.

## CHAPTER 14



**W**hen Callie returned to Graeme, giving her theories about Brigid and how it was obvious to her that Mary wasn't taken by goblins, and Brigid was hiding something, they devised a plan. It was going to take a little longer to get Brigid to confess whatever she was hiding, so Graeme booked two rooms at the inn upstairs after they ate supper.

The supper that Graeme ordered was a very hearty one, and Callie tried not to laugh when she thought of it as a date. They ate hen drumsticks that were brought out on a board of breads and cheeses, followed by a cup of hot soup. The wine flowed freely between them and talk strayed to other subjects besides the disappearance of Mary.

Callie found herself talking about her work in the modern world again, which was oddly like what one did on a date. It was all bizarre to her.

After supper, Graeme gave Callie a key that was for her own room and together they walked upstairs to the second floor of the inn. His room sat two doors down the hall from her own.

“Good night, lass. I am just here if you need me,” he said unlocking his door.

“Good night,” she said and gave him a flirtatious look. She couldn't control it; it was the wine and talk over dinner that was date-talk.

Callie looked around the very simple room that she would occupy for the night. There was a bed and a small dresser against the wall. A small table with a bench sat in front of the door, so close that you had to walk around it when you entered. The room was pleasant enough and would do for the night. She wondered if Graeme's room looked the same way. She was still getting used to the rules about what a woman could and couldn't do in this time. In her own time it would be perfectly normal for a woman and man to share a room without it being scandalous if they weren't a married couple, but here it was different. It seemed like a waste of money to her, but there wasn't much she could do about that.

Callie got undressed taking off her boots and then the cumbersome layers of the dress that she wore. She stayed in the trousers that she had borrowed and the chemise. It was much more relaxing and since there wasn't a fire in the room it also kept her warm.

She sat on the bed and looked around the empty room feeling very restless. She didn't know what time it was, but it seemed odd to be going to bed at such an hour that felt early to her. If she was sharing a room with her travel partner at least they could talk more and perhaps play a game of cards even though she did not know how to play any of the games of this time.

She set the material satchel bag that Elena had packed for them on the table and untied the knot. Inside was a wedge of cheese, a roll of bread, a few pieces of fruit and a flask. Callie pulled off the cork and got a whiff of very strong whisky.

"Oh Elena, my friend, you are brilliant." She took a strong swig and then another.

A knock at the door startled her and she opened it with the flask in her hands still. Graeme stood there in the doorway looking at her with a smile on his face.

"Are you going to be sharing that, lass?" he said looking at the flask.

"Of course. Come in. Elena was good enough to pack it within the bag of goods," she said as he entered and closed the

door behind him.

He sat down on the bench at the table and Callie stood next to him since the bench was the only seat in the room and even though it was big enough for two, she did not want to make him uncomfortable by being so close to him. The memory of him kissing her and pulling away from her then turning cold was still fresh on her mind. She didn't want to be doing anything that would force him to leave the room; not when there was drinking to be had.

“Aye, strong whisky I see. She has access to the good batches then. The drink is a good remedy for traveling in the cold and rain. Heats the body,” he said handing it back to her.

“I agree.” She took another swig.

“Sit down then, let's talk about this whole business of Brigid,” he said putting his hand on the bench motioning for her to sit.

Callie wasn't going to refuse the invitation. She sat next to him. The proximity to him was intoxicating to her taking in his manly scent and the warmth radiating from his body she felt very good but her body was responding to him.

She didn't know what else he wanted to speak about because they had spoken very thoroughly about the situation when they were eating. A part of her thought this might be an excuse simply to visit her room and she was very welcoming of that idea.

Handing the flask back to him, he took another swig and handed it back to her. They passed it back and forth as they got deep in it. It was giving her a pleasant buzz.

“I do want to thank you, lass. I took your skills for granted for too long and I now see they are of very good use. First you discovered Mary's items missing and now you've discovered that her friend is up to something. These are all good leads that I should have noticed long ago, but I am a man of physical work, not of using the mind like you do. So thank you,” he said.

Graeme gazed into her eyes and a bit of the lust she'd seen before shone in them. A moment later he was leaning forward and then he pressed his lips to hers. Callie welcomed his kiss with something akin to relief.

She pressed her body against Graeme's hard chest as she kissed him back. She wanted him badly. It was hard not to ravage him in that moment. She was a woman of a more modern time, where taking the lead and pulling off his clothes in an aggressive manner wasn't frowned upon. She needed to practice restraint, so instead she simply kissed him and pressed her body against his. She felt his hands on her waist strong and hot. She decided to make a move and grabbed his hand pushing it up her body until it was placed firmly on her breast. He let out a groan and continued to kiss her with deeper passion. She was glad that he wasn't repulsed by her wanton behavior.

Their kisses turned more fervent, and Callie was blown away by the passion in the man. He made her toes curl with each kiss. His fingers moved over her chemise, under it, touching her smooth skin, lighting a fire within her. She wanted him more than she'd ever wanted any man before. She hoped he would continue to kiss her, to make love to her, but she feared that like before he'd pull away. She didn't want that to happen so she continued to kiss him and encourage him with little moans of pleasure at his touch. There was a noise coming from just outside the door, a light bump against the wall, and soft sound of shoes on the wooden floor. Graeme stopped kissing Callie and they looked at each other realizing that someone was outside the door. Callie stood up, straightened her chemise, and lightly walked to the door not making a sound. She opened it quickly.

Outside the door was a startled Brigid holding a tray. It was obvious that she had been leaning against the door eavesdropping. She tried to cover up her fumble.

"Sorry, my lady, I was just bringing you a picture of heather ale on the house. To warm your bones and sleep well," she said with fear in her eyes.

Then Callie noticed that Brigid looked at her up and down and it was obvious that Callie was flushed and fresh from a lustful experience. Brigid then looked into the room and saw Graeme sitting on the bench. Her eyes grew wide.

“I apologize. I see that you are busy. Have a good night, my lady,” Brigid said pushing the tray into Callie’s hands then scaring off down the dark hallway.

Callie stepped into the room, placed the tray on the table and looked at Graeme. Both of them restraining a laugh. But their restraint didn’t last long and they both burst into laughter after having seen the look on the young girl’s face.

“I guess that is my sign to leave you be. Have a good night, lass,” he said standing up.

“Leaving? But...?” She was confused because she wanted to continue.

“I think it is best, good night.” He moved past her and out the door before she could plead her case.

After a restless night thinking of Graeme, Callie met him in the tavern for a light breakfast.

“Good morning, lass. You look beautiful this morn’ I trust you slept well,” Graeme said as she sat down at his table.

Callie smiled, she was shocked to hear his flirtatious words, but wasn’t going to complain. “I did sleep well, thank you.”

“I did as well, at least after I was able to get your kisses out of my mind,” he whispered in a low voice.

Callie again felt shocked by this change, but it was a welcome change. “I feel the same way,” she said with a gleam in her eye.

“Well what do you want now?” Brigid approached the table in a huff.

“Sausage and a boiled egg,” Graeme said.

“I’ll have the same and if you have strong tea, I will have that, please,” Callie said.

“Right, be back,” Brigid said walking away.

“I think she is embarrassed to look at us in the eye after last night,” Callie joked.

“Yes, that is true. I spoke with her father and Brigid is off work at midday. I think we wait to question her then so she does not have the excuse of work like yesterday,” Graeme said.

“Oh that is good work, sir,” Callie said. “You are in good spirits; I think for the first time since I met you.”

“I must confess I have been down since you met me, but that is because I was in a state of panic on the inside for the safety of my sister. Now, knowing what I know now, that she left of her own accord and seeing how her friend is acting, I admit that the panic has lessened greatly. I am not as distracted by the heavy weight that she is in danger. I am still very angry at her that she left like she did, and I am still worried, but not as much as before.”

“Of course, and we will find her,” Callie said.

“With you at my side, I know that we will,” he said with a wink.



## CHAPTER 15



Callie and Graeme waited until Brigid finished with her shift, but they didn't wait inside the tavern. Instead they waited outside behind the kitchen near the stables.

Callie looked at Graeme as he walked back and forth between the kitchen and the stable. It was very clear to her that he was growing anxious and nervous about his sister. However, it gave her some sense of relief that this man cared so much about his family relation. He was a good man. It wasn't easy for her to trust men from the experiences that she'd had in her own time. Even though Graeme wasn't good at making his proclamations and thoughts known, she could see that he had a good heart and that too meant something to her.

Graeme was preoccupied with thoughts of his sister always. It was very hard to know that she was out there somewhere not knowing what had happened to her. He couldn't get it out of his mind that she had run away from the only life that she had ever known. Perhaps, Callie thought, he didn't know his sister the way he thought he did and she had grown into a woman who wanted some sort of sense of adventure which would make her very much like him.

Since he was in the Watch he could journey far and wide and see the world around their region and have a sense of responsibility. Perhaps she was too old to be in the McGregor cottage and this was her way of making a change for herself even if it was a daft one.

It was shortly after lunch that Brigid was relieved of her duties.

Eventually she appeared ready to leave to the family home which sat behind the property of the inn.

“Oh no, not you lot again,” she said turning back toward the kitchen.

At that moment, her father appeared from the kitchen giving her a stern look. “Now, Brigid, you listen here. You help these people with this situation. Whatever it is you are hiding you need to tell them now. I won’t have any more trouble here at the inn, do you understand me, lass?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Thank you, sir,” Callie said taking a seat on an outdoor bench summoning Brigid to join and sit beside her.

Brigid hung her head low as she walked to the bench and sat down.

“Now Brigid, I want you to understand that you’re not in any trouble. Telling us the truth is not going to get you in trouble at all and I won’t tell Mary that you told me anything. It will be our secret. I’ll tell her that I figured it out some other way on my own.”

“And why should I trust you?” she said, crossing her arms across her chest like a stubborn little girl.

Callie wanted to get tough with her, but knew it was not the way to handle her, having worked with many witnesses before trying to get information out of them. So she remained gentle and direct.

“That is true. You have no reason to trust me at all. But if you don’t tell us something then we are going to stay here and I don’t know what your father will think of that.”

Brigid looked at Graeme who stood nearby with his arms crossed in a very intimidating figure. She swallowed hard and looked at the ground pushing the dirt with her feet.

“My father will not be happy about that and he will blame me,” Brigid said.

“That will not be a good situation to be in on a daily basis now, is it? Now, tell me what Mary was up to the last time she was here. Have you been lying for her?” Callie asked.

“She made me do it. She made me give an excuse for her so that she could be off with him,” Brigid said with tears running down her cheeks.

Callie knew that this was the break in the case having broken the girl down by feeding the fear building inside of her. No one wanted to be interrogated on a daily basis and soon gave up information just so that it could end.

“I believe you; that Mary made you do it. You’re not in trouble at all for doing it. You’re younger than she is and she should have known better. Now you said you lied so that Mary could be off with *him*, who are you speaking of? Who did Mary leave with?”

“An Englishman. Mary is quite taken with him. She came here to leave with him. It is not my fault,” Brigid said.

Callie looked at Graeme. Graeme shifted his weight from one leg to another, ready to respond to the news. But Callie shook her head for him not to speak up or get angry. She could see his fury building in his eyes, however, he restrained himself. Though she could see his hands turning into fist at his side.

“An Englishman? What is his name?”

“Tom. She met him here at the inn a few months ago when she visited me.”

“That is good. His name is Tom do you have a last name?”

“No, I do not know his name beyond it being Tom.”

“Is he older than Mary? Is he a businessman traveling through town?” Callie asked.

“No, he is not a businessman, he is with his family. He is about Mary’s age. That is all I know, truly,” Brigid said, starting to shake with her crying. She got up and ran inside.

Graeme took a step toward her, but Callie stopped him putting a hand on his chest. “It’s alright let her go. We cannot

let her family ask us why we were making her cry or they will check us out of the inn and never let us speak to her again. Let her go. We have a lot of information now.”

“She left with an Englishman! I cannot believe Mary. How could she do this? How could she just leave like that and with the enemy?”

“I know it is hard to hear, but perhaps Mary is in love and when people are in love they do crazy things,” she said.

“I suppose you are right. But she is young and reckless. She could have come to me and spoken of this; done it proper like.”

“But she didn’t and now we must find out who this Tom is so that we can find your sister.”

“There are not many Englishmen who come through here,” Graeme said.

“Actually there is.” Callie winced. “Didn’t you say that there were English bandits who have been roaming this region?” she asked.

His eyes grew wide with anger. “Mary would not leave with criminals!”

Callie placed a gentle hand on his forearm. “I think it is safe to say that you don’t know your sister when it comes to love.” She kept her voice gentle and saw some of his anger leave him. “Besides what gentleman would think it proper to leave with a young girl, unwed and without her family’s permission, if he wasn’t after something else?” Callie said.

“That does make sense and makes things worse.” Graeme groaned. “We need to find these roaming bandits and get my sister back,” Graeme said walking back toward the inn. “We leave at first light.”

Callie worried about what his temperament would be if he did find his sister with a group of bandits. There was no way that it wouldn’t turn into a fight and they were outnumbered just she and him against a group of bandits and suddenly she thought about the pain that she felt when she was shot through the door in New Jersey. She found it hard to breathe all of a

sudden as though a panic attack had taken over her. She sat down on the bench calming her nerves and breathing deep. This was unusual. It had never happened to her before when faced with danger and it was obviously some sort of traumatic response from the shock of having that experience. She hoped that it would soon go away and not reappear, not now when Graeme needed her most.

## CHAPTER 16



Later that night, Callie sat in her room at the inn thinking about the panic attack that had overtaken her by the stables. It was very unusual for her. Her job required her to stay calm and all of this was very new. Not only was the world new and the circumstances within it but she didn't know how to feel about her growing feelings for a Scotsman who was so unlike any man she had ever met, yet her body cried out for him anytime he was near her. No other man had made her feel that way, not even in her own time.

There was a knock at the door and Callie half expected it to be Brigid trying to get out of being questioned again. Instead, she opened the door to find Graeme holding a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

"I thought you could use a drink before bed."

"Yes, I can. Come in," she said.

Graeme entered the room and poured a glass of whisky for her and himself handing her a glass.

She gulped it down with one quick shot, which seemed to impress him. He poured her another.

"I have to tell you something, Graeme. I think that I might be using us and the job as an anchor in this situation. Something to keep me grounded because all of this is so strange to me. This world and talking about goblins and I don't know where I am or if I'm still dreaming. I still think I'm going to wake up one of these mornings and be in my apartment in New Jersey. It is all very hard for me and I have

been using you and this search for your sister as a way to keep me distracted and I feel like I owe you an apology for that,” she said.

“There is no need to apologize for that, lass. I am a man that also uses my responsibilities and duty as a distraction from emotions and the like. So I know exactly what you mean. In fact I must apologize to you.”

“Apologize to me for what?”

Graeme took a step toward her. He grabbed the glass from her hand and put it down on the table. It was very obvious to her that the shift of energy was becoming sexual. He looked down at her from his towering height with those startling blue eyes.

“I have been distracted with searching for my sister. I have been so distracted that I have not seen the beauty that stands right before me. Not only are you bonnie, but you are also of intelligent mind. I have never known a woman like you,” he said. “I apologize for that.”

“I accept your apology,” she said her voice growing to a whisper.

He placed his mouth on hers, kissing her. Callie released a soft moan as Graeme deepened the kiss. She opened her mouth slightly to allow his tongue to move against hers. He placed his hands on the small of her back and then moved downward over her bottom.

She moaned again. Graeme pulled her body to his and pressed her against his chest. She could feel just how hard his body was. Her hands moved up his chest to his broad shoulders where she rested her hands. She had longed to touch those strong shoulders since she first saw him.

“Callie, I want you,” Graeme said.

“I want you too, Graeme. I have since I first saw you,” she said.

He groaned with lust at this admission to her passion. Callie kissed Graeme with a hunger that she didn’t know was

still inside of her. The desire for the man had moved past any words she could think of and was purely primal.

Her hands moved greedily to Graeme's belt around his waist unbuckling it. With this movement he stopped kissing her to help her undress him. He kicked off his boots and allowed his kilt to fall to the ground. He pulled his plaid and tunic shirt over his head and tossed them on to the bench so they wouldn't be on the floor.

