

MARIAH STONE

# HIGHLANDERS' CAPTIVE

CALLIED BY A HIGHLANDER

A  
FANTASY  
NOVEL



# HIGHLANDER'S CAPTIVE

*Called by a Highlander Book One*

MARIAH STONE



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takes them every day by storm.”*

— JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

## PROLOGUE

**D**unollie Castle, Scotland, 1296

THE FIERY CROSS BURNED.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.* The sound of hundreds of palms beating against drums reverberated in Craig Cambel's chest, his heart slamming with the rhythm.

Behind him waited two hundred Cambel clansmen. Every single one had answered the ancient call of the cross in flames which stood next to the clan chief's horse.

The call to bloodshed.

The call to restore lost honor.

The call to rescue a loved one.

Dunollie Castle loomed before Craig, the seat of the MacDougall clan. It had four curtain walls, a gate right in front of the Cambels, and a simple square tower of three floors built into the right corner. On the roof and on the walls, archers stood at the ready, strings taut, arrows pointed at Craig and his men.

But Cambel fire arrows prepared to answer. The battering ram was in place before the gate. Long siege ladders, some repaired, some newly constructed, held tightly.

Sir Colin Cambel, the chief of the clan and Craig's grandfather, raised one arm, and the drums silenced as one.



“John MacDougall!” His cry carried far, into the leaden sky, echoing from the rocks and the walls. “Show yerself!”

Archers shifted up on the roof, giving way. A man appeared between them.

“Cambel,” he cried. “Did ye come to return my lands?”

“The lands were granted to me by King John Balliol and are nae yers no more.”

“Aye, ye were too eager to accept them. Dinna forget ye’re still my vassal.”

“Seems ’tis ye who forgets things. Things like honor. Things like keeping yer word. Things like protecting yer vassals.”

“I owe no protection to thieves.”

“Thieves?” Sir Colin spat on the ground. “How dare ye. Give me back my granddaughter. And if ye ken what is good for ye, give me yer bastart of a son who canna take a lass’s nae for an answer. I will teach him about honor. Clearly, his own father failed to do so.”

Craig’s hand clenched around the handle of his claymore. He remembered the day when his sister Marjorie had disappeared. She had gone out of the castle with her maid to gather herbs for the kitchen. After a while, the maid had run back alone, screaming, trembling, a deep cut on her cheek.

It took the Cambels two sennights of searching and questioning to learn who’d taken her.

Alasdair MacDougall.

Their laird’s son.

Craig’s jaw tightened, the need to find the bastart and free his sister stinging.

John MacDougall was silent for a moment. “If ye want yer granddaughter, Sir Colin, ye must come and take her. She is my son’s intended, and I wilna give her back until my son wants her gone.”

Silence fell on the shore of Oban Bay. Craig knew in his bones that this day would not end without spilled blood.

It remained to be seen if Marjorie was harmed or not.

A growl of fury was born in Craig's gut, rose up his throat, and carried through the field. The MacDougalls looked at him. Cambel men tensed, ready to launch at the signal.

"If yer son touched a hair on her head..." Craig heard his own voice carry through the air. "I will make it my life's mission to make his death long and painful."

His family roared. His father on the horse beside him, his two stepbrothers, his grandfather, his uncles, and his cousins were all here. The rest of the clan followed, their axes and swords high in the air. The thundering returned—not of the drums this time, but of weapons against shields.

"*Cruachan!*" Sir Colin called the Cambel battle cry, and the clan picked it up. The word ran through the field in a rumble and united them all as one.

Death might await them, but they would die for their kin. For what was right.

And Craig would gladly die saving his sister.

They launched. Shielding themselves from the arrows raining over them like hail, they came at the tower. Their own archers sent fire arrows up into the castle, and the first ones found wood among the stones.

Death picked its victims among the Cambels. Warriors cried in pain. Flesh tore. The iron tang of blood hung in the air, spurring Craig's fury and fear.

Craig ran forward and finally reached the castle wall.

The ram beat against the gate. The ladders were erected, but the enemy pushed them back, and some of them fell. Others stood, and his men began climbing.

Craig's pulse beat violently against his temples. He looked to the left and to the right, trying to see past his clansmen. How could he sneak into the castle without the enemy noticing?

Holding his shield above his head, he ran to his right, along the line of his clansmen who were climbing the siege ladders. The chief's plan was to storm the front and western walls, both low. So that the MacDougalls' attention would be in those locations.

Not east.

He turned the corner and ran along the western wall of the tower, which led into the curtain wall. He stopped under three windows, one on each floor.

So far, no one from the tower had noticed him. All of the archers were looking to where most of his clansmen were.

And Craig was a good climber.

He put his shield on his back, took out his two climbing knives and looked up. He just needed to make it to the lowest window.

"'Tis just a steep mountain," he muttered to himself. "Ye've climbed steep rocks dozens of times."

*'Tis for Marjorie.*

The grooves between the stones were perfect for his knives. He drove the knife into the first slit, and the gesture brought satisfaction, almost like piercing a MacDougall in the heart.

He pulled himself up with one arm and dug the second knife in higher.

*Traitors.*

He pulled himself up again, the muscles of his shoulder, the biceps of his arm singing with the strain, his fury finding a small relief. Another hit, higher, sand and dust pouring from the hole. The third one—

Someone yelled high above, and an arrow swooshed by him, hitting the ground.

He looked up. Men on the roof aimed their arrows at him.

Faster. Faster!

Another arrow brushed against his shoulder.

He hurried, stabbing the wall faster and pulling himself up. Something sharp burned his shoulder—one arrow had scratched him.

He was almost at the window. Another stab of the wall, and he was pulling himself up the small ledge of the windowsill. He put the knife into the slit between the wooden shutters and pushed the latch up. It gave, and the shutters flew open.

Craig peered inside. His muscles burned from the tension of the climb. It was a bedchamber. The shadow of a person was cast from the candle flickering slowly in the corner. Someone stood against the wall to the right of the window.

Craig took a small rock that cracked out of the wall and threw it into the room.

A wooden plank flew past the window. He pushed himself up, and into the room. Landing, he grabbed the attacker—a woman—and clasped her arms behind her back.

He put the knife to her throat.

“Marjorie Cambel,” he said. “Where is she?”

The woman was John MacDougall’s wife. In the corner by the bed, huddled children. He looked around. There was no one else.

“Where is she?” he repeated, louder, pressing the blade tighter. “I dinna mean ye harm, I came for my sister.”

The woman closed her eyes tight. “Third floor,” she said. “Chamber facing east. Like this one.”

He released her, took out his claymore from the sheath on his back and opened the door slightly, peering into the hallway.

Could he trust the woman’s words? What if she sent him up so that he would meet the most resistance?

Well, Craig was going to find out.

He heard heavy footsteps down the hall. The ram battered the wooden gate.

He quickly climbed the narrow stairs and peered from behind the corner of the stairwell.

Two guards ran towards him. Sword meeting sword and shield, he began the dance he had been trained for since he could hold a weapon. *Clank. Swoosh. Bang.* One was down, holding a gash in his side, the other knocked unconscious.

Craig ran up the next flight of stairs.

The cries from the roof were louder on the third story. The scent of smoke filled his nostrils. The wooden roof must be on fire—he needed to hurry to get Marjorie out before flames engulfed the top floor.

He stepped into the hallway, quietly. One guard stood before the door to the bedroom. He turned to Craig. Their eyes locked. The man had just raised his sword when Craig attacked, hitting him with his shield. A second guard came from the stairs, and Craig met him with the claymore, slashing the man's thigh.

More came at him, but downstairs a loud *bash* pierced the air, and the walls reverberated. Had his people made it through the gate? He ducked from the guard's sword and stabbed him in the gut.

As the man fell, Craig hurried to the door that led to the east. He opened it—and was met with a sword slashing his side.

Pain blinded him, his own scream ran through his body. The floor shifted, dizziness filling his head.

He slashed back and missed the attacker. He fell on one knee and lifted his claymore to meet the sword. Pushing back, he stood up.

Alasdair.

“Ye pig,” Craig spat.

On the bed, a pale figure lay, dark hair spilled on the pillows, her face in the shadows. But he'd recognize his sister

anywhere. Her bare leg, covered with bruises and scratches, caked blood on her inner thigh, was shamelessly visible.

Was she dead?

“What did ye do to her?” Craig cried.

“Only what she deserved with a willful character like that!” Alasdair snarled.

Roaring, Craig attacked again. But Alasdair was a much better warrior than any of his guards—he deflected, then went at Craig again, hammering at his sword. Craig’s claymore met Alasdair’s, but Craig was weaker, the pain in his side sucking away his strength.

“Ye will die, ye maggot!” Craig spat through his clenched teeth into the MacDougall’s face.

Alasdair’s claymore pressed against Craig’s, and finding strength deep in his soul, he pushed back. Alasdair swayed and stepped back, and that was enough. With one swift movement, aiming for the heart, Craig thrust his weapon. Alasdair screamed and stood, surprise mixed with pain on his face. Craig removed his sword, and the man collapsed to the floor.

Beyond the door, the sound of a skirmish grew louder.

Good. They were inside the tower.

Craig fell on his knees by Marjorie’s side, and the blood stood still in his veins. Her chest was rising and falling, although weakly. Her face was distorted—cut and bruised. One eye was swollen completely shut, the skin red and purple. Her lip was cut, and her nose looked broken. Her dress was torn and dirty. She was asleep. Or maybe unconscious.

“Marjorie,” Craig whispered and brushed his hand against her hair.

She opened her eyes, just a little, and looked at him. Tears welled in her eyes, and a barely visible smile touched her lips.

“Brother,” she croaked.

The door flew open, and his cousin Ian stepped in, his face bruised and sprayed with blood, his *leine croich*—a long,

heavily quilted coat—cut and torn and soaked in blood.

“I found her,” Craig said.

“Good,” Ian said. “Let us go. The way is clear.”

Craig wrapped his sister in the blanket and picked her up. She seemed so tiny and it felt like she weighed nothing. As he stepped into the hallway with her in his arms, men stopped fighting and looked at him. There was his father, whose face wrinkled in pain as he saw his daughter. His uncle Neil and his sons. Sorrow and fury shone in their eyes.

Ian went before him down the stairs, looking around the corners for danger, his sword atilt. But as Craig walked down, the fighting stopped on the lower floor as well.

When he finally walked out into the clear daylight, blood covered the grass, making it look purple.

Then he saw a painfully familiar face among the slain warriors on the ground.

Sir Colin Cambel.

*The chief.*

*His grandfather.*

Craig came to him and fell to his knees, Marjorie still in his arms. He took his grandfather’s hand in his and squeezed it. A tear fell down his cheek.

Ian’s hand lay on his shoulder.

“I have her, Sir Colin,” Craig said. “Yer death didna come in vain. And I swear on yer dead body, and on yer heart, that I will never again trust a MacDougall. And never again will I let a Cambel fall prey to their betrayal.”

## CHAPTER 1

**I**nverlochy Castle, Scotland, November 2020

AMY MACDOUGALL LEANED BACK AGAINST THE CASTLE WALL and let her eyelids slide down. The November sun warmed her, a relief after three days of freezing rain.

Amy's sister Jenny came and sat on the boulder by her side.

"Everything okay with the rebels?" Amy asked.

"We'll see." Jenny threw a dubious glance around the grass-covered courtyard where a dozen teenagers walked, laughed, ran around, and took selfies. "Zach threatened to climb that tower and sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'" She nodded at the crumbled stump of a tower across the courtyard. "Of course, he's showing off for Deanna. Here, you're in a strategic position to catch Gigi if she does decide to go and see if there are any skeletons in the dungeons in the eastern tower."

She nodded to their left and Amy frowned at the black, gaping entrance into the tower. A tiny chill ran down her spine as she imagined the confinement of the seven-foot-thick walls and the ancient ceiling that might collapse at any moment.

Jenny's smile fell.

"I was just kidding, hon," Jenny said, "no dungeons for you."



Amy shook her head and forced a smile. “It’s fine, come on. I’m fine. I can go in a dungeon. It’s my job to go to dangerous places. Isn’t that why you asked me to come?”

“Well, hopefully, nothing will happen. It’s good to have a search and rescue officer as a backup on a school trip, but that’s not why I invited you to replace Brenda. I want to spend time with my sister, of course.”

Amy leaned her head against the wall. “Yeah, when does that part of the program begin? I thought there would be more whiskey, more hot Highlanders, and less teenage drama.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I thought so, too. Brenda has much more authority over them—she’d rule them with an iron fist. They think I’m a softy. Oh God, do you think they smell my fear like dogs?”

Amy chuckled. “Yeah, even I can smell your fear.”

They both giggled, and Amy rested her head against her sister’s shoulder. When was the last time they had laughed so wholeheartedly together? Both North Carolina and Vermont were full of memories, saturated with the sickening aftertaste of fear and rejection.

But here there was none of that. Here there was fresh, cold air and thick, ancient walls, and the breathtaking, raw beauty of the Highlands. The colors of fall reigned here, as though the very rocks had rusted, moss grew everywhere, and leaves were always aged. There was so much history—hundreds and thousands of years—and a part of her belonged here, too.

“Do you think any of our ancestors lived here?” Amy asked.

Jenny shrugged. “Maybe. Grandpa would have known.”

“Yeah, he would have.”

“Even Dad would probably—” Jenny suddenly stiffened, her mouth still open.

“It’s okay,” Amy said. “You can mention Dad. How is he?”

Jenny swallowed and looked at her hands. “Fine. Asking about you.”

Amy pursed her lips, her throat clenching. “Well, I’m asking about him, too, see? Is he still sober?”

“Yeah. Holding up.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Yeah. Thank you for the money, by the way. Again.”

“Of course. You can’t support him alone on a teacher’s salary.”

It was hard to talk about Dad. To distract herself from the scratching in her throat, and to avoid Jenny’s grateful expression, Amy studied a bare bush growing by the wall to her right.

“I’m not alone. I have Dave—” Jenny’s eyes widened as she looked across the courtyard. “Hey! Zach! Stop it, get back down this minute!”

But Zach was already halfway up the pile of crumbled rocks, heading to the top of the tower, and not slowing down. Jenny jumped up and raced towards him, waving her arms and yelling for him to stop. Amy sat up straight, alert, just in case. Her hand brushed over the backpack, feeling the familiar shape of the first aid kit inside.

“What a bonnie wee crowd of children,” said a lilting female voice.

Amy glanced up, to her right. A young woman stood by the bare bush Amy had studied a moment ago. The air filled with the scent of lavender and freshly cut grass. How strange. Goose bumps covered her skin. She remembered having a similar feeling whenever she and Jenny had told each other ghost stories—suddenly the shadows had grown darker in the corners of the room, and she could almost see shapes she hadn’t noticed before.

The woman was pretty, her features delicate, her skin translucent, with tiny freckles like a sprinkling of ground cinnamon on her nose and cheeks. A dark-green woolen cloak hung from her shoulders, and the hood of a cape covered her bright-copper hair.

“Yeah,” Amy said. Her jaw must have lost the ability to close.

She studied the northern entrance which was ten feet or so away. Was that how the woman had slipped in unnoticed?

“They are a bonnie...crowd,” Amy said.

Zach was already on top and began singing, ““Oh, say can you see, by the dawn’s early light...””

“What is he singing?” the woman said. “I like that song...”

She swayed her head a little from side to side with the broken rhythm of Zach’s bellowing.

“Erm... It’s the American anthem...” Amy said.

“Oh. The American anthem. I shall remember that song.”

Amy smiled politely. Who was the woman? She seemed to be dressed in a historical costume underneath the cloak, a long green woolen skirt and a white shift that showed just a little from beneath the hem.

“I like your costume,” Amy said. “Are you a tour guide?”

“A tour guide?” The woman laughed. “I suppose ye might say so. My name is Sineag. What about ye?”

“Amy.”

Zach continued yelling, ““And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air...””

He stepped back and lost his balance a little, and the small crowd of his schoolmates, led by Jenny, yelped.

“Come down, Zach! Right now!” Jenny cried. “Or no phone till the end of the trip.”

But Zach’s eyes were only on Deanna, who sang with him.

“Aw, looks like he is in love,” Sineag said.

Amy chuckled. “I doubt it’s *love*. He craves attention, like all boys his age, that’s all.”

“Oh, aye? Do ye ken love?”

Amy crossed her arms over her chest. Sìneag was local, no doubt, so maybe it was normal here to skip the small talk and get straight to the deep stuff.

“Do I know love? I was in love. Who wasn’t?”

“But ye havna met yer man yet...” Sìneag said slowly and rubbed her chin.

“My *man*?” Amy laughed.

“Aye, the one man that ye truly love. The one ye change for. The one that ye want to die on the same day with. The one ye are ready to cross countries, oceans, mountains...and even the river of time for.”

Amy sighed with a smile. “I’ll never have a man like that. The relationship you describe doesn’t exist.”

Sìneag cocked her head. “Why so sure, Amy?”

“Because I was already married. I had thought he was my soul mate, but now I’m divorced.”

Sìneag studied Amy thoughtfully. “Do ye ken how this castle was built?”

“I read on the information board—built by the powerful Comyn clan in the thirteenth century—”

“Aye, but do ye ken it was built upon a stronghold of the Picts?”

Amy raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t know that.”

“Oh, aye. And those Picts, they kent powerful magic. They could open the river of time and build a secret tunnel under it to help people pass through.”

Amy smiled. Adorable. She enjoyed fairy tales.

“Do you mean like time travel?”

“Aye.”

“I’ve never heard fairy tales about time travel. How does this one go?”

“Well, the castle was built upon a rock that can open such a tunnel. It takes a person with a purpose to reopen it and take

the journey.”

Sineag’s smile grew a little mischievous, and Amy raised her eyebrows.

“There was once a Highlander here,” Sineag said, “a Craig Cambel. A mighty warrior, and an honorable man. Do ye ken of King Robert the Bruce?”

Amy wondered why Sineag didn’t answer her question directly, but maybe she was leading into the story of time travel.

“The Wars of Scottish Independence, right?” Amy said. “It said on the information board, he took Inverlochy Castle from the Comyns.”

“Aye. Cambels—they’re called Campbells these days—were his allies. King Robert asked Craig to guard the castle for him against his enemies.”

Amy chuckled. “Must be an important man, that Craig.”

“Aye, he was a man of high achievements, but with a deep sorrow in his heart. Clan MacDougall betrayed him and his family, and it scarred him for life. He swore never to trust so easily again.”

“Thank God he’ll never meet me—I’m a MacDougall.”

Sineag’s eyes sparkled. “Are ye really?”

“Well, yeah. My grandparents immigrated from Scotland to the States, so I’m American. But my last name is MacDougall.”

“Aye! Aye! Good.” Sineag’s voice shook from excitement.

Amy frowned, something about those words setting her on guard.

“Anyway,” Amy said. “What about that Craig? Did he travel in time or something?”

“Nae, he didna. He marrit a good lass to arrange a clan alliance, but he was never happy. He lived his life as a good man. An always lonely good man.”

Amy pursed her lips to fight a strange wave of emotion that Sineag's words brought up within her—sadness and loneliness. The desperation of being left alone and abandoned was too familiar.

“Yeah,” she said. “Some people never get over things that cut too deep.”

Sineag's eyes shone with understanding and empathy. “Aye. And what if the person who can heal them lives across the river of time?”

“Then they need to use that Pictish tunnel, I guess.”

“Aye, Amy! That is very true.” Sineag clapped her hands like a little girl. “Ye said it yerself.”

A movement caught Amy's eye. Zach hurried down the pile of rocks towards Deanna.

“Careful!” Jenny cried.

As soon as Zach was on the ground, Deanna ran with a squeal away from him. With a yell like something between a battle call and the sound of a horny chimp, he followed her.

This wouldn't end well. Forgetting Sineag, Amy followed every movement as Deanna circled around the courtyard, every time evading Zach's attempt to bear-hug her. Then she launched herself faster than ever towards Amy. Amy had already prepared to grasp and stop the girl when, at the last moment, she turned to the eastern tower.

Amy took a step forward on instinct.

Deanna pushed the security grating to the side and squeezed herself behind it—towards the gaping blackness of the entrance. She took one step inside, screamed and fell.

Amy's heart stopped.

“Damn it,” Amy cursed and raced towards the tower. “Do not even dare!” she cried at Zach, who had stopped at the grating with a pale face and a worried expression.

Amy grabbed the flashlight from her pack. Grass flashed under her feet while she ran until she reached the grate and

slid through. She stopped by the entrance into the tower. Her light fell on the broken, crumbling stairs leading down—and gaping black nothingness around them.

“Damn those teenagers,” Amy cursed under her breath and climbed down the broken stairs as fast as she could without breaking her own neck.

Rocks crumbled and fell from under her feet. Some steps were missing, some were broken and turned into flat slides. It smelled of wet earth and damp stone, of rotten leaves—and something else rotten she didn’t even want to think about. By some miracle, Amy made it all the way down. The outside light didn’t reach here. Only her flashlight remained, as though nothing else existed beyond the underground. Amy shivered, memories rattling the door in her psyche that she’d closed tight long ago.

She’d learned how to deal with darkness and with confined spaces, she reminded herself. She needed to be strong for Deanna.

“Deanna!” Amy called as the flashlight ran along the rough rock surrounding her. “Deanna!”

Her words echoed in the silence as though she were alone. As though Deanna had disappeared into nothingness.

Amy looked up, but there was only a rocky ceiling and the gap she had come through. Her arms and legs chilled, and her hands shook.

*Quick. Just find Deanna, help her, and get the hell out of here.*

“Deanna!” Amy searched around with the flashlight. It fell on the entrance to another room. Shivering, her legs leaden, Amy moved towards it. She couldn’t leave anyone alone in the darkness.

She had to let the people she was rescuing know they hadn’t been abandoned.

Someone was always coming for them.

She was.

“Deanna,” she called as she stepped into the chamber, her voice echoing from the rock.

It was a small room—not even a room, but rather, a cave. Amy searched around the floor—no one.

Any more exits or doors?

No.

“Where are you?” Amy called. She didn’t know if she meant Deanna or herself.

“In here,” a voice said.

Amy moved the light, and there she was. Deanna stood, hugging herself, her eyes wide, the mass of her hair in disarray. Relief flooded Amy, the tension in her chest releasing.

“Oh, thank God!” Amy said. “Are you hurt?”

“Just bumped my head a little.”

“Okay, let’s go back right away. I’ll take a look at your head when we’re up. Here, take this. I have another.”

She handed the light to Deanna and removed another one from her backpack. Deanna swept around herself with the flashlight, and it fell on something. Amy frowned.

A rock, big and flat. There was a large carving on top of it—a broad ribbon with three wavy lines. Something like a river in the form of a circle. Through it ran the broad line of a road.

“I’m freezing,” Deanna said, walking back towards the entrance.

“Wait for me,” Amy said, but then froze, her gaze glued to the rock.

Was Amy hallucinating, or was the carving glowing ever so slightly—the river blue, the road brown? Next to the carving, there was a handprint right in the rock.

Deanna’s light was already flashing in the first room. She’d be all right. Amy came closer to the rock, curious.



The glowing grew brighter, and it seemed as if the carving moved: the waves of the river seemed to flow, and it looked as though a small cloud of dust rose above the road. It was so pretty.

Was this a Pictish handprint?

A lonely hand... A lonely man...

Was it Craig Cambel's?

Would she be touching his fingers if she pressed hers into the imprint? Holding her breath, she traced it gently. It was cold and damp. Had it been cold and damp when Craig lived here?

She laid all five fingers into the imprint. A buzzing went through her—like a wave of excitement before a journey, an adventure. Her heart raced, and her pulse beat in her temples, in the veins of her neck, in her wrists and between her fingers.

Fear struck her again—gripped her throat and her shoulders, clenched her airways till she gasped for breath.

She tried to pull back her hand but couldn't. The rock pulled her palm like a magnet. The cold surface felt wet, as though water rose up from it.

Amy's palm touched the stone completely and was sinking into the rock as if it were a river. The rest of her arm followed, and then her shoulder.

“Ahhhh!” Amy heard herself scream.

She gripped the stone with her other hand, scabbled her feet against the floor, but couldn't stop herself from falling.

And then she fell completely into the stone...and the world grew dark.

## CHAPTER 2

# I

nverlochy Castle, November 1307

THE CATAPULT LAUNCHED A ROCK WITH A LOUD WOODEN crack, and Craig held his breath, watching the rock fly. No matter how often he'd seen that during the last three days, the sight was ever majestic.

The rock hit the castle wall. Archers sprang to the sides. Stones cracked, and the upper part of the wall crumbled, falling in a shower of sand and shingle.

Robert the Bruce's army, standing across the broad moat from the castle, erupted in a jubilant cry that reverberated in Craig's chest. Or maybe it was the hope—the hope to finally turn the tide of the war for the true King of Scots.

The War of Independence. The war between a small number of Highland clans and a giant—England.

The war with no promise of victory but a stubborn resolve to fight no matter what.

“’Twas a good shot,” Craig's father said, and Craig nodded.

“Aye, Dougal,” Robert the Bruce said. “Mayhap too good. We dinna want to completely destroy the castle. ’Tis too important strategically.”

The three of them sat on their horses at the edge of the Inverlochy village, which lay across the moat. While the catapult master cried orders to reset the catapult, a movement on the right side of the moat caught Craig's eyes.

A small figure emerged from behind a tree and boulders and raced across the field like a speedy ant.

"Do ye see that?" Craig asked.

Craig strained his eyes. The person was running away from the castle. The figure was too small to be a warrior or even a woman.

"What is it?" Bruce said.

"By the northeastern tower, but on this side of the moat, do ye see a massive tree and a collection of large rocks?"

"Aye," said Craig's father.

"Someone is running," said the Bruce.

"Oh. Aye," Dougal said. "A child?"

"Mayhap," Craig said. "A moment ago, they appeared there, as though from under the ground."

Bruce frowned. "Are ye certain?"

"Saw it with my own eyes. Might that be a secret passage into the castle?"

Bruce nodded. "Aye, that might be. The Comyns are sly enough to think of such a thing."

"But why risk revealing it now?" Craig asked. "We've been sieging them but for three days. Surely they still have food and supplies."

"A messenger," Bruce spat.

Craig exchanged a glance with his father, an understanding running between them. If it was a messenger, they had to interfere right away. They couldn't allow help to come to the Comyns. Bruce's forces were very weak, just barely recovered from a major defeat at the hands of the MacDougalls earlier

this year. Bruce had to stay and oversee the siege. It was up to Craig and his father to catch the messenger.

The catapult sent another rock into the wall, a *boom* bursting through the air. Another warning shot just to remind the Comyns that Bruce could do more damage.

“Hya!” Craig spurred his horse, and his father followed, both galloping through the streets of the Inverlochy village.

Villagers sprang aside, avoiding the horses. Unlike most besiegers, Bruce had made a point not to kill Comyn’s people unless necessary and not to pillage the village and the farms. He was their new king, and he wanted their support, even though their lord had chosen to be Bruce’s enemy.

The village ended, and they galloped through the fields. Craig had seen the figure disappearing behind a large hill. Grass flashed under the horses’ hooves, and the river grew closer.

The small figure appeared from behind the hill and ran—indeed, a lad of twelve years or so. Craig and Dougal raced towards him.

“Stop, ye wee rascal!” Craig cried.

The boy threw a glance over the shoulder, his eyes wide. He sped up.

Craig leveled with him on the horse, leaned down and grabbed the collar of the boy’s coat. With a grunt, Craig threw him over the horse. He turned the beast and let it gallop back towards the hill so that they wouldn’t be visible from the castle.

When he reached the base of the hill, he jumped off the horse, hauling the boy with him. His father dismounted as well.

Craig set the lad on the ground. He stared at Craig with wide eyes but a set jaw.

“How did ye get out of the castle?” Craig asked.

“Dinna ken what ye mean. I came from the river.”

“From the river?” Dougal chuckled. “Didna ken the rivers are so dry these days.”

The boy pursed his mouth, angry.

“Aye, ye said enough,” Craig said. “I can go and find out for myself. I’ve seen where ye came out. But what is yer purpose?”

“I am no traitor,” the boy said. “I wilna say a thing.”

“I respect that, lad,” Dougal said. “We will search ye, and if there’s a letter or a message on ye, we will find it.”

“Go on and try!” the boy challenged.

He jumped and launched himself to run, but Dougal caught him and held his arms behind his back. Craig quickly searched the boy, but there was nothing that could be a message. No folded paper, nothing else.

“Here’s what we do,” his father said. “We ken now ’tis likely the entrance into the castle. We take him to Bruce. Even if he is a messenger, we caught him, so he wilna pass the message. Let Bruce decide what to do with the lad.”

“Aye,” Craig said. “Ye take him. I will take a peek to see what is there and come back. We’ll decide then what to do.”

“Aye, son. Be careful.”

Dougal put the struggling, kicking lad on the horse like a sack and let his mount gallop to the camp. Despite his age, his father restrained the lad with no difficulty. Pride filled Craig’s lungs. He truly belonged to a clan of mighty warriors.

Craig scanned the castle as he raced towards the tree and the rocks where he’d seen the lad appear. No arrows came at him. The defenders were probably too busy with the siege.

He reached the tree and the rocks. Where was the entrance? He studied the thick trunk, the boulders at its base. Some of them reached his shoulder. Nothing looked suspicious.

He leaned down and examined the grass.

There. Footprints in the soil. They appeared next to a flat, low rock almost as broad as a shield. Craig inspected a gap between the rock and the ground. He pushed his fingers into the gap, pulled the rock, and it opened like a latch door. Narrow stairs led into a dark tunnel.

His heart thumped. He was right. This was a secret entrance into the castle. It was dark and he didn't have a torch, but he needed to see where it led. He glanced at the castle. It was probably thirty feet away and the tunnel must be deep—deep enough to go under the moat.

Those smart bastards, the Comyns. No one would suspect they'd build a tunnel under the moat. Couldn't it collapse under the weight of water?

Craig crossed himself and went down into the darkness.



THE COLD, HARD FLOOR SHOOK AND THE ROCKS RATTLED. Small stones and sand showered down on Amy.

She sat upright with a jerk. She looked around, but blackness surrounded her.

Where was she? Not in the barn, not again.

Her lungs contracted, her diaphragm tightening. She coughed and searched around her with her hands. She was on something like a rock or a smooth stone floor. Something metallic and rounded rolled from her touch.

She had a flashlight, she remembered.

There wasn't a flashlight in the barn—so Amy was somewhere else. Relief flooded her body.

Then events rushed into her mind—Deanna, the underground chamber, the glowing rock, the sensation of falling into it...of being sucked in...

She turned on the flashlight and studied her surroundings. There, against a rocky wall, was the stone with the carving—dark and still, not glowing. Along the rough rock wall laid

firewood in heaps and wooden planks. Barrels stood along the walls, as well, and full sacks. She didn't remember anything being there before; as far as she remembered, it had been a giant, empty cave.

It was clear now that she was in a storeroom, not the crumbling ruins she'd walked into.

She stood, her head spinning, nausea rising. Her body ached all over, as though she'd had a hard fall. Something boomed, and the walls and the floor shook, sending another shower of rocks and sand over her.

What was going on? An earthquake? She'd never heard about earthquakes in Scotland. If it were one, she needed to get out right away.

She ran the flashlight's beam over the walls. Where there'd been an empty doorway leading to another room, there now stood a solid, heavy door with large bolts.

Crazier and crazier.

Well, whatever it was, Amy needed to get out. She walked on weak legs towards the door and opened it. It was dark, but a golden light poured from somewhere above, illuminating the curved stairs she'd descended before—but they looked like new. More chests and barrels lined the walls here. The odor of wet earth and decay was gone, replaced by the barely noticeable scent of grain and something else...something like beef jerky.

The room had been a ruin when Amy had followed Deanna in just a few minutes ago. Was Amy hallucinating or dreaming? Her head heavy, she made her way towards the stairs. Looking up the flight of stairs, she could see the light of fire dancing on the wall. People's worried yells and cries carried from somewhere outside. Probably, Jenny and the class were looking for her.

Amy laid her hand on the cold, hard wall, which felt very real, and walked up the stairs as quietly as she could. The ground floor wasn't a ruin anymore, either. It was a storage room of some sort—full of swords, spears, and axes, as well as

barrels, crates, and chests like downstairs. Fire from torches on the walls illuminated the room. There was a door that probably led outside and another opened door to a stairwell leading up.

Amy gave a small shake of her head. This looked exactly like the tower she and Deanna had run into—but as though she'd returned to a time when it had been recently built.

What was this? Maybe the rock and the whole glowing river and such were just some sort of fungus or algae that had hallucinogenic effects? Or had she hit her head? How else could she explain this?

Sineag had spoken of a river of time and time travel. That must be why Amy had dreamed herself this medieval world.

Or maybe Amy had gone crazy, her fear in that dark space sending her over the edge.

Another *boom*, and the building shook. A large rock fell from the wall onto a barrel, splitting it in two, and brown, yeasty liquid poured out—beer? Amy had better hurry if she didn't want to end up like that barrel.

She approached the door and opened it a crack, peering outside through the slit.

Her stomach dropped.

It wasn't the empty, grass-covered courtyard surrounded by four ruined walls and towers anymore.

It was a real castle, all four towers tall and whole with cone-shaped wooden roofs. The yard itself had several small timber buildings and one big building made of stone. Amy could smell horse dung, woodsmoke, and something being cooked. Archers shot arrows from the walls, and men ran across the courtyard in heavily quilted coats, metal helmets, and chain mail. Almost everyone had a sword on their belt, as well as a shield, and many had spears or axes.

Amy blinked once, twice. Her heart stopped for a moment. How was all of this even possible? Maybe it was some sort of hologram to represent how the castle had looked when it was still in use. What other explanation was there? Unless Amy truly had gone insane...



Then a man came straight towards the tower, and Amy closed the door. Her pulse beating like a drum, she searched for a place to hide.

The stairs.

She dashed up the circular staircase. There was a small door on the landing, and still more stairs. She heard someone on the ground floor open the door and step inside. Amy tugged open the door in front of her and peered in—it was a barrack room with several beds, and there was no one there. She quietly went in and closed the door behind her, listening for anyone following her.

There were eight beds and something like sleeping bags on the floor. Three slit windows let light in with huge, wide sills like sitting alcoves.

Amy walked to the window, and her jaw dropped to the ground. The castle was surrounded by water—a moat—something that hadn't even existed when she was there with Jenny and the class. On the other side of the moat was a small village with thatched-roof houses...

And an army—an actual medieval army—with a catapult, archers, tents, horses, carts, and campfires around the village.

This could not be happening. When they had driven here in the bus, there had been a few scattered houses here and there, and instead of the moat, meadows, hills, trees, and boulders.

In her jeans, hiking shoes, and puffer jacket, she felt strangely out of place. It was like she was in another time... But that wasn't possible, she reminded herself stubbornly.

Quick footsteps hurried upstairs, and Amy froze. She rushed to the nearest bed to hide, but she had no time. The door opened, and she whirled around, holding her flashlight like a weapon. A tall warrior—sword, ax, and all—stepped inside.

Astonishment flashed through his handsome features.

And then it turned to threat.

## CHAPTER 3

**C**raig stared at the woman.

He had opened the door because someone was coming from downstairs, and he needed to hide.

When he'd come through the tunnel that morning, he'd carefully checked the tower and the courtyard. Then he'd gone back to Bruce, and together they'd made a plan.

A plan that would open Inverlochy Castle to Bruce and bring the Comyns to their knees.

A plan that did not involve an enemy lass seeing him and alerting the whole castle to his presence.

She held a small rounded object in her hands, something like a bottle, in a protective manner. She was a pretty one, with her hair like copper in the sun, her eyes as blue as the sea. She was dressed like a man, in dark breeches that shamelessly hugged her long, sculpted legs, and some sort of a padded, short coat.

Very strange—but who knew how the Comyns allowed their women to dress?

One thing was clear.

He needed to silence her before she screamed—which, based on her eyes as round as moons and her open mouth, she was about to do.

Craig raced to her. She backed away, but he caught her, clasping her mouth with one hand and holding her wrists behind her back with the other. The strange object fell and

rolled across the floor. Her scent reached him—flowers and fresh wind, the lushness of a summer forest. Her skin and lips were soft under his fingers, and surprisingly, a wave of tingles rushed through him.

She struggled, trying to break away, and he whispered into her ear: “Dinna make a sound, lass. I wilna hurt ye. But I must keep ye from screaming yer throat out and alarming the whole castle. Aye?”

In response, she lifted one foot and stomped on his boot with a strength he wouldn’t have imagined she had.

He didn’t make a sound, although pain burst through his leg and almost made him release her.

“Ye bloody minx,” he whispered. “I said I wilna hurt ye.”

He needed to tie her up so that she wouldn’t run out and alert the Comyns. He quickly released her mouth and she screamed. With his free hand, he reached down with one hand to someone’s storage chest and found a clean cloth, then gagged her with it. He grabbed a belt, tied her hands behind her back, then used another to tie her to the bed. He also bound her legs—not an easy task because she kicked and wriggled. He felt sorry to do this to her—the thought of doing anything against a woman’s will sent a wave of repulsion through him, reminding him of Marjorie.

But it needed to be done.

When he was finished, she sat on the floor, her hands tied to the leg of the bed. Her face was red—no doubt she was feeling angry, helpless. She panted and moaned through the gag.

“I’m sorry, lass,” he said. “But if I’m successful, it’ll all be over soon, and ye can leave the castle with yer family. King Robert the Bruce wilna let women be harmed—and nor will I.”

She frowned, blinking at him, looking confused. Throwing one last glance at her to make sure she wouldn’t suffocate or escape, he left the room. The man downstairs must be gone by now. Craig needed to hurry.

He stopped at the staircase to make sure no one was coming from the upper floor or the lower. Everything was quiet, so he hurried down the stairs.

Earlier, in the village, he'd made sure to remove any signs he might be the enemy. He'd left the shield with the Cambel heraldic sigil, his helmet, and had even exchanged his sword for a simple one.

He carefully stepped into the courtyard. The northeastern tower he'd just left was used for food storage and sleeping chambers for the warriors. The two small southern towers were probably for the same purposes. The Comyn Tower, the biggest one on the northwest, was the donjon, or the keep of the castle. In addition to more weapon and food storage, it housed the lord's chambers: his bedchamber and his private reception room where the family would gather. It was smart to put the secret tunnel under a tower that attracted less attention.

How many people knew about it? Probably, not many—or the purpose of the tunnel would be obsolete.

Edward Comyn, the lord of Inverlochy, stood on one of the curtain walls, surrounded by archers. The courtyard was busy with activity: servants carried baskets and firewood, warriors descended the stairs and went for a meal or to have a rest. Their faces were somber, no doubt from the tension of being under siege.

“Attack!” someone called from above. “To the northern wall!”

Men ran towards the wall and climbed the stairs. Many came running from the great hall—taking arrows and bows with them.

Good. This was the first part of the plan. MacNeils on their *birlinns*, the West Highland ships, would attack from the river. They would land and start climbing the walls.

More calls for warriors came from the eastern and the western sides. There, he knew, Bruce's army was bringing logs and rocks to put into the moat for the siege towers and siege ladders to cross over.

Most Comyn warriors from the northern wall spread to the eastern and western walls. Even Edward Comyn moved to the west. But guards still stood by the gates.

They'd run away soon.

Craig hurried into the great hall. It was empty, save the servant girls who were cleaning the tables after the warriors had their meal. They paid little attention to Craig. He took a torch from one of the sconces on the wall. Then he grabbed the basket with kindling standing by the fireplace.

He sprinted out. The chaos and the tension inside the castle were palpable—screams of pain from on top of the walls; yells from outside; arrows flying, hitting people, bouncing off the rocks, piercing the mud of the courtyard.

He walked behind the great hall, in the space between the building and the curtain wall where he'd be hidden. He then began setting fire to small batches of kindling and throwing them onto the thatched roof.

Dark smoke rose from the roof of the great hall—that would be the signal for Bruce to move towards the gates. Craig was running out of time, so he quickly kindled the whole basket and threw it onto the kitchen roof together with the torch itself.

“Fire! Fire!” men screamed, and feet pounded across the courtyard towards the great hall. Craig needed to try to blend in with the panicking warriors, then make his way to the gates.

“Stop this!” someone cried from the wall. “Traitor! Get him!”

Craig glanced up—one of the warriors pointed straight at him. The warrior rushed down the stairs, and so did several others. Archers loomed over the parapet and aimed at him.

Whether the Bruce had had time to prepare or not, Craig would never get a better chance to open the gate.

With all the speed he had in him, he sprinted through the courtyard to the gates—where now no one stood. Arrows hit the ground around him. Something bit into his ankle—one of the arrows had scratched him, he realized—and he stumbled

but continued his sprint. Reaching the gate, he pulled at the giant handle of a heavy iron latch, and it gave, but slowly—too slowly for his liking. The Comyn warriors were coming closer; they'd reached the middle of the courtyard.

The latch undone, he had to remove the heavy bar. He lifted it in the middle with as much strength as he could muster—normally at least two people were needed to lift such a bar.

The enemies were just a few feet away.

He pulled at the doors, and slowly, heavily, they began to open.

From the other side of the gates, Craig heard running footsteps and "*Cruachan!*" They were coming. He pulled at the gate even harder, then barely turned in time to deflect a claymore.

While he fought with one man, the warrior's companions were pushing the gates to close them.

Too late.

With the force of dozens of running men, the Bruce's army flowed in through the gates.

The castle was theirs.

After a short fight, it was clear to everyone that the Bruce and his army had won. Edward Comyn was gravely wounded and dying while his healer did his best to save him.

"There will be no marauding!" the Bruce cried, watching his men hold the captives under their claymores. "Ye all may take three things from the castle to reward ye for yer hard work. But Inverlochy Castle shall be, from now on, a royal residence of the Scottish king."

Bruce turned and walked towards Craig, holding him with his eyes. Craig frowned.

"And the temporary commander will be Craig Cambel."

Cambel men erupted in cheers. Craig's eyebrows crawled up. Bruce came to him and looked him in the eye, approval and friendship lightening them.

“Are ye certain, Yer Grace?” Craig said. “Do ye nae have more experienced strategists, my father or my uncle Neil?”

Bruce grasped his shoulder and squeezed it. “The man who risked his life to take the castle deserves the reward. If it wasna for ye, God kens how long we would have been freezing under those walls. I am very grateful, Craig Cambel. ’Tis yer reward—but also a heavy task. Now ye must protect the castle if the rest of the Comyns, the MacDougalls, or the English want to take it back. Because they will try.”

Bruce studied him intently. “What do ye say, Craig? Will ye take the mission upon ye?”

Craig inhaled sharply. That was a good question. He’d need to be especially careful about trusting people. Managing a castle and protecting it from a siege would require him to be even more observant, even more cautious.

Was he up to the task, to secure the first victory of the King of Scots, the victory that might lead to winning the whole war?

“Aye,” he said. “I wilna let ye down.”

## CHAPTER 4

**A**my tried everything. Kicking, moving the bed, yelling, which essentially was moaning, and therefore, useless. Nothing helped. The heavy wooden bed didn't budge a bit. Finally, she decided to save her energy.

The only thing was, doing something distracted her from the terrible, suffocating tightness in her chest and the tension in her stomach.

The feeling that she knew all too well.

She swallowed, her mouth as dry as paper. At least it wasn't an abandoned barn, she told herself. It was a castle, after all. There were people all around, and sooner or later, someone would come. Plus, there were windows. There was fresh air and light.

She took deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

Every single day, going out into the forest and the mountains in Vermont, she was running away from the feeling of being trapped. That was why she did what she did—rescuing people. Because she hated that there were people who felt abandoned and alone.

She wanted to give them hope. To show them that they weren't alone.

Because once, a very long time ago, she'd needed someone like that.

And they hadn't come.



As time went by, Amy sweated and breathed and repeated that this would pass.

From outside, the sound of a battle reached her. The clicks of something wooden hitting rocks. Arrows? People screaming in pain, in fury, metal clanking against metal. Then there was the scent of smoke. Then the sound of a battle grew louder, and it seemed it was right behind that door.

Her heart thumped, and her chest tightened more with every scream, with every clash. If another man with a sword came in... There'd be nothing she could do. She was completely helpless. Oh, how she hated that barbarian who'd tied her to the bed.

This hallucination or hologram was all too real. The sounds, the scents, the bindings on her wrists and legs—she doubted she could have hallucinated them. Maybe it was all a high-tech, super-advanced hologram experience. But a hologram wouldn't be able to touch her like that man had.

And then a thought hit her. She hadn't noticed it back then, because of the shock and the fear, and then fighting for her life—but when he'd talked to her, he hadn't spoken English.

He'd spoken something else. Amy's grandfather from the MacDougall side came to mind. He and Grandma had immigrated to the United States from the Highlands when they were young. Granddad had brought the ancient painting of the family tree going back to the Middle Ages. A MacDougall sword hung in the living room. And for as far back as Amy could remember, he had taught Amy Gaelic by telling her ancient Highland fairy tales and the stories of his ancestors in both Gaelic and English.

Yes, that warrior had spoken Gaelic to her.

And she'd understood it.

How? She'd never learned it to the point of fluency. She didn't remember more than five or six words.

The door opened.

Speak of the devil—Amy's captor loomed in the doorframe.

His dark hair was disheveled, and his face had cuts and bruises. Dirt and sprays of dried blood covered his skin and coat. There were also bleeding gashes on his shoulder and his ankle. The heavy quilted coat he wore was torn in several places. He slowly looked her over, his eyes dark and cold.

And smug.

Yeah. Self-righteous jerk. Treating her like he could do anything he wanted with her.

*We'll see about that.*

Ah well, he probably deserved what he got. Still, if he were any other man, she'd want to look at his wounds and see what she could do with her first aid kit.

"I came as soon as I could, lass." He walked towards her and sank to his knees. "'Tis over. We won. I will undo yer ties now and remove yer gag. All right?"

She just gave him a heavy glance. She didn't want to believe he was an all chivalrous knight. He also had some explaining to do about what the hell was going on around here.

He gently removed the gag, and Amy moved her tired jaw to ease the pain a bit.

"Are ye all right?" he asked. "I was worried someone else might have found ye."

"Go to hell," she spat.

Then frowned. She spoke Gaelic, too. How was it possible? Could she even speak English at all?

"Go to hell," she repeated in English. It worked.

He laughed. "Dinna curse. I understood ye the first time," he said in English, with that Scottish burr Amy knew from her granddad. "I shall release yer hands now, aye? But ye must ken, the castle is taken, it wilna help ye if ye try to resist. All I want is to take ye to yer family. The Bruce will likely release ye all. He dinna want more bloodshed than necessary. But the castle is his. Aye?"

He began undoing the ties around her wrists. Amy shook her head in disbelief.

“Do you think any of this makes sense to me? I have no idea what’s going on, and all I want is to return to my sister and her class.”

Her hands were free now and she rubbed them, enjoying the pure bliss of moving them, and the blood returning to her stiff muscles.

“Yer sister? She must be with the other Comyns in the courtyard.”

He started releasing the belt on her ankles.

“I’m not a Comyn,” Amy said. “My name is Amy MacDougall. My sister—”

He froze and stared at her, his moss-green eyes darkening, his high cheekbones gaining color. Amy shut up from the sheer intensity—no, hatred—in his gaze.

“MacDougall?” he hissed.

Amy swallowed.

“Did ye say MacDougall?” he pressed, one hand going to his sword.

Sweat broke through the skin on Amy’s back. “Calm down, buddy. I didn’t do anything wrong. You’re probably mistaking me for someone else.”

He looked her up and down, carefully, as though she was a predator he needed to assess. “I canna believe I have a MacDougall in my possession.”

“In your *possession*?” Amy gasped, then pulled her knees up to remove the belt herself.

The man’s hands covered hers.

“Free me right this minute,” Amy said. “I didn’t do anything to you or anyone in this castle. It was you who assaulted me, tied me up, and left me alone. I’m going home. In fact, I’ll do better. I’ll call the police and they’ll arrest you. I’ll press charges, you’ll see.”

He beat her hands away and removed the belt.

“Are ye trying to trick me, Amy MacDougall, with yer strange words? I wilna be distracted.”

He grasped her upper arm and yanked her to her feet.

“And now I shall bring ye to the King of Scots and he will decide what to do with a member of the clan that stabbed him in the back earlier this year. It seems ’tis all ye MacDougalls are good for. Backstabbing and betraying.”

Amy listened with an open mouth. He led her down the stairs onto the ground floor. “I didn’t do anything. I’m just on a school trip in the Highlands. This is absolutely ridiculous. This strange role-play—”

They passed through the storage room, outside into the courtyard, and Amy stopped talking. There were a lot of people there—men, warriors—walking around, carrying things. Many stood guarding about a hundred men who were sitting in the mud, their heads bowed.

And then, there were dead bodies—real dead bodies. Their clothes were bloody, and they had terrible bone-deep gashes and wounds in their abdomens, legs, arms. Some had crushed skulls. Others were pierced with arrows. The smell—smoke and blood and feces—assaulted her.

Nausea rose in Amy’s stomach. This was all way too real.

This was all too much. Her knees weakened, and wobbled, but the medieval giant continued dragging her through the courtyard towards the biggest tower.

“What’s going on?” she whispered. “Where am I?”

He glanced at her. A shadow of pity crossed his face, but it changed into a hard, cold resolve. “Dinna think I’ll fall for yer lies and traps. Never again. Never for a MacDougall.”

They entered the tower—the door was open.

Two men stood there, talking “...and then once we’ve recuperated, we shall go on to Urquhart on Loch Ness. That is the next castle we shall take. Then Inverness.”

Amy's captor coughed, and both men turned to him. The one who spoke was tall, dark haired with strands of gray. The other was older, in his fifties, but still powerfully built. He had the same moss-green eyes as the man who held Amy.

"Craig." The man nodded and frowned, studying Amy.

So his name was Craig...

"I brought ye a MacDougall, Yer Grace," Craig said. "I'm afraid we both heard ye discussing yer plans."

The man who Craig had addressed as "Your Grace" frowned, studying her. Your Grace—was it the king? "She canna leave the castle if she heard what I said."

Oh, how crazy was all this? They played at kings, and knights, and wars...and...

But deep down, her instincts told Amy this wasn't a game. Those people outside were really dead and wounded. She'd seen enough injuries to know how they looked. And the attacks on the castle had been real—the stones had crumbled and fallen, and now some men were prisoners while others were victors.

The most logical explanation was the most insane one.

Because, based on what Sìneag had told her, the castle was built on a rock that allowed people to travel in time. She had said something about the river of time...and crossing it—and the rock had had that carving of a river and a path through it.

And then Amy had *fallen* into the rock.

And when she'd woken up, the castle was whole, and there was Robert the Bruce and Craig Cambel and men with swords and a catapult...

So the insane explanation was that Amy had fallen through time into the Middle Ages.

She shuddered. The floor shifted under her feet. Sweat broke through her skin all over her body. No matter how crazy it sounded, she just couldn't think of anything else that would explain all this.

And if she was in the Middle Ages, she needed to return to her time.

“Aye,” Craig said, and his eyes weighed heavily on her. “She must stay now.”

Amy sucked in air. If she’d traveled through time by means of that rock, that was what she needed to do again. Therefore, staying in the castle was actually to her advantage. She just needed to access that underground cave.

“What is her name?” the other man asked.

“Amy. Amy MacDougall.”

“I am Dougal Cambel,” the man said. “Surely ye ken the name, lass?”

Amy shook her head.

“No need to pretend, Amy...” He rubbed his chin under his short white beard. “Aren’t ye John’s daughter? The one who is supposed to marry the Earl of Ross next year come spring?”

The other man—King Robert the Bruce—nodded. “Aye, I heard that, too. A very unfortunate alliance for us. It will make both parties too strong. I was hoping to negotiate with the Earl of Ross while our powers are equal, but if he unites with the MacDougalls, it will make my position impossible to negotiate.”

Amy couldn’t believe her ears. Should she say something? She wasn’t their enemy. She wasn’t who they thought she was—the Amy they talked about was probably safe at home. The dangerous alliance of the MacDougalls and the Earl of Ross was still taking place.

But if she told them she wasn’t the Amy they thought she was, what would she say? That she thought she had slipped through time? That she was from the future?

They’d never believe her. They’d think she was insane. Or worse, they’d become violent and imprison her somewhere in the darkness, where no one would come for her. A shiver ran through her, her whole body spasming.

“Well, we have her now,” Craig said. “I will keep her here, dinna fash, Yer Grace. She will be useful. We can negotiate with the MacDougalls and the Earl of Ross for them to hold their attacks.”

The king nodded thoughtfully, studying her.

“Aye. I will give it more thought. But it is a very good thing she is here. For now, lock her up. We have a victory to celebrate tonight and a feast to enjoy.”

## CHAPTER 5

“S *làinte mhath,*” Craig said.

“Good health,” his half brother Owen echoed.

Craig clunked his cup of *uisge* with Owen, then his other half brother Domhnall.

Across the table from Craig, Hamish MacKinnon and Lachlan Cambel sat. Hamish, a tall, strong man with black hair and battle scars on his face, had come to Bruce’s army recently with the MacKinnon clan. Lachlan was a distant cousin from Cambel lands. He had the Cambels’ dark hair, but unlike most Cambels, he had brown eyes.

The great hall still smelled like smoke and coals. Rain drizzled through the holes in the roof where fire had taken the wood and thatch, but it was rain that had made sure the fire didn’t take the whole building.

The atmosphere was cheerful. Someone at another side of the hall played a lyre and sang, although not as well as a bard. But in the times of war, this would do. The feast consisted of whatever Bruce’s cooks found in the kitchens—which was plenty more than the food they’d had while marching through the freezing Highlands.

“Tell me ye will throw better feasts, brother,” Owen said as he eyed a spoonful of the vegetable stew. His eyes sparkled with humor. They were green like almost everyone else’s in the family, but he had blond hair like his mother. “Isna a king’s feast supposed to have roasted boars, rabbits, and mayhap a grouse?”



Craig shook his head and hid a smile. Owen always said and did what he wanted.

“Dinna be a ninny, Owen,” Domhnall, Owen’s older brother, grumbled. Craig winced—Domhnall was usually the first to berate Owen. “’Tis war.”

“Aye, ’tis, brother,” Owen said. “But if Bruce hadn’t let go all the servants and kitchen maids, we’d have roasted meat, fresh bread, and fruit. Aren’t ye tired of oatcakes as hard as stones and dried meat? Of falling asleep alone at night?”

“Ye shall sleep alone for a long time, brother.” Craig chuckled through a mouthful of stew.

“There’s more chance of his farts smelling like roses than him sleeping alone.” Lachlan laughed and the whole table echoed him.

Lachlan was as tall as Craig, and looked enough like him that people sometimes mixed them up when they saw them from afar. It was probably the blood of their common ancestor—Craig’s great-grandfather, Gilleasbaig of Menstrie, the first Cambel.

“I wilna hire any female servants as long as Owen’s in the castle,” Craig said.

The men at the table guffawed. Domhnall clapped Owen on the shoulder. “See, Owen. Even Craig wilna help ye.”

Owen threw his uisge down his throat. “Aye, aye, laugh, everyone. But dinna crawl to me on yer knees in a month or so, asking for me to introduce ye to a nice village lass.”

“Take me with ye, Owen,” Hamish said.

The warrior was easy to spot, always at least a head taller than anyone. Something about him made Craig glad to have Hamish on his side of the battle. Mayhap, the heavy glance of his dark eyes, like the man had already gone through hell.

“Keep yer cocks in yer trousers,” Craig said. “We let go of all castle servants to avoid treachery. Local villagers may spy for information for their previous masters—or other enemies.”

Owen shook his head. "I might go north with Bruce after all. Plenty of maidens there."

"Dinna go, brother," Craig said. "I need one of ye here, with me." *Someone I can trust*, he thought. "And look at all this excellent Comyn uisge."

"Aye, ye should stay, Owen," Domhnall said. "I am to go north with father and Bruce."

Owen held Domhnall's gaze, then looked down and nodded, but Craig caught a glimpse of bitterness in his eyes, though it passed quickly.

"Of course," Owen said. "Yer place is always next to father. I'll stay."

"'Tis his decision, nae mine." Domhnall gulped the last of his uisge and rose from the table. "Dinna be a child. Enjoy the rest of yer vegetable stew. I'll retire for the night."

After he left, Craig turned to Owen and squeezed his shoulder. "Dinna fash, Owen," he said in a low voice. "Yer time to shine will come. I dinna see a stronger or better warrior than ye. Father kens it. So does Domhnall. Ye're still young. Yer time to command troops and lead conquests will come."

Owen chuckled and Craig saw that his eyes had softened. "I'm not that young. Most lads of twenty-six are long marrit."

"Aye, well, I'm not marrit, either."

Owen looked Craig up and down with a dubious smile. "Why is that, I wonder, brother? Does yer cock not work?"

Craig shook his head. "Shut yer hole. Everything works fine, not that is any of yer concern. My fiancée died, if ye remember, before we were wed. Father hasna found a good match yet. But I am in no haste. I need to ken I can trust the woman and her family."

Owen sighed. "Aye. Trust is important to ye."

"Trusting the wrong person will lead to the loss of those ye love," Craig said. "Look at what happened to Grandfather Colin. Look at what the MacDougalls did to Marjorie."

Pain stabbed Craig and twisted his stomach at the memory of Dunollie Castle ten years ago. Of seeing Marjorie hurt like she had been.

“I wish I had been there,” Owen said.

“Ye were but a lad,” Craig said.

“Domhnall is only two years older than me. If I were there, maybe Grandfather—”

“Nae, dinna dare to blame yerself. I should have been more careful. We all should have.”

Marjorie had Alasdair’s son, Colin, named after their grandfather who’d died saving her. The clan kept his existence secret—especially from the MacDougalls—afraid that John MacDougall would come and take Alasdair’s only child.

Although Marjorie had a bastart son, Dougal could still have found her a good husband who’d accept her. But she would never wed and would never love a man—she had confided that in Craig. Thankfully, their father understood her trauma and didn’t insist.

Craig and Owen were silent, heads hanging over their cups. Where before, Marjorie had been cheerful and sweet, when she’d returned from Dunollie, she’d been a shadow of herself. After a while, she had asked Craig to teach her to defend herself, and he had, gladly. Owen and Domhnall had joined as well. Strength and confidence had come back to her; although, she would never be the same lass she’d been before Dunollie.

“The MacDougall lass,” Owen said. “Did anyone bring her food?”

“Dinna think so,” Craig said. “I shall bring her here. She wilna run with a hundred men in the hall to guard her. And we might get an answer or two.”

Craig stood up and was striding towards the exit, when he saw his father and the Bruce rise from their table and walk in his direction. “Craig, a word,” Bruce said.

The three of them went to a corner where no one would hear them.

“’Tis about the MacDougall lass,” his father said. “Please, listen with an open mind. I already gave my agreement.”

Craig frowned. Something dark turned in his gut.

“What about her?” he asked.

“The news of her being kept here by the Cambels would bring the MacDougalls right to our doorstep to retrieve their daughter. Mayhap even the Earl of Ross himself.”

Craig clenched his jaw. “Aye. But I can withhold a siege. As long as no one kens of the secret entrance...”

“No one kens but Edward, who died in the battle, and the boy ye caught. He told me after I threatened to whip his arse. I shall take him north with me and make him my cupbearer. He’ll come to the right side of this war. He’s a Scot and he kens what’s best for our country—independence.”

“’Tis good news,” Craig said. “So let MacDougalls come.”

“’Tis nae so simple. Risking the castle for one maiden is foolish.”

Craig stepped back. “Ye’re not suggesting to kill her?”