Suddenly, this strong man stood before her completely naked. He was a sight to behold. Callie wrapped her petite hand around Graeme's hard throbbing cock. She just wanted to touch it. He released a hungry moan as she did so.

She moved her hand over it, enjoying pleasing him.

"Your turn, Callie," Graeme said as he began to undress her.

He untied the laces of her gown pulling at the material to loosen it before pulling it over her head. He smiled at the trousers she wore and pushed them down to her knees. She stepped out of them. The chemise underneath these layers was the last thing to go before she stood naked in front of Graeme. He placed his hand on the mound between her thighs. Her head arched back in response to his touch with a lustful moan.

Graeme moved his hand on Callie igniting her and making her wet. Her moaning grew louder and louder until she thought she would explode, but he stopped before she did.

"We should not be doing this, Callie," Graeme whispered as he kissed her neck. "You are not mine."

"I know. It's not wrong for us to do this though. Besides, I don't want to stop. It being naughty makes it better, doesn't it," she whispered between kisses as she caught his gaze.

"I hate that you are right, lass," he said.

With those words, he picked her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her down on the bed and positioned himself between her thighs. His hand once again went to work touching her as he clamped his mouth over hers,



kissing her. His lips traveled from her mouth down her neck until he had taken a pert nipple into his mouth.

“Oh, Graeme ... Graeme ... I want you so badly,” Callie moaned with each move he made. It didn't matter what he was doing to her, it was the fact that he was the one doing it that turned her on.

“I want you too,” he said.

He grabbed his thick cock and entered her. She arched her back up accepting him. Callie's thighs opened wider allowing him in. Graeme groaned as he entered Callie. He kissed her with desire. He moved his hips back and forth slowly. Then he moved faster and faster until the bed shook beneath them. Callie buried her mouth into his strong broad shoulder to stop herself from being too loud. Together they moved like this, allowing the motion to carry them to new heights.

“I'm going to come,” Callie whispered to Graeme.

“I want you to. I want to feel your pleasure, Callie,” Graeme said with his thick accent.

With those words she released all over him. Her soft whimpers left her trembling lips in the most intense climax she had ever experienced.

“Mm, lass. I am there with you,” he said. Then he moved faster until he released.

Graeme laid on top of Callie as they basked in the energy between them, both vibrating in their elation. They fell asleep in each other's arms feeling something beyond either of them could comprehend.

## CHAPTER 17



The next day Callie found herself confused about her new situation. After breakfast, Graeme had returned to his room to see to his things, leaving her on her own to ready herself for their return to the Keep. She had spent the most thrilling night with Graeme that she had ever had with a man, and she knew that she wanted more of him. Her attraction for him had grown and her feelings had become stronger day by day and every minute that she spent with him but there was something conflicted inside of her.

Being in this time and place made everything different for her than if she were back in New Jersey. She was fairly sure that in this time, having sex with a man that you were not married to was quite a strong thing to do that sent a real message. Perhaps he now thought she was a harlot? Some sort of loose woman who would have sex with anyone without a marriage proposal. But was that what she wanted? A marriage proposal? She hardly really knew Graeme and if it were the twentieth century, she wouldn't be worried about what they'd just done, but now, here, she was afraid that her reputation would be in tatters.

She had seen the change in Graeme since they arrived at the inn and she noticed that he was now giving her attention, flirting, and treating her in a way that a guy would treat a girlfriend in her own time and that frightened her slightly. She enjoyed his attention quite a bit, but she wasn't sure what it meant. Did he now think of her as his? Was that what she wanted? .

The significance of sex with him meant so much more in this time, considering there was no birth control. She worried that she might have gotten pregnant and what that would do to her reputation. Would Graeme marry her? Was he even thinking that far ahead? And if he did propose, would she accept? She knew she was in deep lust with the man, but was it love? Could it turn into love? She just didn't know.

It was all very confusing to her and had her deep in her thoughts as she made her way to the stables to meet Graeme for their departure.

"There you are, lass, I wondered if you would be coming down or if I was going to have to come and get you," he joked as he grabbed the reins of her horse and led him over to her.

Callie smiled. "I'm here," she said as she put her small bags into her saddlebag. "I also stopped in the dining room and got us a few bread rolls, some sliced meat, and some cheese in case we need it."

"That's a good thing. If we catch the scent of these bandits, we might not be able to get back to the Keep before supper," he said.

"Yes, I understand. Once hot on the trail, time is of the essence," she said knowing exactly what it was like to lose someone she was tracking.

"Precisely," he said with a wink. It was these sudden winks that were surprising her because it seemed out of character for him compared to how he was before. He was being cheeky and she liked it. It was adorable, and sexy but she was also unsure of herself and what she allowed her lust to get her into.

They both set out onto the main road of the village and out to the fork in the road. One direction went back to the Keep and the other went in the opposite toward a region that Callie had not seen yet.

As they rode, Graeme continued to look over at her and smile, which made her a bit giddy. She had to admit that she enjoyed his attention, even if they were on a mission and she had no idea what it all meant. Could he be thinking about her

in the long term? Was that what she wanted? She really didn't know. It was all too new for her to make a judgement yet about her feelings. And on top of that, they still had his sister to find. The Sun was shining and Callie was glad that it wasn't the dead of winter where the harsh wind would be hitting her face. She had gone through grueling winters in New Jersey and was used to it, but definitely not on horseback in a dress. With the sun shining and the weather warm, she could enjoy the sights and sounds as they passed quaint farmsteads and farmers plowing the fields.

Callie understood that the only way to track these bandits were to ask people if they had come across them. There were no surveillance cameras to look at or records and mugshot to browse and this made it far harder than anything she had ever done in her previous work. They definitely had a lot of work cut out for them. However she did notice that Graeme was very keen about scanning the region and horizon, always looking for some sign of something. She thought they made a good team because he understood the natural environment and she understood the behavior of people and how to put things together in a search.

“Up here is another fork in the road and we must decide which direction to go in. There are a few cottages and we will inquire with them to see if they have seen any English bandits. Some of them might not wish to say anything because they feel it will bring trouble to their door, but with them being Englishmen, I think they are more likely to speak.”

“I understand. Perhaps you should do the talking since I don't have a Scottish accent and I've seen the curious looks on people's faces when I speak. They immediately think that I'm an outsider and no one likes to speak to outsiders,” she said.

“That is a bright observation, lass. My position as a watchman is well known, they know it is part of my duty to search for these miscreants. No one wants the English here, no matter what they are up to,” he said.

They veered their horses off of the main road and toward a small farm and several cottages..

“This is McKay land in these parts. Good family, very old name,” he said.

Callie scanned the faces of the men working the field. They looked up as she and Graeme drew closer.

“I am Graeme Grant, from the Keep, we are in search of the English bandits who have been harassing people in these parts. Have you had any sightings of them?” Graeme asked as they reached the edge of the field.

A man stepped forward “Come with me over toward the stables. We can speak there,” the man said. He turned toward the back of the cottages. He began to pump water into a bucket and then poured it into a trough for their horses.

Graeme dismounted and led his horse to the water and Callie followed his lead.

“I am Paul Innes, I run this farm for the McKays.” He shook Graeme’s hand.

“Call me Graeme. This is Lady Mercer. Thank you for the rest.”

“Alright then you said you were searching for the English bandits?”

“We are, have you encountered them?”

“Aye, five of them. Looked similar, probably related, but then don’t all the English have a similar look?” The man smirked. “They tried to steal a horse, but my men chased them off.”

“I am glad to hear that they routed them out and didn’t allow the bandits to get away with such a deed. It was brave of them to challenge these men. I’ve heard they have been ruthless toward others.”

“They were no match for us, we’ve fifteen men here working, all of us brawny Scotsmen. Should have rounded them up for you lot to handle, but they scattered and we had work to be seeing to.”

“No, you did fine. The Laird would not expect you to go chasing these bandits down. We’ll catch them. I’m just glad to

hear that you gave them what for.” Graeme grinned.

Callie was impressed by the words of appreciation and brotherhood between Graeme and Paul. It only made her like him more.

“Did you happen to notice if there was a young woman with them? A young lass about twenty years of age, a Scottish woman?” Graeme asked.

“I did not see any women. It was early evening and only two of the bandits had the nerve to creep up to the stables. The others watched from a distance and were dressed in similar attire, so if there was a woman with them, we wouldn’t have noticed,” Paul said.

“I understand. Did you notice which way they went,” Graeme asked.

“Aye, they headed south. My brother followed them for a bit to make sure they were well on their way and overheard that they were headed to Loch’s valley at the edge of the moors,” Paul said.

“Thank you very much for the information, Paul.”

The two men shook hands again. After a few minutes of allowing the horses to rest, the two were off again. Only this time they had a destination. Callie didn’t know why but hearing that there were five bandits gave her a feeling of dread.

## CHAPTER 18



**G**raeme felt a sense of relief as they left the farm and followed in the direction of the bandits. He knew that his mood was lighter even though he was still focused on tracking down his sister. The reason for this change in mood was because of the woman at his side. It had been a long time since he had been with a woman that he allowed to enter his heart and mind. He was not a virginal man of course having bedded a few bar maids and servants throughout his youth but they were always fleeting and never anyone that captivated his attention or heart for more than a week or two.

This woman from another other time was far different than those women and perhaps that was why he took a fancy to her. Could it be because where she was from women were far more independent and able to take care of themselves? Perhaps it was this that made him open himself to her more than the others. She was not simply a woman that he had to look after but one that was his equal in her skills to use her mind and physical capabilities.

It was this notion that had changed his mood on this journey and was feeling lighter and hopeful because he could see a relationship building between them. It gave him something to look forward to when all of this mess with his sister had ended. Perhaps he could start a life with Callie and that gave him hope for the future. He also was relieved that Mary was most likely alive with this Englishman that she had run away with and that was a relief compared to being eaten or murdered by the goblins. He still did not want her running off

with English outlaws but it was a far better fate than the creatures who would eat her alive.

“Tracking horses on this road is hard. In the future we have cars with wheels that are distinct and we can track them on dirt roads much easier. Of course, most of our roads are paved over, so I guess there isn’t much tracking done that way anymore, but there are cameras and other means to track them,” Callie said, braking through his deep thoughts about her.

“Aye, they can be difficult to follow, but there are things to look for. Paul did not mention any type of wagon with these men, so they have to be on horseback and trying to steal another which probably means they only have four horses for the five of them. So I am looking for horse tracks from four different sets of horseshoes or naked hooves. So any tracks left by a wagon wheel is most likely a farmer and we do not need to follow it,” he answered.

“Sounds reasonable, though how you can tell the difference in horse prints and distinguish how many horses, is amazing. I suppose I will need to learn to do that,” she replied, sounding thoughtful. “Graeme, have you thought about how you are going to talk Mary into returning to the Keep with us?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. He couldn’t fathom Mary having a choice in the matter. She was his sister and she belonged at the Keep. Not out gallivanting all over the country with English bandits.

“I mean she ran away on her own and on purpose. Did you ever think that she won’t be happy that you have come after her and she will refuse to come with us?” Callie said.

Graeme sighed. He had considered that she might balk at that, but he wasn’t going to leave her with those men. It was no place for a woman, let alone his sister. “I have. However, she does not have a choice. I will throw her over my shoulder and tie her to the saddle if need be. She is going home whether she likes it or not. I am in charge of her. She is not in charge of herself,” Graeme said.



“Well I’m glad you have thought that through,” she said, but her tone told him she wasn’t really glad, something was off.

“What is there to think through? She is my sister and she belongs at the Keep. She will be coming home. If I have to, I will ask the Laird to lock her up in a room in the Keep if necessary to keep her from running off again, but hopefully it won’t come to that. Either way, those are matters to be thought of when the time comes, for now, we simply must find them.”

“So her feelings of love are not going to be considered? Does she have no right to be with whoever makes her happy? I’m not saying this bandit is a good man and she should get to be with him, I’m merely asking if you are going to take her feelings into consideration.” Callie frowned at him. “It is not as though we can dictate who we fall in love with.”

“I understand your romantic notions, lass, but she is young, she doesn’t know what love is yet. She will get over it in time after she meets somebody else, preferably a good Scotsman, and falls in love with him. It is the way of things as it has always been. You will see.”

He glanced over at Callie and realized his words troubled her, though she didn’t speak. He knew that things were different where she came from, but he couldn’t allow his sister to be with such a man, no matter how much she claimed to love him. Mary was prone to flights of fancy and dreams of traveling the countryside, but this was not the way for her to go about it. This Englishman had taken advantage of her and her whims and she simply hadn’t realized it yet, but she would. Given time, Mary would come to realize she had made a mistake. It was his duty to save her from herself. He hoped that Callie would understand that, but maybe he wasn’t explaining himself well enough. He would need to try again later, after he’d dealt with Mary.

“There it is. Have you ever seen something so beautiful?” He pointed, hoping to distract her from her thoughts.

Callie’s eyes lifted and widened, her expression lightening as she took in the beauty of the valley. They were at a high

vantage point and below them was Loch Valley. A river ran through the valley that led to Loch Ness. The valley itself was very green and one of his favorite places to visit.

“This is Loch Valley. On the other side of the river, past those trees on the far side, is the moors that we rode to before,” Graeme said.

“This area is gorgeous, Graeme,” she replied. Her voice was filled with wonder as she took it all in. “It’s huge though. They could be hiding anywhere down there.”

“They could be, but there are only two paths that lead into the valley that are good enough for horses to be led down. So that makes it much easier to track. It is indeed quite a lot of area to cover though from one side to the next, so we should be on our way,” he said.

Graeme slowly led his horse down the path until they stopped at a steep incline. He dismounted his horse and Callie did the same. They led their horses by the reins down the incline all the way until they were at the bottom of the valley. They stopped at the bank of the river to allow the horses a fresh drink of water. Callie took off her boots, pulled off her stockings, and sat at the edge of the river. She rolled up her trouser legs and pooled her skirt in her lap before plunging her feet into the river.

“Oh! It’s icy!” she said, laughing. She continued to dip her feet in, splashing them in and out of the water.

Graeme watched her with a smile. He wished this was a different kind of trip. One where they could make a day of it. As though nothing was wrong and they could lounge in the grass having a picnic and playing in the water, but something like that would have to wait. He pictured her swimming in the river, despite the chill and hoped that one day soon they’d be able to enjoy doing something like that together.

After twenty minutes or so they were back on horseback riding the even path toward the center of the valley. It was a muddy path and Graeme could not see any tracks whatsoever from a band of horses that may have passed recently. But that did not mean the bandits were not in the valley because there

was another path to get to where they were going. They would know once they arrived at the crossroads where this path crossed the other.

“You really do know your way around these parts,” Callie said.

“Aye, there isn’t much call of us to visit this area, but I remember the way well,” he said.

Callie sighed and Graeme looked over at her.

“What is it? Are you tired? Do you need a break?” he asked.

“No, it’s not that.” She smiled. “I was just thinking about how well you know the area, and that we make a good team. I mean back in New Jersey, I knew every street, every alley, every shortcut. I knew what places to visit to hunt down the people I was looking for, and here... well it’s going to take me a while to learn all of it.”

Graeme nodded. He understood what she wasn’t saying. That she missed that aspect of doing her job, perhaps she even missed being in her own time. He hoped that wasn’t the case, that she was happy to be here, but he understood if she wasn’t. He couldn’t imagine being dropped into a different time period and having to adapt. He decided he’d do what he could to make her feel more at home here. “I will teach you,” he said.

Callie tossed him a smile. “Thank you, it’s a bit overwhelming, and I admit, I’m a bit anxious over it.”

He could see that she was a little more hesitant than she had been before. He vowed to do his best to help her feel more comfortable here.

## CHAPTER 19



The sun began to set and they still hadn't made it halfway across the valley. Graeme knew that stopping for the night was a dangerous thing to do with bandits nearby who could easily sneak up on them, but since they hadn't reached the crossroads yet, he thought that it was better to stop now before they reached that point where the bandits might be able to track them if they came back in their direction.