“Son, shut yer hole and listen to yer king,” Dougal said.

Craig’s jaw tightened. “Forgive me, sire. Please speak.”

Bruce’s lips spread in a sly smile, and there was something about the expression Craig didn’t like at all.

“How would ye like to take yer revenge on the MacDougalls while weakening them and the Earl of Ross at the same time?”

Craig cocked his head. “Aye, I would like that very much.”

“Then marry the lass.”

Craig’s stomach tensed. “What?”

“Son,” said Dougal Cambel, “’tis a good plan. Take from the MacDougalls their biggest alliance. Get revenge against

them not by violence, but by taking away their future. Benefit the cause of the King of Scots.”

But marrying the enemy? The woman whose brother had assaulted and raped Marjorie? The woman whose family had killed Craig’s grandfather, Craig’s cousin Ian, and many more Cambels?

The woman whose blood was saturated with betrayal.

Craig had sworn never to let another MacDougall betray him. And if he married Amy...

A shiver of anticipation went through him at the thought of her naked in his arms. Her soft skin, her lips against his, that red hair spilled against his chest...

What was he doing? If he married a MacDougall, he’d be giving her an invitation to betray him. Even if she was forced to make an oath to be loyal to him as his wife, the marriage vow wouldn’t mean anything to her. She’d be too close. She’d know too much.

This was beyond him.

“Nae, Yer Grace. Forgive me. I canna stand thinking I will need to tie my life to a MacDougall. I am sorry, Yer Grace. We must think of something else.”

Bruce looked long and hard at Craig. “Sometimes personal sacrifices must be made for the good of many.”

“Aye, sire, but I fear ’tis nae sacrifice. ’Tis stepping into a trap.”

Dougal laid his hand on Craig’s shoulder. “Think it over, son. Ye’re a strong man and a man of duty. Ye will do what’s right.”

Craig gave a polite nod while fury boiled in his veins—anger at Bruce and his father for even considering taking a MacDougall into their family.

He turned and walked away, to find Amy MacDougall and ask her everything he needed to know and then lock her up somewhere he’d never have to see her again.

## CHAPTER 6

**A**my jerked her elbow from the iron-cast fist of the damned Highlander. He led her through the dark courtyard, illuminated only by the torches. Freezing rain poured, and Amy's hiking shoes slurped through the mud.

It was one thing to be confined in a room, and another thing altogether to be stuck in this strange, medieval reality. Despite her warm jacket, it was as if the very air pressed on her body from all sides.

"I have nowhere to run away," she said. "Get your grabby hands off me."

"Ha! I wilna be fooled by a MacDougall again. Just move yer feet."

Amy scoffed. Oh, how her hands itched for something heavy to throw at him. They entered the great hall, which was full of people dressed in medieval clothes. She became acutely aware of how her modern jeans and her jacket stood out. The air was stuffy here, smelling of wet wool, woodsmoke, and stew. The wooden floor was dirty with mud. Torches and a fireplace illuminated the hall.

Her stomach growled, and she realized how hungry she was. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, which must have been ten or twelve hours ago given the darkness outside.

Heads turned in her direction, and she noticed the king and Craig's father at the farther side of the hall, together with a few other older men, drinking and eating.

Craig led her through the aisle between the tables and benches. Men and more men sat at other tables. She glanced around.

“Why are only men here?” she asked.

“’Tis an army. And I let every Comyn servant go, including the women.”

“Why?”

“Because just like ye, they are enemies and potential traitors.”

“Well, lucky them. I’m envious of people who just lost their jobs. They can be as far away from you as possible.”

Craig stopped in front of a table by the fireplace. Other warriors sat there, laughing, but they quieted once they noticed Amy.

“Sit,” he said, pointing at the bench.

She jerked her elbow from his hand, and he released her. “I’m not a dog,” she hissed.

“Nae, ye’re not. Dogs are loyal.”

*What a jerk. He doesn’t even know me, and he makes assumptions just based on my last name.*

What did he know of the MacDougalls anyway? She was proud of being a MacDougall. The stories her grandfather told, of the brave warriors and mighty chiefs, of how the clan had sprung from a great warrior named Somerled, of how her ancestors had defeated the Vikings, of how strong and proud they were.

“Suit yerself,” he said and sat down. “Enjoy yer meal standing.”

He handed her a bowl and a spoon. Aha. The heavy object she was hoping for. And the brownish-green stew would stream nicely down his face. Amy’s fingers tensed, and she had to physically stop herself. She would have thrown it at him if she hadn’t been starving.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

She stepped over the bench and took her seat. The table was silent, while the rest of the hall droned with voices, erupting with occasional laughter. Someone played medieval music on a lyre and sang. Badly.

Amy put the spoon to her mouth, but felt the eyes of the men on her. She glanced up. They looked away. She just needed to ignore them.

She began eating—it wasn't a particularly tasty meal. It lacked salt and seasoning, but it was food. And if she didn't eat now, when would she?

A tall man sitting across the table slid a silver cup to her. He eyed her from under his brows, a dark, probing look with more meaning than she could understand. He was in his thirties, she guessed, a tall, lean warrior, his skin weathered.

“Something to wash that down, lass,” he said. “Looks like ye need it.”

Amy glanced into the cup and sniffed. Whiskey. No. Not quite. Maybe whiskey didn't exist yet. If she remembered correctly, the information board said Inverlochy Castle was taken by Bruce in 1307 so this must be the fourteenth century.

“Thanks,” she said and took a sip.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the burn that went slowly down her throat and settled in her stomach, warming her.

“My name is Hamish MacKinnon,” he said.

“Hamish,” Craig said, “she's nae a guest. Ye dinna need to be friendly with her.”

“Aye, I ken, but she didna commit a crime, either. Let her have her peace for now.”

Craig scowled at her. “I suppose.”

Amy smiled at Hamish.

“Thank you,” she said and gave his cup back to him.

Hamish shook his head once. “Drink up, lass. I've had enough. Looks like ye need it more.”



“So there are nice people in Bruce’s army after all,” she said and could almost hear Craig’s teeth crack.

“Ye have a strange accent,” a blond man sitting to Amy’s right said.

He looked similar to Craig and Dougal with his green eyes.

“Do MacDougalls have such an accent?” he asked Craig.

“Nae, Owen,” Craig said. “Hers is peculiar.”

“Were ye raised somewhere else?” Hamish asked.

Amy was chewing the stew and slowed down. At least she could tell the truth about this part.

“Yes. I mean, aye.”

“Where?” Hamish said. “In Ireland? Ye sound a little like the Irish.”

God, she hated lying. “Yes.”

“Why?” Craig asked.

Oh, darn it. She should have paid more attention when her grandpa told the story of the MacDougalls.

“What is it to you?” she asked. Best defense was offense, right?

“I need to ken who ye are and what ye’re doing here,” Craig said. “Ye will answer me. Every question.”

His words tied around her, digging into her, suffocating her—but she wouldn’t let him. “Or what?”

Craig’s lips flattened into a line. “Or ye will be sorry.”

Hamish opened his mouth—no doubt to soften the situation—but Craig raised his palm, and Hamish closed his jaws.

“I don’t care,” Amy said. “You said you won’t harm a woman. Or were those just words?”

“Aye, I did. I never break my word,” Craig said, his voice a low, purring warning. “And I dinna throw empty threats.”

His heavy gaze lay on her, and Amy's breath caught. A shudder went through her—but it wasn't fear. It was something like heat. Their eyes locked, and Amy's throat dried. For an eternity, she softened and melted, and forgot everything around her. Then too soon, he withdrew and looked into his cup.

“Look, lass. Ye're going to stay here for a long time. Dinna hope yer father will come for ye soon. But even if he does, I wilna give ye to him and he wilna take the castle. I dinna wish for ye to feel what my sister felt.”

Hamish and Owen pointedly stared at their bowls at the mention of Craig's sister. What happened to her? Was his sister locked up somewhere? Taken against her will?

“What did she feel?” she asked, her voice rasping.

Craig's mouth tightened. “Ye ken what I talk of. I wilna disrespect Marjorie by telling about the worst days of her life.”

Amy exhaled softly, unwelcome tears stinging her eyes. The memories of the worst days of *her* life pressed against her psyche. No. This was not the time to let those dark emotions drown her.

Craig looked around the table. “Owen, Hamish, Lachlan, can ye three leave our guest here and me alone?”

“Aye, brother,” Owen said, and Hamish nodded, although, Amy thought, unwillingly. The three men rose from the benches and joined another table, where someone greeted them cheerfully, and laughter erupted.

Craig poured more of the strong stuff from the bottle into their cups.

“What's it called?” she said. “It's not whiskey, is it?”

“'Tis *uisge-beatha*.”

The water of life, or moonshine, Amy understood. “Right,” she said. “That's what I mean.”

Dubious, Craig studied her for a brief second, then raised his cup. “*Slàinte mhath*,” he said. Cheers in Gaelic, Amy

remembered from the hotel brochure on whiskey tours. She should have taken one back then.

Oh God, poor Jenny must be freaking out, looking for her. Amy needed to act, to find a way to access the rock.

Craig took a large gulp and grunted, clearly satisfied. Amy followed his example, enjoying the burn of the moonshine. If this was supposed to be the origin of whiskey, it was a great one.

“Lass,” Craig said. “I’m nae jailor. My task is to keep the castle safe and secure, and ye in it. Just answer my questions. I need to ken what yer purpose is for being here. Why were ye with the Comyns?”

Was it better to lie? She did need to get access to the underground storeroom. Maybe she should play it nice, after all. What if her stubbornness only led to Craig tightening his grip?

“I’ll answer your questions,” she said, her voice sounding unnatural to her own ears, everything tightening within her. She hated lying. But if it would take her closer to home, that’s what she needed to do, even though her whole being felt repulsed. “I was invited here as a guest.”

“As a guest? By whom?”

“I’m friends with—” Oh shoot, did the Comyns have a daughter? Or a son? Any children? “Lady Comyn.” That was vague enough.

“*Lady Comyn.*” He sounded disgusted. “Ye even speak like the Normans, like the Comyns. Are ye nae a Scot?”

“Of course I am.” Oh God, she was doing more harm than good with the lies. “What else should I call her?”

Craig shook his head. “I suppose ye’re right. Bruce himself has Norman blood. So yer father agreed for ye to visit Lady Comyn. How long did ye intend to stay?”

In the twenty-first century, it would be a couple of days, maybe. But here, with no communication and long travel times

—especially in winter, which was coming—the visits were probably much longer. “Just a couple of months.”

“’Tis nae my place to judge the current female fashion, but why are ye dressed like a man?”

Oh, for Christ’s sake. Those medieval people and their canons about women’s clothing and behavior. Amy was probably breaking every single rule without even trying.

“It’s for hunting.”

Craig hemmed and looked her up and down. The gaze burned through her clothes and brought blood to Amy’s cheeks.

*Oh, get a grip of yourself. You’re not a schoolgirl!*

“And does yer father expect messages from ye?” he continued, seemingly oblivious of her reaction. “From any of the Comyns?”

“No. He trusts I will be safe here. The castle is supposed to be impenetrable. How did you get in here at all, by the way?”

He chuckled. “That is none of yer concern, lass. When is yer wedding?”

“My wedding?”

“Aye, dinna play the fool. I ken about yer wedding to the Earl of Ross.”

Oh no. What if this was a test? What if he knew the exact date?

“Father is still not sure about the date because of the war,” she said.

“So he isna expecting ye anytime soon? Or is he coming to Dunollie?”

What the hell was a *dunollie*?

“No.”

Craig held her in his dark green gaze, and it was though he looked right through her, getting under her skin, digging up the

truth. Amy's breath caught, she stiffened, trapped in her own body. He was going to see right through her.

And then she'd never see home again.

"Ye're lying," Craig said. "I dinna ken what. I dinna ken why. But I see that ye are. Which is another confirmation I shouldna have trusted ye to tell the truth."

He grabbed her upper arm in his steely grasp and pulled her to her feet. Amy tried to free herself, but he only held her tighter.

"Ye will stay locked up until ye talk."

## CHAPTER 7

**A**my paced the barracks. She was now in the southeastern tower, not the one she'd come from.

Not the one she needed to get back to if she ever wanted to return home.

Craig had left her here the day before, and now a night had passed and another day, and he still hadn't come.

Hamish had brought her food yesterday and taken out her chamber pot. And she knew there were guards on the other side of the door.

But she had screwed up. She had screwed up big time. She knew she was a terrible liar, and Craig—oh, smart Craig!—saw right through her.

Damn. She needed to find out more about how things worked here. It was the only way she could be convincing.

Her legs became more restless the longer she was here, tingles going through them in waves. Pacing the room helped to relieve the sensation, but her insides still quivered, and her stomach churned.

What would be the worst thing that could happen to her? Would Craig hold her here forever?

At least there were windows, beds. It was dry here and relatively clean. Amy sat in the deep alcove by the slit window and looked outside. The view was spectacular. She could see the village and the army that was still there.

Although, by the evening they had started to clean the horses, pack things into saddle bags, put barrels and crates onto carts, and generally bustled about. The army was probably leaving soon. It was for the best. Fewer eyes on Amy and more chances to get into the underground storeroom.

Amy gazed at the landscape. Groves with bare trees, brown patches of empty fields, hills and mountains as far as she could see. Yes, this was different from being in the barn, and it reminded her of Vermont in some way, which brought her comfort. She took a deep breath of fresh, cool air, almost sweet with the scent of rich soil and rotting leaves.

Nature and broad views always made her feel better. It was small, confined spaces she was afraid of. At least Craig hadn't locked her up in a cellar.

But he was smarter than that. Or kinder. Because by keeping her here, he deprived some of the warriors of beds and a roof. Guilt stung Amy.

She looked through the contents of her backpack. Her phone, which she had already tried yesterday—and, of course, it was useless. The first aid kit. That might come in handy, but she'd need to be careful not to reveal any modern supplies that could bring questions. The flashlight had rolled under one of the beds in the eastern tower, and she'd forgotten to retrieve it. Well, she'd need to find it again, or use candles when she went to the storeroom.

What would medieval people do if they found it?

She shook her head, chasing the thought away.

She had her tampons, her wallet, her passport. That was it.

Not much to work with. She now regretted not stuffing her backpack with all kinds of unnecessary crap just in case she might need it, like Jenny did.

No. Amy preferred a minimalist lifestyle. She didn't need much, living in a small house and being on the road in the mountains or in the center with her team, waiting for search and rescue calls. That gave her a feeling of freedom, a sense of purpose.

The lack of a toilet and running water, of conveniences, didn't bother her that much. She could eat pretty much anything and be happy with it.

The worst thing was that she was trapped in this medieval time. And no one was coming to rescue *her*.

She supposed it might be easier if she was welcome here. But Craig and the rest of the men had put her in a tiny box—of being the enemy.

The only one who was willing to look past that was Hamish.

Amy spent the rest of the day counting the minutes as they crawled by until she finally let sleep pull her into dark dreams.

The morning of the next day, she was done with being locked up. She banged on the door. "Let me out! Right now! Take me to Craig Cambel. I demand you take me to Craig! I want to see him—"

The door opened, and Hamish came in, bumping into her. A small splash of hot porridge from a clay bowl landed on the floor. Amy jumped back.

"Are ye all right, lass?" Hamish asked.

"Yes, I'm fine."

The door closed behind him.

A cheerful smile spread across his face. His eyes were dark and attentive on her, taking her in head to toe. "Hungry?"

"Always." She smiled. He handed her the bowl with porridge, a spoon of honey in the middle. She went to one of the beds and sat on it, placing the bowl in her lap. He sat on the bed opposite hers.

"I put in some honey for ye, and a little butter."

"You shouldn't have." She smiled. "I don't really mind simple porridge. I can eat anything. I'm not demanding."

She mixed the hot porridge with the melting butter and honey and took a spoonful. Hamish's eyes narrowed. "Are ye



not? 'Tis unusual for a clan chief's daughter. Are ye not used to honey and fresh berries and the best all the time?"

Oh snap. "I guess I'm just different from other clan chiefs' daughters, you know."

He chuckled. "Aye, I can see that." He studied her. "I suppose ye are nae too happy to be away from home."

She smiled. "Not too happy, that's right." Though she felt more cheerful with the hot porridge in her hands and Hamish's friendly presence than she had since she'd arrived.

He nodded. "When did ye hear from yer father last?"

All these damn questions... She took another spoonful of porridge, feeling Hamish's eyes on her. "When I left home—"

The door opened, and Craig stood there, tall, and broad-shouldered, and so handsome her breath caught.



HAMISH JUMPED UP, AND JUST FOR A SPLIT SECOND, HIS HAND jerked to his claymore. But then he relaxed and forced a smile.

"Craig—"

"Hope I didna interrupt anything," Craig said, his eyes narrowing on Amy and Hamish.

Craig didn't like what he saw one bit. It was the first time he'd seem Amy with her face carefree and the corners of her lips up in a small smile. Was it because Hamish sat so close, his knee almost touching hers?

Surely Craig's stomach was tense only because he didn't like his men getting too friendly with the enemy. Not because he hated that it was Hamish who'd made her smile.

And not Craig.

"Ye didna interrupt," Hamish said. "I brought Amy her meal, 'tis all."

Craig studied Hamish for signs of a lie. Hamish was a MacKinnon, and the clan was loyal to the Bruce. They had hidden him when he was chased by the English and the enemy clans. Which had saved the king's life and brought him to where he was now.

"Aye," Craig said. "Thank ye. Bruce and the troops are leaving north as we speak, so is yer clan. Surely ye dinna want to be left here."

Hamish glanced at the window.

"My clan and I decided 'tis best I stay and help ye with the castle," Hamish said. "If ye agree, of course."

Craig glanced at Amy who was eating another spoonful of her porridge.

"I didna ken ye wanted to stay. May I ask why?"

"To help ye protect the castle, of course. Bruce will get more supporters after neutral clans hear of Inverlochy. But ye will need good warriors."

But that was not the reason. He wanted something here—no one just stayed back without their clan.

"But what is it to ye?" Craig said.

Hamish let out a nervous chuckle. "Sire, yer questions have the most amazing ability to make one want to shite himself. If ye're looking for bad intentions, ye're looking in the wrong place. I didna have a home for years, always on the road. 'Tis good for a warrior to have a rest under a roof and behind four strong walls. All I wanted with Amy was to keep her company. The lass didna do anything. She isna responsible for her brother's and father's deeds. Dinna punish her for what she doesna deserve."

Craig studied Amy. She sat at the end of the bed, the bowl in her lap, the spoon in her hand. Her beautiful blue eyes glared at him, shiny and big.

Aye, Hamish was right that the lass hadn't done what her family did. But with a straight back like that, with those eyes

telling him she wouldn't budge, she was every inch a MacDougall. Which meant she wasn't all that innocent.

"Ye can stay, Hamish," Craig said. "Ye speak the truth. I need a strong warrior like ye. But ye shouldna become friendly with the enemy clan. Ye dinna ken what information she might fish out of ye."

"Aye, but she—"

"Hamish," Craig said. "Please, leave us."

Hamish looked at Amy, as though to make sure she would be all right alone with Craig, gave a polite nod and left.

When the door closed behind him, Craig turned to Amy and spread his hands. "Ye demanded to see me. So here I am."

She put the bowl on the bed and stood up as well, crossing her arms over her chest. She stood with her feet wide apart, her legs long and sculpted and there for him to appreciate. Her long, wavy red hair spread across her shoulders. Her full lips flattened, anger flaring in her eyes.

"I want out of this room," she said. "You said you'd ask your questions and then let me have my freedom. So. Let me out of this damn room. I would like to walk about the castle. I want fresh air."

Oh, she was amusing. A chief's daughter, making demands when she had no place to make them.

"Ye want, ye want..." He walked towards her and stopped, admiring her pretty mouth. "And yet ye fail to keep yer side of the bargain. Ye lie. Ye hide something."

She pursed her lips, and they wrinkled a little—so pretty. He had the sudden urge to run his thumb along her bottom lip. She swallowed, and he looked up, their eyes locking again. He could sink in those eyes, as blue as deep lochs, with long lashes the color of the mountains in autumn.

"I just want freedom. I'll drive you crazy if you keep me here a day longer. I'll bang on the door every day, I'll break things, I'll make your guards hate their job."

An eyelash lay on her cheek, and he raised his hand and gently touched it with his finger. It came away on his fingertip, so delicate and long and beautiful.

Flushed, she watched him with something that resembled his burning need to touch her. To kiss her. To feel the softness of her hair, the silkiness of her skin.

He gently blew on the eyelash and it disappeared from his fingertip.

“Aye, I understand the desire, lass,” he said.

Her eyes brightened and a smile began spreading on her lips. “You do?”

“Aye, of course I do.”

“Well. Thank you. Because I’d love to leave this room and go around the castle freely—”

“Are ye ready to talk then? Answer my questions?”

He saw her lips close and her throat moving as she swallowed. She was nervous.

“Yes,” she said, her voice jumping. “I was ready the last time.”

He let her go, and she frowned at him.

“If ye mean when ye answered me with yer lies, that didna count.”

She glared at him, angry, scared, red-faced, eyes burning.

“So you’re not letting me out of here?”

“Nae, ye may go out. I am nae monster. But ye will have a guard with ye at all times.”

And before he could forget his anger because of how pretty she looked right now and taste her lush lips, he walked out.

## CHAPTER 8

**O**ne week later...

CRAIG LOOKED AT THE VIEW OF THE RIVER LOCHY AND LOCH Linnhe and the lands beyond, from the parapet of the northern wall. He breathed the chilly air in deeply and let out a cloud of steam.

“Anythin’ troublin’ ye?” asked Owen, standing at Craig’s side.

Craig cocked his head. “*I’m* in trouble, man.”

“Oh, the almighty Craig Cambel is in trouble?” Owen chuckled.

Craig threw him a sideways glance. “Aye. I am. I’ve never run a household, least of all a castle. And ’tis bloody obvious.”

Owen cocked an eyebrow. “If ye refer to the campfires in the courtyard and men grilling their own game, aye, I’d say ’tis nae very traditional for a grand castle. But I havna heard anyone complain.”

“They wouldna complain. But they wouldna do anything about it, either. The problem runs deeper, Owen. Bruce’s army took a lot of the supplies when they left, which is understandable. But what we have won’t last us through the winter. I have about a hundred men. All of them warriors, none servants. We dinna have a cook, no boys to carry water

from the well, no one to bake bread, cut vegetables, and make cheese.”

“Aye, well, ye ken they aren’t used to having a cook. They’re happy to get out every day to hunt and fish.”

“But everyone needs to cook for themselves. Time for training is wasted, and the courtyard is littered with campfires. ’Tis simply unsafe. Especially if the enemy arrives suddenly.”

Owen shrugged. “I suppose. Ye’re still a good constable.”

“Supervising the patrols and the men-at-arms, training, and planning the defense in case of a siege, aye, mayhap. But the household suffers. No one cleans, washes, or mends clothes. Besides, we need carpenters, masons, and simple manpower to repair the damages from Bruce’s catapult.”

“But ye dinna want a local mason.”

“No. Ye ken my position about the locals.”

Owen shrugged as if to say, *Then what do you expect?*

Well, aye. Then he also shouldn’t mention there was the matter of the stables. He needed a blacksmith to make horseshoes and mend the weapons, as well as farriers and stable boys to take care of the horses and clean the stables.

“Maybe letting go of all the servants wasna such a great idea,” Owen said.

“I need people I can trust. I sent a messenger back home to hire people from Cambel lands.”

“It’ll take weeks until he’ll find people and bring them back. Maybe even months with the winter coming.”

“Aye. And I need someone now. Someone to organize the men into cooks and cleaners and oversee them while I’m busy training warriors. And someone to coordinate the watch as well as the cleaning and maintenance of the weapons.”

He looked to his left and saw Amy MacDougall walk up onto the parapet, and Hamish with her—her guard today. She nodded to Craig and stood by the tower, looking at the view.

She was dressed now in a lady's attire, probably tired of her hunting clothes. And watching her now, with her hair spilling over her gray woolen cloak, her cheeks and nose rosy from the chill, she took his breath away.

He'd moved her to the only private bedchamber—the lord's bedchamber in the Comyn Tower—and he slept downstairs in the lord's private quarters, along with Owen and other Cambels. Craig was used to the simple life of a warrior—sleeping on the ground while on the road with his father and his uncles. At home he shared a bedchamber with his brothers. But he could imagine Amy, the only woman in the castle, needed some privacy.

For the last week, he'd been catching himself staring at her, glancing around the castle, hoping she'd walk nearby or want to ask him something. Even demand something from him, protest against her guards. But she barely spoke to him unless spoken to. And he hated to see Hamish near her, bringing her an apple or an oatcake.

No, he wasn't jealous. There was nothing to be jealous about.

“Ye want someone to run the household,” Owen said. “There she is.”

Craig stiffened.

“Ye can marry her,” Owen said. “’Tis what Bruce asked of ye, innit?”

Marry her—again, the thought that had tormented Craig.

“It would break the MacDougall and Ross alliance,” Owen insisted, “which would weaken Bruce's enemies but also be revenge against the MacDougalls from us Cambels.”

Aye, well, both reasons were strong enough.

“But I can never marry a MacDougall,” Craig growled. “’Tis a sure way to be betrayed.”

“And ye dinna think she can help ye with the household as yer wife?”

Craig studied Amy's profile in the distance. Aye, she was probably trained to run a noble house, so he could give her some of the tasks. He'd already seen her with the horses—cleaning them, talking to them, feeding them. She seemed to know what she was doing. She'd also cooked a simple soup once. But she should know how to organize a working kitchen and cleaners even if he gave her warriors to command and not servants. He'd assign her men, and she'd be the one to manage them.

There was something else he liked about the idea.

As her husband, he'd have the right to kiss her and bed her, hold that long-legged body in his arms, inhaling her scent. That would be an advantage on top of everything else... He'd never force himself on her, of course. But if she was willing, he wouldn't say no to her. More than that.

He wanted her.

“But she's a MacDougall,” he said, again. “A treacherous, despicable MacDougall. I canna imagine binding my life to one forever.”

“Ye dinna have to bind yerself forever,” Owen said. “Just long enough to hold the castle and break up her marriage with the Earl of Ross. Then let her go.”

Craig straightened and studied Owen, trying to understand if his brother was secretly a genius. “Handfasting?” Craig asked.

The ancient Celtic tradition of a trial marriage for a year and a day.

“Aye, handfasting,” Owen said.

“I like the idea more and more,” Craig muttered. “I can just imagine the face of John MacDougall when he would find out that his daughter was now married to a Cambel.”

Aye, Craig hoped that the man would wonder what Craig was doing to his Amy. If she was safe. If she was unharmed.

If she was held against her will and suffered.



Because that was exactly what Craig, his father, his brothers, and every clansman had wondered and feared with Marjorie. Only in Craig's case, their worst fears had come true.

Craig clapped his brother on the shoulder, nodded, and marched towards Amy. She looked up, and her serene expression changed into a tense mask. She straightened and met him with her chin high.



AMY STUDIED CRAIG'S HANDSOME FACE. IN THIS LIGHT, HIS eyes were like September leaves, still green but with fall's brown already touching them. They were a little slanted, she noticed, and framed with thick black eyelashes.

And there was something in them, something she didn't like one bit. A spiteful decisiveness. Whatever he'd decided, she wouldn't let him take away her freedom again.

"Good morning to ye, mistress," Craig said.

"Good morning," she said.

He chuckled. "Care to take a walk with me?"

"Where?"

"Right here, on the wall."

"Oh." She shook her head. "Of course, on the wall. God forbid you'd want to let me out of the castle."

"Mayhap one day I will."

She shrugged. "Sure, let's walk."

He glanced at Hamish who stood behind her. "Hamish, ye're free to go."

Hamish nodded and disappeared into the tower. Owen, who'd been standing with Craig before, left as well. They were alone.

Craig offered Amy his elbow and she put her hand through his bent arm, the touch electrifying even through his thick cloak.

“Do ye enjoy yerself in the castle?” he asked.

“Is that a trick question?”

“Nae. I merely want to know if ye find the household to yer liking.”

She coughed. Everyone seemed to be cooking for themselves, it was dirty, the horses were not taken care of, and basically everyone could do whatever they wanted without any consequences. In essence, it was a giant medieval bachelor pad.

“Ehm, I think you and I both know the household is a mess.”

“Aye. That is what I think, too.”

“Then why do you ask?”

“Because I want yer help.”

“My help?” she scoffed. “Why should I help a man who holds me prisoner?”

He stopped, making her halt as well. He turned her to face him, so close the proximity melted the lower part of her body into Jell-O. He looked deeply into her eyes, overwhelming her with the heated promise in his. Then he took both of her shoulders in his hands.

“Marry me.”

Amy’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

“Marry me. Run the household as my wife. And I will let ye go around unsupervised.”

Amy shook her head. “Marry you? Have you not been insisting all this time that I’m your enemy?”

“Aye. Well not ye personally. Ye belong to my enemy clan. But ye havna done anything—nae yet. Which is another reason. I can keep a closer eye on ye.”

Amy turned around and laughed. “This sounds absolutely insane. Do you hear yourself?”

Craig’s cheerfulness was gone. “I do not jest, Amy.”

These were insane times. Of course, people from the Middle Ages married for all kinds of reasons except love, but now she was a personal witness to the madness.

“So, you want to marry your prisoner to keep a closer eye on her and so that she will do your housework...”

Her words trailed off. Suddenly, she realized it. If Amy MacDougall from this time was engaged to some important Earl or something, this would break that engagement. Amy’s dad would probably be pissed.

“You want to stop my engagement.”

Craig smiled. “We’re enemies, lass. ’Twas Bruce who suggested our marriage to stop the MacDougall alliance with the Earl of Ross.”

So it was political.

“I will never agree to this.”

“Think about it. It will be handfasting, so for one year and one day. Ye will have the privileges of the lady of the castle here. Ye can go everywhere in the castle, nae outside of course. And once the year is over, ye are free to return to yer father.”

Amy inhaled deeply. These medieval times were so strange. Marriages for politics and money and whatnot. Not for love.

Ah, love. She had been married for love. And look where it got her.

Divorce.

So that year and a day didn’t sound like such a bad idea, actually.

Not that she planned to stay here for so long. And it wouldn’t be a real marriage, anyway.

“What about sex?” she said.

“Forgive me, what?”

“Sleeping together. You can forget that.”

“I will never force myself on ye, Amy. I hope ye know by now I treat ye with respect, and that is how I intend to continue. I wilna touch ye unless ye want me to.”

“And I can go anywhere in the castle?”

Then the thought struck her. If she needed access to food supplies, it would even give her an excuse to explore the underground storeroom.

Once they were married, he’d trust her more. Maybe she could even use organizing the household as a pretext to visit the storeroom. Even if it was with him, it didn’t matter. All she needed to figure out was how to make that rock glow, and then she’d put her hand into the imprint. Then, hopefully, she’d be back to 2020.

“So you’ll let me go anywhere freely.”

“Aye...”

“And I don’t have to sleep with you?”

His nostrils flared a little. “Not unless ye want to.”

“And you want me to organize the cooking and cleaning?”

“Aye. Verra much.” His Scottish burr rang harder. Cooking and cleaning must be really important to him.

She crossed her arms over her chest. Infuriating man!

“So basically you want me to be your housekeeper?” she said.

“Nae. Not only.”

Right.

She’d be *married* to this hunk... Her throat went dry at the thought, her gut clenching as images flashed through her mind—him naked, his hands exploring her body. She hated that he made her feel this way. This man, who kept her prisoner!

He was so handsome she felt like she was looking directly at the sun. He was honorable—she really appreciated being given the only bedroom in the castle and that Craig made sure none of the men harmed her. But it felt like a golden cage. And guards following her constantly.

She should just stop caring about how handsome he looked and how kind he might be and agree to the terms. Because she needed to do whatever it took to get back to her time. Jenny was probably feeling more and more worried and abandoned. Plus, she wouldn't be able to take care of Dad alone for long.

So, it seemed, giving in to this madness was the fastest way to the storeroom. What was the alternative? If she was constantly followed by a guard, there wasn't a chance in hell she'd be able to get anywhere close to where she needed to be.

She'd just pretend. Just keep playing this other person and hope she wouldn't get killed in the meantime.

All right, she'd go through with this ruse of a marriage. And then once she activated the stone, she'd just leave him behind, go back home and live her life, remembering this as a wild adventure. Maybe she'd write a book or something.

It would serve Craig right for keeping her here against her will. After all, she was a MacDougall. So yes, technically, his enemy. Her grandfather had told her their clan motto—To Conquer or Die. There was pride in that, and strength. She could use those now.

"I accept," she said, clasping her hands so that they wouldn't shake.

He nodded, solemn and serious, and led her farther along the wall in silence.

But it was only when his arm tensed under her palm that she realized what she had done.

She had willingly gone into the trap of marriage. The trap that had suffocated her and scared her and made her miserable.

It wouldn't be real, she reminded herself. It wouldn't be like the last time.

But as she watched Craig's handsome profile, she liked the idea of being married to him more and more. She looked at his lips. Would he kiss her at the wedding ceremony? Would his lips be soft or firm? Suddenly, there wasn't enough air in the whole of Scotland for her to breathe. The image of him covering her mouth with his, of his arms wrapping around her waist, of him carrying her to the bed invaded her mind. Her skin warmed, and a drop of sweat crawled down her spine.

Oh no. It was one thing to be trapped here when she hated him and only wished to escape.

It was another to be attracted to him and start developing feelings.

That would be a whole different level of trap altogether.

Because if she fell in love with this Highlander, never in a million lifetimes would she escape with her heart intact.

## CHAPTER 9

**T**hree days later, Amy paced the giant bedchamber. The morning had passed like a blur. She shouldn't be so nervous.

And she wasn't, she told herself. It was just that fear of being trapped.

Not the thought of spending more time with the handsome Highlander.

"This is just the next step to get to the rock," she reminded herself. "Calm down."

She drew a deep breath in and released a long breath out. Tension uncoiled within her. Tension from lying every day, from walking on the tip of a blade, afraid to say the wrong thing and betray how much of a stranger she was here. Tension from knowing she wasn't the Amy MacDougall they thought she was. Tension from being sure their plan to disrupt the alliance between the MacDougalls and the Earl of Ross would fail without a doubt.

And then Craig. She caught herself looking for him, and staring at him whenever he was near. Something about him made her breathe quicker, made her pulse beat in her neck.

She was an idiot. Yes, she liked the guy, but she couldn't let that distract her from her goal. There could be absolutely nothing between them, for every reason in the world. He was a good man at the core, and she was a liar. She didn't belong in this time and was here only temporarily. She was a MacDougall, even if born hundreds of years later, and Craig

would never be with a MacDougall. He hated her for her name alone.

And he'd hate her even more once he learned about her deception. What would he do to her?

He wouldn't kill her, would he?

Amy looked down at her red dress. It was the best dress she'd found in the chests, and it probably belonged to Lady Comyn. It wasn't a perfect fit—it was too short in the sleeves and the skirt, and the shoulders were a little too broad. Plus, Lady Comyn clearly had bigger breasts than her because there was plenty of space in the bodice. Well, that wasn't hard. Most women had bigger breasts than her.

Amy remembered the dress she'd worn for her wedding with Nick. They'd gotten married after a year of dating and half a year of living together. It was a simple, cheap white dress she'd ordered online, one of the few that would ship overnight. The skirt was knee length, and the dress turned out to be “beach” style, which was ridiculous for a spring in Vermont. But Amy hadn't cared. She wasn't big on fashion—most of her clothes were practical and outdoorsy. So, as long as the dress fit, which it did, Amy was happy. She hadn't booked a makeup artist, hadn't gone to a hairdresser.

She'd put on the dress for Nick to see that morning, and he'd whistled like a wolf.

“Yowza!” He'd picked her up, making her wrap her legs around his waist. “That's one hot wife-to-be,” he'd said, his Texas accent singing. “Mine.”

Then he'd kissed her, making her head spin and her skin burn. Two hours later, they'd gotten married.

Amy had been light-headed from happiness. From the pure bliss of being with her soul mate. Tall, sturdy, kindhearted Nick whom she'd rescued from a fall in the mountains.

And even with her soul mate, it hadn't worked out.

He wasn't a jerk. He'd never cheated on her. He hadn't been abusive. He'd been great to her.



So if she couldn't make it with Nick, she couldn't make it with anyone else.

Tears blurred her vision, and she quickly wiped them away.

Better to be done with this handfasting thing and move on to the next part of the plan.

Someone knocked. "Come in," she said, wiping her cheeks quickly.

Hamish entered, a small bouquet of autumn leaves and horsetail in his hands. "Are ye all right, lass?"

She nodded and pressed out a smile. "Yeah, thanks."

"Craig sent me for ye. They're ready."

"Okay."

"Are ye ready?"

"Yes. Of course." She straightened her back and walked to him. She looked at the bouquet.

"Oh, aye, 'tis for ye." He handed it to her. "Couldnae find any flowers at this time. 'Tis almost winter."

"No need for flowers. This is more than enough. There are no women to throw this to anyway."

He frowned. "Do ye throw flowers to women? Why?"

Oh shoot. "It's a tradition I've seen in Ireland. The bride throws the bouquet to unmarried women, and whoever catches it gets married next."

Hamish smiled and opened the door for her to go through. "They're funny, the Irish. Never heard of such a tradition."

They began descending the stairs. "Are you married, Hamish?" Amy asked.

"Me?" He laughed. "Nae, mistress."

"No one special in your life?"

Hamish threw a glance at her over his shoulder. "Aye, there is someone I care about in the Borderlands."

“That’s very kind of you. Why can’t you be together?”

“Long story, lass. I’m nae good for her.”

“That’s not true. I’m sure one day, you’ll settle down.”

“Aye, that is the goal, though I dinna wish to marry. I’ve had enough people ordering me around, where I go and what I do. I’d like to buy my own estate, my own lands, and lead my life the way I want to.”

They descended to the ground floor of the tower where the weapons and food were stored. Hamish turned to Amy, sadness in his eyes.

“’Tis nae easy to find a good woman who isna taken. Craig Cambel is a lucky man.”

Amy opened her mouth, not even sure what to say, but Hamish already turned and opened the front door for her.

Outside, rain drizzled, mixed with snow. The courtyard had turned into a swamp. She lifted her skirts and followed Hamish across the courtyard and into the great hall, which stood between the Comyn Tower and the eastern tower against the north wall.

When she entered, the hall grew silent. The burned parts of the roof were patched up, although quite poorly, and water dripped from there into a barrel. The hall smelled of damp thatch and warm beeswax candles. They set the room in a golden glow, like a million faerie lights. The tables and benches were pushed aside, and the warriors—there must have been at least fifty of them—stood in a large oval, silently watching her.

At the head of the oval, stood Craig. Owen stood next to him. Craig wore a blue tunic, and a belt with his sword on it. His hair was combed and his short beard freshly trimmed. Wow, it looked like he’d made an effort for her. He stood with his feet wide apart, solemn, his back straight, as though he was about to participate in a sacrament.

His eyes were on her, dark and heavy, and it was as though they caught her and held her in their gaze. Surprisingly, he wasn’t hostile. He was...

Admiring.

Kind.

Respectful.

As the men stepped aside to let her through, she walked towards him across the middle of the circle, her medieval heelless shoes whispering softly against the wooden floor. The closer to Craig she got, the warmer her whole body became. And when she reached him, her cheeks were hot and her throat hurt from tension.

Silly.

What was wrong with her that she was sweating from nervousness, that her heart beat like a drum?

Craig smiled at her.

Smiled.

For the first time since she'd met him, he smiled. Soft. Welcoming. Gentle.

She couldn't stop herself—she smiled back, and something connected them, like invisible threads.

“Shall we begin?” Owen said.

“Aye,” Craig said and took her hand in his.



AMY LOOKED LIKE ONE OF THE FAERIE FOLK, HER CURLY, LONG red hair ablaze in the candlelight, her blue eyes bright and burning under her long eyelashes. The red dress she wore heightened the impression that she was born of flame.

As she came to him and stood by him, her cheeks burned, and he secretly hoped it was because she might be excited or at least pleased in some way to be marrying him.

Craig's chest tightened with the anticipation of wonder he'd never felt before. Why would he feel that towards an enemy he was just using for revenge?

He remembered a similar feeling before he lay with a woman for the first time as a boy of sixteen. He had been infatuated with pretty servant girls and farmers' daughters before, but he'd never loved anyone. The difference between lust and love had always been clear to him.

As had the knowledge that he would marry one day to form an alliance between his clan and another. To continue the line. Because that was what men did.

But he'd also known that he might not love his wife. He might not even trust her the way he trusted his father, his brothers, and his cousins.

But excitement lit up his whole body. He took Amy's hand. Hers was icy cold, and it burned his skin. Something went through his hand to hers and back. An invisible tie wrapped around their wrists. What was that? Craig felt stronger and more powerful and alive than he'd ever remembered feeling.

"Here today," Owen began, "we are going to join these two, Craig Cambel and Amy MacDougall in marriage."

Owen looked a little nervous. Usually, the chief or the highest authority in the clan led the handfasting ceremony. In this castle, that was Craig. But Craig was busy getting married, so he'd asked Owen, as his closest relative present. But Owen was as far away from marriage as a man could be, chasing skirts and seeking adventures. So Craig understood why his brother would feel a tad uncomfortable.

"Who wishes to support these two to be joining their hands and lives now, say aye," Owen said.

"Aye," the men in the circle echoed.

And a small shudder ran through Craig. He understood why this was an important part of the ceremony—the support of his clansmen and his ancestors brought confidence in the rightness of the decision.

"Do ye have vows?" Owen said.

Craig hadn't thought of the vows, but he needed to say something. He turned Amy towards him and took her other

hand in his, too. Her eyes big, wide, and vulnerable. He wanted to reassure her all would be well. That she was safe.

“I vow to be loyal to ye while ye’re my wife. I vow to protect ye as though ye’re of my blood and bone. I vow to care for ye as a man should for his wife. And I vow to always come for ye if ye need me.”

Her eyes glistened—with tears?

“Amy?” Owen said.

“I—” she said. “I vow to be your wife to the best of my ability. To help you with whatever I can. And to...to...to be loyal to you.”

The word “loyal” came out with a little jump in the middle, and Craig frowned. That was to be expected, he reminded himself. She was, after all, the daughter of the enemy.

“Please hold out yer hands,” Owen said.

Craig and Amy turned and raised their joined hands to him, and Owen put a simple band over their hands.

“Here are the hands,” Owen said, “that will join and work together, the hands of friends and not of enemies, the hands of a man and his wife. These are the hands that will hold each other if ye’re lost and support each other if ye need a rest. These are the hands that will care for each other and wave goodbye before the last journey to the land of death.”

As he was saying the words, he was wrapping the band around their wrists and their fists, and finally tying a knot on top of them. Craig liked the feeling of Amy’s soft skin, now warm from his touch. The skin on the back of her palm was weathered, and her fingers weren’t the fingers of a gentle lady but had small calluses on them. It was the hand of a strong woman, a woman who did things on her own and didn’t expect others to do them for her.

He liked that.

“And with this band, ye are now man and wife,” Owen said.

The warriors around the room stomped their feet and hooted.

“Share a drink from the *cuach*.” Owen took out the communal drinking cup with two handles and poured the uisge into it. “As a symbol of many other things ye will share.”

He brought the *cuach* to Craig’s mouth, and he took sip, then watched as Amy sipped the liquid as well, her lips red and soft around the side of the *cuach*.

“And join the union with a kiss,” Owen said.

Craig suppressed a “finally” that longed to get out of his throat. He looked into Amy’s eyes, then gazed at her lips, a little swollen from the spirits. Oh, how he craved them. But he would never do anything against her will.

He looked into her eyes again, asking for permission, letting her know he wouldn’t kiss her unless she wanted him to.

She breathed quickly, her chest rising and falling. There was alarm in her eyes, but also desire—then they softened, and her lips called to him.

With a groan he couldn’t stop, Craig brought her to him with his free arm and sealed his lips with hers.

## CHAPTER 10

**C**raig's lips were like velvet, warm and soft, and yet his chest under her palm was hard as a rock and as hot as a furnace. His heart thumped under her hand fast and strong.

He smelled like clean skin, and male musk, and like mountains and the forest in fall after a rain.

And the kiss...

Oh, the kiss...

It spurred an avalanche of tingling and sweet burning through her lips. He pressed a little more, opening her mouth with his tongue. Then he swiped it against hers gently once, twice. Maybe she heard herself moan. Maybe it was him, but her head spun and her whole body ignited. Her mind went blank, filling with sighs and moans and dirty, dirty thoughts.

The room filled with whistles and hoots.

"Aye, ride the MacDougall so that she canna stand on the morrow!" someone cried.

"If he has anything to ride her with," another man said.

The room erupted in guffaws.

Amy sprang away from Craig, her face hot. "Are we done?" she asked Owen. "Please, remove the ribbon."

"Aye," Owen said and glanced at Craig.

Amy ignored Craig's eyes on her, which were as heavy as lead. She was such an idiot. Being attracted to him—allowing

him to kiss her like that... As though it was normal, as though having feelings for him wouldn't complicate things and make her leaving even harder.

Owen undid the tie, and Amy snatched back her hand. The warmth of Craig's skin gone, coldness surrounded her. They were married now. She was tied to him. Entrapped even deeper here in the medieval Highlands—because she was tied to a human being now. And even though there was no ring to bind her, the memory of the band around her wrist was like a handcuff.

Craig held her gaze for a moment, then gave a curt nod. He turned to his men. "A wedding canna go without a feast," he said. "Let us bring the tables and the benches back to their places. The hunters have already gotten back with the game and 'tis being roasted. I bought bread, butter, and pies in the village. And there won't be any lack of wine, ale, and uisge. Ye all may empty the casks for all I care. A Cambel marrit a MacDougall today."

He looked at Amy, and this time she saw something like regret in his eyes. The sight punched her in the gut.

"We better drink to that," he said.



CRAIG WAS A FOOL. HE'D THOUGHT IT WOULD BE EASY TO BE indifferent to her. It would only be for a year, and only to break the enemy's position.

But that kiss...the handfasting...looking into Amy's eyes and seeing the vulnerability in her. The real her.

Craig had always prided himself on being a good judge of character. And he sensed that she was lying about something. Which he hated but also understood, given she was living among her enemies. He'd probably have done the same—anything to protect his clan.

But underneath that, he saw a good person. Her eyes were pure, honest. They didn't lie. They showed him her pain, and



in their depths, fear. A constant sense of panic.

He wanted to free her from it.

Was he the source of her pain, her fear? If so, he hated causing her distress.

But he shouldn't care.

Craig grunted as he pulled the giant table into position with several of his men. The hall wasn't decorated for a traditional wedding. There were no flowers, it hadn't been cleaned, and the food wasn't yet ready. The lack of a woman's hand over the household was clear.

"I'll go see about the food," Amy said.

She'd been standing in the corner, looking a little helpless and lost, watching the men do the heavy lifting.

"Aye," Craig said. "Thank ye."

She nodded, not meeting his eyes, and walked out. What had changed? He swore she'd liked the kiss, she'd wanted him to kiss her. But then...

*Stop caring about her feelings*, he reminded himself.

But despite himself, he wanted to please her. Mayhap, a clean floor and tables would lift her mood.

"Owen, Lachlan, take two more men and wipe the tables," Craig said.

Both stared at him.

"Ye're jesting, cousin, surely," Lachlan said. "'Tis women's work."

"The only woman here is my wife. So if ye dinna wish to dine in dirt, like pigs, ye move yer arses and clean."

Frowning and mumbling curses, they turned and walked out.

At least they were Cambels and his direct relatives. He looked over at the others standing nearby. They all tensed, sensing they were all about to get similar tasks.

“Dinna look at me like that, lads,” Craig said. “Ye three, come with me. We shall take brooms and sweep.”

Unhappily, they trudged after him.

After a while, the dirt had been swept away, the tables and chairs had been cleaned of spilled ale, crumbs, and scraps of food, a fire was burning in the fireplace, and even the rain had stopped.

Craig, Owen, Lachlan, and the rest of the helping crew brought food and drinks from the kitchen: bread, butter, cheese, and roasted hares and fowls. Then casks of ale, wine, and uisge were brought from the storage rooms.

When everything was set up, and the hall was full of men sitting around the tables, chatting and drinking, and the homely scent of grilled meat, fresh bread, and woodsmoke filled the room, Craig’s bride finally returned. She took a seat by Craig’s side at the table at the end of the hall, next to the fireplace, where the lord and the lady of the castle usually sat surrounded by their family.

Family Craig would never have with Amy MacDougall.

“Did you clean?” She cocked one eyebrow, looking around the room.

“Aye,” Craig said, watching a smile spread on her lips.

“Oh. Looks great! Thank you, Craig.”

He slid a cup of ale towards her and she took it, their fingers touching briefly and sending heat through him. He may enjoy this marriage if he managed to keep the peace with her, giving her what she wanted when he could.

He rose from his seat and raised his glass. “May my wife live long and well!”

The warriors echoed. Owen stood up, “And to Craig Cambel, I could have sworn I’d never see him marrit to a MacDougall. May God give him strength to live through this year!”

The men laughed, and even Amy smiled and shook her head, then drank.

Craig sat down and looked at her. “Do ye love the Earl of Ross?” he asked.

She coughed into her cup. “What?”

“I dinna ken. Mayhap ye love him already.”

“Excuse me, but how is it any of your business? How would you like it if I asked you the same question—do you love a woman who isn’t me?”

Craig leaned back and watched her carefully. She was all thorns, but judging by the vulnerability he’d seen in her eyes, it was only on the outside.

“I have nae problem answering that question for ye, Amy,” he said. “I never loved a woman. Nae yet.”

She softened. “Why not? No one good enough for the honorable Craig Cambel? Everyone may betray and backstab?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Aye. They may. I didna meet one I can trust my life and soul with.”

She nodded, thoughtful, as though remembering something. “And you may never meet one. Yes, if you don’t open up more and trust people, that may never happen for you.”

He chuckled. “This sounds like a prophecy. Are ye a seeress?”

“No. But I know things.”

“How mysterious. Tell me, what are ye good at? What do ye enjoy doing? Cooking? Embroidery? Sewing?”

She burst out laughing, the sound sweet and beautiful. “Me? Embroidery? No, my friend. I don’t care about that at all. I’m good at searching for and finding people. I can apply first aid, help with choking, stitch wounds, bandage and fix broken arms and legs—that sort of thing. You didn’t marry a wallflower, I’m afraid.”

His jaw hung open, and he closed it. She took a sip, smiling into the cup. He had never even heard of a woman

being able to find lost people. But besides that, she sounded like she was a healer. Which was good news, given that he didn't have one in the castle.

But searching and rescuing?

“So ye are a witch? How do ye find lost people?”

“No, nothing like that. Just tracking. Logic. Common sense. Then I know rock climbing and swimming and such. But I also need equipment...”

His eyes widened as she said the last word.

“I mean, certain tools. Rare tools. I don't think you have them here.”

“Equipment?” The word was strange, like something from a foreign language.

He respected her for her skills more and more. She certainly wasn't just a chief's daughter. She was more. So much more.

“How did ye learn all that?” he asked.

She had just opened her mouth when a young man ran into the hall with something in his hand and strode directly to Craig. It was Killian, one of the younger boys from the army, who had stayed behind. He was good with his bow, Craig remembered. Tonight was the boy's watch.

He had a bird in his hand, a pigeon, with an arrow sticking from its chest.

“Lord,” Killian said. “Forgive me, but I need a word.”

Craig stood up and followed the boy to a corner where no one could hear them.

“’Tis nae pigeon from our birdhouse,” Killian said. “I ken because we only have a dozen, and I ken every one of them. I feed them every day. This one is new. It has these white flecks on the breast, see? None of ours has them. It was brought here recently. Someone sent it from the southern tower. Since ’tis nae our pigeon, ’tis someone else’s, trained to fly to another

house. And ye dinna receive pigeons from the Cambel house or I'd have kent. Aye?"

"Aye." Craig removed the leather pouch wrapped around the bird's leg. Inside there was a paper, and he unfolded it. A message was written in uneven letters, as though a child had scrawled them, or someone who didn't have much practice in writing.

"Secret passage nae found," the message said. "The lord, therefore, alive. He marrit Amy. Send more pigeons. More time needed."

A chill ran through Craig.

There was a traitor in the castle, and they were searching for the secret tunnel.

Someone wanted to kill him.

The only person he knew about who would want all those things was his dear wife.

## CHAPTER 11

**A**my could actually see the broad muscles on Craig's back stiffen as he talked to the kid in the corner. Craig turned to her, his eyes dark. His grimace of fury made her stomach flip. He walked right to her—his expression would make the devil himself pale in fear.

Her feet froze. Her pulse skyrocketed. Her lungs contracted. The walls were closing in on her like they had that night long ago, when her dad had been coming at her just like Craig, furious and powerful. And there was nowhere to go.

And something bad was about to happen.

He grabbed her by the upper arm and tugged her after him amid the hoots and wolf-howls of the men. He led her away from the great hall, out into the freezing night, with gentle snow falling. The mud of the courtyard had frozen and was hard underfoot. Snow was turning the blackness into a gray blanket.

The hum of voices seeped from the great hall, but otherwise, it was quiet.

So quiet, she could hear her own breath rushing in and out.

“Where are you pulling me to like a goat?” she growled.

“I must have a word with ye, wife dearest. Alone. In our bedchamber.”

He opened the door to the Comyn Tower—the air was warm from the torches on the wall.

“*Our* bedchamber?” Amy said.

He began climbing the curved stairs and pulled her after him.

“Why of course, *our* bedchamber. We are marrit, or did ye already forget?”

They passed the door to the lord’s private hall on the first floor and continued climbing.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

“Good.” He opened the door on the second floor. It was pleasantly warm in the bedroom—the fireplace burned, and the room looked homey. Suddenly, the bed took up all the space in the room.

He closed the door and turned to her.

“Good that ye remember, dear.” He took a step towards her, and there was such dark promise in his eyes, that she stepped back. “Because this”—he held a small paper in front of him—“suggests that ye might have forgotten.”

“What’s that?” Amy said.

“Oh. Nothing much. Just yer regrets ye sent to yer father that ye didna kill me yet.”

Amy shook her head. “Excuse me?”

He took several slow steps towards her and stopped so close she could feel the heat of his body, could smell him—all manly and delicious—could see the vein in his neck throbbing.

“Ye want to kill me,” he said. “Don’t ye, Amy? ’Tis the perfect opportunity for yer clan. Ye’re close to me.”

Amy’s mouth was suddenly dry. “I don’t want to kill you, Craig,” she said, careful not to let the shaking in her fingers slip into her voice.

“Hm.”

In one swift movement, he reached for his dagger and held it out, handle to her. Flames from the fireplace were reflected in the long, sharp blade.

“We might as well see, shall we?” he said.

He put the point against his heart. Amy's stomach flipped.

"Take it," he said. "Kill me. Now."

"Craig—" she said, her voice trembling.

"Then yer mission will be complete. Yer father will rejoice. Ye can marry the Earl of Ross."

She shook her head. Her chest tightened further, making it hard to breathe. "Stop it this minute! I don't want to kill you."

His arms fell, and he put the dagger back into his belt.

"Oh nae, wait. Ye canna kill me yet. There's one more thing ye need, do ye not? That is why I am still alive, aye?"

"I don't need anything from you except freedom."

Craig chuckled. "Ye can pretend really well. Aye, MacDougall blood, what can I say."

He stepped away from her and looked her up and down. "So ye deny it? Ye deny writing this?"

He held the paper out, but it was too far to read the tiny script.

"I didn't write anything, and I sure as hell didn't send this. I don't want you or anyone dead."

"Why is it that ye wanted access to the whole castle, Amy? Is there something *specific* ye're looking for?"

Her body went as stiff as wood, and Amy exhaled to relieve the tension. What did he know? Did he suspect she was looking for the rock? Was he even aware of it? If he thought she was a witch or something, surely he'd kill her. Or lock her away somewhere dark forever... A tremor went through her, and she moved to the fireplace to warm herself.

*Get yourself together*, she commanded. *He isn't locking you up again. Not yet.*

She turned to him, her head high, her shoulders straight.

"I have absolutely no idea where this message came from, what is in it, or who wrote it. I do not want to kill you. I'm not a murderer, I save people's lives for God's sake. And I know



you don't trust me—you have no reason to—and I don't know how to prove my innocence. But I have nothing to do with this.”

His heavy, piercing gaze bored into her. It was as though he saw beneath her skin. She held his eyes, even though hers burned and she needed to blink.

Then he smiled, and a sense of relief went through her.

“Mayhap, it was nae ye who wrote this. That would be too easy.

“But it doesna mean ye're not involved,” he continued. “So I will be even more careful. We will sleep together in one room because we're marrit now. And because I need to know what ye do and with whom. Ye're under my watch now, Amy, understood?”

Amy sighed. “What's not to understand? But if you sleep here, you can't sleep in the bed—understood?”

“We are man and wife. I have every right to take ye. Ye're mine.”

The ground shifted under her feet, heat suddenly flushing through her.

“Do not even dare,” she said. “You promised, nothing will be done against my will. I do not give my permission for sex. I do not want you, do you hear?”

His face turned dark. “Aye, Amy.” He walked away from her, then turned for a moment. “Dinna fash, I wilna touch ye. Not now. Not ever.”

And he left the room, leaving her breathless...and strangely disappointed.

## CHAPTER 12

**A**my didn't return to the great hall, and her seat felt empty next to Craig. In fact, he felt empty. His mind was not here, not now, but with her, up in the tower. It was their wedding night. The night they were supposed to consummate the marriage.

And his bride didn't want anything to do with him. Which was exactly what he should expect from this marriage. And he shouldn't want anything to do with her, either.

So why did her rejection hurt?

And why, now with a cup of uisge in his hands, could he only think of going back to the bedchamber, kissing her and making her his? A quiver of desire ran through his body as he imagined Amy naked under him, her back arched, her head tilted, her sweet mouth open as she moaned his name.

Craig shook his head. What a fool he was. Blinded by the wiles of a MacDougall. Wanting his enemy, the enemy who wanted him dead.

Most likely.

Or someone else, someone among his men, wanted him dead. The thought only darkened his mood further.

As he drank, he looked around the hall, studying every single man.

One of them could be a traitor, looking for the secret tunnel and wanting to kill him.

He had thought he could trust his men and the men of his allies.

Obviously, he was wrong.

Was Amy the one plotting his death?

That could still be possible. He had been certain of it before. But when he'd confronted her, she'd seemed genuinely surprised and even angry at his accusation, which had made him believe her for a moment. That could just be a ploy, though. Having access to him at night, sleeping, unguarded, might very well be the reason she'd married him. Or she could plan to put poison in his food.

Just as any man in the castle could, he reminded himself.

He wasn't convinced Amy had sent the message, just as he wasn't sure who the traitor was.

Not Owen, not Lachlan, not any other Cambel—none of them had any connection to MacDougalls or reason for treachery.

Not that he could think of, anyway.

Unless it was someone he wouldn't have thought of—a Cambel who had ties to the enemy clan.

He saw Lachlan sitting at the same table as Owen, and the other Cambels. The men laughed, their table loud and lively.

Craig had known Lachlan his whole life. They were the same age, and for a time, Lachlan had been fostered with Craig's family while their fathers were fighting in the south. Now he was a tacksman on Cambel lands and was as loyal to the clan as any Cambel through and through. Never in his life had Craig suspected Lachlan could have a treacherous bone in his body, except...

He had a MacDougall grandmother. Yes, on his mother's side. Didn't he?