But he did not want to stop because of the woman who was with him. This was the first time he had been on such a long journey with a woman whom he cared deeply about. He realized that every decision he made could put her in danger and he would never forgive himself if that happened, despite the fact that he knew that Callie was no weak woman to be coddled.

Still, there were the goblins around that roamed after dark looking for their next meal. They weren't stupid by any means. Goblins were somewhat intelligent creatures, capable of trickery to get what they wanted. He didn't want to be running into them with Callie, since she had never encountered an Unseelie creature before, let alone a goblin.

Graeme scanned the area knowing that he needed to make a decision soon. They could not ride through the night and come upon the group of bandits with no sleep between them. That would be setting them up for catastrophe, especially if a quick escape was needed. Their horses would need a rest as

well. He made the decision right then and there and would have to suffer if he was wrong for it.

“We need to stop for the night and set up camp here. This copse of trees will do well for cover but we cannot make a fire unfortunately. It will draw too much attention and we do not want to be caught off-guard by these English bandits or any others who might be roaming the countryside. I hope you are all right with that?”

“Of course, I understand. It is better to be safe than sorry and we have plenty of food that does not need to be cooked. I agree this is a good place to stop,” Callie said dismounting Thunder and leading him to the riverbank where he could drink water and nibble at the grass while it was still light out. She got the bag of food from her saddlebag while Graeme pulled a blanket from his.

Graeme tossed the blanket over his shoulder and then began brushing away twigs and debris from a small area in the middle of the copse of trees. He unrolled the plaid cloth blanket and laid it out for them to sit on.

Callie sat down on the cloth and untied the bag and spread it out. She took a swig of whisky from the flask she'd had the innkeeper refill and handed it to Graeme. He took a long drink and handed it back to her.

“Best take another, lass, to keep you warm on this night as it does get cold the longer the sun is away. Even with me to keep you warm,” he said squeezing her thigh.

She smiled at him and before she could take another drink of the flask, he planted a quick kiss on her lips. He chuckled knowing he'd taken her by surprise, but he'd been wanting to do that since he'd left her at her room this morning at the inn to pack up her bag. He greatly enjoyed being with her and he wanted her to know it.

“Keep your wits about you as you never know when we could be surprised. If an ambush should happen, I want you to get to your horse and ride back the way we came. I will find you. If you cannot get to the horse then run and hide,” he said.

“A man who thinks ahead, I like that.” Her grin was infectious and he found himself smiling back.

“I will always be thinking of keeping you safe no matter what, lass,” he said, putting his hand around her waist, resting it on her hip in a possessive way.



CALLIE'S HEART TIGHTENED WITH HIS WORDS AND ACTIONS. She knew it was anxiety that was messing with her and that she was somewhat worried about how their relationship would play out. She should be thrilled she was with somebody who wanted to care for her in this strange place. He was attractive and drove her crazy with lustful thoughts and was completely capable of rescuing her and keeping her safe since he had already rescued her once before. But she had always been independent and wasn't used to being claimed by any man and it made her very nervous to even consider it.

She quickly changed the subject hoping he wouldn't notice. “What about the goblins? I know they come and go from this world to hunt and cause trouble at nighttime, from what Elena explained,” Even though she had not seen one before, she considered them to be the worst possible thing they could come across. She would rather have an ambush by the English than those creatures.

“You are right to worry about them, lass. They could easily come upon us, but that is why we cannot have a fire and why I have us in this copse of trees so we'll hear them, should they try to come close. We should keep our wits about us, however. The horses can sense when goblins are nearby as well and will start to make a fuss. They seem peaceful at the moment, so we shouldn't have to worry too much,” he explained.

“That's good. I do have the iron dagger that Elena gave me as well, should they come near. She said that it will burn them?”

“Aye, iron is toxic to the Fae, not just the goblins. It is good you have that on you. My sword is iron as well, for that

reason. Still, if we should get separated, you should try to make your way back to the village or to the farm that we came across. They will help you until I can get back to you. Do not try to stay out in the wilderness alone, it isn't safe. Find a group of people with weapons, like the farmers. That is the plan.”

Callie nodded. It was a sound plan and one that she would agree with. She wasn't prepared to fight goblins, so getting away was her best option. “Speaking of plans, what is your plan for the bandits once we have Mary?”

“We'll probably have to speak with them to get Mary back. My hope is they will easily let her go, but if they do not, I will grab her and then we'll have to outrun them. That is why it is good to camp and let the horses rest. I am positive we will catch up with them tomorrow and it might come down to doing that, but I am hopeful that it will not. Once we return to the Keep, I will head back out with the Watch and try to capture them, if they are still in the area. The Laird does not put up with bandits harassing his people.”

“I can understand that.” Callie nodded as she handed him a bread roll. “We should eat and bring the horses in closer.”

“Yes, we'll want them closer should anything come calling,” Graeme agreed. They ate the supplies that she had packed from the inn. Callie was careful to drink more water than whisky just in case they were ambushed but also because she didn't want to get a buzz from the alcohol and lose control and give into her lustful feelings for Graeme out here in the wilderness. She wasn't an exhibitionist and didn't want Graeme thinking she was. Plus she didn't fancy getting caught by goblins when she was in such a vulnerable position.

As the darkness fully set in, they brought the horses closer and tied them to the tree with loose knots that would come undone at the slightest pull. Graeme pulled another blanket from his saddle bag and then laid down where they'd been sitting and covered himself with it, holding it up for Callie to take refuge underneath next to him. She did so, rolling onto her side giving her back to him so they could lay together and be reasonably comfortable.

Graeme kissed her neck and pulled her close against him as his hands moved up and down the side of her body in such a way that it was affecting her senses. She wanted to throw caution to the wind and make love with him, but the thought of being caught unaware, made her more hesitant than the thought that he considered her his. She put her hand on his and wrap it around her waist stopping him from moving it up and down.

“I don’t feel comfortable having sex out here, when we are possibly in danger of an ambush,” She glanced over her shoulder at him, hoping that she wasn’t upsetting him. It was the last thing she wanted. “And after that ride, I’m sore and really tired.”

He kissed her shoulder again. “Of course, lass, I understand. It has been a long day and a long hard journey, especially for one that is not used to riding like you. I do find you quite beautiful and desirable, and enjoy touching you, however, I promise I will restrain myself, if that is your wish,” he murmured and cuddled her close, relaxing as he laid his head down on his arm.

Callie was relieved that he wasn’t make a fuss out of the situation and found herself in a restful sleep within minutes. She did notice just how safe she felt around him; enough to fall into a deep sleep, even when there was danger about.

The next morning Callie ate a light breakfast of the leftover ham and cheese and packed up her things. She washed up in the river and felt a shift in the energy between her and Graeme and she immediately regretted putting him off the night before.

She didn’t know why she was so confused about their relationship. It wasn’t like her to be so indecisive. She was usually a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and went for it without any doubts. This was all so new to her and now that Graeme was being a bit standoffish, she wanted him even more. She didn’t understand why her feelings were so up and down and it was frustrating to her. If he were a man that she was dating in her own time this would be easy to deal with because none of them bedded a woman and immediately



considered her theirs after the first time having sex. At least none that she had encountered did. If anything they were ready to move on to their next conquest and she was all too ready to let them go. Graeme was different though.

“We should be off then, lass. Are you ready?” he asked without even looking in her direction as he tightened the saddle on his horse.

“I’m ready.”

They mounted the horses and were off down the same path that they had been on since the day before. About an hour later, they finally arrived at the crossroads.

“There you see. It is obvious that a group of horses came this way and they used the second path. This is it, lass be ready for anything,” he said scanning the area with his hand on his sword as though an ambush could happen at any moment.

Callie looked around but didn’t see any rustling in the brush and therefore put her focus on the tracks seeing that they continued on as far as she could see which meant the bandits were quite far ahead.

“Come, we must ride faster. They could be to the moors by now and there is not much cover there to be had,” he said.

He pushed his horse into a gallop and Callie followed.

This was it. This was the moment that Callie had waited for and knew that things were becoming very serious. She had not been in a situation like this since New Jersey when she was walking up that sidewalk to knock on the door. A cold chill ran through her as she remembered the sound of the gunshot. She shook her head as though trying to shake the sound and memory away. It wasn’t a good idea to focus on something that gave her fear, not in this moment anyway.

She put her focus on the man ahead of her, watching his strong form on the horse. It was a sight to be seen and he was a man to behold. Looking at him brought a sense of calm and safety to her and there was something good and wholesome and that. She rode hard and fast squeezing her legs against the

horse so that she wouldn't fall off. This was going to hurt later, she thought.

## CHAPTER 20



**T**hey rode fast but with caution as they continued along the river in the valley. She was impressed by how aware he remained the entire time, constantly scanning the surroundings. He was obviously a man who had done this as a second nature and she understood why he was a Watchman at the Keep.

Callie found herself impressed by his tracking skills and how he was able to track the bandits to the end of the valley where the swath of moors began. He stopped at the edge of the shrubbery for cover.

“They have gone across the moors. Away from the Keep. This isn’t good for us, I’m afraid,” he explained as he looked out over the rolling hills.

“It isn’t? There is no actual cover to be had here, it’s just out in the open. Can you see where they have gone?” Callie said stopping beside him.

“No, but there is a good camping spot a few miles from here. But we cannot track directly across the moor or they will see us. We must go around. We could follow this path. It would give us a good vantage point from higher ground. That is our way.”

“I trust you, Graeme. You know this area better than I ever could. I’ll follow your lead,” she replied.

“We must move quickly so that we are not spotted by anyone. Are you ready for a quick and hard ride?” he asked. “I

know you are sore from yesterday's ride. I fear this will be worse."

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me, I can handle it."

"Very well then, lass, let us be off." Urging his horse forward and getting a lead before he sent his horse into a full out run. Instead of going directly across the moor, he took the path to the left along the edge of the moor.

Callie was invigorated by the situation she found herself in. It felt like she was once more chasing down a criminal. Having to use an undercover situation in order to find them. It was her favorite part of her job. The thrill of the chase.

They rode hard and fast along the edge of the moors until Graeme reined in his horse on the far side from where they'd been. It was just as he had said and Callie followed his lead. She was getting better and better at riding Thunder with every mile they took. She was still not completely confident in her seat, but she managed to get the trust of the animal and Thunder seemed to be trusting her as well.

Along the edge they traveled overlooking the hills of the moor. The sky was overcast and the light was dim, making their position less visible..

Finally, Graeme came to a stop and dismounted his horse and nodded for her to do the same. He held his finger to his mouth for her to stay quiet and she understood that this meant the bandits were nearby.

They tied the horses to a nearby tree, with the same loose knots they'd used the night before for a quick escape. They moved to the top of the hillside that overlooked the rolling hills of the moors. Graeme pointed to an area that was more flat between two of the hills.

"The campsite is directly below and I believe I can hear voices. Do you?" he whispered.

Callie took a moment to stop moving and listened. Indeed she could hear the sound of men talking. Her eyes widened with surprise at how easily she could hear them. "I do hear them; they aren't being very quiet."

“No, they are not. Follow me,” he murmured and moved stealthy and low, his hand on his sword, ready to pull without a moment’s hesitation. She followed his lead but stayed out of the way of his sword hand.

They changed their position so that they were mere feet from the campsite, but still out of the bandits’ line of sight. Callie continued to listen and noticed that their English accents were unmistakable.

“It does sound like they are Englishmen, but I don’t see a young woman. Do you?” Callie asked as she eyed each of the bandits. None of them had the build of a woman, even one wearing men’s clothing.

“No. No one who could be Mary. I would know her build anywhere. She is not in view, but that does not mean she is not among them,” he said.

“We should wait and see if she appears, no sense engaging them until we know she’s there,” Callie said.

“I agree.”

They waited and listened. The voices echoed across the moor making it clearer to hear them. As they soaked in the sounds of these men, it became evident that one man was the leader of this group. He complained about something that they couldn’t quite make out as his voice was too low, but from his stance and hand motions, Callie was sure he was upset about something.

Callie watched and waited. She had spent many hours doing this sort of thing in New Jersey. Sometimes even crouching in the shrubs, sort of like she was at the moment. However this was her first time doing it next to a burly Scotsman. It was a new experience and she found it thrilling. There was something very sexy and exciting about spying on a group of bandits. It made this world seem just as exciting as she felt when chasing criminals in her own time.

Looking over at Graeme she could see that he had a worried look on his face. His brow furrowed and his jaw was set in a hard line. Obviously, he had hoped that Mary would be

among them so that this all could end, but she still had not made an appearance among them.

“What do you think?” Callie asked, taking in his expression.

“I think something is not right, but I do not know what. I really cannot see Mary voluntarily coming all this way with these men. I think she would get frightened to come so far south, no matter if she were in love or not. I know I said she wanted to see the world, but I am fairly certain this was not what she would have in mind.”

“It is strange that we have not heard her voice or her name being called out. I have not heard the name Tom either. Perhaps these are not the bandits we are looking for?” she said.

“I don’t see how it could be any other. Unless Brigid lied to us,” Graeme said.

Callie looked at him with shock. It was a possibility because the girl had lied before. How cumbersome to have come all this way for a lie. Just at that moment the voice of the leader down below, became louder.

“Tom is a fool to have done what he’s done,” the man said.

Callie and Graeme turned their attention back to this conversation.

“Running off with that silly little chit from the Keep. He causes us nothing but trouble, that one,” the leader said.

“He’ll have the Laird sending Watchmen after us more than they already are!” one of the others exclaimed.

Another man shared his opinion as well. “Aye, Tom is a fool for doing so. We need to find him and take him away from this cursed place. With those foul creatures attacking us, and us with useless weapons against them, I say we return to England.”

“Aye, we need to find Tom and get out of this Godforsaken country,” the leader agreed.

“Hear that. Mary *is* with this Tom,” Graeme said.

“But Tom isn’t with them. They’re going to go search for him,” she said.

“And who knows what will happen once they find them. They might take their grief for Tom out on Mary. We have to find them first,” Graeme said.

“How? Should we not just follow them? They will lead us to them,” she said.

“No and they could change their minds and abandon Tom. I must question them.”

“Go down there and question them? We are outnumbered,” she said surprised.

“I have a plan, lass,” he said with a wink.

## CHAPTER 21



**I**t was good news that Mary wasn't among this group of bandits, but there was no other choice than to confront them. This was a lead as to where she was and they couldn't walk away from it. Callie of all people knew this was the best course of action because it was her job to follow leads and clues and it was good that Graeme was the one who had mentioned it first.

But now that Graeme had let her in on the plan, she was growing anxious again, which was not like her. Previously she would be filled with adrenaline and ready to confront the criminal she was tracking, but this time it was different. Trembles overtook her body and she was very nervous. There was no denying what was causing it. It was that she had changed after her incident in New Jersey. Being shot through the door had changed her somehow and now she was shy of confronting anyone or instigating violence. She knew that Graeme saw fights and battle quite regularly and was adapted to it, but she wasn't. Not in that sense anyway. Sure she'd had her fair share of taking down criminals, but usually that mean chasing, tackling, sometimes throwing punches. A few times she'd had to avoid gunfire, but that last one, where she was actually shot, it had made her hesitant.

So as she watched him descend into the valley, she had to focus very hard to keep her wits about her and make sure that she didn't let him down because she had an assignment to fulfill.



Graeme walked directly into the camp. She admired how brave he was to be able to do that but his love for his sister was strong and that only made her like him more.

“Who goes there?”

“I am Graeme Grant, a Watchman from the Keep. I have come with a message from the Laird, not to engage you in a fight,” Graeme said walking with his arms up.

“A Watchman!” The bandits began to panic as they encircled Graeme with their swords drawn.

“I do not trust him,” the leader said moving menacingly toward Graeme.

“There is no need to trust me, but allow me to speak,” Graeme said.

“Don’t listen to him! Grab him, tie him up,” one of the other bandits said.

“Aye, that is an option, but if you do, it will mean certain death for you. I have not come alone, what kind of Watchman would I be if I did?” Graeme said.

The bandits grew nervous and scanned the area fidgeting and speaking chaotically amongst each other.