Craig stood up and went to the table. He touched Lachlan's shoulder. "Lachlan, a word?"

The man stood up. "Aye, cousin."

They walked to Craig's table, where no one was sitting.

"What is it?" Lachlan asked. "Why aren't ye with yer bride, warming her bed?"

Craig was silent for a moment, studying the man's face. His brown eyes were foggy and red, his eyelids heavy, his expression carefree.

How could he be a traitor? As long as Craig had known him, the man had been honest to a fault.

"Dinna matter. Listen, were ye close with yer grandmother?"

"Was close with both of them."

"The MacDougall one."

"Aye, Granny Coline. She died when I was but a wee fart. Still remember her honeyed oatcakes, though. I didna see her often on account of they lived farther away. Did she visit ye from the grave or somethin'?"

Craig couldn't tell anyone that the pigeon had been intercepted. He needed the traitor to be oblivious, so that whoever it was wouldn't be jumpy. So that Craig could observe. He'd told Killian to keep silent about the note or he'd be endangering the whole castle. The boy understood—Craig had seen the determination on his face, the importance of the secret weighing on him.

"Since I marrit a MacDougall now," Craig said, cringing about lying to his clansman, "I thought maybe ye kent some of them. Did ye ever go to MacDougall gatherings? Visit yer relatives from yer grandmother's side?"

"Once or twice, while Granny was alive. A couple of cousins also visited, I reckon."

"Are ye still in contact with them?"

Lachlan's face sobered. "Nae. Dinna ken where they are or what they do. Dinna want to, either. Not after what Alasdair did to Marjorie. Do ye need something from the MacDougalls, cousin? Say a word and I'll find the shites."

Guilt stabbed Craig. Lachlan seemed to be completely innocent, honest, and oblivious to Craig's suspicions.

Could the relative he'd known his whole life plot such treachery?

Losing his grandfather and having seen what the MacDougalls did to Marjorie, Craig had sworn to never be so naive and trusting, and to never let another MacDougall betray him or his family.

He just couldn't allow himself to completely trust Lachlan.

The truth was, he couldn't allow himself to trust anyone.

"Nae, not now, cousin." Craig squeezed Lachlan's shoulder. "I'll ask ye again if I need to. 'Tis good to ken for now."

"Aye. Then let me congratulate ye on yer marriage personally and wish ye many years of health and happiness." He took two cups from the table, gave one to Craig and clunked it with his. "Let us drink."

## CHAPTER 13

**T**he next morning, Amy woke up with a headache and stomach cramps. Her period had started. Thank God for the tampons she had in her backpack. What did women even do in the Middle Ages?

She didn't have anyone to ask. Clearly, she wouldn't ask Craig.

Craig had come to sleep in the bedchamber last night, but he hadn't gotten into the bed with her. He'd slept by the fireplace, covered in sheepskins and furs. In the morning, he'd left before she'd woken up. So she had privacy to dress. Somehow, it was comforting to have him in the room with her. Being a stranger here, not just from another continent but another time...

It was lonely.

She was used to being alone back in Vermont, but this was different. She couldn't be herself. Every day here, she pretended. She watched what she said and how she behaved.

But today was a new day, and all she needed to do was get one step closer to the rock in the storeroom. One step closer to getting out of here—which seemed even more important now that Craig thought she wanted to kill him!

So there was a killer in the castle, someone who meant business... And that was all her clan's doing—well, her ancestors, anyway. Which meant Craig was in real danger.

She wanted to help him, but what could she do about it?

It wasn't her life, and it wasn't her business. Her business was back in her own time, helping Jenny out, making sure her little sister didn't feel abandoned and alone taking care of their dad. Amy had better get out of here as soon as possible.

She was now Craig's wife and the lady of the castle or whatever, so she needed to run the household.

A perfect excuse to visit the underground storeroom, to check what was available for meals.

She marched through the courtyard into the eastern tower. She opened the door and froze. Two guards stood by the entrance to the downstairs.

Why would Craig put guards here? What were they guarding? Not the rock, surely...

"Mistress." One of them nodded, watching her carefully.

"Hello, gentlemen." She bit her lip. Based on their confused expressions, they had no idea what "gentlemen" meant. Never mind, she thought. *Shoulders straight, chin high, continue pretending you know what you're doing.* "I need to see what's downstairs in the storeroom, to plan for the meals."

They looked at each other, frowning.

"Now," she said.

"Canna let ye in, mistress," one of them said. "Lord was strict about that."

"Do you want to eat well or continue roasting squirrels and eating hard oatcakes? How about some fresh bread, butter, and a hot stew? Winter is coming, I've heard."

The other guard swallowed saliva. "Can only let ye in with the lord, mistress."

Amy grunted in exasperation, turned away, and marched to the kitchen. "Lord this, lord that," she mumbled under her breath. "We'll see."

Nevertheless, she was also tired of eating scraps. And she wanted to help out, so she was looking forward to establishing some sort of order in the household.

She already ran the local search and rescue station in Vermont, with eight people in her team. This couldn't be much harder. And it would be much less dangerous—no lives depended on her actions. Unless she put a poisonous mushroom in a stew by accident... But she trusted herself enough to not make people sick from her cooking.

She entered the empty kitchen, still dirty from yesterday's cooking.

She needed a team of cooks and a team of cleaners. Since Craig had let the professionals go, she had to recruit help from the men she had in the castle. The best method was probably to choose men based on experience. Likely, many of them knew some cooking, but she doubted anyone would want to clean.

She should make a rotation plan, so that everyone would share the burden. Otherwise, they'd need to be paid or rewarded in some other way.

The kitchen was a huge room, a separate timber building. There was a giant fireplace on one end with a big cauldron hanging from a chain. In the middle of the room, was a massive wooden table where vegetable peels and remnants of butchering remained from the night before.

Men, Amy thought.

There was, of course, no running water, so she'd need to send someone to the well in the courtyard regularly. But, thankfully, there was a slop drain for dirty water—just a hole in the wall leading to the castle gutter.

Bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling. When she'd first arrived, there had been fish hanging to dry around the fireplace and in the chimney, but now it was gone.

A stone oven stood on the opposite side of the room from the fireplace. Amy had seen some of the men use it to bake breads and pies. Unfortunately, she didn't know how to bake. She remembered her mom baking in the farm kitchen. Amy used to help her, but it was such a long time ago, she no longer had any idea what to do. She wasn't a big cook, either. She



usually made mac and cheese from a box, put a frozen pizza in the oven, or heated up a microwave dinner. She needed to remind herself how to make real food.

Right. She went into the pantry at the back of the kitchen. It was chilly there, with the weather significantly cooler than when she'd first arrived, which, she supposed, helped the cabbages, leeks, onions, and dried peas to last longer. There weren't any potatoes, tomatoes, or carrots. She saw plums, apples, and pears, but they were going bad already. She saw cheese and pots of butter, which was heavily salted, probably to preserve it. Sacks of flour stood by the walls—and remembering the scent of wheat from growing up on the farm, she knew this wasn't it. Probably the sacks held either oats, barley, or rye.

Smoked meat and fish hung suspended from the ceiling. Eggs lay in a basket. She'd been feeding the chickens, which were in a pen right in the stables—probably to keep the birds warm.

Amy remembered caring for chickens and geese on the farm. They'd even had cows and horses. She'd loved the animals and even wanted to become a veterinarian. But once she'd gotten through one year of vet school, she'd known it wasn't for her. She'd missed working with people.

There were also small pots with spices—cinnamon, ginger, and pepper—no doubt imported and very expensive. Salt was in a small sack on the shelf. A casket with vinegar stood in the corner. She could use it to clean the surfaces, and maybe even to clean wounds if it came to it. Yeast was there, too—no doubt for bread and ale.

That was it. Her small kingdom.

What could she do? Clearly, she couldn't cook alone for the whole castle. Craig had mentioned there were a hundred people or so. Someone would need to bake bread, because she couldn't. Her best, most effective cooking would no doubt be making stews and soups. She would just throw meat and vegetables into that giant cauldron, maybe even oats to thicken

it. If that wouldn't feed a hundred people for a day, she didn't know what would.

She could roast the meat the men hunted, and make stew from the fish they caught. Someone would need to help with peeling, chopping, and cleaning vegetables, kneading dough for bread and pies, and general cleaning.

She needed to talk to Craig about assigning people.

Walking out of the kitchen, she hit a rock-solid human body, almost losing her balance. The tall man steadied her, grasping her by the upper arms.

"Whoa, lass," Hamish said.

Amy quickly stepped away from him. "Good morning," she said. "Looking for breakfast?"

"Aye, break the fast. My head is splitting from the feast yesterday. Something to ease the hunger would be fine."

"Well, I'm just looking for Craig so that he can assign people to work in the kitchens. I need bakers and cooks and a butcher..."

"I can help ye," he said. "I have watch duty on the southern tower after dinner, but I can help ye now."

She'd learned by now that dinner meant lunch for them, eaten from midmorning to noon. And supper was actually like American dinner, eaten in the late afternoon or evening.

"Well, I really appreciate it, Hamish. Can you bake bread?"

"Aye. I grew up on a farm. I ken how to cook and bake."

Something warmed in her. "You also grew up on a—"

Oh damn.

She shut up. The truth had almost slipped out. She wasn't a great pretender.

"I mean, like many other people. You grew up on a farm—that's great!"

He narrowed his dark eyes, studying her. For a few moments, they grew cold and suspicious. She laughed nervously.

“If you can start on the bread, that would be great. Do you know where Craig is?”

He nodded slowly. “Aye. Seen him near the eastern tower.”

“Great. Thanks, Hamish.” She nodded to him, smiled, and walked away as quickly as she could. But she felt his eyes on her back.

## CHAPTER 14

**T***he next day...*

“FERGUS, COULD YOU PEEL THE PARSNIPS BETTER, PLEASE?” Amy said. “Look, you’re leaving such big patches of skin unpeeled.”

Fergus, one of the two middle-aged warriors helping her, stopped peeling the parsnip and threw her a heavy glance from under his eyebrows.

She’d organized the cooking like a conveyor belt. She had no idea how big kitchens worked, really, but her common sense told her they’d be faster and more efficient if one person had one job, just like Henry Ford had intended. One washed, the other peeled, and Amy cut. One of the older men butchered recent game that hunters had brought. And the other two—a teenager and an older man—kneaded dough and made bread.

“Ye mean, like this, mistress?” He threw the half-peeled parsnip to Amy.

Instead of landing on or near the cutting board, the parsnip hit Amy right in the head. The men snorted and then laughed out loud. Tears burned the backs of Amy’s eyes, but she ignored the pain. She’d be damned if she’d let these jerks see her cry.

The parsnip rolled on the floor towards Fergus.

Keeping her face cool, Amy blew a strand of her hair off her face, then wiped it to the side with the back of her hand.

“Please pick it up, Fergus, and finish the job,” she said.

He held her gaze for a moment, then turned to Angus who stood by his side washing the vegetables in a large pot. “Do ye ken the story of Kenneth MacDougall, who fecked a goat because he thought it was his wife?”

Rage hit Amy in a hot wave, and her cheeks burned.

“Nae,” Angus said.

“Aye, ’twas because the goat smelled just like her.”

The kitchen exploded with the laughter of all five men. Amy stood with her hands on her waist, watching them coldly.

“Very smart and funny, Fergus,” she said when the laughter died out. “Now, finish the parsnip, or I will shove it up a certain part of your body you’d least want it to be.”

Fergus’s smile died. “Dinna threaten me, mistress. Ye’re not the one commanding me. I’ll be damned if I take orders from a MacDougall. ’Tis my lord I answer to.”

Amy straightened her back. “Well, your lord told you to work in the kitchen under my orders.”

“He said work in the kitchen, so I work in the kitchen. He didna say a word about pleasing the little red MacDougall arse.” He pushed the parsnip with his boot, and it rolled back to Amy. “Now finish yer own peeling if ye dinna like my work. Or find yerself another cook.”

He spat the last word and returned to peeling another parsnip.

The men threw dark glances at her and returned to their work while Amy stood speechless, fuming.

She was just about to pick up the parsnip and acknowledge her defeat in front of her staff when a movement from the door caught her eye, and she turned to see Craig.

He entered, taking up all of the space with his presence. The air was sucked out of Amy’s lungs from the sight of him,

making her forget all of her anger and indignation about Fergus. Craig's hair was a little damp and clung to his forehead... Did he take a bath? The thought of his body, naked and wet and tall and hard...

Oh, was she a schoolgirl? Melting like that at the sight of a handsome man.

Their eyes locked, then his traveled to her lips. "Everything all right, lass?"

As long as he looked at her like that, she'd be all right. "Yes," she said.

Fergus and the rest did not lift their heads, their hands busy. They looked like naughty schoolboys in the presence of the teacher.

Well, Fergus had just basically compared their lord's *wife* to a goat. If she wanted, Amy could have his ass thoroughly punished just now.

But she wouldn't. She wouldn't rat on her team, no matter how badly they behaved.

Didn't mean that she couldn't teach him a lesson.

"I don't know," she said and looked pointedly at Fergus. "Is everything all right, Fergus?"

One of Fergus's eyes twitched, his nostrils flared, but he continued peeling the parsnip. "Aye, mistress," he mumbled. "Why wouldna it be?"

"I think you promised to finish peeling the parsnip you dropped. Didn't you?"

Fergus glared at her, his jaw muscles working.

"Or did I misunderstand your MacDougall goat joke?" Amy pressed.

"What joke?" Craig asked.

Fergus's mouth pulled into a spiteful curve. He looked like he was about to spit at Amy. "Nae, ye got it right, mistress," he said finally and picked up the parsnip.

Amy nodded, satisfied. Military authority was military authority in the Middle Ages, as well. And they definitely respected Craig.

“Good,” Amy said. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

She turned to Craig. “Did you want something?”

“Aye.” Craig looked around the kitchen, still puzzled. “I need yer assistance. Ye said ye had healing skills.”

“Well, not healing exactly, just first aid stuff...”

Damn, first aid probably didn’t mean anything to him.

“Um,” she said. “Yes, I have some healing experience. Is anyone hurt?”

“Aye. First aid or nae, ye’re the best we got. Ye better come with me.”

Amy nodded, undid her apron, and put it on the large table. “Angus, please take my place cutting the vegetables until I’m back.”

“Aye, mistress,” Angus said.

Craig let Amy go through the door, his warm, masculine scent touching her as she passed by him, making her pulse accelerate. “What was that about a goat joke?” he said when they were in the courtyard.

Cold air bit Amy’s cheeks and nose, reminding her that winter was not far away. The courtyard hummed quietly with voices, and a small gathering stood by the gates.

“Nothing to concern you with,” Amy lied. “Everything’s under control. They are not thrilled to be chopping veg, but someone has to, right?”

“Aye.”

“Who’s hurt?”

“A child, something about their arm,” Craig said. “The villagers came for help. Can ye do something?”

“I hope so.”

Amy had received advanced training in first aid—she could secure broken limbs, do basic treatment for burns, and stop external bleeding until an ambulance arrived, but she was certainly not a medical professional.

The small crowd consisted of about a dozen people, men and women of all ages. Women wore long dresses of dark wool with white linen caps on their heads, while men were in heavy quilted jackets and woolen trousers. They looked warily at Craig and Amy as they approached. In a cart drawn by a pony sat a girl of ten or so. An older man sat by her side, his arm around the girl's shoulders. She hugged herself with one arm, her face distorted in a grimace of pain.

Amy hurried to her, while the people looked at her cautiously.

“Hi, sweetie,” Amy said as she stood next to the cart. “My name is Amy, Amy Mac—”

“Amy Cambel.” Craig raised his chin.

*Amy Cambel...*

How could he just put a yoke like that on her—publicly claiming ownership of her. Amy's chest and stomach tightened till a sharp pain cut at her gut. Not long ago, she'd been Amy Johnson, and look how that had turned out. She couldn't breathe for a moment, and made a conscious effort to suck in air, then breathe out.

“'Tis my wife,” Craig explained.

*Forget Craig. Just concentrate on the little girl who needs help.*

She'd deal with Craig later.

“Good day, mistress,” the man hugging the girl said. “Are ye a healer?”

Amy smiled, rubbing one hand against her leg to stop it from shaking. “Well, not quite. But I know how to deal with some injuries. I might be able to help your—”

“Granddaughter,” the man said. “My name is Erskine, we came from the village up River Lochy. We heard rumors that



the Comyns are nae here no more and wanted to see for ourselves who we are to pay rent to. And Caoimhe”—he pronounced the girl’s name as *Keeva*—“fell and hurt her arm. Since the healer is away, we came to ask if the new lord has one.”

Amy nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. Caoimhe, why don’t you come inside with me where I can take a look at your arm. It’s a little chilly here for you to undress.”

“Thank ye, mistress,” Caoimhe said.

Amy helped the girl to climb down from the cart. Instead of wearing a jacket, she was wrapped in a couple of adult-sized coats. The three of them and Craig walked towards the great hall where it would be warm by the fireplace and there’d be enough light to examine her.

“I didna want to harm her arm even more by putting it into a sleeve,” Erskine explained.

“Yes, you did right,” Amy said. “Caoimhe, sweetie, why don’t you explain to me what happened?”

“Boys were chasing me,” she said. “I climbed a tree and fell...”

So it could be a broken arm. Broken bones were tricky. If it was a broken bone—and God forbid, in several places—Amy could do little to help the girl. She could put on a splint and make some sort of cast, but she couldn’t guarantee how well it would heal.

“And where does it hurt?”

“The shoulder, mistress. I canna move my arm.”

They arrived and settled near the fireplace, and Amy unwrapped Caoimhe. Even under the girl’s simple dress, Amy could see the odd shape of the shoulder. It wasn’t bleeding, though, which was a good sign. Amy felt along the shoulder and arm to make sure there were no broken bones.

She sighed with relief. “Good news is it’s not broken. It’s dislocated. I’ll put it back in.”

Caoimhe’s eyes widened with fear.

“It’ll hurt just for one moment, honey,” Amy said. “Then the sharp pain will stop, but you’ll be sore for a while, and you’ll need to wear a sling and not move your arm for a couple of weeks. Certainly not climb any more trees.”

Caoimhe tensed and moved away from Amy a little. “Look, sweetie,” Amy said. “You’re a brave girl, aren’t you? A Highland lass climbing trees... I know you’re a little afraid, I’d be in your place. But you’re safe. Your grandfather is here. I’m right here with you. And look at your new lord, Craig Cambel—have you seen a stronger warrior than him? Do you think a man like him will let anything happen to you?”

Caoimhe glanced at Craig, and so did Amy. He stood with his back straight, his posture tense and a barely visible blush on his cheeks. He eyed Amy with astonishment and perplexity. Their eyes locked for a moment, and something passed between them—like agreement, and adoration, and something that felt like a warm kiss on a cold winter evening.

“Aye, mistress,” Caoimhe said. “Do it. I’m ready.”

Amy nodded and smiled to her, although inside she was nervous. Usually, she’d leave the dislocated limbs to the ambulance attendants. But sometimes the dislocation would last for too long, and the muscles and blood vessels would start to atrophy, and the ambulance wasn’t available. Amy had done this three times—twice in a storm and once in a location where she had no signal. Every time it had gone well, but she still could pull too hard or in the wrong way, and do more harm than good.

She needed to be careful. “Right, honey, I’ll need you to lie on the table here. Craig, could you push away the bench so that I can have access to her shoulder?”

“Aye,” Craig said.

He removed the bench and pulled the table closer to the fire.

“Thanks,” Amy said. “Caoimhe, Craig will help you get on the table. Please lie on your back so that your shoulder is to me.”

Caoimhe did as Amy asked. The warmth should help the muscles relax a bit, because they would be stiffening the longer the shoulder was dislocated.

“I’m going to take your arm now,” Amy said. It was important to let the injured person know what would be done to them.

Amy took the girl’s arm and put it into a straight position. Slowly, she rotated it so that it was about forty-five degrees to Caoimhe’s side. Without changing the angle, Amy grabbed Caoimhe’s hand and pulled it firmly. Once the muscle loosened enough, the head of the humerus should slip into the shoulder socket.

Caoimhe’s face gathered into a grimace of pain, and the poor girl cried out.

“I know, sweetie, just a little more.”

The arm moved a little on its own and gave out a barely audible *pop*.

“Ahhh!” Caoimhe cried.

Amy released the pull softly, and laid the arm on the table by the girl’s side.

“I think it’s fixed. Don’t move though, sweetie, okay?”

Amy felt the shoulder under the girl’s dress, and the bones were in place. She helped Caoimhe sit up.

“Can you move the arm a little for me? It’ll hurt, so gently, please. We just need to see if you can move it.”

Caoimhe nodded, and with a grunt she moved her arm upwards.

“Excellent! Now, please hold your arm like that, close to your body, and support it with one hand, like this.” Amy showed her. “And don’t move it. I’ll fetch a sling for you, and then you’ll be good to return home.”

“Let me fetch it, mistress,” Erskine said. “Where?”

“Oh, thank you, Erskine,” Amy said. “Next door is the kitchen. There should be clean linens in one of the chests

there.”

“Aye.”

“Tell them I ordered it,” Craig said.

“Aye, lord.”

Erskine walked out. Amy looked at Craig, and his eyes were on her, heavy and hot. He considered her, looking puzzled, as if she were something wondrous he’d just discovered.

Amy’s throat dried. “What is it?” she asked.

“In the field, we just push the bone back, but it often breaks. Where did ye learn to do it gently like that?”

Amy looked down at her hands. Did he mean it as a compliment? Or was he just curious? “Ah well, you know. You learn things in Ireland...”

His green eyes were the color of moss in the sun, and she found herself unable to look away. Her breath caught, bubbles tickling her stomach—just like when she looked at the vastness of the Vermont mountains, just like the first time she’d seen the Highlands. Somewhere deep, she knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was the beginning of a disaster.

And yet she couldn’t look away.

## CHAPTER 15

**L**ater that evening, Craig savored the hot, meaty stew, which brought him a feeling of home. His stepmother often had a stew made, and he enjoyed the hearty, filling comfort of it. The great hall droned with the voices of satisfied men, who'd eaten their first decent meal in weeks. The atmosphere was almost festive, as though there was something to celebrate.

In a way, there was. Stew. Cleanliness. A working kitchen for the first time since they'd claimed the castle.

Craig couldn't stop staring at his beautiful wife, who sat by his side at the chief's table. He sensed her, as though there were a warm, invisible field around her that touched him even though her body did not.

"Well. 'Tis nae poison. 'Tis the best meal I have had since I left home," Craig said.

Amy turned to him and raised her eyebrows with a half smile.

"Really?" she said. "I'm not that great of a cook. It must be your men who did that. I only organized who did what."

"As long as ye put a meal like that on my table every day, I dinna mind who cooked it."

"Just a little salt and some herbs, whatever I could find—"

"Salt?" Craig interrupted her. "How much salt did ye put here?"

“As much as I needed—I don’t know, a couple of spoons...”

“How could ye be so wasteful?”

“Wasteful? Why, is salt so precious—”

She stopped herself, her eyes widening as though in realization.

“Aye, mayhap ye MacDougalls swim in salt, but ’tis very costly for the rest of us.”

Craig looked for a sign of arrogance, for her to say that she didn’t care about the goods wasted, that he couldn’t forbid her to use whatever she liked no matter how dear.

“Sorry,” she said, blushing, as though she was embarrassed. “I didn’t know. I thought you’d just get more.”

Aye, the MacDougalls were a wealthier and mightier clan than the Cambels, but she must have seen there wasn’t much salt left. It was as though she had no idea this was too wasteful. As though everyone in the world could afford as much salt as they wanted. He was sure that a rich MacDougall maiden, even one raised abroad, would have known that.

“Get more where?” he asked.

She swallowed hard, panic flickering in her eyes. “I don’t know, Craig! Let’s just forget it. I won’t use salt again, all right? Anything else precious you don’t want me to use?”

“I thought ye’d be the one to tell me to be more careful with things like soap, medicinal herbs, bed linens, and clothes.”

Her face fell. “Yes. Of course. All those things.”

Something was so odd about her, as though she didn’t understand the most basic things. She didn’t seem insane to him. She’d cooked a delicious stew and helped with that girl’s arm. It was as though she just didn’t *know* certain things. Her manner of speech was so peculiar, Craig had never heard anyone speak like that in his life. The way she’d been dressed when he’d met her, the strange, metal object in her hand...

“Why are ye so different from anyone I ken?” he asked.

She exhaled a shaky breath. “Am I? How so?”

“I dinna mean it in a bad way. But ye dinna ken things that everyone kens. Ye speak strangely. When I met ye, ye were dressed like no one I have ever met before.”

She looked at her hands, which were flat on the table and shrugged one shoulder. “You’re not exactly the kind of man I meet every day, either.”

“And what is so different about me?”

She sighed, then met his gaze, her eyes like two dark pools of water. “Everything.”

He held her big, beautiful eyes for a moment with his, his throat going dry. Did she sound as though she liked what she saw in him? Or was he only imagining it? His mind cloudy, refusing to think, his blood hot and pumping, he leaned towards her.

“Ye’re a mystery,” he whispered. “I am usually good at solving mysteries. Why canna I solve ye?”

She leaned closer to him. “Because you shouldn’t.”

With a moan he couldn’t stop, he covered her mouth with his. Her mouth met him like lush velvet, her lips like petals, her tongue like fire. She tasted delicious, and he wanted more. Desire ran through him in a hot, burning wave. *Mine, mine, mine* proclaimed his heart.

He wanted her. She was his wife. She was his by right.

He turned her chair towards himself and pulled her closer. Her waist was delicate and strong under his hands, like the curve of a bow. His groin throbbed, the need for her thick and hot and heavy.

“Lass,” he said into her lips. “If ye dinna want me, tell me now. I canna stop myself a moment longer.”

She froze, and he felt the flutter of her eyelashes as she opened her eyes. She leaned back, and he looked at her, frowning.

“Yes, I think it’s best to stop, Craig.”

He breathed out. Frowned. Her eyebrows knitted together, her red and swollen lips parted as she tried to regain her breath.

“Why?” he said. “Dinna ye like my kisses?”

“I—that’s not why.”

“Ye’re my wife. I’m yer husband. I have the right to bed ye. Or are ye still saving yerself for the Earl of Ross?”

Jealousy stabbed him in his gut at the thought.

“What? No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just think it’ll complicate things.”

“What is there to complicate? It’ll certainly make our time together much more enjoyable than it is now.”

She licked her lips.

“I will show ye all the ways a man can love a woman. All the pleasures ye didna think were possible.”

She exhaled, slowly. Her chest rose and fell quickly. The vein in her neck pulsated. Aye, she wanted him. He reached out for her hand, but she jerked it away from him and jumped to her feet.

“I’m really tired, Craig. I’m going to bed.”

“Ye barely ate—”

But she turned and left, leaving him frowning, confused, and feeling rejected.

He went to sleep in the room in Comyn Tower which was under their bedchamber. But he couldn’t rest. His thoughts returned to Amy, his muscles burning with unsatisfied need. Aye, he wanted the lass, although she was his enemy. And he was a fool for it. She was a beautiful woman, but he had started to see more.

He had started to see a caring heart, and skill. Strength and cleverness.



But caring about her would cloud his judgment, make him overlook danger. Make him miss a blade in his back.

So he couldn't trust her. He couldn't like her. Not just because she was a MacDougall, but because she was hiding something. Her shaking hands, her nervousness about how different she was, basic things she didn't know. She was lying to him. But whether it was because she wanted to harm him, and Bruce's cause, or because she was afraid of something, he couldn't tell.

A shadow stood over Craig, and his hand jerked to his dirk under the pillow.

"'Tis I, Hamish," the man whispered. "I see ye canna sleep, either. Mayhap an uisge can help to ease us both into sleep?"

Craig frowned. An uisge to slow his thoughts and lull him into sleep did sound like the right idea.

"Aye." Craig stood up from his sleeping roll and put on his coat. "'Tis the one solid thought I've heard in weeks."

They walked up the stairs and went onto the wall. They leaned against the parapet, breathing out clouds of steam into the dark air. From here, the river and the loch were black against the shore and hills on the other side, which were grayish from a thin layer of snow.

Hamish handed Craig the drinking pouch and Craig gladly took several gulps. He grunted as the liquid burned his mouth and watched Hamish take a sip as well.

"Wife didna want ye to sleep with her?" Hamish said.

Craig threw a careful glance at Hamish. The man looked out into the vast darkness, his face pointedly calm and indifferent.

"I dinna wish to discuss my wife," Craig said.

"Aye. Forgive me. 'Tis only that talking about things that trouble me helps when I canna sleep."

Craig cleared his throat. He felt possessive of Amy—Hamish had often been near her, and now his first question

was about her... Why was he so interested in her? He'd never get her as long as she was Craig's.

"Why couldna ye sleep?" Craig reached out for the pouch.

Hamish chuckled. "Thinking of a woman kept me awake."

Craig ground his teeth. Amy?

"A woman?" he said.

"Well, nae a woman. A girl. From when I was a wee lad."

Craig raised his eyebrows, then took a sip. "Aye?"

"I was fostered on a farm after my parents died. She, too. She was the only person in the world who was kind to me. We were thick as thieves. My foster parents were rough with us both, but she, being a lass and younger, was weaker. She got sick because they beat her, and she died."

Craig shifted his weight from foot to foot and gave Hamish back the pouch. Hamish took several long gulps. "I'm sorry to hear that, Hamish," Craig said.

"I think of her often. Think what would have happened had I protected her. Would she have grown up strong and bonnie? Would I have marrit her? How would my life be different if she hadna died?"

Craig exhaled. The uisge began burning his stomach pleasantly, loosening his thoughts. Finally.

He sighed. He understood those thoughts, that pain. He hadn't lost Marjorie, but he had allowed great harm to come to her. What would her life be like if she hadn't been abducted and abused?

"I swore then to never let a woman be harmed," Hamish said, then looked at Craig. "I suppose I feel overprotective of yer wife because of that."