“I don’t see anyone else,” the leader said.

“Up on the hillside there are archers aimed in your direction. We have you surrounded,” Graeme said raising his right arm higher in the air as he pointed in the direction of the hillside.

The bandits followed his finger to look in the direction of the higher hill and saw a glint of metal gleam in the sunlight on the hillside.

Callie gave out a piercing whistle, to let them know she was there. She was very nervous as she hid against the ground, whistling and moving a sword in the sunlight to make it gleam and reflect. This was Graeme’s clever plan and she hoped that it was working because if they attacked him, she would have no choice but to intervene even though they were outnumbered.

“What do you want of us, then?” the leader said.

“One of you by the name of Tom, has taken a young lass who is important to the Laird. He has sent his Watchmen to track you down and get her back. We have orders to not stop hunting Tom until she is found safely and returned,” Graeme said.

“I told you that Tom was trouble! The fool,” one bandit said to the leader.

“He’s not with us,” another said, as they all spoke over each other.

“You mean the silly chit by the name of Mary? Aye, Tom is with her, the fool met her in the village, but they not be with us now,” the leader said.

“Where are they?” Graeme asked.

“They traveled with us for a while, but then left us during the night. Took off together on one of our horses” the leader said.

“And where abouts were you when they took off together?” Graeme asked.

“Outside the closest village where they met, about two days ago,” the leader said.

Graeme was shocked to hear this but he did not let it show on his face. Two days ago he was also in the village at the inn and to think Mary and Tom were nearby.

“We searched for them in the forest, but could not find them,” the leader said.

“Aye, it’s as if someone took them in and gave them shelter; cause the only places we did not check was inside the villagers’ homes,” a second bandit said.

“I will tell the Laird you have cooperated and are leaving our lands,” Graeme said sternly.

“Yes, we are. This place is cursed,” the leader said.

“See that you do, and don’t return.” Graeme backed away slowly, through the brush and back up the hill. Quietly, he

made his way back to Callie.

“Let’s go now, before they come up here and find that it is only the two of us,” he said mounting his horse.

Callie jumped on Thunder and they began their journey. “It worked? I can’t believe it worked,” she said in awe.

“Aye, you have so little faith in my skills, lass?” he joked.

“Not that; it’s just so absurd. They must be terrified of the Watch,” she said.

“Aye. We are nothing to trifle with. It takes strong hard men to battle the Unseelie. Not that they understood anything about them, calling our land cursed.”

“Cursed?” Callie questioned.

“I’m sure they don’t have the same type of encounters in England as we do here in Scotland with the Fae and the burgh being so close. I can see where they might believe the land cursed by strange creatures. Even our villagers believe them to be demons and other evil creatures, not what they truly are. Though the local priest, Father Caleb, does, thankfully.”

“The local priest understands they aren’t demons?” Callie asked in surprise.

“Aye, he’s encountered his fair share of Unseelie as well as Seelie, and understands them for what they are, and what we do to keep them under control. Hurry, now, I want to make it as far as we can before night falls,” he said, racing his horse alongside hers.

“So are we heading to the village?”

“Aye, Mary and Tom were in the village right under our noses. We need to head back there now,” he said, urging his horse to go faster.

“I can’t believe they’ve been in the village this whole time!” she said in shock. Then she raced after him.

Callie followed him in disbelief. The adrenaline rushing through her as they tried to get as far away from the bandits as possible was mixing with her feelings of fear. As she rode, she

thought about Brigid and how the girl must have lied. She was going to ring that girl's neck for the trouble she's caused them. Not literally of course, but she was going to give her the talking to of her life the first chance she got.

To keep herself from feeling extreme fear about being followed by the bandits, she decided to review talking to Brigid in her own mind. She could see the girl's face before her as though she were standing directly in front of her. This was a skill that Callie had sharpened over time. She would review conversations in her mind as though she was playing back a video. It allowed her to think about anything she might have missed.

She thought about how nervous and fidgety the young girl was but she'd thought it was simply because she didn't want to be questioned and Graeme was a fearsome man to behold. She thought Brigid was scared because she had done something wrong by helping Mary, but now Callie considered that maybe Brigid was scared of something else. She was scared of being found out and there was more that she was hiding. Callie knew this now and going over this information helped her greatly as she sat on Thunder racing back in the direction of the valley where they would make their way to the village again. It was going to be a very long ride.

## CHAPTER 22



**T**hey didn't stop, racing the horses as fast as they would go, so by the time they arrived back at the village, it was dark. Graeme constantly looked over his shoulder expecting the bandits to be following them, but luckily, they did not. Not as far as he could tell and he was lucky that he had gotten away with his little plan of a lie about having archers with him. He did not like putting Callie in danger like that, but at the moment they had no choice and so he'd had to do what needed to be done. He also felt that she could handle herself and wasn't a frail woman. She truly was his match and he thought of that every moment they were together.

He could see that Callie was getting exhausted by the ride. Being on a horse for such a long period was wearing on a body. She'd need a good soak, soon, he reckoned. He'd have to arrange it for her once they finally returned to the Keep. His thoughts turned back to Mary and he hoped that she and Tom hadn't been taken by goblins. That would be the worst outcome. He had no wish to prolong this journey beyond here. Especially not for Callie. He worried that she would not wish to sit a horse again after this.

Graeme felt relief rush through him as they entered the village and torches lit the way down the main road toward the inn. He knew that goblins could ambush the village if they wished, but generally they only did so if causing trouble and so far, they had kept away from the village..

"Looks like we have arrived for late supper and drink. We made such good time that the kitchens have not closed.

Perhaps you want to go inside and secure our rooms again and a table to eat and drink? I will take the horses to the stable,” Graeme said as they stopped in front of the inn.

“I am glad to. I hope that a tub of hot water will be available for our rooms because a proper bath is all I can think about,” she said.

“Well now you naked in a bath is all I can think about,” he said with a grin, enjoying the thought of her naked in a tub of water. He’d thought earlier of arranging a bath for her but hadn’t stopped to enjoy the thought as he did now.

Callie laughed, her face turning a bit pink. “Graeme!”

“Go on in, I’ll join you in a few minutes.” He led the horses around the back toward the stable where the stable boy was running toward him.



CALLIE ENTERED THE TAVERN, A GRIN STILL GRACING HER LIPS, and went directly up to the bar where the inn keeper was in attendance.

“I see you have returned,” he said.

“Yes, we have. If you have rooms available, we would like to secure two of them again.”

“Of course, my lady. The rooms you had before have been cleaned and empty since you took your leave. I have the keys here,” he said fetching two keys for her.

“Thank you, sir. We will have dinner in the tavern tonight but is it possible to have a bath brought up to my room in about an hour’s time, the hotter the water the better,” she said.

“Yes, of course, my lady. We will set the water to boil now and have the tub sent up as it takes many pails to fill it, though I cannot guarantee the water being too hot, by the time the tub is filled,” he said.

“Thank you, I know, but the warmer it is the better. My muscles are quite sore from our ride,” she said.

Callie looked around the tavern and found that it was quite full. Some looked in her direction and she didn't mind it because she knew that she looked out of place even though she was wearing the proper clothing at the time. There was something about the way women of this time carried themselves and Callie knew that she carried herself much differently.. She found a table in the corner of the tavern and sat down to wait for Graeme to appear.

"I see you are back again, my lady," one of the barmaids said as she approached.

It wasn't Brigid and Callie was relieved because she didn't want to have to decode that girl's behavior over supper.

"We had to come back through on our way back to the Keep and decided to stop for the night. It is such a lovely village of course," Callie said trying not to give away more than necessary.

"As you say, my lady. What can I get for you?"

"A large bottle of whisky with two glasses. And if you have a proper meal, we'd appreciate it."

"We have meat pies tonight. They are hearty and delicious; would you like those?" the barmaid said.

"Perfect. Bring three of those, a pitcher of water, bread rolls, and anything else you think I might like, except for cheese. I think I have had cheese to last me for weeks," Callie said, wishing she could order a burger and fries.

"I'll be right back with that, my lady," the barmaid replied, walking away.

Graeme entered the tavern and everyone, including Callie looked in his direction. He was a sight to be seen and Callie couldn't help but appreciate it as she was looking at him from a distance. She was very attracted to him but there was something about his presence that made everyone turn and look at him. He was commanding and obviously quite strong and dangerous. He found her and took the seat opposite her.

"I've already ordered for us," she said.

“I am famished,” he said.

“Me too.”

“Have you happened to see Brigid yet?” he asked.

“No, only her father there and a different barmaid is on the floor,” Callie said.

“Just as well. We will deal with her tomorrow after we have had a chance to rest,” he said. “I believe she knows more than she has said.”

A moment later the barmaid appeared with the bottle of whisky and a pitcher of water as well as several glasses.

“I be right back with the food,” she said.

Callie poured herself a glass of water and chugged it down while Graeme poured the whisky. She felt dehydrated and tired but it was a good sort of exhaustion having come off a journey she didn't expect to take.

The food was served and the meat pies were just as the barmaid had said, very good and exactly what she needed. It still wasn't burgers and fries but it would do. They scarcely spoke as they scarfed down the food both being hungry and exhausted.

They took the whisky with them as they made their way upstairs and Callie handed Graeme a key to his room. She noticed a kitchen maid bringing a bucket of hot water into her old room.

“Just about six more trips, my lady, and you will be all set.”

“Thank you very much. I really appreciate it,” Callie said, her voice filled with gratitude.

“I will leave you to it then,” Graeme said, entering his own room across the hall from hers.

Callie entered her room and was relieved by the steam that met her. The water in the tub was still hot which meant that by the time the kitchen maid was done, it would be the perfect temperature to climb into. She set her bag down and began to



unlace her boots taking them off her aching feet. She wanted to undress but could not do so with the door wide open waiting for the maid to reappear with the rest of the water.

A few moments later the maid appeared but she was not alone. There were two more women each carrying two buckets of hot water.

“I brought help so that you might get into your bath sooner,” the maid said as they poured the six buckets of water into the tub. “There’s a sliver of soap here for you. I wrapped it in this cloth. Enjoy, my lady.”

“Thank you very much.”

The three maids dipped curtsies and then headed down the hall with the buckets.

Callie closed the door and started the long process of undressing. She poured herself a glass of whisky and placed it by the table. Then she crawled into the steaming hot water releasing a soft moan as she did so. It was perfect and exactly what she needed to relieve her body from riding a horse for such a long time.

Just as her body relaxed there was a light tapping at the door. “Callie? It’s Graeme,” Graeme said.

Callie smiled knowing exactly why he was there and she was glad for it. “It’s unlocked, Graeme”

Graeme opened the door and entered the room. He closed the door behind him and paused taking in the sight of her in the large tub of water as it steamed around her.

“I thought I might keep you company,” he said walking toward the tub. He sat down on the bench next to her and picked up the cloth wrapped soap. “Would you like for me to wash you?” he asked, a lustful look in his eyes.

Callie smiled wider. “I’m not going to say no to that.”

He dipped the cloth with the soap in the water and began to wash her arms first. She watched him through her half closed eyes, enjoying the feeling of being pampered in such a way. He groaned as he washed her leg from thigh to feet, massaging

her muscles as he went. He washed every inch of her and she relished his touch.

“It’s a big tub. There’s room for two,” she murmured.

Graeme stood up and moved to the door, locking it. He disrobed and then stepped inside the tub, easing himself down behind her. She leaned her back against his chest, feeling satisfied in this moment.

Graeme kissed her neck softly. She moaned knowing that she was about to experience this man again and her skin felt alive simply having his naked body against hers.

He moved his hand around her body onto her breast. Callie moaned as Graeme touched her, lightly pinching her taut nipple. “Oh Graeme,” Callie whispered.

“Do you like that, lass,” Graeme asked.

“I love the way you touch me,” she said.

“I love touching you,” Graeme replied.

His hand traveled down from her breast plunging into the water down her belly. Callie moaned again. She opened her thighs wide. Graeme’s hand slipped over her core massaged it under the water.

“Oh yes, yes,” she whispered. Her body was already on the brink of release with his touch.

Graeme kissed Callie’s neck as he touched her. The water moved gently with their movement.

“I’m almost there,” she whispered.

He moved slightly faster, but still gentle. Then she moaned loudly as she released.

“I want you,” Graeme said to Callie.

“And what are you going to do about it?” she whispered playfully.

“I’m going to get you out of this tub and into bed,” he said.

She moved forward as he climbed out the tub. Callie stood up and Graeme carried her out of the tub and onto the bed,

both dripping wet.

Graeme ran his tongue down the side of her body and then back up. He kissed her mouth. Callie wrapped her legs around Graeme drawing him close to her.

“I’m begging you, Graeme. I need you inside me now. I cannot wait any longer.”

“We’re two of a kind, aren’t we?” he said between kisses.

“Yes, I believe so,” she said.

Graeme pushed his cock inside Callie. She moaned loudly not caring about anyone that heard her. She wanted to have this moment of wild abandon with this man who she cared for deeply. A man who made her act like a lustful, wanton woman simply by being near her. She didn’t know how he had this effect on her, but he did.

“Yes, take me there, Graeme,” Callie moaned.

“Anything you want, lass.”

He moved inside her, slowly moving his hips forward and back, pumping against her wet body. She moaned louder truly feeling every part of his body underneath her fingertips as she moved over his strong back and arms.

Graeme was a man, through and through, unlike any she had been with in her own world.

“Oh, yes, Graeme,” she moaned.

“Aye, lass, I am with you,” he groaned.

Together they climbed to release with a trembling motion as their bodies shook.

## CHAPTER 23



The next day Callie woke in a restful state. Graeme still slept. She quietly got dressed and braided her hair, tying it with a ribbon. Her legs were still sore and she wanted to stretch them but the room was too small to really do much.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Graeme whispered in a hoarse voice, barely waking from sleep.

“Shh, go back to sleep. I’m just going to grab a bite to eat down in the tavern,” she said. She placed a kiss on his lips.

He groaned in delight and then rolled over in bed. “I will join you shortly,” he said.

A few moments later, Callie walked around the outside grounds of the inn. She stretched her legs on the bench to warm them up with a brisk walk before she walked back into the tavern.

The moment that Brigid saw her, she turned and scurried into the kitchen. This made Callie very suspicious as the girl always acted nervous. Since they had already questioned her before, it was normal for her to act in such a way, but there was something else to her behavior that Callie saw as avoidance. She knew that Brigid hadn’t told the entire truth when they questioned her but she didn’t want to push the young girl away or frighten her. They needed to stay in the inn and to do so meant staying on the good side of the family.

But it was obvious that they had been in the village at the same time as Tom and Mary and knew that Brigid must have

known that with her being so close to Mary to know her secrets.

Callie sat down at a table and a different barmaid attended her. “Will you be wanting breakfast, my lady?”

“Yes, food for two as my other party is on his way downstairs soon. We will have tea, water, bread rolls, boiled eggs and ham if you have it.”

“Of course, my lady,” the barmaid said and scurried off to get the order.

Callie was proud that she was acclimating herself to the foods of this time which were very fresh and delicious and of smaller portions than the American diet she was used to. Usually, if she were back home, she would be going through the drive-thru getting an *Egg McMuffin* and coffee in order to start her day and perhaps a donut or two. Unfortunately, they didn't have coffee yet, so she had to have tea. This was a far healthier breakfast though, and probably much better for her health overall. All the meals were, even if the Scots did drink more alcohol than she was used to with their meals.

Graeme joined Callie at the table wearing a mischievous grin and Callie knew exactly what he was thinking. It made her blush.

“I've already ordered food for us.”

“Excellent. We shall eat and get a start on talking to villagers to see if anyone has seen my sister. It will be good to walk instead of being on horseback,” he said.

“I agree. I'm excited to walk around the village and visit with people. It is beautiful here,” she said.

“I see our friend is not on the floor,” he said scanning the dining room.

“She was until I sat down and then she scurried into the kitchen. I believe we've frightened her,” Callie said.

“As we should because it is obvious that she lied to us. There's no use in questioning her again since she will just mislead us and tell us more lies. No it is best that we go walk

around the village and see what others have to say before moving again on Brigid,” he said.

“I agree; that’s a good plan. “

The pair ate their hearty breakfast before walking out of the tavern and into the bustling village. Callie was glad to take in the sights and sounds and the boisterous nature of the people who live there. Children ran in the streets partially doing chores while also stopping to play with their peers. Everyone was busy it seemed, going into the butcher’s or the grainery. Stopping to visit with neighbors. It was interesting to see their interactions.

Their first stop was at the blacksmith. He worked outdoors and had a good view of the village from his hearth where he worked. Graeme had said he might have taken notice of Mary and Tom as they moved about the village.

Graeme described his sister to the blacksmith and mentioned that the man she was with was English and spoke with an English accent. The blacksmith had not seen a girl matching her description except to say that the description matched many girls in the area. They thanked the man for his time and continued on stopping in at the general store to speak to the woman there..

This time Graeme was sure to mention that the young girl would have his resemblance and went by the name of Mary. But the woman was unsure, saying that she thought she saw a girl matching that description stop in her shop, but that she did not buy anything. However, she could not be sure if it was the woman that Graeme was looking for.

“Perhaps we should try the church?” Callie asked.

“I suppose it does not hurt to ask anyone though I doubt that Father Caleb has seen them for there wouldn’t be a congregation in attendance at this time in the church, and being Catholic, I doubt the Englishman would visit,” Graeme said.

“If anything I would simply like to see the church as it looks beautiful,” Callie said looking at the old stone building

made of the same gray stone that the castle. She had seen plenty of old churches in New Jersey but not as old as this. She might as well mix a little tourist sightseeing with their search for Mary.

“Let us go then,” Graeme said.

As they entered, Father Caleb greeted them. “Welcome, Graeme. It has been a while since I have seen you at church.” “Thank you, Father. I have not been able to make services due to being away for some time on missions for the Laird. I hope to return soon, though.”

Father Caleb’s eyes turned to Callie. “And who might this be? A new face, surely. Are you one of them?”

Callie turned her gaze to Graeme unsure of how to answer.

“This is Lady Mercer. Yes, she was brought to us via our Seelie friends.”

Father Caleb nodded. “I see, well, welcome, Lady Mercer. It is indeed a pleasure to have you among us.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Yes, such a particular speaking voice, similar to the others who’ve arrived. I would have known right away when you spoke.” He smiled.

“I hope that you will not mind a few questions, Father. I am searching for my sister, Mary, perhaps you have seen her? I believe her to be somewhere in the village, though I am unsure of her whereabouts.”

“Of course, I do not mind. Do come back to my quarters and we can share some refreshments while we speak.”

“Thank you,” Graeme and Callie said together.

They entered the small cottage where Father Caleb made them tea. As they sat, Graeme asked about his sister again.

“Aye, I have seen Mary and wondered why she had not come with you. I also noticed because she has been coming with a new member of my congregation and I make a point of welcoming all new members,” he said.

“You have seen them?” Graeme asked astonished.

“Yes, as I said, they have been attending Sunday mass for a few weeks now. I assumed the young man was staying with relations in the village, and courting Mary. Though, I have not seen them with any chaperones. Mary did make an inquiry about marriage and the process of being married in the church. Something that made the young gentleman quite uncomfortable, if I remember. Though it is possible that being English it is the prospect of marriage in the Catholic church and not the Church of England that was bothering him, I can’t say for sure.”

“Do you know where he is staying in the village?” Callie asked.

“No I am afraid not. I have not asked. When they leave, they go in the direction of the village so it’s hard to know where they might be headed after service, but perhaps to the tavern like everyone else for a midday meal.”

“When was the last time you saw them?” Graeme asked.

“This last Sunday they attended service. I assume they will be attending again if he is still in the village that is.”

“Thank you very much for the refreshment and for the information. You have been of great help,” Graeme said.

“It is my pleasure, and I do hope that you find her. I had no idea that you were unaware of her location. If I see her again, I shall send word to you.”

“Thank you, Father.”

They said their goodbyes and we’re off back to the main road of the village into the center. It was absolute insanity that Mary and Tom had been hiding in the village the whole time and yet not hiding at all. To do something as public as going to Sunday service meant that Mary wasn’t concerned about being caught at all.

It was obvious to Callie that Mary was playing house. She had seen this before in runaway girls in her own time. They had a fantasy in their head that if they ran away with a man, it would be joy and immediate happiness of playing housewife



and a constant honeymoon, but that was usually not how things ended up and she knew that it was probably going to be the same for Mary, though for her sake, she hoped that she was wrong.

“Can you believe this? My sister right here in the village taking part in daily life as though no one at the Keep is concerned with her whereabouts,” Graeme said, clearly frustrated.

“It is very strange and strange that reports have not reached you at the Keep since you have put word out that you are looking for her,” Callie said.

“Aye, that is odd. Though if they barely go anywhere else besides church then maybe not. It is clear from what he said that Mary is contemplating marriage to this Englishman, but with him being of a different faith, it may make things difficult for them,. So it might be true that they have only been going to church and nothing else in order to be seen by people in the village.”

“That is a good point,” Callie said.

“What now? I cannot knock down every door in the village looking for her, even if my authority as a Watchmen would allow it. It would be intrusive to do it for personal gain and the Laird would hear of it.”

“I think it’s time we speak to Brigid again. This time a little tougher and with an ultimatum. I have a plan that might work,” Callie said.

“Good, I am glad to hear it because I have none, lass. You lead the way then,” he said.

## CHAPTER 24



**G**raeme and Callie went back to the inn to confront Brigid again only this time they knew that they could push harder because it was obvious that Mary was somewhere within the village and Brigid knew where she was. There was no more messing around and they were going to get to the bottom of it.

Once again Graeme and Callie waited outside the back door of the kitchen between the inn and the stables waiting for Brigid to come out. There was no need to make a scene inside the tavern and they didn't wish to humiliate or embarrass the girl. Nor did they want anyone inside the tavern to start gossiping that a Watchman was looking for his sister and causing a scene at the tavern and then that news getting back to Mary causing her to flee. Therefore they were very careful in their movements.

Callie found that she was enjoying her time with Graeme. Walking around the village questioning people was invigorating for her. Now that she had felt like she was of some use to the investigation she felt more of his equal and that he trusted her. She started to think of her confusion about being with him in a long-term relationship and possibly even marriage and it did not make her as anxious as it did before. She noticed this change and remembered all the women who had come before her and how they had found love as well in this new land.

Now she understood why such bonds were formed between two people in such a strange place filled with danger

and uncertainty. Having a strong man at your side to help you and grow with you on a daily basis created a connection that she had never felt before.

As they waited, Graeme put his hands on her waist and drew her close giving her a kiss on the cheek. Then stepping away as though he had stolen the kiss. Then he looked around.

“What is it?” Callie asked.

“It is not proper to be seen kissing a woman you are not wed to. We have to be careful out here in the eyes of the villagers. I do not want your reputation ruined simply because I cannot keep my hands off of you.” He chuckled, giving her a wink.

Callie realized that he was right because most of their flirtations and touching had taken place inside the inn room, or on an empty road without anyone around. This time they were in society and such things as kissing and holding hands were frowned upon unless you were intended for each other or already wed.

“What made you think of that?” she asked.

“Father Caleb. What he said about Mary looking to marry this Englishman. It made me realize that her intentions are true. She really does believe this Tom has his sights set on making her his wife. She is at least going through the motions of attending church and making their intentions known. I should be doing that with you,” he said.

“Where I come that isn’t particularly necessary. I don’t think of it as improper, but I understand that the people here in this time do. I hope you’re not worried about my feelings on the matter, because I’m not like Mary, a young girl thinking that you’re promising me anything. I know where I stand and it is my choice,” she said, not wanting to push him into thinking he had to marry her.

“Aye, you are a very strong woman indeed and different than any other as I have ever encountered.” He smiled, touching her cheek in a loving manner.

“Good. We can talk more in depth about what this is between us later. Right now we need to concentrate on finding your sister. We are so close.”

“That I can agree with.”

Finally, after the midday meal the tavern started to calm and people left, leaving Brigid time to take a break. She stepped out of the back door, but the moment she saw Callie waiting for her, she turned on her heels and attempted to go back inside the kitchen. But Graeme quickly stood in the doorway blocking her path.

“You are making this more difficult than it needs to be, Brigid,” Callie said.

Brigid turned back to Callie knowing that she couldn't get through Graeme to go back inside.

“I have told you already that it is all I know. I know nothing else, so leave me be,” Brigid said crossing her arms over her chest in a stubborn childlike way.

“Yes, you told us a great story before and we believed you then, but we don't believe you now. We have found out a lot more about the situation. We know that you have lied to us, Brigid. We know that Mary is here in the village and has been attending Sunday service with Tom. You lied to us about all of this,” Callie said softly.

Brigid shifted her weight from one leg to another and her eyes grew wide. Her crossed arms uncrossed and fell at her side as she fidgeted. There was panic and fear on her face and Callie recognized it every time she caught someone in a lie.

“Sunday service. How do you know about that?” Brigid asked.

“That is not important. What is important is the trouble that you are going to get yourself into if you do not give us real answers, Brigid. Do you know that Graeme is a Watchman for the Laird and lying to a Watchman will bring you a lot of trouble? The Laird does not allow people to lie to the Watchmen. I know you must be too young to know of such things, or you wouldn't have done it. But that is not the only

reason you would be in trouble because as long as Tom is hiding out in the village the bandits won't leave without him. If we return to the Laird and let him know that the bandits will not leave because one of their own is in the village being hidden away by a girl whose family owns the inn then that won't look good for you or your family, now will it?" Callie said.

Tears began to swell up in Brigid's eyes. "I had not thought of it in that way. I am not a criminal, my lady. I do not aid the bandits, I promise. I was simply helping my good friend Mary. I am not a criminal." Brigid began to sob.

"You will have to plead your case to the Laird telling him that, because it seems to us that you are partly responsible for the bandits lingering in the area and that could bring serious trouble to you if it is known that you have been hiding one away somewhere in the village," Callie said.

In that moment, Brigid's father came out from the stables having heard the whole thing. "Now Brigid, I have heard enough of this. Do you see what you have done, silly lass. Your daft ways have brought trouble our way. I did not know you were hiding Mary and an Englishman! How dare you do that under my roof. Now you tell these people exactly where they are. It will be a miracle if the Laird does not come down hard upon us for your actions. How could you be so troubling and a fool?"

"I am sorry, Father. I did not think of it in this way." Brigid sobbed hard.

"I do not need to hear your excuses. Now take these people directly to Mary wherever she may be. You should be thankful that these bandits have not hurt you or Mary. Having a Watchman alongside you will keep you safe in this matter, but how many times have you gone before without security? You have been a fool, lass. Now go."

"Aye, Father, I will, right away. Follow me, I will show you. They are staying in an abandoned farmstead on the outside of the village. I will show you. Please, don't tell the

Laird. I cannot be locked up in the dungeon. I simply cannot.” Brigid blubbered uncontrollably.

Callie looked to Graeme with a smug look. They had broken the poor girl but it was necessary. Still she wondered about the dungeon part. Did the Laird have a dungeon? If so, she wanted to see it, but that would have to wait for later.

“We will follow on foot so that our horses do not alert them to our presence. You are doing the right thing, lass,” Graeme said. “I will see that the Laird knows your family has been of great help.”

“Anything I can do for my Laird I will do. Apologies for my simpleton daughter. She is young and naive. Go with luck and may you find your sister,” he said.

Graeme handed Brigid a handkerchief and then they were off walking through the village and toward the outskirts. It was in a direction that they had not yet checked and Callie noticed Graeme scanning the area.

“It is this way just beyond those trees,” Brigid said.

Callie could see how they had missed this particular farmstead because it was hidden away in a grove of trees with no one nearby. Therefore no one would see candles in the window knowing that it was occupied when it should be abandoned. She had to hand it to Brigid for picking such a spot. The young girl was more clever than her father thought her to be.

## CHAPTER 25



**T**hey walked down the narrow path that led to the farmstead. It was obvious that this was the path that they used in and out of the home to get into town and why they were so rarely seen doing so. It provided ample coverage. Graeme was impressed by it because if this were out in the countryside it would be a good place for an ambush.

As they grew closer to the farmstead, they could hear the sounds of arguing. It wasn't violent arguing, but obviously they were having a quarrel.

Callie noticed Graeme stopped in his tracks. His shoulders seemed to drop in relief and she knew by the look on his face that the sound of the voice they were hearing was that of his sister. She was very relieved as well to know that it brought him some release of anxiety and distress.

"That is Mary's voice all right. I would know it anywhere," he said.

"And that is the sound of an English accent, if I am not mistaken. It seems that finally Brigid hasn't lied to us and has led us where we asked her to," she said looking at the young girl.

"I said I would this time, didn't I?"

As they grew closer to the cottage, Callie could see Mary walking back and forth across the wooden floor of the cottage and hear their conversation.

“I had dreams Tom! We weren’t supposed to stay in this terrible cottage for more than a few nights! You promised! You said you were going to take me away to London! You said we were going to live in high society and have adventures!”

“I have already explained all that, Mary! We cannot wed until we get to England. I cannot.”

“I don’t understand you at all, Tom. I have done what you asked. I ran away with you, against everything that I know to be good and true. I left my brother and the McGregors who were kind enough to share their cottage with me. I left the safety of the Keep for you! It’s no longer my home and I did it for you, so that we could share our love together and become husband and wife. But still you will not go and speak to Father Caleb about us being married in the church.”

“I have told you before that I cannot do such a thing because of my criminal past. We must wait until we get to London where I am free of it,” he said. “Besides, I cannot marry in the Catholic church. It must be in the Church of England.”

“I did not agree to that. I lay here with you without being your wife and it is scandalous that you have not wed me already. I cannot journey with you all the way to London without being your wife. I will not take it that far and you owe me more than that. I have given up everything for you and you have done nothing for me.”

“That is not true I left my brotherhood behind to be here with you,” he replied.

“Aye and I thought that was a sacrifice but now that we sit here idle, I see that it is nothing but a holiday for you. You sit here and we do nothing but to make love and eat and nothing else. I think you did it to get out of the work required of being a bandit. Not because you loved me and wished to make me your wife, as you promised. I feel like a fool,” she said.

“Now, now calm down, Mary. It is not like that at all. It is all just very complicated and I love you and love making love to you. It is best for now to keep it that way without complicating things further by trying to get married. Do you



think that your brother would not hear of your wedding announcement by the priest?"

"That is the same excuse you have been telling me for a week now and I will not accept it any longer. You are nothing but a liar, Tom," Mary said and stomped toward the door opening it wide. She stepped out and slammed the door behind her. She was quite angry and tears were flowing down her cheeks.

"I see you are well, Mary," Graeme said from the path, his arms crossed over his chest.

Mary gasped in complete shock. "Graeme? What... what are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same question. Do you know what trouble you have caused at the Keep? I have been looking for you for weeks. The Laird is unhappy with the resources I have used to find you. Do you know that we suspected goblins had taken you and we've sent many patrols out to find you. There are men out there looking for you right now, tracking deadly goblins because everyone thinks you have been murdered by them. When all along you were here playing out some silly fantasy with an English criminal!" Graeme said, not holding back his anger.

"Goblins? That is absurd. There was no need to go to all that trouble for me. I simply could not stay there any longer. Do I not deserve to be loved?" Mary said with defiance.

"Of course you do, but not at the cost of making everyone worried and using the resources of the Watch to find you. A simple note would have sufficed. It might have ruined your reputation, but at least no one would be putting their life at risk to find you, you silly lass."

"Well you have found me, have you not? How did you find me anyway?" Mary said and then saw Brigid lingering behind them. "Oh I see you betrayed me. How dare you bring my brother here! Have you lost your mind?"

"You don't know what you talk about, Mary. I have not betrayed you, but I have lied for you long enough. Do you

know you put my family in danger by harboring a criminal with me helping to feed you and hide you? You did not tell me this to begin with or I would never have helped,” Brigid said.