That, Craig understood, too. "Dinna fash about my wife. I am the one who is responsible for her protection, and I'll never let harm come to her."

"Aye. I ken. Still. Canna help it. Someone raises his voice at a woman, and something in me rises. I swear, I havna any

thoughts of her as a woman, Craig. She's rightfully yers, and I will never look wrongly at another man's woman. I hope ye believe me."

Craig studied him. There was a tone of insistence in his voice, mayhap a wee bit too much pressure in his words, but his eyes shone earnestly, dark under his furrowed brows.

Craig had no reason to mistrust him. In fact, he could very much relate to Hamish's protective instinct.

Craig clapped the man's shoulder. "Aye, Hamish. I believe ye."

"Thank ye."

"And if ye see anyone lurking around the pigeon house or anything strange, come to me, all right?"

Hamish straightened up. "Why? What is it about the pigeon house?"

Craig trusted him, but not that much. "Nothing. 'Tis only that if she tries to send a message to her father, ye canna allow her to do that. Aye?"

Hamish's cheek twitched, barely noticeable under his eye. He probably still wasn't thrilled that anyone could think badly of Amy.

"Aye," he said finally and gulped uisge.

## CHAPTER 16

**T** *hree days later...*

AMY WOKE UP EARLY AFTER A NIGHT OF TOSSING AND turning. She couldn't get the kiss they'd shared three days ago out of her head—or her body. The brush of his lips against hers, the sweet, sweet tongue that had caressed her and promised wicked things. The heat of his body as he'd pulled her against him.

That kiss made her forget everything. She had dissolved in him, brewing in the promise of sheer bliss. His hard muscles under her palms as she'd put her hands on his chest. His smell—oh, his smell. She wanted to inhale it forever, to inhale *him*.

Oh God. She was crushing on a damn Highlander from the fourteenth century.

He never came to their room, and Amy didn't blame him. In fact, for the last few days he'd been absent from the castle. With a few of his men, he had gone out to collect rent and taxes from the new lands.

So she'd only seen him last night, when he'd come home. It was better this way, anyway. She'd stopped herself when he'd kissed her, but if he came again and they were in one room, with a bed and furs and the fireplace...and he started undressing and...

*No. Stop thinking of him shirtless!*

Amy jumped off the bed and dressed. The medieval clothes took longer to put on—the shift, the laces, then the dress itself. No bra. She didn't miss that. But she missed underwear. There were these thin, woolen pantaloon things she didn't want to wear, because they had been worn by the lady whose room she now occupied. And even if she'd washed them, she felt weird about wearing someone else's undies.

Amy went to the kitchen to start preparing breakfast. During the last three days, she had gotten into a routine. Breakfast, cleaning, cooking the large cauldron of stew, and baking bread—both of which would be eaten for lunch and dinner. Highlanders always had oatmeal for breakfast, or porridge, so that's what she cooked for them.

It was still dark outside as Amy carried a couple of buckets of water from the well in the courtyard. She started the fire. Poured the water and the oats into the cauldron, which had been washed thoroughly yesterday.

She went to fetch another bucket of water for cleaning later. The sky began to lighten, and the castle started to wake up. Men went about their morning business and began gathering in the great hall. Someone cried out beyond the gates.

“...speak to the lord...need a horse...”

The guards opened the gates, and a woman and a man hurried inside. They looked frantically about them, and the woman raced to Amy. “Please, where's the lord. The new lord?”

“I'm his wife.” Amy put the bucket of water on the ground. “What is it?”

“We are from Inverlochy village. My name is Alana, my husband is Diarmid. My mother—” The woman sobbed. “We canna find her. She sometimes wanders about, forgets things. We looked last night and this morning, she didna come back. She probably went to gather herbs in the mountains and forgot how to get back home. We need a horse—the army took all horses from the village. Please—”

Amy nodded. Search and rescue. That was what she did. She could find the woman—she could try. Without a car it would be difficult, of course. On a horse, easier. Amy knew how to ride a horse; she'd learned on the farm. But Craig wouldn't let her out of the castle. Well, she'd need to make him.

“Wait here,” she said. “I'll find Craig.”

She turned and rushed towards the Comyn Tower. He had probably slept with his clan in the lord's hall below the bedchamber. As she hurried to the entrance, he stepped out of it, walking towards her.

She stopped as though she'd hit an invisible wall, her breath stolen. Craig's tunic was still undone at the base of his throat, showing a smattering of dark chest hair. His face still sleepy, his hair disheveled, he was putting on his coat as he walked towards her. He pinned her with his gaze, his face cool and indifferent but his eyes burning.

Suddenly, Amy was thirsty, and the ground shifted beneath her feet. Craig stopped right in front of her, looming over her like a mountain.

“Good morning,” she said. “I was just looking for you.”

“Aye, ye found me,” he said, his voice caressing her. “What is it?”

“Those people.” She gestured behind her. “They came for your help. The woman's mother has gone missing. I think she has dementia. I mean, she probably forgot how to get home. They need a horse to go looking for her in the mountains.”

Craig frowned and studied the two visitors.

“Where did they come from?”

“The village. Apparently, there are no horses left. I can go look. The woman is at risk of freezing to death if she spent the night in the mountains. We must hurry, or we might be too late.”

He raised one brow. “We?”

Amy looked at her feet. Right. “Look, like I told you, I’m a good tracker, and I have found and rescued many, many people. I know how to help with injuries—you’ve seen Caoimhe.” She looked him straight in the eyes. “I won’t run away.”

He held her in his gaze for a long time, and Amy felt as if an invisible lie detector scanned her, digging deep into her soul. Those piercing green eyes... A shiver ran through her as she wondered if he really had discovered the truth just by looking at her.

“Do ye give me yer word?” he said.

“I do.”

He kept silent for a while, as still as a statue.

“I’m probably insane to be trusting a MacDougall when I have sworn to never do that again. But I will be with ye the whole time. And if ye try something—try to run away or to get a message to someone—I will lock ye up again. Once broken, my trust will never be restored. Aye?”

Amy nodded. At least in this, she wouldn’t be deceiving him. If, one day, he found out how much she was actually deceiving him—and he would—he’d never forgive her. He had said it himself. His trust would never be restored.

And somehow, she wanted to have his trust. It was like a precious, fragile gift she wanted to keep alive. She could—at least for now.

“Aye,” she said automatically. “If I try anything, you may lock me up again.”

Craig gave a curt nod and walked to the couple. “I will help ye,” he said to them. “I will go personally as well as my wife.”

Their faces softened, the masks of worry and anxiety gone, replaced by elated smiles. The woman took Craig’s hand. “Thank ye, lord. Thank ye.”

Amy followed him and stood by his side. “Is there a route she normally took when she went there?”

“Aye. Up the brook, towards the waterfall. But we looked there yesterday, and she wasna there.”

Craig nodded. “Ye can show it to us. We should get the horses.” He turned to Amy. “How many men do ye need to come?”

“Just you. Two will be enough—you have to know where to look. More people who have no idea what they’re doing will be useless.”

“Are ye certain? They can call her name.”

“I’ll be faster. They could destroy all her tracks without knowing where to look, and then we’ll never find her.”

“I will at least ask Owen to come—”

“Does he know how to track?”

“Only for hunting.”

“Do you know?”

“Also for hunting.”

“You and I will suffice.”

You and I... That sounded so good. As though Craig thought the same, a tiny smile spread on his lips.

Amy shook her head and sighed. “I’ll go fetch blankets, and we need some food and water.”

“Aye.”

Soon, the horses were saddled, and things for the rescue were gathered—Amy even took her backpack with the first aid kit, hidden under the fur cloak she’d found in Lady Comyn’s chest.

Holding her breath, Amy climbed onto the horse. Finally, she’d leave the confinement of the castle, and at least do what she was good at, what she’d been called to do.

The gates opened and Craig and Amy rode through them, crossed the bridge over the moat, and continued into the village. Even though Amy was already used to the idea that she was in medieval Scotland, she still studied the thatched-



roof houses, the people, the carts. There was a bigger world out there, a medieval world, that she hadn't even seen yet. Excitement washed through her like a wave.

They rode for half an hour, until the hills began rising and turning into mountains. There, Alana and Diarmid showed them the trail that Elspeth—that was the name of Alana's mother—usually took.

They began climbing. Thick forest—pine, birch, and aspen—grew here. The tops of the tall mountains were covered with snow. Amy breathed in the sweet, freezing air, her lungs burning from the fast ride. The sun rose, and she knew the thin layer of snow covering the soil and fallen leaves would begin melting soon.

Amy halted and climbed down from the horse. Right there, in the snow-covered frozen mud, was a footprint—a medium-sized, slightly supinating footprint.

“I see a footprint,” she said.

Craig jumped down off his horse as well. Amy studied the ground and trees around them.

“What are ye searching for?” Craig said.

“I need a straight, forty-inch stick to track the footprints.”

He found a branch that was more or less straight.

“Will this do?” he asked.

“Yes, can you please cut off the smaller branches?”

He nodded and removed them with his knife, then handed her the branch.

“May I have the knife?” she asked.

His eyes shone with alarm. “Why?”

“I need to make some notches on the stick to measure the size of the foot and the length of the gait. To make sure we're tracking her steps and not someone else's.”

Craig eyed her and the imprint dubiously. “I have never heard of such method. If this is a trick...”

“I’m telling you, I’m good at this. We’ll find her. Let’s hurry.”

He handed her the knife and she put the stick over the footprint and marked the length from the tip of the stick. The sole pattern was flat, with a flat heel. Of course people didn’t have shoes with patterned rubber soles back then, she thought.

Amy crouched and slowly swiped the stick parallel to the ground above the imprint from ten o’clock to two o’clock. Her attention near the tip of the stick, she looked for the next sign.

“There!” She pointed.

A little less than a foot in front of her was the next imprint, not as deep as the first one and therefore less visible. She moved closer and sank to her knees, careful not to touch the track. It was only partial, with a visible heel. She marked the distance between the heel of the first one and the heel of the second one.

“Definitely an older person. You see how the edges of the heels are a little smudged?”

Craig crouched down next to her. “Aye.”

“She shuffles her feet. Maybe she’s tired. But likely, it’s her age.”

Craig nodded. “Ye’re right. I wouldna ken what to look for. How did ye learn all this? Who taught ye?”

Vermont Mountain Search and Rescue, she replied in her head.

“There was a man back home,” she said. It was vague enough to be the truth, and it felt good not to lie to him. “He’s been a tracker his whole life, and he taught me.”

“But why were ye interested in tracking at all?”

She exhaled shakily, her chest tensing from the memory of the abandoned barn, the cold nights, the sucking hunger in her stomach, the dry, cracked lips from dehydration.

But she couldn’t tell him that. Not just because she couldn’t reveal she was from another time. She couldn’t bring

herself to tell this to anyone. She couldn't admit her own shame and the cowardice that had led her to that situation.

Something else, much later, had made her choose search and rescue as a profession.

"A child was lost," she said.

It was in New York, where she had moved to become a vet. Her neighbor's son had wandered off.

"I couldn't let him wait alone, desperate, hungry, and cold. I found the boy—by chance more than by knowledge. I had no idea back then how to do any of this. But when I found him—when I saw the tears of relief on his face, when he hugged me, shaking, and wouldn't let go of me until I brought him to his mother—I knew this was what I wanted to do. What I was destined to do. To never let anyone get lost like that. To assure them that someone was always coming to their rescue."

Craig stared at her, blinking. "'Tis very noble of ye, Amy. Very kind."

She shrugged. "I wish more people knew how to track and rescue. But even one person can make a difference. Even if it's just one life I can save, I think it's all worth it."

Craig exhaled sharply. "Are ye sure ye're a MacDougall?"

She chuckled. "Yeah. Blowing your mind right now, aren't I?"

"And yer father allowed ye to do this, a woman? Wandering about alone in the mountains, in the woods?"

Amy licked her lips nervously. Right, women in this time were probably not allowed to do much outdoors. "Well, my teacher was with me most of the time."

Craig narrowed his eyes. "I havna heard of such a thing. This sounds very strange."

"You don't believe me?"

"I do, strangely. I see ye're telling me the truth, but I canna imagine John MacDougall letting his only daughter put herself in danger like that. Or does he nae care for ye?"

Amy looked at the ground. *Her* father certainly didn't care for her. "Yes, you got it right, Craig. But we should hurry. Poor Elspeth is waiting."

She looked at the track and swept above the ground with the stick again to find the next imprint. They continued like that while the tracks were still fairly visible in the mud. Craig made sure the horses followed.

They talked a bit more, about tracking, comparing what Craig knew about tracking animals to what Amy knew. Then they started talking about other stuff—about Craig and his family. How he had gone to England with his father and uncles during the four years that Bruce was allied with Edward I to oppose the restoration of John Balliol as the Scottish king. How, during that time, the Cambels had fought for Edward I, and how Craig's uncle Neil had received new lands in Cumberland for the service. How England was different from Scotland. Although her mind was on the task of tracking Elspeth, talking to Craig was easy and pleasant, and she wished they could talk like that forever.

An hour or so must have passed, until the terrain became rockier, and the forest became sparser. Up there, the woman's footprints became confused. She had stepped several times in one place, as though looking around. Then the footsteps changed direction. The woman went off the trail and into the woods.

There were only a few patches of snow there, and Elspeth's footsteps were now buried in the fallen leaves, rotting grass, and between small stones. It was harder to see them, but Amy knew now what to look for. The woman had gone up the slope, stopped again, rested on a boulder, then gone in yet another direction. It was clear she was confused or lost. It was good that she must be moving slowly, because the signs were getting fresher. Amy also saw broken twigs on the bushes and a couple of tiny woolen threads stuck on the branches.

"I think she's close," Amy said. "I feel it in my bones."

They sped up. Sometimes the signs were barely visible, and in a completely different direction than Amy had anticipated. And then they were in front of a cliff, and there was a cave. Amy and Craig exchanged glances.

“Elspeth!” Amy called, running up the hill towards the cave. “Elspeth!”

“Elspeth!” Craig echoed. He tied the horses to a tree and followed her.

Amy stopped at the mouth of the cave. Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, she saw something gray leaning against the wall a few feet away.

She rushed in.

An old woman sat on the ground, propped against the wall. Her hair was disheveled under her cape, her cloak dirty and torn with leaves and old grass stuck to it. She was pale, and she was shaking. She opened her bloodshot eyes, which were wet from tears.

“Who is Elspeth?” the woman asked.

Craig stopped next to Amy.

“It’s her,” she said. “She doesn’t remember who she is. But it’s her.”

She felt Craig’s eyes on her. “Ye kept yer promise. Ye found her,” he said, and if Amy wasn’t mistaken, his voice rang with admiration.



WRAPPED IN PLAIDS AND BLANKETS, ELSPETH SAT IN FRONT OF Amy on the horse. Amy felt protective of her and insisted the woman would come with her so that Amy would be able to react fast if she noticed any signs she might need medical help. They rode down the hill carefully, letting the horses choose the way. Craig rode before Amy and Elspeth, and Amy kept looking at his broad, powerful frame, at the dark, wavy hair

that brushed his shoulders. What was he thinking now? She'd kept her promise not to run away. She'd found the woman.

Something tightened in Amy's stomach. She desperately wanted him to like her, to trust her. Because her stupid, stupid heart was heavily crushing on him.

"He's a bonnie lad," Elspeth said.

Amy glanced at the back of the woman's head.

"Yeah," she said. "He's not bad."

"*Not bad?* Where do ye come from, dearie? Never heard anyone talk quite like ye before."

Oh God. Her accent, again. She should probably learn to speak like a Scot if she stayed here much longer. "Uhm. I'm Amy MacDougall."

Elspeth chuckled. "Nae, dearie, ye're nae Amy MacDougall."

Amy's skin chilled. The woman had dementia or maybe Alzheimer's. She hadn't remembered where her home was or who she was when they'd found her. Amy and Craig had warmed her up and given her food and water. Craig had wanted to give her uisge, but alcohol was one of the worst things a person could take if they had hypothermia. Craig had asked Elspeth where her home was, and the woman had asked him if he were the faerie king, taking her to the faerie land.

So how seriously could Amy take her words, really? Nevertheless, a chill ran through her.

"Yes, I am," Amy said.

"Wait, I did hear a voice like that once," she said, as if recalling something from another time.

"You did?"

"Aye. A man, a tinker passed by the village, stayed in our house. 'Twas so long ago, my daughter was but a bairn. He told many stories, and one was about a woman who used the tunnel under the river of time. He met her himself. He said she

had the most peculiar talk, and 'twas just like yers, what he imitated.”

Amy swallowed. She glanced at Craig, but he showed no sign that he'd heard any of that.

“What happened to the woman?” Amy whispered, her voice hot and quick.

“So I am right, aren't I?” Elspeth turned a little and glanced at Amy. There was no confusion in her blue eyes anymore.

“I can't tell you.”

“Dinna fash, dearie. I wilna tell a soul.”

“Tell me about that woman.”

“I dinna remember much else, just that she came through time, from the future. She used the Pictish rock of time. The Comyn castle is built upon one, if I remember. My ancestors, the Picts built it. Aye, my kin comes from here, as far back as time goes. They built the stronghold that was there before the castle, and then they built the castle ye see now.”

Amy couldn't believe her ears.

“What happened to her?” she asked again.

“She should have kept her secret, that's what I can tell ye. People didna believe her. She was proclaimed insane. Folks didna want anything to do with her. No one dared to help her or open their doors to her. He said she was found with her throat slit on the streets of a village. Someone killed her in the end, afraid, mayhap, she was telling the truth. Afraid she might open the tunnel of time and let many more outlanders from the future in.”

Something dark and cold twitched in Amy's stomach. A drop of sweat crawled between her shoulder blades. If the truth about her being a time traveler came out, would that be her destiny, too?

“So.” Amy cleared her throat to relieve her tension. “Do you know how that rock works? How can one activate it, or whatever, and travel in time?”

“Are ye here by mistake?”

“Yes. By mistake. I need to go back. Please, help me, Elspeth.”

“If I remember it right—and I admit, my memory isna as good anymore—the woman touched the stone and fell through it, through time.”

“Yes, that’s what I did…” Amy murmured. “I put my hand into a handprint on that rock. So if I touch it again, it’ll work?”

Elspeth was silent.

“Elspeth?”

Silence.

Amy shook Elspeth’s shoulder a little. “Elspeth?!”

“Who’s Elspeth?” the woman said.

Amy grunted a little. “Do you remember what we just talked about?”

“And who are ye?” She turned around a little, her eyes milky with confusion. It seemed the moment of clarity was gone. Who knew if what Elspeth just said was even true or the product of her illness. Poor woman. *It must be so terrible, to never have control of what you remember and what you know is true.*

Amy sighed. “I’m Amy. We’re taking you home to your family.”

When they returned to Inverlochy, Alana and Diarmid still waited for her in the warmth of the great hall. Alana’s head lay on Diarmid’s shoulder, her face a worried mask. She turned and her eyes widened and tears welled in them.

“Oh, Mother!”

She covered her mouth with her hands and rushed towards Elspeth. Diarmid followed her. She took the confused woman in her arms.

“Thank God ye’re well,” she whispered against Elspeth’s white hair. She turned to Craig. “Thank ye, lord. Oh, ye’re



such a good lord, we're lucky to have ye. The old lord wouldna have done it for us..."

"'Tis nae me ye should thank. 'Tis my wife. I wouldna have found yer mother without her."

Alana let go of her mother, and Diarmid hugged the woman by her shoulders. Alana came to Amy and took her hands in hers.

"Thank ye, mistress. Thank ye with all my heart."

Amy's cheeks warmed, and she squeezed Alana's hands in return. This was why she was doing what she was doing. To put such happy, relieved smiles on people's faces.

"Of course," she said. "I'm just glad we found her in time."

As the reunited family walked out of the hall, Amy let out a long breath. Elspeth didn't remember anything of their conversation now, but what if she would? Hair lifted on the nape of Amy's neck.

She needed to do everything she could to get into that storeroom and touch that damn rock. She needed to get out of here. Out of a world where she could be proclaimed insane or killed because people would be afraid of her for being different.

She glanced at Craig again.

Only...the more time spent around *him*, the less she wanted to return to a world without Craig Cambel in it.

## CHAPTER 17

**F**our days later...

AMY LEFT THE KITCHEN WITH TWO BOWLS OF STEW, WALKING into the evening darkness. The weather had changed earlier that day from sunny and freezing to windy and warm. Rain was coming—she could smell the wet, lush scent of its approach.

Supper was about to be served, and everyone was gathering in the great hall. She saw Craig walking there with the young warriors he'd just finished training. He had been practicing swordsmanship with them often during the last couple of days. He was smiling, the locks of his hair clinging a bit to his sweaty forehead.

An image flashed in her dirty mind—his naked, muscular body with abs like rugged plains she could lose herself in, the hard pecs. She hadn't seen him shirtless yet, but that's how she'd imagined him from his powerful body when he kissed her. She wanted to lick those muscles, make him tilt his head back and moan.

Craig clapped one of the boys on the shoulder, then let him pass into the hall. He stopped for a moment and looked up at her.

Her breath evaporated.

He smiled.

The smile was so disarming and sweet she almost dropped the stew and flew into his arms.

He gestured to her to come to him. So easily. As though she was his friend. As though she really was his beloved wife. As though she hadn't lied to him from the moment she'd met him.

She couldn't breathe. And she couldn't help smiling back. Joy and happiness spread through her like warm sunlight.

Like spring.

She gestured with her head for him to go in.

He nodded, his eyes still lingering on her—not suspiciously anymore, but as though he cared. As though he wanted to make sure she didn't need help, that she was all right.

And she...she was taking him in, every detail of his handsome face: the gorgeous curve of his eyebrows, the dark-green eyes, the chestnut-brown stubble.

She was saying goodbye to him.

Then he went in.

Amy exhaled slowly, both relieved and sorry that the moment was over.

Even though it was more and more difficult to leave, she had to. Jenny needed her. Amy couldn't abandon her sister to take care of their dad. Besides, after hearing Elspeth's story, she was more aware than ever of the danger she faced. What would people do to her once they found out the truth—that she was a time traveler?

What would Craig think...?

At best, he'd think her insane.

At worst, he'd lock her up in a dungeon somewhere or kill her.

No, no. She had to run. Run to Jenny.

If all went well tonight, she'd be back in her own time.

All she needed was to get into the underground storeroom—even if only for a minute.

The bowls burned her hands. She'd better hurry.

She proceeded through the courtyard into the eastern tower. Opening the door with her back, she squeezed in.

As expected, there were two guards: Hamish and Irvin. Well, Hamish seemed to like her. Maybe he'd go along with her plan more willingly.

“Good evening to you two,” Amy said cheerfully and set the bowls on a barrel.

They had been playing a game of some sort, but stood up at her entrance.

“Good evening, mistress,” Irvin said.

Last night, after Craig and Amy had returned from the search and rescue operation, Amy had brought stew and oatcakes with honey to the tower, to see if she could make friends with the guards. In the evenings, she'd found out, it was Irvin and Drummond. So why was Hamish here? Hopefully, it was a good sign—a sign of her luck.

“Some dinner for you two,” she said. “Irvin, I brought something special for you. Yesterday you said you liked stuffed fowl. Well—” She retrieved a bundle from the pocket of her dress and opened it. There were two stuffed, fire-roasted fowls. She had set the two birds aside from the game that was brought from the hunt last night and personally made this dish for Irvin and Drummond—after asking Fergus how to make them, of course.

Irvin's eyes sparkled. “Aye?” he said.

She smiled. “Actually, there's one for Drummond, too, but where is he?”

Irvin licked his lips. “He's ill. More for me.”

Amy frowned. “Now, that wouldn't be very nice. He must be hungry. Why don't you bring one to him, eat your dinner and keep him company for a while? I'm sure Hamish can stand guard alone for a bit.”

Irvin glanced at Hamish, who shrugged his shoulder.

“Aye, I can stand guard alone,” Hamish said. “Not that I need ye much anyway.” He guffawed.

Well, yes, Hamish was much taller and stronger built than Irvin.

“Aye, aye, laugh. I shall see how ye laugh when I beat ye at cards when I’m back.”

He grabbed the birds, the bowl, and walked out of the tower.

Amy smiled at Hamish. “What’s your favorite dish? Maybe I can cook it for you next time.”

Hamish grinned. “I thank ye, mistress. Yer stew. ’Tis my favorite dish. Have never tasted anything as good. Swear to God.”

Amy shook her head. She was sorry she was about to trick him. “You’re so sweet to say that. Listen, I saw some salt pork downstairs, and I want to add that to the stew tomorrow. Why don’t you eat your dinner, and I’ll go and fetch it?”

Hamish’s face changed from a content smile to alarm. “Downstairs? But, mistress, the lord was clear, ye’re not allowed there at all.”

“You can come with me, if you don’t trust me. What am I going to do there? I just want to add some salt pork to the stew tomorrow. Wouldn’t it be delicious?”

He hesitated, studying her. Then she saw something flicker through his face—something like realization.

“Salt pork,” he said with a strange emphasis, as though it was a secret code only the two of them understood. “Ahh. Of course. Let’s go and see that salt pork, then.”

Amy frowned. Something was odd about that reaction, but she didn’t have the luxury of questioning it. He opened the door leading down the stairs and handed her the torch, then let her pass.

“Thank you,” she said and walked downstairs.

The familiar scent of wet stone and stored food enveloped her. Her heart beat faster with each step she took. Could this really be it? Would she be back in her time in just a few minutes?

In the storeroom, she looked around, bringing the torch closer to the barrels and casks, to the hanging slabs of dry meat.

“It’s not here,” she said. “I know I saw it somewhere. It must be in the back room.”

Hamish frowned at the door. “The *back* room...” he said. “Aye. Let’s take a look there.”

With a shaking hand, Amy opened the heavy door to the back storeroom. It was completely dark there, even compared to the semidarkness of the previous room. Pitch black. It was cold. Steam pumped out of her mouth as she breathed, her pulse pounding. The scent of wet stone and earth, and wood, and something slightly rotting reached her. There were the piles of firewood, the barrels, and the sacks.

The rock.

Hamish would see in a second that there was no salt pork here. She should hurry.

Quick steps pounded from behind. Quick! Amy rushed to the rock, fell on her knees.

The steps were closer.

Why did Hamish not do anything?

There was the carving of the river and of the road—and there was the handprint!

Amy glanced back. Hamish stared at her with an open mouth and wide eyes. And from the door, Irvin rushed in.

She laid her hand into the imprint. Her pulse beat like a small drum against her temples.

But the rock didn’t vibrate. It didn’t glow. Her hand didn’t sink.

It was just cold.

“What are ye doing here?” he growled behind her back.

Strong arms yanked her up and away from the rock.

Irvin glared at her. “The lord must learn of this. Let’s go.”

And before she could do anything, he dragged her out of the underground chamber.

CHAPTER 18

“**W**hat were ye doing there?” Craig roared.

Irvin had eventually found Craig in the lord’s bedchamber, where Craig had gone looking for Amy after finishing his stew. He’d thought she’d join him in the great hall, but she had never showed up. Now he knew why.

Craig saw red. To the devil, he didn’t remember the last time he’d been so furious and felt so betrayed.

No.

Wait.

He did.

When Alasdair MacDougall had kidnapped and raped Marjorie.

Amy gaped at him, sorry, confused, disappointed.

“She was looking at a rock with some sort of pagan carving and a handprint,” Irvin said.

“I never noticed anything like that.” Craig shook his head.

“Thank ye, Irvin,” he said through gritted teeth. “Go.”

When the man left, Craig turned to his wife.

“What were ye doing there?” he repeated slowly, coming closer.

She kept silent.



“Were ye looking for the—” He turned and kicked the bed to stop himself from finishing the sentence.

He couldn’t throw information around.

“For what?” Amy said.

“For a way to escape,” Craig finished, lowering his voice. He turned to Amy, who looked as guilty as a thief caught red-handed. “Were ye?”

She breathed heavily, her chest rising and falling quickly.

“I was just looking for salt pork,” Amy said.

“There is no pork in there!” Craig yelled. “And why did Hamish let ye in?”

“I tricked him.”

Craig bowed his head, closed his eyes, and exhaled. “Were ye looking for an escape or not?”

She kept silent, only stared at him with her big, beautiful eyes.

“Find yer courage, Amy,” he pressed, and she lowered her head guilty. “Tell me the truth. At least once in yer life!”

She lifted her head and met his gaze, her eyes hard, full of tears.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I was.”

Craig shook his head slowly. Oh, his guts seethed with vinegar. He itched to punch something. Where was a good fight when he needed one?

“Of course. Another betrayal, just when I thought ye were different.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Well, what did you expect?” she said. “You married me and promised me freedom. And yet you treat me like a prisoner. Because I am a prisoner to you, aren’t I? Nothing but an enemy you feel obliged to be courteous to. You question my every step. If you treated me like an equal, like your real wife—”

She was flushed and bright-eyed, and her mouth was as red as late-autumn raspberries. Her hair was disheveled, her dress askew—he let his eyes travel over the curves of her breasts, down to her thin waist and round hips.

What was wrong with him? He still lusted after the woman who'd just betrayed his trust.

He must have lost his mind the minute he'd seen her in those barracks.

He suddenly became aware of the large bed, and the furs that lay on it, and the warmth of the fireplace. The image of her lying naked on those furs, the sensation of skin gliding against skin as he covered her body with his own, the taste of her mouth, her voice calling his name with pleasure.

Not anger. Not disappointment. Not hurt.

But pleasure—and affection.

Craig shook his head and walked towards the fireplace. He turned his back to her and put his hand on the stone, watching the flames dancing, trying to burn those images from his head.

“Ye fooled me,” he said. “What else did ye lie about, Amy?”

“I lie because I'm afraid of what you will do to me. I lie because I'm afraid you'll never let me go. I lie because... Do you think I don't want to tell you everything? But you're not exactly the most compassionate person, either. Had you made sure I had nothing to be afraid of...”