“Where is your sense of adventure? Nothing can be perfect, can it? Some things take a lot of risk and danger and love is one of them. Tom will not be a bandit forever. He will go to London and become a gentleman, and I will be his lady and we will live in a grand house and attend balls and be in society and that is worth the risk any of it,” Mary said.

“Is that what that fool told you? No one goes from criminal to gentleman in London and he told you exactly what you wanted to hear to have control over you. Hearing your argument from inside I see that you are starting to understand that,” Graeme said.

Mary began to sob. There was no denying that her brother was right and her fantasy was coming to an end, but she was stubborn and didn't want to give up so quickly.

Callie watched relief wash over Graeme that his sister was standing before him. She was just as fiery and as feisty as he'd said, which meant her spirit hadn't been broken by the cruel delusions this Englishman was feeding her. She didn't have any marks on her and seemed to be in one piece and looking well. This was a much better fate to deal with than if she had been taken by goblins. She knew that something like that would have to be traumatic. For now she was only scorned by a lover and there were things much worse than that.

She knew Graeme would be taking control of the situation, taking matters with Tom into his own hands and Callie was sure this young Englishman would come to regret having messed with Graeme's sister.

Callie continued to watch, staying out of the argument between brother and sister. A feeling of satisfaction came over her as she realized that her job was complete and successful. This was just like being a bounty hunter in New Jersey, with the goal being to find a person. Now her assignment was complete and they had found the missing girl. She felt good about herself. Not only was she good at her job in her own

world but in this one as well. A world that was strange and bizarre to her that she wasn't familiar with at all, but she was still able to work within it and with this Scotsman at her side.

For now she kept her eyes on the cottage so that Tom wouldn't escape unnoticed if he happened to hear their voices. There was no indication that he did though because there was no movement from within the cottage. This was good because she knew that Graeme wanted to speak with this man and he deserved every right to.

## CHAPTER 26



Callie and Graeme followed Mary back into the cottage. She was still crying and sniffing, but Callie knew Graeme wasn't about to let her out of his sight.

"I noticed that your friend has not brought us a meal today. When is she coming, the lazy bar wench? I am—" Tom stopped mid-sentence seeing Callie and Graeme. He stood up with haste. "Who are you? What is going on here?"

"Easy now, Lad. You don't want to be doin' anything brash," Graeme said.

But Tom was all panicked. He moved to the hearth where a kettle sat and grabbed a bread knife. He held it in the air toward Graeme. Callie immediately felt adrenaline rush through her, but she did not panic. Instead she put her hand on the dagger that Elena had given her, ready to do anything that needed to be done.

"Calm down. I am Mary's brother," Graeme said.

"Oh, so you have brought your brother to force me to marry you is that it?" Tom said, turning accusing eyes upon Mary.

"There's nothing to speak of until you put that knife down," Graeme said taking two strides across the cottage which put him in front of Tom. He towered over him and with a swift movement immediately disarmed him. Graeme took the bread knife and put it on the table across the room. "Now sit down, Tom, before you hurt yourself," Graeme said.

“What are you doing here? How dare you invade our privacy. This is our home for now and no one invited you. Did this simple bar wench bring you this way?” Tom said looking at Brigid.

“I said sit down, Tom.” Graeme said with a loud booming voice.

Tom seemed to shrink like a violet and sat down on the bench obeying.

“Don’t speak to him like that, brother. I love him,” Mary said.

“Aye, so you have made known by coming here with him. You did not even leave a note for me. I suppose you didn’t want me knowing you had done something so stupid, but at least you could have let me know you were leaving of your own accord and you were not abducted. How could you do that to your own brother?” he said.

“I did it on purpose because if I had left a note, you would be on my heels immediately. You would stop me from being with the man that I love. I would not be allowed to follow my heart and this was the only way. It is why I did things the way that I did.”

“And what was your plan, dear sister, after you followed your heart? Were you to stay in this village forever hiding at an abandoned farm? What kind of life is that? Following a group of bandits around?” Graeme said.

“No, I have said before we are off to England where Tom will be getting a proper position as a clerk or something—or—other where we will prosper. There is nothing for me in this countryside,” Mary said.

“Clerk? You think I will be a clerk?” Tom said surprised by her intentions.

“Aye you will do something. You cannot sit idle, Tom,” Mary said raising her voice.

At the same time Brigid started in on the argument as well. “You did promise her a different life. I was there when you said those things to her.”

“I said no such thing.”

“Aye, you did.”

At that moment of being exhausted by the words of these three arguing, Callie noticed that Graeme changed in demeanor. He was listening intently, but not to the argument on the inside. He walked toward the window and peered out.

Callie followed to stand and peer out next to him. “What is it, Graeme?” she asked quietly.

“A rider approaches. I hear a horse. Sounds to be just one approaching,” he said.

“Perhaps it is Brigid’s father?” Callie asked.

“I think not.”

“You lot stay here inside. Do not venture out unless I say so,” he said.

Suddenly the cottage grew quiet at his words. Tom stood up and Callie noticed his actions. Perhaps there was a reason why Tom was staying at this farmstead.

“I shall return,” Graeme said walking outside of the cottage and closing the door behind him.

He stood directly in front of the door waiting as the lone rider approached on horseback. Callie watched from the window with one eye on the rider and one on Tom.

“You again. I should have known,” Graeme said.

“I see you have found my brother Tom. I have not come to start a fight and as you see, I am alone,” the man said.

Callie recognized him as the leader of the bandits they had spoken with before. This leader was Tom’s brother. She grew tense and kept her hand on the dagger knowing that Tom and his brother now out-numbered Graeme, but they would be taking her presence for granted.

“It’s my brother I must go to him,” Tom said.

“But Tom you heard what my brother said. We have to stay inside,” Mary pleaded.

“I do not take orders from your brother. That is my brother out there and he has obviously come for me. I must see what his intentions are.”



OUTSIDE, GRAEME STOOD FIRMLY IN FRONT OF THE COTTAGE door. He thought about nothing but guarding his sister and Callie inside, as well as Brigid. These two criminals were criminals, as well as English, and could not be trusted. One moment they could be calm and in the next turn to violence simply to save their own necks. He did not let that get past him.

“I have simply come to talk to my brother. If you are going to get in the way of that then I will have no choice but to engage with you,” Tom’s brother said.

“Speak with your brother if you must, I only ask that no harm comes to the women. That is my concern and the concern of the Laird. As you already know. Are we going to have a problem here?” Graeme said.

Callie looked at the leader with him moving his hand across his body toward his sword. And she knew that this was getting heated. She stood still because she knew that opening the door and stepping outside would cause Graeme to look in her direction and give the bandit an opportunity to make a move. She was smarter than that and wasn’t going to be the reason a distraction was caused.

“I’m going out there,” Tom said.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea because my brother might see it as an act of fighting. He is like that. I have seen him take on five men at once. He is very skilled and I do not want to see you get hurt,” Mary said.

Tom scoffed at the idea. “You are worried about me getting hurt? You should be worried about your brother because my own brother is one of the most skilled fighters in England. You would have to be to get this far in Scottish territory as an Englishman, wouldn’t you?” Tom said smugly.

“Tom. Come out and speak with me,” Tom’s brother shouted.

“Let him go, Mary,” Graeme heard Callie say. “Tom, announce yourself that you are going outside so that there is no altercation.”

Tom scoffed. “I take no orders from a woman.”

It was quiet within the cottage for a moment.

“I am here, John. I am coming out,” Tom shouted as he opened the door behind Graeme.

Graeme stepped aside with his back to the wall of the cottage, keeping both brothers in his line of sight. The bandit leader, whose name was apparently John, dismounted his horse and held on to the reins.

“There you are, brother. Are you being held hostage by this man?” he asked.

“I am not. He only just showed up. No one can hold me. How dare you ask such a question?” Tom said walking toward his brother.

“You are always finding trouble so it is important for me to ask because it would not surprise me if you were being held by the entire group of Watchmen and me having to come save your neck again.”

“Well that is not happening, brother. I am here with Mary and this lot came across us because they are looking for her and not me,” Tom said.

“Yes, I am aware. I have crossed paths with them as well and know they are looking for Mary which is why I have come to you. I have come to say you must make a decision now,” John said.

Graeme looked at the brothers knowing that there was much animosity between them and that Tom had probably caused as much trouble to his family as Mary did to him. They were two young lovers creating chaos with their irresponsible actions. Still he held firm knowing that anything could be a lie and there could be trouble. Though it would be very strange



for a loan Englishmen to cause trouble in a village full of Scots.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Callie, Mary, and Brigid were at the window as they watched anxiously to see what was happening. He hoped things weren't about to escalate.

## CHAPTER 27



**T**he three men stood outside of the cottage as the tension grew thicker. Tom's brother John appeared very angry at him for the situation they were now in.

"I am giving you one chance right here and right now, Tom. Either you come with me now and leave Mary behind and return to us so that we can leave these lands for good, or you stay here and get left behind. We will not be coming back this way. Not as long as I live, this land is cursed," John said.

"Leave without Mary?" Tom asked.

"This man is of the Watchman. If you leave with Mary, they will hunt us down until they have found us and take her back. There is no choice to bring her with us. The choice is yours. Stay with her here or come with us."

Tom was quiet but for only a moment. Then he looked at his brother and put his hand on his shoulder. "Of course, I will not abandon you, brother. I am one of you and I cannot stay here among the Scots. I am a proud Englishman. I am a proud bandit and my loyalty lies with you, John."

"If that is your choice then we need to be leaving now. There is no time to linger or stay another night to say farewell to your lover. We leave now," John said, mounting his horse.

"I will get my things," Tom said.

Callie knew Graeme was pleased with this outcome because he would not have to break Mary and Tom apart, however she knew that Mary would be heartbroken. But there was no way Graeme was going to allow them to take Mary

with them and give her a fate that would be unknown if Tom abandoned her along the way as he was at this point. She would be a woman out there alone in the world.

Mary gasped when Tom entered the cabin having heard his declaration.

“You’re leaving me so easily? After everything I have given you? I gave you my innocence. You promised me we would be together forever. I never would have run away with you, if I didn’t think you were as good as your word. Now you’re leaving to go run away with your brother being a criminal? How can you?” Mary said shouting at him.

“You cannot ask me to turn my back on my brother. England is where I belong, not here. This is not my home, it never was,” Tom said packing his things into a bag made of leather.

Callie got a good look at it realizing it was very fine made and expensive and definitely stolen.

“I do not ask you to turn your back on your brother. You will see him again, eventually. But you need to stay here with me and together we can go south to London and make a life there as we talked about after we get married. Why is this so hard for you to understand when we have spoken about it many, many times? You have whispered it to me as we lay together,” Mary said.

Callie rolled her eyes knowing that Mary had been subjected to empty promises by a man who simply wanted to have sex. In her own time it was easy to spot and most women were not fooled by it any longer, but in this time, a young girl such as Mary did not know that a man was capable of such things. She felt for her, but also knew that this would be a good hard lesson for Mary to learn so that she did not get caught up in fantasy again.

“I am sorry, my love. Let us not depart in anger, but with love in our hearts and remembering memories that were shared between us. I will always remember you, Mary,” Tom said. He attempted to kiss Mary, but she stepped away from him.

Tom made his way to the door and threw his saddle bag over the saddle of his brother's horse.

Graeme stepped forward with a warning. "I expect that you will not return to these lands," Graeme said.

"You have my word. I do not enjoy being here and we will not return," John replied.

"The word of a bandit?" Graeme said sarcastically.

"Unlike my brother, my word is my bond, even if I am a thief," he said.

He mounted the horse and Tom did the same. They turned and left with the horse accelerating to a gallop as they vanished onto the forest path. Mary watched them leave from the doorway with tears and sobs as she trembled trying to catch her breath.

"I will never love again," she declared.

"I am very sorry, Mary," Brigid said putting her hand on Mary's shoulder.

"Don't touch me! This is your fault, for bring my brother here!" Mary ran inside and fell on the bed sobbing.

Brigid gasped at her behavior.

Callie stepped outside to Graeme watching him look in the direction of the bandits.

"That was quite dramatic. I'm glad that we have found your sister and she is well but I am sorry that she is in such a state and was fooled by such a man."

It is all for the best I believe," he replied.

"She is in such a state. I think we should head back to the inn and put her in my room where she can be watched. Just in case she does something brash out of her desperation and sadness."

"That is a good idea. It has been a long day. We will stay the night at the inn and then head back to the Keep in the morning for all of this to be over."

“I will fetch her. Let’s simply give her a moment as she is mourning a broken heart.”

## CHAPTER 28



**A**t the inn, Mary was quick to lie on the bed in Callie's room and cry. She did not stop crying and barely spoke a word. Meanwhile, Callie tended to the fire in the fireplace and planned not to leave the room at all so that she could watch over Mary so that she did not run off again or do anything silly.

Eventually, Mary cried herself to sleep in exhaustion. There was a soft knock at the door and Callie opened it to find Graeme standing there with a tray of food and drink.

"I thought we could supper together here in the room. Is she still awake?" he asked.

"She isn't but I am glad you are here. I'm very hungry. Come in," Callie said.

Graeme entered the room and set the tray of food on the table. He glanced at Mary asleep on the bed with a blanket over her. Her cheeks were stained with tears.

"The poor lass. She did not know what she was up against," he said pouring a glass of whisky and handing it to Callie.

"No, I don't expect she did. That guy was a player. He was never going to marry her. I feel for her, the poor thing, but things have turned out the way they should, I believe." Callie looked over at the young girl and sighed.

"I agree. Even if it is something that broke her heart, in the end, she will recover."

“This looks very good and is quite a heaping,” Callie said looking at the food. There were three bowls of hearty stew packed with root vegetables and chunks of meat. Two loaves of bread a chunk of cheese and a bowl of fresh picked berries.

“Aye. I thought there would be three of us eating, but I will set a bowl aside for Mary to eat in case she wakes in the night. It will just be cold, but I believe that the inn keeper is quite ashamed of his daughter and is giving us a bounty to make up for it. Even this whisky, which I do not mind at all.”

“Nor do I. We deserve some refreshment for all the work we have done. We did good work together, didn’t we?” Callie said.

“Aye we did, lass. We make a good team and are good together. I am glad you are at my side for this, lass,” he said.

Graeme looked over at Mary, as though to make sure she were truly sleeping and then quickly placed a kiss on Callie’s lips. She smiled and enjoyed the moment and then took a sip of the whisky.

“Come now, eat up. We shall take turns watching over Mary so that she does not leave. Then we have a long ride back to the Keep tomorrow morning. I am very glad it is all done with and she is well,” Graeme said breaking off a piece of bread and pushing it into his mouth.

“I am too,” Callie said, digging into the hearty stew.

The next morning, Mary was still in a state where she would stop crying and then burst into tears all over again. She rode with Graeme on his horse as he was not going to let her out of his sight for long.

The road back to the Keep wasn’t very long, but they went at a leisurely pace, for there was nothing that was forcing them to move swiftly now. There were no goblins out in the daylight and they were not searching for anyone any longer.

“I am just so deeply disappointed that Tom turned out to be as flighty as a butterfly and not attached to me at all. I thought I knew him well. I feel like a fool. I am so disappointed and my heart hurts,” Mary said when they stopped for a short rest.

Callie looked over her shoulder to see that Graeme was off in the grass, feeding his horse and that Mary was addressing her.

“I understand. I have had the same thing happen to me before as well,” Callie said.

“You have? With whom? You do not mean my brother, do you? I have seen the looks that you two have given each other and it is fairly obvious that there is more than work between you,” Mary said suspiciously.

“No, not your brother. Your brother is far from that type of man. He is a very good man. Any woman would be lucky to have him,” Callie said. In that moment she realized that her words were true and that a man like Graeme would be a trophy in her own time. Why was she so hesitant to give herself completely to him?

“Then who do you speak of?” Mary asked.

“You are aware of where I come from, are you not?”

Mary nodded. “You were brought here by the Fae, weren’t you? You sound like the other women they’ve brought from some future time and place.”

“Yes, I am. In my time, there are many men like Tom. We call them players. They only have one thing in mind. Laying with as many women as they can. It is almost an epidemic. So few men like your brother even exist in my time that it is hard to find a good man. That is one of the differences between my time and yours. There are a plethora of good men here, you just managed to find one of the bad ones.”

“How did you ever manage to put yourself back together again? How did you move past him?” Mary asked.

“It simply takes time, and in that time, you will meet another man, and you will be able to immediately see the difference between a good man and a bad one because you have already had the experience with a bad man and know what to look for. Whisperings of sweet nothings and flights of fantasy of some romantic life are usually a way to persuade a girl to do what the man wants. Do you understand what I



mean, Mary?” she said realizing that Mary, although twenty-three had the maturity of a fifteen year old, and it was probably why she was good friends with Brigid who was so much younger than her.

“I do see. I have not thought of it in that way,” Mary said and walked away with a dazed look on her face as though she had just been given knowledge that had never existed before.

Callie smiled glad to have made a connection with the sister of the man that she had fallen for. She looked over at him and how he scratched the nose of his horse thoroughly bonding with the animal and she knew he really was a good one and one that her heart had grown ever attached to. She knew it in the moment that she grabbed her dagger when Tom’s brother had shown up at the abandoned farmstead. She was ready to go out there and defend him if needed and that was true love. She smiled a big grin as this realization took over her.



JUST BEFORE SUNSET, THEY ENTERED THE GATE OF THE courtyard at the Keep and Graeme was relieved. He could breathe again as the women he loved were brought to the safety of the castle.

“I shall go to the McGregor cottage and rest for the night,” Mary said as she dismounted the horse.

“No you will not. You are staying here in the Keep under my supervision. I shall ask the Laird for a room for you for a full month before I allow you to live at McGregor cottage again,” he said.

“That is not necessary, Graeme. I am not going to run off again,” Mary said with a stubborn voice.

“Do as I say. For now you will stay with Lady Mercer here just as you did at the inn. She has a room in the Keep,” he said.

“Ugh. Fine. Find me in the kitchen for I am hungry.” Mary stomped inside the Keep toward the kitchens.

Callie laughed a little. “I will have to have another bed brought in, but I will watch over her, do not worry.”

“I do not worry when she is with you, but I am displeased that I shall not have your company this night, since she will be in your rooms,” he said.

“We will have to wait then, won’t we?” She smiled.

“I can wait. All is well. The bandits are gone, Mary is back safely, and I am a lucky man to know a woman such as you, lass.” He gave her a wink.

“Callie. There you are. I heard you both had returned and with Mary. You must be weary. Let’s get you inside for food and a bath,” Elena said rushing out of the Keep to join them.

“Elena. So good to see you.” Callie gave her a big hug.

“I will see to the horses.” Graeme grabbed the reins of the horses and walked toward the stables. “And a word with the guards to not let Mary out of the castle walls.”

## CHAPTER 29



**T**hat night Mary was still in a state of distress. She sat in Callie's room wiping her tears from her face and drinking strong whisky. However she was not alone as Elena and Callie sat with her doing what good friends would do, which was listen to a heartbroken woman vent all the things she needed to get off her chest. It was a good way to move on and Callie and Elena did not mind since they were able to have a few drinks and catch up as well.

"It is best to give in to drinking your worries away, for now at least," Elena said sitting on the second bed she'd ordered moved into Callie's room.

"I will take that advice for as long as I shall need it," Mary said pouring herself a glass of whisky.

"Graeme will see that you will get better with time and allow you to move back to the McGregors," Callie said.

"I am glad to hear it. I'm glad to have both of you in this moment. At first, I wanted to do nothing but go back to the McGregor's cottage, but now I see the noisiness of that environment would not be good for me in the state I am in. I looked at my brother's proclamation to hold me in the Keep for a month in a room of my own as if he were locking me in the dungeon. But now I see I do need time to get my head sorted," Mary said.

"That is a very mature thing to say and perspective to have on it," Callie said, proud that Mary was starting to see her problem from a different perspective.

“And being in the Keep is not all bad. You will be here in the walls for a month and join us in the dining hall for supper. You will see that it is not like being in the dungeon at all,” Elena said, giggling.

“Aye, that is something to look forward to. Perhaps it is just what I need. I do think I may have outgrown the McGregor cottage, however.” Mary frowned.

“Do you think that is part of the reason why you were quick to run away? Maybe it wasn’t just your love for Tom, but the need to get out of that cottage and have your own life. I have been in the cottage and although it is a joyful place, it is quite cramped and noisy with children. A lot for a woman of your age to deal with,” Callie said.

“It could be. Girls are already married and living with their own husbands by the time they are my age, if not years before. I simply have not found anyone I fancy. That is until I started going into the village. Until I met Tom,” Mary said with sadness.

“And what of the other villagers? Did you not fancy any of the young men who live there?” Elena asked.

Mary’s eyes grew and she looked surprised. “I never thought about considering any of them. Usually, I go on Sundays to services with Graeme and there is no time to meet any of the young men. And then when I went to see Brigid and I met Tom, well, I did not bother to look at any others.”

“Then that is something to have hope for. Maybe in time your brother will allow you to work at one of the shops or maybe the inn with Brigid. Then you will be able to meet more of the eligible young men, including the Scottish tradesmen who come to bring wares to the town,” Callie said.

A smile came across Mary’s face. “I do like that idea. At least it gives me hope that perhaps my heart isn’t as broken as I thought.”

“To hope.” Callie raised her glass and they toasted to hope.

They spent the night deep in their cups and drink. They ate a hearty meal together and Mary was quick to fall asleep first.

Elena and Callie shared a look after Mary went to sleep.

“I have so much that I want to tell you,” Callie whispered to Elena.

“Step into the hall so that we don’t wake Mary. Being right outside the door isn’t leaving her alone. She isn’t going to crawl out the window at this height,” Elena said.

“That is a good point,” Callie said.

She poured two glasses of whisky and handed one to Elena. Then they walked into the hall and closed the door behind them. Callie was very much in desperate need to tell someone all that had happened to her. Elena was the only one she could tell immediately and she was glad that she was still visiting with her.

“I am glad you are here. I hope that Brandon junior is doing well.”

“I am sad that I did not join you on the mission, but the way things turned out with you not coming straight back, I believe it was for the best. Brandon junior is doing very well now. But enough about me; I want to know everything.”

Callie started the very long story about everything that had happened. However she started the story with the factual details about going into the village. She told Elena about the innkeeper’s daughter and her lies, but how they managed to set her and Graeme on the trail of the bandits.

Callie told Elena about the farm they visited and the valley and how beautiful it was. She told her about her astonishment at seeing the moors and how she found it beautiful as well. She told her about finally feeling like she mastered her seat on Thunder and felt like her riding skills had greatly improved. He was a very fast horse indeed and possibly saved her life more than once by simply being quick.

Then she told her about having to go back to the village once they found out that Mary and Tom were actually hiding in a nearby abandoned farmstead right underneath their noses and how Brigid was bringing them food and supplies. Elena

listened intently with wide eyes drinking from the glass of whisky.

Finally, when she got to the point of Tom's brother John showing up, Callie changed in demeanor, something that Elena noticed.

"What exactly happened?" Elena asked.

"John gave Tom an ultimatum to either stay with Mary or return with them to England. He could not do both," Callie said.

"No you already said that. I mean what happened to you in that moment? You are telling the story with enthusiasm and then there is great sadness in your voice when you speak about Graeme confronting Tom's brother. Why is that?" Elena asked.

Callie gave her a look. "Fine if you are going to make me admit it. In that moment I was worried for his life. I knew in that moment that I would go out there and fight for him if I needed to. That was when I knew I loved him," Callie said.

"So that is what you are leaving out. I wondered. When did you get together?" Elena asked.

"I admit it was very slow, at least considering how things are in our modern time. I mean sometimes you sleep with a man on the first date. This was very strange for me and it wasn't until our first night at the inn, that we actually made love. Then afterwards I had a brief panic attack where I didn't know what it meant and I started over thinking and worrying about everything," Callie said.

"Yeah, I understand that. I went through something similar because the men here see things differently and are not like the men in our own time. Thank goodness for that too."

"Exactly, and I didn't know if it meant I had to marry this man that I hardly knew. I didn't know what the rules were or how the Laird would take it since he seems to be in charge of everyone here. It gave me great anxiety and I kind of pushed Graeme away for a while."

"How did he take that?" Elena asked.

“Like a gentleman. He didn’t complain and he gave me the space I needed. But it was in that moment that he was confronting John that I knew I loved him and I wanted to be with him.”

“That is quite a realization to have at such a moment. I’m glad that you have found love and Graeme is a good man. I would tell you otherwise. I know that you’ll be happy with him.”

“I think you’re right. I feel good when I’m with him and when he’s away from me, I want to see him. Which is also very strange because I wasn’t expecting it when I arrived here,” Callie said.

“None of us were expecting anything when we arrived here. It is a miracle we don’t go insane with what we have been through, completely losing our minds. But the people here are kind and they are accepting of us and that helps. Not to mention that the men are extremely attractive and that incredible accent.” Elena grinned mischievously.

“I know, I agree. I never realized that I would be done in by a Scottish accent and a man who was basically a brute warrior. It astounds me every single day,” Callie said.

“To Scottish men,” Elena said lifting up her glass in a toast.

“I will toast to that indeed.” Callie laughed and they bumped their glasses together and drank of the strong whisky.

“I should be getting back to my rooms and my own Scottish man. Not to mention my little boy. I love them dearly,” Elena said walking back into the room and setting her glass down on the table quietly.

Callie gave her a very long hug. “Thank you so much for being my friend and for being here for me. I couldn’t have adapted to being here without you at my side.”

“I’m glad for it and anything you need I’m here for you.. We are different kinds of women and it helps to know that we are here for each other.”

The next morning Callie woke to a gentle knock upon the door. When she opened it, she noticed Graeme on the other side with one of the staff.

“It is done I have secured Mary a room in the servants quarters of the Keep. The Laird has approved it; however, you will need to pull your weight and help in the kitchens for a month,” Graeme said.

“I can do that. Perhaps it will be good training for a different position in the future,” Mary said looking at Callie knowing that she meant the tavern in the village.

“Follow Me, Mary, and I will show you where you’ll be staying,” The maid standing in the hall with Graeme said.

“I should also let you know that I have had words with the guards to not let you out of the castle walls. Do you understand?” he said.

“Aye, I understand and that is annoying, but you must then escort me to the McGregor cottage so that I can apologize to them in person,” Mary said.

“That is fine. I shall find you before sunset and we will go,” Graeme said.

Mary left and Graeme looked at Callie standing in the doorway. “Did you get a good night sleep?”

“Yes, I did. I’m wondering if we can speak?” she said.

“Of course anything you want, lass,” he said entering the room.

“I think I have to make a confession to you. As you know I have been up and down in my emotions when it comes to you.”

“Aye, I have noticed that you have been a bit hesitant in declaring a relationship with me. I have tried to give you time and not push for something you are not quite ready for, but I will admit that my body aches for yours,” he said.



“I need to admit why that has been the case for me. This whole time that we have been searching for Mary I have worried that I am as impulsive as her. At least in my dealings with you. I hardly know you and I gave myself to you and did not think about how you would feel about it since things are different here than they are in my time. I know that men, good men in any case, do not sleep with ladies without the expectation of marriage.”

“I see. I do understand, but may I point out that we have been working together for a decent amount of time and have taken that time to get to know each other. We don’t let the work change our relationship or do harm to others. I do not think you are as impulsive as Mary or as I. She might be twenty-three, but she is very young in spirit and does not know what she gets into. I do not see that in you. You are an intelligent woman who knows her mind. As far as being wed, I do confess that my mind goes in that direction because I cannot think of being with any other woman but you. However, you should know, lass, that I would never pressure you to do anything you do not want. If you wish for things to remain as they are between us for many months then I am happy to do so.”

“I think that I have been naive and that I have worried too much. In part because of Mary’s behavior, but I see that I’m not the same as her. I promise not to let this stress and worry rule our connection that we have between us. Being impulsive is not necessarily a bad thing and I am glad that we have come together. I find that my heart is very fond of you. What I’m trying to say is, I love you, Graeme.”

“I love you too, Callie,” Graeme said. Then he swept Callie into his arms and kissed her deeply and passionately.

Graeme untied the laces on her dress and pushed his hand against her breast. She sighed a deep sigh as he touched her. Her body ached for his touch every time he was near. It was a feeling that she couldn’t shake and she didn’t know how she could ever be without this man.

In that moment as he kissed and touched her, she knew, she wanted this forever.

“I need to be inside you, Callie,” Graeme whispered.

“And I want you inside me, Graeme,” Callie said.

He picked her up and laid her on the bed. Slowly he took off each item of her clothing laying a kiss on her skin as it became exposed to him. Callie moaned with every kiss he gave her and every time his tongue slid over her.

She lay naked on the bed in front of Graeme. He looked down at her from his towering height. His stark blue eyes glimmered as they looked at her. His jaw locked in lust as he allowed his eyes to roam over her.

Then he kicked off his boots and allowed his hand to move over his cock. Callie could see its hardness under the material of his kilt. Her mouth opened in response to this sight.

Graeme’s hands went to work undressing, laying his plaid and kilt on the back of the chair. Graeme stood naked before Callie at the edge of her bed. He groaned with anticipation.

“You are beautiful Callie,” Graeme said.

“I want you, please, Graeme,” Callie said to Graeme.

“Aye, my love,” he said.

Graeme climbed onto the bed and on top of Callie positioning himself between her thighs. His finger lightly massage her with a delicate movement. Callie’s back arched up at Graeme’s touch as the sensation vibrated through her.

Graeme grabbed his cock and pushed it inside of her slick core.

“Oh yes, Graeme, yes,” Callie groaned.

They came together in that moment in a bond of magic that could not be broken by time or an alternate world. This was theirs and theirs alone and neither of them had ever felt love making the way it felt in this moment.

## CHAPTER 30



**T**wo months had passed since the ordeal of the search for Mary. It had been a very intense two months. After Callie admitted to herself that her stress and worry over her relationship with Graeme was nothing to be seen as a problem, she gave in fast and hard to their connection. They were almost inseparable and it wasn't long before Graeme proposed marriage and to his surprise she said yes.

So on a crisp autumn day the two prepared to make their bond stronger than ever by getting married. Callie wasn't a frivolous woman wanting a grand ceremony but she wanted the most simple and pure form of a wedding. Graeme suggested just the very thing.

The day was bright and the air was crisp with a chill from the loch. As Callie inhaled the air, she remembered what it was like to be cold and wet from being in the water. She should have known then that the man that dove into that water putting himself in danger to rescue her would be a man that she could marry.

She wore a simple dress that was not adorned with decorations other than a pattern sewed onto the hem of the skirt and brandishing the clan colors. She braided her hair across her head and a crown and Mary helped push some adornments in it from the forest of yellow and orange colors.

Graeme wore his dress plaid proudly and with new white tunic for the occasion.

Together they stood with a small group of their closest friends and family in the castle's courtyard to keep things simple. Father Caleb over saw them as they forged their bond and promised to be together for eternity. Now that Callie knew that eternity could exist among all of these worlds, she knew exactly what this meant.

They ended their bond with a kiss and the celebrations began.

The courtyard behind them was laid out with tables decorated in autumn decor as the seasons had changed. A feast was laid out on the table tops ready to be enjoyed by the small party.

"I have never been as happy as I am now," Graeme said looking at Callie.

"I feel the same way. I cannot believe I'm married. I never thought when I arrived here that this would happen to me. I never thought I would fit in at all."

"I must admit that I am not sure what I have done without you and I don't simply mean finding Mary. I mean my entire life. I am glad that the Fae saw fit to bring you here. They brought you into my life and it has been the most joyous thing that they have ever done for anyone I can promise you," he said.

"Yes, I am glad that they rescued me and I am glad that you rescued me as well, in more ways than one," Callie said.

She kissed him and it turned into a deep and passionate kiss. The entire group erupted in cheers and applause at their kiss. They both laughed and hoisted their drinks high in the air ready to celebrate their union.