He turned to her. “But ye should be afraid, Amy. Not of me. But of what will happen with yer family. We're at war. And ye're on the other side of it.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled. “What if I'm not?”

“What are ye talking about?”

“What if I don't want to be your enemy?”

He frowned. “Then ye'd have to prove it.”

She shook her head. "It's really hard to prove anything when you're constantly like a hedgehog, all bristled up and ready to prick with your quills. You command me all the time. I'm not allowed to leave the castle, and even within its walls, I can't go where I want. You don't miss a chance to point out I'm your enemy."

Hot blood hit his skin. "But how can I stop treating ye like an enemy when ye do shite like that?" He gestured at the door. "Just when I'd started trusting ye, ye tricked my men and tried to sneak out of the castle!"

She shook her head. "Well, that's a chicken and an egg situation, don't you think?"

"A what?"

"The eternal question of who was first, the egg or the chicken. You can't trust me because I'm a MacDoguall, so you treat me like a prisoner. I try to run away because you treat me like a prisoner."

Was he again losing his mind, or was there a grain of truth in her words?

"What do ye suggest?" he asked.

"I suggest we start anew. How about, we stop for a moment. We do something nice. Forget what our names are and just spend time together, as..."

She stopped, opening and closing her mouth, apparently unable to find the words.

"As husband and wife?" Craig suggested.

His eyes darted to the bed. That was how a husband and wife spent time together without remembering their names. She followed his gaze, and her cheeks blazed brighter than the rising sun.

"That's not what I mean!" she cried.

"But I must tell ye, lass," he said, his voice raspy, and approached her. "If ye want that, I am happy to oblige. I told ye from the beginning."

To his dark delight, her eyes widened. He reached out and stroked her warm cheek with his knuckles. Her lips parted and her eyelids closed.

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, her voice softer. “I meant, just go out somewhere. I love the mountains, the woods we saw yesterday—although I didn’t have time to truly admire the beauty. But I haven’t felt that good in a long time.”

Craig loved the mountains, too.

“Do ye want to go to the mountains?” he asked.

“Yes. How about we take the horses, I pack a picnic, and we make a day of it. Let me feel a bit free. Let me see the country around us. Let me show you I’m not the enemy. And allow yourself to show me you aren’t mine.”

“And if ye try to run?”

“I won’t. And if I do, lock me up for all eternity. I just want to feel a little freedom. Is that too much to ask?”

Craig studied her bright-blue eyes. Her lips, so close to him he could just lean down and kiss them. She looked earnest, but he’d fallen for that before.

Still. His instincts told him, at least in this, she wasn’t lying.

And the idea of spending time with her alone, in the mountains—which he also missed—was more delicious than he could admit to himself.

And if she began to feel more at home here, mayhap she would be his wife, truly. Mayhap, she’d let him into her bed.

His groin burned and his cock hardened at the thought. He leaned down and kissed her. She took him in, without hesitation and with a barely audible moan. Her mouth was warm and soft, and he sank into it like it were the waters of a loch. He wrapped his hands around her and pulled her to himself, pressing her into him, inhaling the scent of her clean skin and hair and a little whiff of stew from working in the kitchen. She smelled like home, like a woman, and he wanted her.

He deepened the kiss, unable to resist the hunger for her that roared in his blood. He swiped her tongue with his, and nipped her lips, and glided and tasted her.

And she answered. Her arms around his neck, her soft breasts pressed against him. He ran his palms over her thin waist. Then his hands found her bosom and he cupped it. His thumbs circled the hard buds of her nipples. She moaned and shuddered and pressed herself tighter to him. He left her mouth and kissed her chin, then made his way down her neck, the vein there beating violently against his lips.

His fingers itched to undress her, his mouth to taste the naked skin of her stomach, his tongue to lick her nipples. Locking eyes with her, he fell to his knees, and ran his hands from her hips down to her ankles, indicating his intention. The only way to relieve her of her gown would be to have her pull it over her head.

“Lass, I’ve wanted ye since the moment I saw ye,” he said.

She blinked, her hands lay on his shoulders and dug into them.

Taking this as an invitation, he gently cupped her ankles and ran his hands up the woolen stockings she had on. He passed the garters just below her knees and caressed the soft, bare skin of her thighs. Her legs shook.

He put his hands on the sides of her hips and glided higher and higher. He cupped her buttocks and squeezed, savoring the feel of her tight, abundant flesh in his fingers. Her skin was so soft and silky, he must be scratching her with his callused palms.

But she didn’t complain. On the contrary, she tilted her head back and gave the most delicious moan.

He growled in response. He wanted to hear how she would sound once he was inside of her. He buried his head in the apex of her thighs, through the dress, nipping the fabric slightly.

He stroked her hips, his fingers making their way under the dress to where his mouth was now. When he found the soft

curls of her hair, she sucked in a gasp.

And stepped back.

Lost, confused, he looked up at her face again.

She shook her head as though shaking off a dream.

“I—” She stepped back. “I don’t think it’s such a good idea right now.”

The space where she’d been a moment ago felt empty and cold. He exhaled and closed his eyes. His cock throbbed and ached for her. There was his beautiful wife. There was the bed. What was he waiting for?

He nodded. “I respect yer no. But why? Are ye testing me?”

“No. No. That’s not it. It’s just, I still don’t know you, really. You’re my husband, but I have no idea who you truly are and what you’re made of. You know?”

“I am made of throbbing flesh that wants ye.” His voice shook. Desire and disappointment fought in his gut like fire and ice. “And of blood that boils for ye.”

“Look, let’s go out, take some time for the two of us, and see where this all goes. Okay?”

Okay... That strange word she liked to use.

Nevertheless, he wanted to go to the mountains with her. Aye, he was looking forward to spending some time with his wife. When they’d tracked Elspeth, when he’d watched her do her magic following the signs, he’d forgotten time, and he’d forgotten where he was. He’d enjoyed listening to her and talking to her, and he’d thought he knew back then what she was made of.

And mayhap she was just afraid of her first time.

“Aye, Amy,” he said finally. “Let us ride out to the mountains and have a picnic. Do ye promise ’tis nae a trick?”

“Yes, I promise, Craig.”

He held her in his gaze and breathed out again. His cock was just starting to calm down.

“Then I bid ye good night. I must go sleep downstairs. I canna stop myself again if we’re in the same room.”

Amy nodded, blushing.

“Good night, then,” she said.

With an effort he thought must have equaled raising the stones for the castle, Craig nodded, too, and left.

CHAPTER 19

“**H**old yer stand!” Craig cried the next morning as he came at Killian mercilessly with his sword.

The crisp air of the courtyard was filled with the ring of claymores as three dozen men trained. Craig breathed heavily. The physical activity was the best distraction from the ache he’d had in his loins all night long.

And from thinking of Amy.

Amy, who had made a delicious porridge and added a spoon of butter and honey—just for him.

Amy, who had smiled at him during the whole morning meal.

Amy, who couldn’t have looked bonnier, with her hair done in a long, graceful plait and her cheeks rosy from sleep.

He shouldn’t have thought about her during training because suddenly wee Killian was the one on the attack.

*Bang, bang, bang.* Craig blocked the sword left, right, left.

“Good, lad!” he cried, a sweaty strand of hair blocking his vision.

“Argh!!” yelled Killian and launched forward to pierce the space near Craig’s kidney.

Craig barely jumped away in time.

“A rider!” called the watchman above the gate.



Craig glanced up, and earned a hard smack of the flat side of the blade against his shoulder.

“Ouch!” Craig shouted, holding his shoulder.

Then he patted the boy’s head. “Well done, lad. Ye’re goin’ to be a great warrior one day. Find someone else to train with. I need to see about that rider.”

An ear-to-ear grin broke out on Killian’s face. “Aye, lord.”

Craig went to the southern tower to make his way onto the wall, but even before he reached the tower, the watchman announced, “He says he’s a messenger from yer father!”

Craig stopped and turned. “Let him in!” he shouted.

As he marched towards the opening gates, a man on a horse galloped in. The rider jumped on the ground, and Craig saw his red-and-weathered face. He had clearly been on horseback for a while.

“What’s the news?” Craig said.

“Yer father’s letter.” The man went into his coat and retrieved a parchment.

“Thank ye, friend. What of my father, was he well? My brother Domhnall?”

“Aye, lord. Yer father, uncles, and yer brother have all been well. I came all the way from Garioch.”

Garioch was Bruce’s estate near Aberdeen, all the way across Scotland to the east.

“Rode five days,” the man continued. “The king has taken ill.”

“What?” Craig unfolded the parchment.

But before he could read it, Owen came to stand by his side. “What’s the news?”

Craig glanced around. His men were stopping their training, watching him anxiously. He didn’t want to announce any bad news or start a panic before he knew what the message contained and what he needed to do.

He clapped the messenger on the shoulder. “Ye’re tired. Ye did well, man, coming here so hastily. Go to the great hall, find my wife, she will serve ye something to eat and drink.”

“Aye, thank ye, lord.”

When the man left them, Craig turned to Owen, who watched him with concern.

“Come,” Craig said. “Let us see what father says.”

They went to the Comyn Tower, to the lord’s private chamber where they’ve been sleeping. The room was empty and crisp since the fire had died, the sleeping rolls unmade. Craig opened the shutters to let more light in, and the two of them sat at the big table in the middle of the room.

Craig unfolded the parchment and read out loud.

*DECEMBER SECOND IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD THIRTEEN hundred and seven.*

*DOUGAL CAMBEL TO CRAIG CAMBEL, GREETINGS.*

*I WRITE WITH GOOD AND BAD NEWS. WITH GOD’S WILL, YER father, brother, and uncles are all well and healthy.*

*Our king has been successful. We followed Great Glen and seized Urquhart Castle of Loch Ness. The Bishop of Moray’s forces joined us, and we took Inverness Castle and burned Nairn. The king has made a temporary peace with the Earl of Ross.*

*Now another Comyn, Earl of Buchan, is marching against us. Having 700 men, we are in a good position to win, but there are bad tidings.*

*The king has taken gravely ill. He canna walk or ride. He is very weak, and we have no food or shelter in the woods. We will carry him to Inverurie where he can rest. Pray for yer king’s health because without him, this was all for nothing.*

*With the Earl of Ross out of the way for now, and Great Glen under Bruce's control, ye in Inverlochy control access to Bruce's lands from the west, and the castle's position is more important than ever to secure this victory. It seems the tide of the war has turned in our favor.*

*Now everything depends on the king's health.*

*Ye're his left hand from the west. I ken ye would rather die than let him down.*

*May God bless ye, Owen, and yer garrison.*

*YER FATHER.*

CRAIG LOOKED UP AT OWEN. HE WAS FROWNING, STUDYING the parchment.

"We are the key to Scotland from the west now," Craig said. "I should have found masons and repaired the damage to the wall right away. But it isna too late."

"Aye," Owen said.

"And I must have a plan of defense in case the MacDougalls or the English come."

"Aye, brother."

"So let me think of something. Go and get the horses ready. I'll ride out with Hamish and a few men to find a mason and hire workmen to repair the damage. Ye will be my second-in-command, Owen."

Owen nodded, suddenly serious. Craig hadn't seen him like this in a while.

"When I'm out, or if I'm wounded or killed, ye must carry on the defense. Aye?"

Owen nodded.

"Ye dinna think ye can do it?" Craig said. "I think ye can. If I doubted ye, I wouldna have set ye the task. I trust ye the most out of everyone in this castle."

Owen nodded and retreated from the room.

Watching the door, Craig wondered if he should have confided in Owen about the secret entrance.

No. If they were under attack, he would. But as good a warrior as Owen was, Craig saw the hesitation in his brother's eyes. The signs of self-doubt on his face. He was experienced in battles but not in strategy.

Plus, his brother had always been a little reckless—Owen might get drunk and tell someone. So, as much as he trusted his brother, revealing this secret could wait.

## CHAPTER 20

**T** *hree days later...*

AMY INHALED CLEAN, CRISP AIR SATURATED WITH THE SCENT of earthy moss and grass.

She and Craig stood looking out at the vast mountain range, the valleys far below, and the wind-worn rock faces and gray slopes covered in yellow-green and brown grass. Across the glen, dark clouds hung low on the tallest mountaintop—Ben Nevis, Craig had called it. A patch of pinewoods darkened the slope of the mountain they were on, and silver-gray bushes grew nearby. Wind whistled along the slopes and rustled the grass.

It was freedom.

Open sky and nature wherever she looked.

But in all of the beauty and freedom around her, Craig was the best part. His handsome profile—straight nose, dark wavy hair, moss-colored eyes, wide mouth, and sensual lips surrounded by sexy stubble. The quilted cloak he wore only accentuated his tall frame, wide shoulders, and narrow hips. Amy’s insides buzzed, her pulse beating in her throat.

“This is a great place for a picnic, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Aye.” Craig put the blanket they had brought on the ground and the basket with food that Amy packed.

He held the plaid so that it wouldn't blow away in the wind, until Amy could sit. They had left the horses down below by the creek to graze, before the trek became too steep.

Amy unpacked the basket: bread, oatcakes, cheese, butter, plums and apples still fresh from the recent harvest, and a bottle of wine. They had left the castle this morning in the peak of activity. After three days of searching, Craig and his men had come back with a mason they'd hired from another village down Loch Linnhe. Now it was a matter of getting enough rocks and stones. At the moment, scaffolds were being built under the careful supervision of the mason and Owen.

Craig had explained to Amy that it was a good time for him to leave Owen in charge for a day. He wanted to give his brother the chance to take responsibility while he was away.

"Thank ye, Amy," Craig said. "For preparing this. I havna been in the mountains for a while because of the war and am glad to come back. I miss it."

"Me, too," she said. "Did you grow up somewhere around the mountains?"

"Aye, on Loch Awe. Didna ye ken where the Cambel clan seat was? Innis Chonnell Castle has belonged to yer clan about ten years now."

Amy licked her lips and fiddled with the skirt of her dress. "Yes, well, I mean...I don't know where you grew up."

"Aye, I grew up there. Climbed rocks and fished in the loch and hunted."

Craig bit into a piece of bread he'd just broken off.

She studied him, his straight jaw working on the bread, the thoughtful eyes looking far into the distance. There was always a hint of sadness behind them, something dark he'd been hiding. She wanted to know his depths, what made him the man he was. And then she remembered why he hated the MacDougalls.

Craig had said, *I dinna wish for ye to feel what my sister felt*. That must mean the MacDougalls had locked her up.

So locking people away was in her family, she thought darkly. Her father locked her up. Her ancestors locked up Craig's sister.

"I overheard someone saying that was where your sister was kidnapped," Amy said.

It was a bit of a gamble, to assume she was kidnapped.

Craig stopped chewing and seemed to hold his breath, then glanced at her, frowning. "Aye. Right near the castle. She went out with her maid to gather flowers. The maid came back alone, screaming."

Pain shot through Amy's chest as it tightened. She shook her head. "Poor girl, your sister."

"'Tis why I canna understand why yer father let ye go wandering with just one man to protect ye and then alone. Because fair maidens walking alone in the woods tend to be snatched away by the boorish."

Amy inhaled. What barbaric times.

"What's her name, your sister?"

"Dinna ye see her while she was at Dunollie?"

Amy cleared her throat. She'd have to pretend again. "No."

"Marjorie. Were ye not there when we freed her? I remember climbing into yer mother's room, and there were several lads and lasses—were ye not among them?"

Amy looked down. "No. I was in Ireland."

"Aye. Well. 'Tis good ye were not there. Are ye not angry I killed yer brother?"

Craig had killed Amy's brother... She swallowed. The Amy MacDougall from this century would have known that.

"Was he responsible for the kidnapping?" she said.

"Ye truly dinna ken anything?" He narrowed his eyes.

She shook her head.

He sighed. "I suppose 'tis nae something a family is proud of. Alasdair didna just kidnap her, Amy. He held her prisoner and raped her. All because she refused his hand in marriage."

Cold shock covered Amy's body from head to toe. Raped...held prisoner...

By one of the great MacDougall ancestors her grandfather was so proud of. A pride he had instilled in her as a child. She now understood why Craig hated the MacDougalls so much. Shame ignited her cheeks and neck. Poor girl.

"Aye, I killed Alasdair when our clan came to free Marjorie. Yer father surely revenged him two years later by killing Ian."

"Ian?"

"Aye. My cousin. Yer family killed him when our clans were in a battle and never gave us back the body. Were ye absent for so long? I sometimes think ye dinna ken these things at all, and yet I'm sure yer clan seethes from hate and fury at us. Nae?"

Amy exhaled. "Like I said, I'm not your enemy, Craig. I haven't done any of those things."

"Aye. True. Ye havna. 'Tis still hard to believe ye turned out so different from yer father. From yer brother."

Her father... She surely hoped she didn't have anything in common with that man. Maybe the Amy MacDougall who was really from this century understood what Amy felt. A father who could allow his son to kidnap and rape a woman—he was as guilty as his son.

"I understand a little of how your sister must have felt," she said.

"What?" Craig's head shot up, his eyes blazing. "Ye were raped? Who—"

The concern, the worry, and the anger in his eyes were genuine, and it warmed Amy's heart. She took a sip of wine from the bottle, for bravery. She wanted to tell him. She'd never told anyone but her sister, and then only in general



terms. She never really talked about it; although, she'd thought several times she should go to a shrink or something.

But Craig had witnessed something similar that had happened to his sister—the entrapment, the desperation of being locked up and never found.

And Amy needed to tell him. She wanted him to know she was on his side. And then maybe, once he knew what had happened to her, maybe she'd tell him the whole truth. That she wasn't the Amy he thought she was.

And hopefully, he'd forgive her.

Her chest ached as she reached out to the corners of her memory she'd deliberately been turning away from for twenty years. Her skin crawled and her eyes burned.

And she let go.

“I wasn't raped. I was ten when I started having nightmares. I'd imagined ghosts and monsters under the bed and couldn't fall asleep.”

The truth was, it had started happening after Amy's mom had died earlier that year. Lost and sad, scared of the future, Amy had gone to the one person she'd had left besides Jenny—her father.

“I went to my dad with this problem, asking him to chase them away. But most of the time I found him half unconscious from booze.”

“Booze?”

“Uisge,” she corrected herself. “And then one night, he'd had enough of me. He was still drunk, but sober enough to find a creative solution. ‘You're a coward, Amy MacDougall!’ he yelled. ‘There are no ghosts. There are no monsters. Go back to your room and sleep.’ But when I insisted I couldn't, he said, ‘It's time for you to face your fears. You know how my father taught me to swim? He threw me in the lake. I almost drowned, but I learned to swim. That's how you'll learn to not be afraid of the dark.’”

Amy swiped a tear from her cheek. Craig listened silently, openly, simply taking it in. And it helped. She felt accepted. She felt he understood.

And she was so grateful.

“He was strong,” she said, “even when totally drunk. A tall man, a farmer, with arms like tree trunks and his breath reeking of alcohol. He hauled me out of the house and drove—I mean, took—me somewhere in the middle of the night. I was terrified. I thought he was going to kill me because I was afraid of the monsters under the bed. But he took me to an abandoned barn on our farm—I mean, estate. And he locked me in there.”

Amy remembered the blinding lights of the truck against the cornfields as Father drove, the roar of the old engine, the smell of whiskey and gas in the cabin. His terrifyingly strong hands that dragged her, kicking and screaming, into the dark building. The unforgiving *clack* of the lock from the other side of the door.

And the darkness that pressed against her from all sides like a coffin.

“I was there for two nights and one day, and I remember every moment, but I wish I didn’t. If I could, I’d have cut the memory out of my brain as though it never happened. I was so hungry I chewed on old hay. There was no real food and no water. Do you know how long a person can survive without food? Twenty-one days. Without water? Three.”

Craig’s eyebrows snapped together, his eyes dark and full of empathy. “Did no one ask after ye? Nae even yer mother?”

There was only Jenny, who was six, and her father on the farm. Father forgot about the episode completely the next day. He just continued to drink himself into oblivion. Jenny had been asking him where Amy was, but he always told her she must be at school.

It was on day three that the school called home, and Jenny said she hadn’t seen her for three days. They called the police. A cop found Amy, dehydrated, shivering, desperate.

“Yes. She did,” Amy lied. “But they couldn’t find me. They only found me three days later. I might have died there had it been a couple of hours longer.”

“Yer father didna have a right to do that to a wee lass.”

“No. He didn’t. And I learned a couple of things there. That I’m terrified of dark, closed spaces. And that as long as I can help it, I won’t let another soul be lost and abandoned like I was. Do you know the desperation that you feel? Calling for help for hours, and no one comes? That’s why I can’t stand to be locked up in that castle—and especially in one room.”

Craig covered her hand with his, and his warmth calmed her. “I am sorry, Amy. I didna ken. And I was the one who tied ye up and locked ye... Had I kent—”

“You couldn’t have known. It’s my thing. I should be over it by now, but I’m still terrified of being lost and locked up. And that’s why I don’t have a direction in life, I suppose.”

“But ye save all these people.”

“Yes, but—what then? What’s next for Amy MacDougall? Most women want marriage. Children. I don’t.”

“Ye dinna? What about the Earl of Ross?”

She brushed it off. “Do you know I’ve already been married before?”

“Ye were?”

“Yes. It was for love. I thought he was perfect, I thought I wouldn’t find anyone better than him. But as great as he was, I felt suffocated. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t take a step. I felt like I was back in that barn again. So we divorced. I divorced him. There’s something fundamentally wrong with me, Craig. If I ever get back home, searching for people in the mountains will be my life.”

“Amy, ’twas a horrid thing yer father did. It seems to me, ye lost yerself somewhere back in that barn and ye havna found yerself yet. It seems to me, ye’re looking for yerself each time ye search for and rescue someone. Ye must find yerself first.”

A shiver ran through her at his words, echoing in every part of her.

*Ye lost yerself somewhere in that barn...*

She gazed at him. How was it possible that a stranger from hundreds of years ago understood her better than she did herself? Better than anyone in her time?

She reached out and cupped his bristled jaw. And just as she was about to kiss him, a wall of rain hit them.

Amy squealed and laughed. Craig smiled, a carefree, lighthearted smile. He pulled her to himself, rolled her under him and kissed her, briefly but deeply, making her toes curl.

“I will protect ye from the rain,” he said.

But his hair was soaking wet, and raindrops fell right into Amy’s eyes.

“Protect me from the rain in the castle, please.” She laughed.

“Aye.” He kissed her briefly again and helped her up.

And as they packed the picnic back into the basket, Amy forgot that she was from the twenty-first century and he was from the fourteenth. She just felt like a woman having a date with a handsome man under the rain.

## CHAPTER 21

**C**raig didn't think he stopped looking at Amy for a single moment, the rain a welcome distraction from the violent beat of his heart.

The woman who'd just opened up to him couldn't be a betrayer. She couldn't be a liar, and she couldn't be a murderer. The realization was like lifting a heavy rock from his chest. She couldn't have just come up with that story—he had seen her genuine pain and desperation when she'd told him about that barn.

The man had left the lass alone for three days, without food and water—left her to die. He doubted Amy could be loyal to a man like John MacDougall, and he doubted that she was looking forward to her marriage with the Earl of Ross.

She'd been divorced—which meant, she was experienced. He didn't mind her not being a virgin; he didn't care about things like that. She'd probably married by old Celtic tradition, which was forbidden by the church. It allowed separation and divorce, while the newer Catholic church did not. But it also meant that her husband had been a kind person. Because a woman could not initiate the separation. So Amy must have convinced her husband to let her go.

But she would be married by the church to the Earl of Ross, and there would be no escape.

Mayhap, her marriage to Craig was a welcome disruption.

Mayhap, he could trust her, after all.

Mayhap, if he got to know her better, there was more for them than just the year of handfasting.

Because, Craig suspected, he was falling in love with her.

Craig and Amy were both soaking wet when they arrived at the castle. The courtyard was now a muddy swamp. The aroma of dinner—stew and fresh bread—hung in the air, but Craig wasn't hungry for food. It was already dark, only torches illuminating the buildings. Craig saw Owen and a couple of others come out of the great hall...

With... No, that couldn't be...

Craig squinted to see through the wall of rain.

"Are those women?" Amy said.

"Either that, or my men suddenly grew breasts and long hair."

Holding a lass's hand, Owen ran into the Comyn Tower.

"Owen, Owen," Craig mumbled and shook his head. "Who else to blame?"

"When the cat's away, the mice will play," Amy said. "I guess he threw a party and invited some girls. Will you go to stop them?"

Craig marveled at Amy's wet face glistening in the light of the torch, her long eyelashes stuck together from the water, her lips so red and lush he longed to taste them.

"The last thing I want right now is to deal with Owen. I have other things on my mind. Our picnic isn't over yet."

She raised her eyebrows and flashed a small, sweet smile at him, brightening the evening.

"Let's take the horses to the stables first," he said.

In the dark stables, the scent of hay and animals enveloped them, something so simple and primal and natural.

"Is this all right?" he asked. "Are ye not bothered being here?"

“No,” she said and smiled. “The exit is right there. And you’re with me.”

His chest warmed as she said that. He watched as Amy brushed the neck of her horse gently, caressing it, murmuring calming words to the animal, as though she’d been doing that for ages. What would it be like, to feel her palm on his body like that? He covered her hand with his, and she stopped, completely still.

She turned to him, her eyes shiny pools in the darkness.

Without a word, he put one hand on her waist and gently brought her closer to him. She put her palm on his chest, under the wet cloak. Her hand was cool and burned him a little.

“I thank ye for today, Amy,” he said. “’Twas a long time since I had a day like that. Everything ye told me—I ken it wasna easy for ye. I shall guard yer trust like a precious gift.”

Her eyes teared up a bit, and she blinked. He brushed her cheek with his thumb.

“I canna stop thinking of ye. What ye did the other day, it hurt me. Will ye hurt me again like ye did when ye tried to find the way out? Will ye betray me?”

She blinked again, her eyelashes trembling. She cupped his jaw, and he turned and quickly kissed the inside of her palm. “I don’t want to think anymore. I don’t want to worry. I want to live. Right here and now. I don’t want to promise, or plan, or remember.”

She reached up to him and planted a gentle kiss on his lips, and even that small gesture brought fire to his veins.

“What I want, is you,” she said.

He studied her eyes, to make sure she was serious, to know she was finally giving him permission.

And what he saw there was dark desire, a longing, and a promise.

“Oh, ye wicked minx,” he growled, then wrapped his arms around her waist, lifted her up, and covered her mouth with his.

She met him with as much passion and need as roared in him. He couldn't wait another minute to be with her. He had to have her right here and now. Before he spooked her and she changed her mind. The truce between them still felt fragile.

Without breaking the kiss, he undid his cloak, then hers. He hooked his hands under her beautiful arse and pulled her legs to wrap around him. She moaned a little in surprise, but tightened her arms around his neck.

There was a large heap of hay at the corner of the stables, and he carried her there. He sank to his knees and laid her down on the soft hay.

A woman shrieked, and a man cursed, and two people sprang from the heap, holding their clothes to themselves.

“What the devil!” Craig cried, jerking Amy back up and putting her behind himself.

“’Tis me, Lachlan!” the man said, shoving his tunic on.

The woman behind him quickly dressed as well. Craig shook his head as he recognized his distant cousin in the darkness.

“Why didna ye show yerself sooner?” Craig growled.

“I thought ye’d be gone from the stables soon,” the woman said.

“We didna expect ye so early,” Lachlan said. “We thought our guests would be gone by then.”

Craig shook his head with a growl. “Get out of here, man.”

“Where? This is the only place that’s nae occupied.”

“I’ll kill Owen,” Craig said. “Go anywhere. Go to my bedchamber, take my bed for all I care. Just leave my wife and me alone.”

“Aye, cousin.”

Both of them ran away, holding hands. The woman’s hair was long and red, like Amy’s, though she was nowhere near as lovely.



Craig shook his head and looked around. “Anybody else here?”

No sound came except for the horses snorting softly. He exchanged a glance with Amy. She looked amused, thank goodness, not spooked or frightened or disgusted. She burst out laughing, and it was the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard. He smiled, too, watching her laugh, and then her laughter caught him, and he, too, burst out. They stood, watching each other, giggling.

And Craig had never felt as happy as he did now.

Finally, their laughter died out and they breathed deeply, letting a few final chuckles surface.

“Come here,” he said, pulling her to him.

“Right here?” Amy asked.

“Aye, Amy Cambel, right here. Ye heard the man, everything else is occupied. And I wilna share a room with anyone else. I want ye all to myself.”

“Well,” she said as she came into his arms. “As it happens, I share your opinion.”

“Thank goodness. If I canna have ye now, my ballsack will burst.”

“We certainly do *not* want that,” she murmured sweetly and kissed him.

## CHAPTER 22

**C**raig's kiss was slow, like poured honey. Amy took her time, enjoying his warm, soft, delicious mouth.

He answered back hungrily, as though he'd never tasted anything so good and wasn't about to stop. He laid her down on the heap of straw again, and it sank under her weight. He stretched out next to her. The scent of fresh hay enveloped her.

Did she feel any anxiety at being in a dark barn? No. With Craig, she felt safe and warm. She was ready for the bad memories to be replaced by happy, pleasurable ones.

Straws prickled through her dress, adding an edge to her excitement. He cupped her jaw and ran his hand down her body, making her skin tingle even through the clothes. She arched her back, pressing into his hand, reluctant for him to disconnect from her. He covered her breast with his palm and massaged it, circling her nipple with his thumb. It hardened and ached sweetly.

"Oh, do ye like that?" he murmured against her neck, his lips brushing her skin.

"Mmmm," she managed.

"And do ye like this?" He moved over her chest, leaned down and took her nipple gently between his teeth, right through the dress, wetting the fabric.

A lightning bolt of sweetness shot through her. "Ohhhhh," she cried a little louder, arching her back.

“I kent ye’d like that. And what if I do this?”

He took more of her breast into his mouth, sucking at it while he cupped her other breast and rolled her nipple between his fingers.