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PREVIEW OF  
HIGHLANDER FOUND



## CHAPTER 1



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At midnight, Audrina James finally laid her head down, gratefully onto her pillow. It had been another grueling day in Trauma One, it was always the worst when the nursing staff and doctors of the trauma ward lost a child. Audrina looked at the ceiling where she had taped pictures of stars, lush green fields, exotic ancient castles and the forests of her ancestral homeland, vowing to herself that she would visit Claran Castle in Scotland someday. Audrina had put the pictures up so that she could clear her mind of the gruesome scenes that she faced in the E.R. day after day, night after night. They'd worked hard to save the boy from the ravages of a car crash, but Donald Nightingale, of sunny northern California, flatlined at eleven-thirty, after half a day's worth of surgeries, blood transfusions and plasma bags. Audrina didn't cry much anymore after working in the trauma center. But there were a few patients who tugged at her heartstrings. Donald would be one of them.

"Look at the pictures. Look at the pictures," Audrina chanted to herself. She used them as a platform to spring her mind into more pleasant thoughts before she drifted off to sleep. Audrina had been fascinated with the stories and lore of her ancestry when her grandfather used to sit her on his knee and recount tales of his youth, roaming the Highlands of Scotland. That was before a potato famine reached his homeland and forced his family to immigrate to the United States. Audrina would spend hours, daydreaming as she roamed the redwoods behind the house, pretending the tall

trees were the ancient forests of Scotland. She knew now that Scotland was much greener, and the forests were made of tall oaks, and rowan trees, beech and pine and ash. But she had promised herself she would visit and discover it for herself someday.

That was all a couple of decades ago, when Audrina had been just seven. After high school, she had gone on to nursing school, and now was faced with the ever-increasing violence of the San Francisco Community Hospital that came through the doors. The timing had just never felt right. There was always one more case to oversee, or one more patient to look after and successfully care for until they walked out the door of their own volition, and not in a body bag or stretcher.

Audrina certainly had the money saved for the trip, but she always felt there was something holding her back. Some small fear she had that there was something Grandfather neglected to tell her about the ancient folklore. Audrina never quite made the jump to buy the plane ticket or book the hotels. She'd never really been sure why, but as she laid there, thinking about all of the never did's that young Donald was never going to experience, she thought, *"Why am I holding back? I have no solid reason, no proof that there is anything in Scotland I should be afraid of."*

"I'm going to request the time off tomorrow and start booking tickets after my trip to the museum," she vowed out loud.

There was no one to hear her proclamation, she realized. There wasn't anyone in her life that she could tell really. *"I guess that makes it kind of sad, maybe even a little pathetic. Sure, I have my co-workers, but they would all say, "Finally, you are taking a vacation," when I tell them,"* Audrina thought.

Audrina had become a trauma nurse after Mom had suffered the same fate as little Donald. She winced as the memories of that day entered her mind. It had been much like Donald's parents rushing into the hospital. The only difference between her grandfather being informed, and Mrs. Nightingale's heart-wrenching screams, had been significantly



different, but as equally as devastating. That's when Grandfather had taken her in. She didn't know who her dad was, and it never occurred to her to go looking for him. She knew that she was loved when Grandfather took her, a scared little girl, home that night. He had cared for her and she didn't need anyone else. Anyone, that was, except her mom, but she wasn't coming back. When Grandfather had passed away she was twenty-one, she was left with no one. She hadn't even bothered getting a pet. Audrina was never home because she worked so much. She'd always felt like it was her duty to save people because, well, she couldn't save her mom back then.

Audrina tried to roll over onto her side. She was disgusted with herself that she was caught up in her own head and wallowing in self-pity. Her vow was just that and she was sticking to it. She realized, as she flipped back onto her back, that she had never been able to fall asleep unless she was looking up at her pictures. Grandfather had printed them for her the week that Mom had passed. He wanted her to have something to think about, other than the sadness of losing her mom.

As Audrina's eyes began to flutter closed, and she emptied her mind save for thoughts of faraway lands and lost familial ties, something, perhaps the moonlight, sparkled in the pictures above her. A small light that glowed in the tower of the castle, appeared to be brighter in the picture. But she squinted at it, and then chalked it up to fatigue and weary eyes. Her lashes batted against her cheeks one last time, and she fell into a deep, sound sleep.



*CANDLES SURROUNDED HER IN A CIRCLE, HALOING THE circular room with an ethereal glow. Long thin tapers of white sheep's fat burned low and lit the gloom of the dark tower. She'd been locked in there for so long, she had lost track of time.*

*There was a straw mattress, in a splintered bed of Ashwood. The thin blanket cast across it, was worn and*

*frayed at the edges. A small wooden chair, equally as uncomfortable, sat at the base of the bed. It wobbled on three legs, having relinquished one of the legs long ago, for the usage of a handle for a torch. The torch, had long ago burnt to ash, and was scattered and lost amongst the dust and dirt that caked the cold stone floor. She rocked back on her heels and murmured a soft prayer to the Gods, the Spirits, anyone who would listen. The tower was a prison, a tortuous place that seeped into the soul like the smoky blackness of a demon, coming from the bowels of hell to inhabit and ingest the goodness of the person's humanity.*

*There were bones in the ashes and they cried out to her. Begging her to release them of their captivity. She couldn't help them that night. They would remain tethered there until the angels came for them on the day of reckoning. Thunder clapped outside the castle and lit up the tiny room in an intense light that threw the stark furnishings of the room into harsh contrast. The candles flickered, and she feared they would blow out. Cotswold Castle had many frivolities, protection from the elements in the prison tower, was not one of them.*

*Rain lashed against the stone tower and sprayed into the room in droves of unending dampness. It rained often in Scotland. She hadn't been dry since she was thrown into that room. The water collected in puddles at the base of the windows. She sat in the middle of the room in an attempt to keep herself and her activities dry.*

*She knelt over a carnelian kilt pin. It glowed in the candlelight like fire. She reached out her hand and touched it as she murmured. The contact sent a spiral of heat through her fingertips, and she jerked her hand back. How could the stone set in silver be warm to the touch? There was no fire there. The brooch had not been warmed against constant contact with her skin, as she had been shivering since she arrived there. The cold was such that it seeped not only into her bones, but into her very soul. There was no possible way the stone could be warm.*

*Her eyes fixated on the glowing center of the gem as she continued to murmur, “Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, through spans of time, I cannot rest. Seek thee my kin, and pardon my sin, that I may reincarnate, and new life begin. And with this pin I shall be returned to my love, cast through the ages, by touch of mine blood, and light from sun up above.”*

*The kilt pin glowed ever-brighter in a hue of burnt orange that lit up not only the room, but blazed like the dawning of the early morning’s sun, sending spirals of light from the tower window. She heard shouts from below and quickly loosened the stone nearest the door, about halfway up the wall. She hid the pin behind the stone, where someone had hollowed out the stone behind that, and replace the stone so that it looked seamless. She prayed that someone would find it someday, and that she might rise up, released from the ashes of the debris of bodies from that hellish place. She heard footsteps on the stairs and boots clunked up the stone steps. She hurriedly pushed the stone back in place and managed to take one step back, as the door was thrown open and she screamed in terror as...”*



AUDRINA WOKE, SITTING BOLT UPRIGHT IN BED.

“What the hell?” she muttered as she glanced up at the pictures. “*What the heck was that?*” she wondered to herself as she let her tired body fall back against the pillows. She stared at her pictures and then pushed herself back up to a sitting position. She used her hands and pushed to stand up, so that her upturned face was almost nose to nose with the picture of the castle. Audrina stared at the tiny light in the tower. It had faded over the years, but she could have sworn last night it glowed brightly. So brightly it almost lit up the room.

*And then...and then, that dream. What a strange dream. Who was that woman in the dream? What happened to her? She must have died there.* Audrina could feel the drive of her trauma nurse training kick in. She had to save her. *But how?*

*That's silly. The woman...me...that was centuries ago when she cast the spell. And what kind of a spell was that anyway?* Audrina's mind began to fog over, the dream becoming misty around the edges, as reality and the present day slowly seeped back into her mind. She looked around the modern-day bedroom and laughed at the absurdity of her mind's vehemence that the dream was somehow a reality way back when.

She climbed off the bed and hit the shower, enjoying the feel of the warm jets hitting her body as the ache from the previous day's strenuous shift was washed away. She combed out her dark red hair and swiftly braided it down her back as she stared into her own brown eyes in the reflection of the foggy mirror. She wiped away the condensation and flashes entered her mind. The reflection of a woman in the puddles on the floor as the lightening lit up the room. *Did she have brown eyes like my own?* Audrina wondered. She shrugged and finished her braid and then donned her typical casual wear of jeans, an oversized tee-shirt and a ball cap. The ensemble fit well on her athletic frame, and it was just what she needed to walk down to San Francisco's Museum of Natural History. Audrina enjoyed the casual wear on a rare day off, and she was equally as pleased that the museum was hosting an exhibit on loan from Scotland. She figured she could kill two birds with one stone. She could get her walk in and surround herself in ancient artifacts that made her yearn for a time and place that she had not yet discovered. She pulled her ballcap low over her eyes as she walked out the front door, not minding in the least that she had been accused on more than one occasion of being a tomboy.

## CHAPTER 2



When Audrina reached the museum, she purchased her ticket and queued to get in line to be let into the exhibits. She was about ten minutes early and so she began to read the pamphlet that was handed out at the ticket booth. She had been to the museum so many times, she was only interested in the exhibit on loan from the Scottish Museum of Ancient History, but she figured she might peruse a few more on her way out. She read about the various artifacts that were on display, quite impressed with the vast array of items that have been amassed.

As she flipped the cover open, she paused, staring down at the pamphlet stupidly and didn't really register what she was seeing and reading on the pamphlet. As she stared down at the glossy photo, the memory of the dream from last night was a bit hazy, but there was no mistaking the kilt pin from the dream. The one that the woman, that she, had cursed. Or maybe the woman in the dream, she, had placed a spell on it. But there it was, shining back up at her from the brochure. Audrina blinked rapidly in the sun, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, and this was another pin that was excavated from some site in Scotland, and it just looked similar. But as she continued to read, the weighted feeling in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

*“The Cotswold Pin, a rare and expensive carnelian-gem set pin, was discovered last year in the ruins of Cotswold Castle’s eastern most tower. Archeologists and Historians know very little about the pin, except that it was discovered hidden behind a loose stone near the doorway to the tower,*

*where a mason was reinforcing the towers infrastructure. Cotswold Castle is host of a long and bloody history in the Scottish culture and it is well known that Lord Cotswold, imprisoned many native Scotsmen, in his long and cruel English reign over the Scottish people. It is speculated that the pin was hidden by one of the prisoners. Most likely in the event of their impending death and the desire for such a rare gem to not fall into the hands of the English. It is known that Lord Cotswold's reign was filled with such terrors and atrocities against the Scottish people, such as imprisonment, torture, and rape. He often invoked the First Rights, also known as Prima, against many young Scottish Brides. It was well known that many of the ones he impregnated he had accused of, tried, and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently sentenced to death. It is no wonder that whoever was bequeathed such a rare treasure as this gem-inlaid kilt pin, would have wanted it hidden from such an atrocious and vindictive lord and ruler."*

Audrina's hands trembled, and the pamphlet shook as she read and re-read the description under the brooch. *"How can this possibly be? How is it that I dreamt of this very kilt pin, only last night? I have no memory of such a pin, even from the countless hours spent with Grandfather pouring over history and ancestry books,"* she wondered.

She only realized that the line had started to move, and people were entering the museum, when someone shouted, "Are you going to stand there all day?"

She jumped and shouted, "Sorry!" over her shoulder as she hastened to the door.

She followed the map of the museum to the new acquisitions and the new exhibit that was on display and it took her a full ten minutes to push through the throngs of people who were gathered around the ancient claymores and thread-bare tartans. She looked for a case, a glass case, figuring, if the museum was going to display rare and beautiful jewelry and gems, they would have it resting on a bed of velvet and enclosed in a high-security, alarm activated case such as the ones she had seen countless other relics, and objet d'art displayed in before.

She found the very case she was looking for and made a beeline for it. She waited at the back of the line and tapped her foot restlessly, as she waited for the older couple who were fawning over the brooches and tartans and listing off their family tree and origins, dating themselves back to the days of yore and their own ancestors. Just when her patience couldn't possibly take any more waiting, the line moved ahead, and she was able to press in, face to face with the kilt pin.

Audrina found it extraordinary that, even after centuries sitting behind a stone, even though it was unexposed to the elements, it was still in pristine condition, as if it had never survived centuries of time passing by. She was sure that it was probably dusty when the mason found it, possibly even the gem was scratched or worn and thus had to be restored, but the pin was pristine.

The burnt orange gem sat at the apex of a silver hill. The silver had been bent and molded onto a swirling pattern to resemble the crest of the hill, so the gem was the representation of the sun. From what Audrina knew of Celtic mythology, the sun symbol was more widely used in the sun cross symbols, which were indicative of Christianity's introduction to the Celtic peoples. But this sun was a literal representation of the sun, suggesting that whoever designed and forged the pin, was still a practicing pagan, possibly giving the pin druidic or witchcraft origins. On the outset of the circular pin, the silver swirled into a Celtic knot which was wavy around the edges, like a river. Audrina knew this because as Grandfather and she had investigated the Claran, or MacClaran name, it was discovered that the Claran's were one of the older tribes of Scotland, but those particular tribes were ancient, nomadic druids who traveled the waters from the Isle of Eire, also known as Ireland. The modern day Claran's were to be found inhabiting the areas on the River Clare and the name Claran literally meant, "One who lives near the River Clare." So, Audrina knew her ancestors had been an ancient people of magics and mystery, and the warring tribes had caused them to take root in Scotland as one of the founding tribes, and they had taken their name and origins with them. The evidence was right there in the pin that resembled the

pagan magics and the river beds from whence her people came. The tribes, like the rivers on the pin, were split between Ireland and Scotland.

Audrina felt her excitement at having found such a connection to her ancestors, begin to grow. She stared with her face almost pressed to the glass, willing the pin to do something, anything to give her a sign that she belonged there, with it. She felt like, somewhere deep in her soul, that the pin belonged to her, but she knew this was silly, because it belonged to the museum in Scotland. It didn't change the connection she imagined she could feel through the glass.

As she stood there, she again realized the grumblings of the crowd around her as she had allowed herself to be lost in her thoughts. She was about to exit the line and circle back around, when the crowd was jostled and parted by the streak of a black clothed and masked figure, who shoved them aside. When the intruder got to Audrina, he shoved her so hard, she knocked into the glass and it smashed as the sirens from the museum began to wail. Audrina cut the back of her hand on the glass as she tried to stop her fall, but with the rest of the crowd, she tumbled to the floor. Audrina looked up, just in time to see the masked figure reach into the case and grab something. A flash of orange and silver registered in her mind, and she clawed her way back up and ran after the thief, as he dashed outside the museum with what she could only proclaim as "her" kilt pin.

Audrina chased after him as the wail of sirens from the museum's security, and the automatically notified police screeched in her ear. As athletic as she was, it didn't take her long to catch up to the thief, and she tackled him, expertly maneuvering him into a judo hold from her years of training with Mr. Tanaka at his Japanese dojo. Audrina had needed an outlet for her rage and frustration for losing everyone she had ever loved. And she had miraculously stumbled upon it in the classes offered at the dojo and Mr. Tanaka's ever-patient and serene temperament.

The thief was quickly apprehended at Audrina's capable hands, just as the police showed up and began to cross the



sunny court-yard.

“Hey lady, are you nuts?” one of the officer called. “You don’t chase after a criminal! What were you thinking!” he shouted.

Audrina didn’t answer him, but reached out her shaking hand toward the pin that had fallen to the ground in the take-down of the thief, and as her bloodied fingers from the cut on the glass closed around the pin, the sun shone brightly through a cloud cover, landing directly on the pin, the blood and her hand, and then suddenly, there was a black and gray mist, and Audrina was falling, falling, falling.

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## ABOUT REBECCA PRESTON

Rebecca lives in New York City with her dog. She loves sweet love stories with great characters. She loves traveling the world and experiencing new cities and cultures. Jane Austen is her favorite author.

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Saving Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy Forgotten

Mr. Darcy's Pride