Waves of delicious torture spread through Amy, and she moaned, unable to contain herself. “Oh, dear God, yes.”

She ran her fingers through his silky wet hair, then over his strong shoulders. He trailed down her stomach with his mouth, kissing her through the dress, and somehow, it was more erotic than if she had been naked. Something about it was so simple. The stables. The man. The woman. Their desire.

Amy’s skin tingled and sang where he touched her, as though he knew a secret to her body even she did not.

Craig ran a hand down her skirt, then he reached under it and touched her leg.

Instinctively, she pulled it away—she wasn’t shaved, of course, but he didn’t seem to care.

Right. Medieval women probably had all kinds of hair.

Hm. She could get used to not shaving.

He ran his fingers up her leg, heating her skin. The closer he got to the apex of her thighs, the more she clenched in anticipation, aching, getting hotter and wetter.

He looked up at her as he covered her sex with his palm.

“Ahhh.” She tilted her head back.

“Look at me, lass,” he said.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. His gaze was dark and burning in the semidarkness of the stables. His eyebrows were bunched together, his lips parted, a little swollen. There was so much heat, so much promise in his eyes, she clenched again.

“Ye’re mine,” he said. “And I’m yers.”

He parted her folds with his fingers, and Amy gasped, but she didn’t know what was sweeter—his words or his fingers.

He pressed gently against her clit, and began circling it, whirling, churning her ecstasy.

She grabbed the straw, trying to find something to hold on to, or she would burst into stardust right there in his arms.

He pulled her skirt up with his other hand, gathering it at her hips, her legs and pelvis chilling a little from being exposed to cool air. He leaned down and settled between her thighs. He looked deep into her eyes as he said, “Lass...”

His voice reverberated through her, low and dangerous. How could one word be loaded with so much heat?

And then his mouth was on her, and she gasped from the intensity of soft pleasure that spread through her.

“Ahhhh.”

And then his tongue...his wicked, beautiful, masterful tongue began moving, circling, flicking, teasing. Amy unfolded, softened and clenched at the same time. Lost her mind from sensations she'd never known she could experience.

She wasn't a virgin—she thought she was good at sex.

But this...

Him...

It was more than physical.

It was something else.

Something where she could see the stars.

“No,” she breathed out and jerked.

“What?” He rose. “Did I hurt ye?”

“You didn't hurt me. Far from it, Craig. But I can't hold off for much longer. And I want you. I want you inside of me.”

His eyes darkened.

“Oh, aye, my sweet lass? Did I not tell ye, ye must ask?”

Amy shook her head once and chuckled. “Yes. Please.”

He nodded, a smug smile on his face. “Only because ye are asking.” He stood up and undid his pants, lazily, letting them slide down his legs, then kicked them off. He stood before her, his gorgeous, sculpted legs a work of art, and then...

Her throat caught.

A long, thick erection, ready and willing, and growing even more under her gaze.

Amy licked her lips. “Come here.”

He sank between her knees, without breaking the deep eye contact. Amy felt like they were connected by something invisible, as though wrapped together in a large, warm plaid. And she didn't know anymore where she ended and he began.

Craig hung over her.

“Ye're mine, lass. Let me love ye like a man can love a woman.”

“Yes, please.”

He settled his cock against her entrance, and an acute awareness of that shot through her in a bolt of pleasure. Then he pushed. Stretching her deliciously, he pushed in slowly, filling her completely.

He held her in his arms as she arched her back, wrapping her legs around his torso. His gaze was on her, as though it had weight, as though it could caress her, too.

Then he withdrew, spilling more liquid velvet through her body.

And then he started to pound into her faster and faster. Hitting the right spot, he was bringing her higher and higher, to heights she'd never known before.

She'd had orgasms, yes.

But not this cosmic, electric, soul-shattering connection.

Like he sensed her, what she wanted, what made her tick.

And harder, and harder, and faster he went. Unlocking her. Letting something break free right in her core.

Her breath was erratic. They panted, moaned, grunted.

Something within her was stiffening with the sweet pleasure.

And soon—too soon—he brought her to the edge.

“Oh, Craig,” she moaned. “Oh, Craig!”

“Aye, my sweet, find yer release.”

With two more exquisite pounds, she was falling apart around him, clenching, unclenching, spasming, and softening.

Matching her rhythm, he sank into her, with her. He was coming, too, his body hardening, his movements abrupt, his fingers clenching Amy’s hips, digging into her.

With a shudder that rolled through his whole body, he collapsed on top of her. “My wife,” he whispered.

Amy wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders. They breathed in one rhythm, his chest rising and falling with hers.

And as Amy was slipping away into sleep, peaceful and happy for the first time in a long time, a thought crawled into her mind.

How could she leave and break his heart now that she was falling in love with him?

## CHAPTER 23

**H**amish huddled in his cloak on the southern wall. Rain wasn't that bad without the wind, just that damned wetness, though the damp seemed to penetrate his very bones. He'd been on guard duty for days—punishment for allowing Amy MacDougall into the underground storeroom.

Ah well.

She was looking for the secret tunnel, too, he knew it.

He'd never seen her before coming to Inverlochy, hadn't even known John MacDougall had a daughter named Amy. But since he had only met with the clan chief and his guards twice, and in the woods, he hadn't met any of the family members.

He did find it alarming John hadn't alerted him that his daughter would be in the castle.

Mayhap, she'd been supposed to leave by the time Hamish arrived.

Or, mayhap, MacDougall didn't care about his daughter. That may be, with the man's cold, distant gaze. Hamish knew people like him. His foster parents had looked at him and Fiona, his foster sister, in the same manner.

As though they looked at farming tools.

Hamish felt sorry for Amy.

Still, she was on his side. She playacted so well, he'd doubted her until he saw her looking through the storeroom.

The tunnel was somewhere there. Mayhap, under that rock with the carvings. Mayhap somewhere else. But that must be why Craig had put guards there. He was afraid Amy would run away. And that someone else might find a way in through the tunnel.

Now that Hamish knew where the entrance was, he didn't need Craig anymore.

He could free the lass from him.

He watched as Craig and Amy rode through the village. Although he couldn't see their faces in the darkness, their postures were relaxed. After they descended from their horses, they stood close to each other. They even looked happy.

Then Craig had kissed her.

Poor lass.

Hamish clenched his fists. She must be pretending to tolerate his touches, only for a chance at freedom.

Like Fiona had. Pretended the work wasn't too much. Pretended she wasn't tired. Pretended she wasn't in pain. Anything so that their foster parents wouldn't beat her. He'd done her work, too. As much as he could but not so much that they would notice.

But Fiona was weak. She'd needed rest and care. None of which she got.

And then he'd buried the only living person who'd been kind to him, who'd given a damn about him, who was like him.

Suppressed. Imprisoned. Used.

Like Amy.

Tonight, Owen had gone into the village with Lachlan and a few others and invited half the village for a feast. There wouldn't be a better opportunity to do what Hamish had come here to do. Most of the men would be drunk and busy with willing lasses.

No one would suspect.



Time to finish his mission. Tonight. Get his money from John MacDougall, take his daughter back to him.

Then Hamish would finally be able to get a small piece of land with farms and a keep or a castle. Mayhap, an island. And live there peacefully.

He'd already let go of the only woman he could imagine marrying. It had been nine years ago, in the Borderlands, that he had fallen in love with Deidre Maxwell, daughter of the Maxwell clan chief in Caerlaverock. She was of gentry. He was a nobody. He'd just started looking for missions at the time, not a penny in his pocket. And yet he'd seduced her, and she'd given him her virginity. Their love affair had been the happiest time in his life.

And then he'd left her. He'd run away. Because she'd wanted him to marry her.

And he just couldn't get attached to someone like that only to lose them. Like he'd lost Fiona.

He shook his head in an attempt to shake off the painful memories. He needed to concentrate on the mission. Part of it was to join Bruce's army and undermine them from the inside. John MacDougall only kent from Lord Comyn that there *was* a tunnel, not *where* it was.

And if the auld MacDougall lord didna care about his daughter, it was an even bigger reason to protect her.

Aye, her misery would end tonight.

He watched as Amy and Craig went into the stables, then after a while, they ran out into the Comyn Tower, holding hands, their clothes wrinkled and hay straws stuck to them.

His jaw tightened, his teeth grinding. Poor lass. She had to sleep with the man.

Hamish would free her.

When the couple disappeared, he left his post. He checked the dagger that Sir William had given him was in his boot. It was a beautiful, goodbye gift for his years of loyal service as squire. Years during which he'd trained to be an unstoppable

warrior. Years he'd been training for the campaign to earn his freedom. When no one else would have the audacity to tell him what to do.

He raced through the courtyard into the great hall. He glanced up to check which of the guards might have seen him. But he knew a couple of watchmen were probably sleeping, and the rest probably weren't paying attention.

He went into the great hall, which was loud with laughter and music, and stinking of body odor mixed with alcohol. People danced to the music, and he greeted a couple of men to make himself be seen. Then he untied his cloak and left it in the corner. He threw back a cup of uisge, laughed and sang loudly. Then, when enough people had noticed him, he slipped out of the hall back into the night. He raced to the Comyn Tower and up the stairs to the first floor.

Behind the door, in the lord's private chambers where the Cambels slept, the sounds of a satisfied woman and a man in ecstasy made him chuckle.

*Owen, Owen. 'Tis good I kill Craig tonight. Because he'd have killed ye tomorrow.*

Hamish continued climbing the stairs until he finally stood before the door into the lord's bedchamber. A man moaned loudly, and rhythmically, but the woman sounded as though she was struggling.

A low groan escaped his throat. Removing his dagger from his boot, he quietly opened the door. Two figures were moving under the blankets. Craig's dark head was on top, and Amy's red hair spilled over the pillow. Her hands were above her head, and he was pinning them to the pillows.

Hamish moved without a sound and came to stand by the bed. Their eyes were closed.

He grabbed Craig's hair, pulled his head back, and slit his throat in one swift movement. Blood spilled onto Amy in pumping jerks.

Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth to scream, but Hamish was ready. He put his hand on her mouth to muffle

the sound.

“Shhh!” he said. “’Tis all right, Amy, lass—”

His eyes widened.

It wasn’t Amy. She had the same red hair, but it was a woman he’d never seen.

He cursed. That was one rule he had. Never to harm an innocent woman.

“To all devils of all the red seas,” he mumbled and looked at the man’s face.

Lachlan!

He’d killed an innocent man. He’d actually liked Lachlan. Hamish’s gut was hard and heavy. A tight lump formed in his throat.

He glanced at the lass who was about to scream.

“If yer life is dear to ye, shut up, dress, and come with me.”

He would need to part with a significant portion of his savings today. But it was one rule he couldn’t break.

Innocent women and children were untouchable.

Or he wouldn’t be able to live with himself.

## CHAPTER 24

**C**raig tangled his fingers with Amy's and studied her feminine hand. They were now fully dressed, lying in hay. The horses were asleep, rain drumming softly against the walls and the roof. She was lying on top of him, her weight pleasant and soothing. Her chest moved with his as he breathed. Her scent encompassed him, her hair and skin smelling like sweet grass and rain and her.

Craig felt sated, his body heavy and broad, as though he'd expanded and grown. Lightness filled his chest, the echo of hope that he sometimes felt in spring.

Amy...

She was more than he'd ever thought or hoped she would be. From enemy, she had turned to someone else now. He did not know what yet.

She might still do something to break his trust and hurt him. Hurt him like he'd never been hurt before.

Because what he really wanted to call her, was his love.

The love of his life.

His wife.

The woman he could trust more than himself.

He needed to trust someone like that.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He chuckled. "I wilna get used to the strange words ye say sometimes. Okay?"

She smiled. “Sorry. I mean, are you all right? Your heart started to beat faster all of a sudden.”

She put her chin on his chest to look at him. Her eyes were big and soft and glossy. He took a strand of her hair, auburn now in the darkness.

“Aye, I am all right. I was just thinking about ye...”

“Oh. Well, good thing I was thinking of you, too.” She kissed his chest gently.

“And about trust.”

She stiffened and looked up at him, the smile faded on her lips.

“Do you think you can ever trust me fully?” she asked.

“I want to.”

“But—”

“I dinna ken if ye understand what yer clan did to me.”

She bit her lower lip. “Tell me then,” she said softly, so softly it could have been a spell.

Craig lay back, his head filling with memories of blood, burning wood, and screams of dying men.

“I suppose I didna quite believe the betrayal was true till I saw her. Marjorie.”

He swallowed in an attempt to loosen his tight throat, letting the tension in his stomach, the burning anger, in. Not chasing them away like he always did.

“I sneaked into the castle, made my way upstairs, and there she was, in that room with yer brother. Her face pale, cut and beaten, scratches and bruises on her bare legs. I couldna think. I had to kill him, even though it wouldna undo his terrible deed.”

His throat convulsed with the sadness and guilt that rose up from deep within in a heavy, dark wave. His eyes burned from the tears.

“I kent the betrayal, but *seeing* what he did to her... It broke something in me, too. She’s my only sister, the only one from our common mother. Owen and Domhnall are my half brothers, and Lena is my half sister. I love them, but Marjorie is special. ’Tis like she’s a part of me. Do ye ken?”

Amy exhaled softly. “More than you know.”

Craig nodded. “All I could think of was, how did I not ken? How did I miss the signs that these people were untrustworthy like that?” He exhaled sharply. “We Cambels were their vassals. Under their protection. We swore loyalty to them. Alasdair had been a friend. I played with him at gatherings as a child. We trained with swords together. I liked him. How could I have befriended a monster like him? And how could I have let my sister wander out like that, unprotected? It was when I carried her out of that castle and saw my grandfather’s body, still warm but lifeless, that I decided I wilna trust another soul ever again, unless I ken them well. Like my clan. And even then...”

Amy’s eyes were full of sorrow.

“And even then, I dinna say everything to them.”

He had not told anyone of the secret tunnel here in the castle. He hadn’t said anything to Owen about the note he’d intercepted. And he was right. Owen had betrayed him today, bringing the villagers in.

“But you want to trust someone, don’t you?” she whispered.

“More than I want to take my next breath. I want to trust *ye*.”

She closed her eyes then, as though something invisible had hit her.

“I...I need to tell you something, Craig—”

It was as though she’d stabbed him in the abdomen. He’d been right. She was hiding something—

Approaching steps pounded outside. Then someone opened the door and entered the stables. Craig and Amy sat

upright.

One of the guards strode forward.

“Lord, thank God ye’re here.”

“What is it?”

“Come quick. ’Tis Lachlan. He’s been murdered in yer bed.”

CHAPTER 25

Craig followed Lachlan's sheet-covered body with his eyes as two men carried it out of the room. The air in the bedchamber was thick with the copper scent of blood. Amy laid her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it, and he briefly closed his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Craig," she said.

"Ye shouldna have seen him like that," he said. "'Tis nae for a woman to see a man slaughtered."

"I've seen dead people before. Not everyone I tried to find made it."

"Aye, I suppose. Ye're a different kind of woman than I'm used to."

Craig walked towards the bed. The sheets and blankets were dark with blood, already starting to cake. Who had done this? One of the people from the village? The woman Lachlan had been with? Or the spy looking for the secret entrance?

It couldn't have been Amy. She'd been with him, sharing the best night of his life.

He glanced at her, standing a few feet away, watching him with concern.

As though she cared.

What they had shared with each other—things she'd told him, things he'd told her... Those were secret things. Sacred things. Their deepest, darkest thoughts. Things eating away at both of their souls.



Could she still betray him, even after that?

Could she have been pretending?

He shook his head a little. He should stop this bad habit of questioning everything and everyone. Had he not resolved to trust her?

At least to try.

She had been about to tell him something—he would ask her about that later.

“What can I do to help?” Amy said.

“Nothing.”

Craig took the torch from the wall and looked around the bed for clues. Lachlan’s throat had been slit, likely from behind. And based on his complete nakedness, he had been busy with what Craig and Amy had interrupted earlier in the stables. So the red-haired woman had likely been underneath Lachlan. Therefore, if she were the murderer, she’d likely have stabbed him in the heart rather than slit his throat.

Aye. There was her long, wavy red hair on the pillow. He picked up three strands. Two of them were half caked in blood.

Craig shook his head. “I hope Owen is full of regret for this. This wouldna have happened had he not invited the villagers.”

“Talk to him before judging him,” Amy said. “He may be able to help.”

“Aye. What I’d like to ken is where is the red-haired woman Lachlan was with.”

“I hope she isn’t dead somewhere in a ditch,” she said.

Craig walked towards Amy and stopped before her. He put his fingers under her chin and lifted it. He locked his eyes with hers, trying to see what was behind them—her thoughts, her feelings. Trying to read if she was telling the truth. “Answer me this. To honor our night together and what we’ve shared, I will only ask ye once and whatever yer answer is, I will believe ye.”

Her eyes widened a bit, a barely noticeable trace of fear on her face. She swallowed. “Yes, Craig.”

“Did ye have anything to do with this?”

Her eyes widened even more, her eyebrows snapping together, anger on her face. “What? Of course not!”

Craig nodded. “And do ye ken if yer family might be behind this?”

“I have no idea who’s behind this, Craig.”

She was angry, aye. And she seemed genuine. He’d promised her he’d believe her, and that was what he’d do—even though a voice in his head told him not to trust her.

He nodded again, curtly. “Then that’s that. We will speak nae more of it. Come. I need to speak to Owen and the watchmen. And ye need to eat something.”

Owen sat hunched over a cup in the great hall, which was full of Craig’s men and the villagers. They sat quietly, most of them still drunk. Several men lay unconscious or snoring on the tables. One of them was Hamish—his clothes were covered with vomit, and some of it dripped down his beard.

Craig came to Owen and sat across the table from him. Owen glanced up, his mouth twisting in a mournful grimace.

“What were ye thinking?” Craig said.

Owen shook his head once, looking into the cup. “Ye ken what I was thinking. What I always think. Everything will be fine. Everyone’s too serious, especially ye. Life is boring.”

“I should send ye to Father if ye’re too bored here. War will quickly wipe those thoughts away.”

“Do as ye see fit.”

Craig sighed. He should punish Owen, show him that the consequences of such actions were grave. But Owen seemed to have already grasped that. He’d liked Lachlan. Everyone had. His death was related to Owen’s misconduct, no doubt. And since Owen clearly felt guilty, he was already punishing himself.

“Just tell me what happened,” Craig said. “Somehow, I must find out who killed him. And why.”

Owen nodded. “Aye. I thought since ye were going to be gone with Amy for the whole day, I’d invite a few local lasses to a feast. Lachlan and some others came, and the word got out. Some mothers wouldn’t let their daughters go alone, so then fathers, mothers, and brothers joined. Before I kent it, half the village came. It got out of hand.”

Craig sighed. Aye, he wasn’t surprised it had.

“Ye think, brother? Lachlan was a good man.”

“Do ye think I dinna ken that?” Owen thumped his fist against the table.

“Aye. Well. Now tell me, did he argue with someone? From the village or from our men? Was someone angry at him?”

“I didna see.”

“What about the woman he was with, do ye ken who she is?”

“The red-haired one? I think she was with that family over there.”

An older man and a middle-aged woman sat by the fire, wide-eyed.

“I will speak to them. She hasna appeared since?”

“Nae.”

Craig fingered an empty cup standing in front of him.

“What I dinna understand,” Owen said, “is what Lachlan was doing in yer bedchamber.”

“He was there because I sent him there.”

“You sent him there? Why?”

Craig shifted on the bench. “Because I wanted some damned time alone with my wife.”

He glanced across the room to where Amy was serving stew and bread to the villagers and the warriors. Her hair

glowed in the light of the fireplace, her face soft and friendly.

His wife...

His bed...

He imagined for a moment Lachlan with the red-haired woman in Craig and Amy's bed. Tall, dark-haired Lachlan, the woman with her long red hair spread over the pillows. Exactly as he had imagined himself and Amy in that bed so many times.

He was missing something...an important detail.

Realization stabbed him in the gut. His blood chilled.

Of course. Lachlan looked like Craig.

And the woman had hair like Amy's.

How could he not have seen it before? The killer had come to murder Craig. The same person who tried to send the note.

Craig looked around the room. One of his men was a traitor, able to slit the throat of a clansman or at least an ally.

The MacDougalls were behind that, no doubt. Clearly, they'd hired someone who had infiltrated the castle, and Craig needed to find that person. He needed to rethink every single man's behavior, question his own judgment, which was much too clouded by his new wife.

Aye, backstabbing and betrayal were the MacDougall signature.

But were they Amy's?

## CHAPTER 26

**T** *hree days later...*

DURING THE DAYS THAT HAD PASSED SINCE LACHLAN'S murder, Amy could sense Craig watching her more intently than ever before. He was also attentive and gentle with her. But the lightness of their mountain date had disappeared. His eyes were dark and intense whenever he looked at her.

And wherever she went, someone went with her.

If it wasn't Craig, it was one of his men.

Her uneasiness spiked, small tremors going through her legs, her airways tightening, her pulse skyrocketing.

She wasn't imprisoned, she reminded herself. She wasn't locked up. Craig still didn't know about the time travel. He obviously cared about her. There was something between them. The way he'd made love to her in the stables—and every night since then—that wasn't just lust.

Every glide of skin against skin was connecting them deeply, beyond the physical.

Every whisper filled her soul with longing.

Every time she looked at him, naked and glorious and sweating, her heart sang.

She shouldn't let him get so close. Clearly, he still suspected her. Despite what he'd said about wanting to trust

her, he couldn't forget she was a MacDougall.

And Amy doubted he ever would.

But the worst thing was, she did have a secret to hide.

A big secret he'd never forgive her for. And the trust between them was so fragile now, they wouldn't stand a chance if he found out that she wasn't who he thought she was.

And that she had planned to leave him all along. So why was she thinking about the survival of their relationship at all?

But she added a bit of salt to his bowl of stew and an extra pinch of dried parsley to make it tastier for him. She washed his clothes because he was busy questioning every person who'd been in the castle that night—and there were about one hundred and fifty. She brought him ale and water when his eyelids were heavy and dark circles shadowed his eyes.

She couldn't help it.

She'd fallen in love with him.

That realization scared her more than anything. They had been doomed from the beginning. Jenny waited for her on the other side of that tunnel through time, abandoned, alone, and worried.

And no way would she leave her sister alone like her father had left Amy.

How long could she keep this farce up anyway? Sooner or later, Craig would find out that she wasn't the Amy MacDougall he'd thought she was. And then she'd surely end up like that woman from Elspeth's story.

Condemned as crazy.

Or worse, killed as a witch.

No. She needed to go.

Now.

The longer she waited, the harder it would be to leave Craig.

But how? Now everyone in the castle was careful and wary. How would she ever get close to the rock again?

Help came unexpectedly.

She had gone to use the latrine, a tiny closet attached to the Comyn bedchamber and protruding into the air from the wall. There was no toilet paper, and she had to use hay. But she didn't mind. She'd had to go to the bathroom in the woods many times and was used to the simplicity. What she missed, was washing her hands. So she'd brought a jar with water and a bar of soap, and washed her hands right above the toilet hole.

Her business done, she left the latrine to go to the kitchen and start on the dinner, but there was someone else in the room.

Hamish.

He was frowning at the bed, which was now clean of blood—Amy had made sure of it. Still, Craig and she didn't want to sleep there, and instead, settled on the floor by the fireplace at night. It wasn't as comfortable, but better than sleep in a bed where someone had just been murdered.

“Hamish, what is it?” Amy asked.

He glanced back at the door.

“Is everything okay? Does Craig need me?”

“I need to speak to ye, lass,” he said.

“Sure, why don't you tell me on the way to the kitchen. I need to start the dinner.”

“Nae. I canna risk anyone overhearing.”

She inhaled, uneasiness settling in her chest in an iron clasp. “All right.”

He cleared his throat. “'Tis about what ye were looking for in the underground storeroom.”

Amy's pulse jumped. Hamish calmly watched her from under his thick eyebrows.

“I was looking for bacon.”

“Bacon?”

“Salt pork.”

“Aye, ’twas a good excuse to go there. But ye, Craig, and I all ken ’twas nae what ye were really after.”

Amy clutched her hands, glancing at the door. Hamish was blocking it. Her insides quivered.

“What do you think I was after?” she said.

“The same thing I am after.”

She blinked. Was he a time traveler, too? No. He was too medieval. The way he spoke, the way he handled himself—everyone said he was a great warrior. Modern men wouldn’t know how to fight with a sword.

She swallowed. Still. Whatever he meant, she wasn’t going to reveal her secret to him.

“And what is that thing, Hamish?”

He frowned at her a little, one eye narrowing. “The thing that will take ye home.”

So he was talking about the portal, wasn’t he? Amy rubbed her damp palms on her skirt. If he was on her side, he could help her.

“Can you help me get back in there? Craig’s watching my every move.”

“Aye, lass. I’ll help ye. When Craig’s asleep tonight, come to the tower. I am nae allowed to guard the tower anymore, but I will make sure the guards wilna say a thing. Aye?”

“What is in it for you? Did you also—”

She stopped talking, unable to say the words “travel in time” out loud.

“I canna talk now, but I am on yer side, lass.”

His words were soft and caring.

Amy watched as he turned and left, surprised at the change of voice in this tall, brutal warrior. So Hamish had secrets. And if he had secrets...



She broke into a cold sweat.

Could he have had anything to do with Lachlan's murder? No, she'd seen him in the great hall with her own eyes, practically unconscious and with vomit all over him. Multiple people had confirmed they'd seen him in the great hall all night long.

Should she tell Craig? But if she told Craig, she could kiss the chance to get to the rock goodbye.

Later that night, lying sated, warm, and thoroughly loved in Craig's arms, Amy wished she could just stay like that for the rest of eternity.

She'd thought he was asleep, his warm chest rising and falling peacefully under her cheek, his heart beating evenly.

But then he said, "Ye've made me happy, Amy."

His rib cage moved against her ear as he said it, sending a vibration through her. Amy's eyes prickled. She hated herself. Because she was still holding his trust in her hands, only she was about to let it shatter into a million pieces.

"You, too," she whispered. "You've made me happy, too, Craig."

He pressed her tighter against himself, let out a long breath, and soon he was sleeping.

Amy wiped a tear off her cheek and slowly, carefully crawled from under his grasp. She quickly dressed, trying to make no sound. Her heart thundered against her ribs. What was she doing? Was she really sure about this? Yes, Jenny needed her. She couldn't abandon her sister.

*I'm coming, Jenny.*

She wasn't sure which she was more afraid of—that the portal wouldn't work and Craig would finally catch her, or that it would work and this would be the last time she'd see him.

She sneaked out. The castle slept. The only ones who were supposed to be awake were the watchmen on the walls, but Amy decided to walk as calmly and as confidently as she

could. She was the lord's wife, after all. She could walk in the middle of the night whenever she wanted.

Right?

She opened the door of the eastern tower and peeked inside. Two guards were leaning against the wall, sleeping. Hamish sat with his sword out next to one of them. As he saw the door move, he jumped up, but he lowered his sword when she appeared.

“Come, lass, we dinna have much time.”

Amy closed the door behind her. “What did you do to them?” she hissed.

“Only a sedative. They will wake up soon. Come.”

Hamish had a sedative?

“Where the hell did you get that?” she asked.

Yet another layer of Hamish she didn't know. She carefully looked him up and down, watching for any signs of aggression or a hidden malice. But she found none. He was calm and matter of fact. The same Hamish she'd known since she'd come here. He'd been the only person who was kind to her back then.

He took two of the torches, handed one to Amy, and hurried downstairs. “I kent herbs from the woman who raised me, the farmer in Skye. Put some in their dinner. They'll wake up soon after a good sleep, with a little headache 'tis all.”

“You have some interesting hidden skills, Hamish.”

He glanced back. “Dinna fash. I'm on yer side, lass, like I said. Come on.”

“But why do you want to help me?”

“I want to free ye, lass. Isna that what ye want?”

“Well, yes, but aren't you supposed to serve Craig?”

“I canna stand when an innocent woman suffers.”

He opened the door to the back storeroom.

“Let us search,” he said.

She entered. Search for what? The rock was right there. What was he looking for?

Maybe to travel in time, she needed something in addition to the rock? Maybe it had fallen off or something, or she hadn't noticed it was there. Or maybe there was some other thing that needed to be triggered before the rock would work.

She moved the torch around. "Do you know what we're looking for?"

"Nae. We'll know it once we see it, I suppose."

Amy looked around. Her whole body tensed, the ceiling pressing in on her. It was as though her lungs had less capacity to breathe down here. She looked near the rock, swiping the wall and stones around it with her hands, then moved farther to the back of the cave.

Hamish was looking on the opposite side.

She searched behind the pile of timber, which looked much smaller now—a lot had been used for the scaffolds. There were more rocks, and the wall seemed to be rougher, less finished. One rock looked flat and resembled the time-traveling rock in some way. Only, it had no carvings. She ran her hand over the surface.

Then she looked closer, under the rock.

There was a gap. It smelled earthy, like mud. And there was a tiny draft of cool air.

Amy laid the torch on the floor and pushed.

It moved, revealing stairs underneath and a pitch-black entrance.

Hamish was already next to her, shining the light into the hole. He looked jubilant.

"What the hell is this?" Amy said.

"The one thing ye and I have been after, lass. Yer freedom."

Amy shook her head in confusion. "Some sort of a cellar?"

He blinked, his frown deepening. The friendly expression on his face disappeared, and something dark and even threatening passed through his eyes.

Something was wrong.

Amy stood up, slowly, and the desire to flee, to get as far away from him as possible clenched her stomach.

“Aye, lass,” he said, his face softening again. “’Tis a cellar.”

The sense of danger disappeared, but she felt uneasy nonetheless. “So how will it help me get home?”

Hamish had just opened his mouth to say something when a soft *thud* came from somewhere upstairs, or at least from the storage room.

Hamish froze. “We must leave, lass.”

He grasped her by the arm and led her out of the room. They stopped, listening for any other sounds, but nothing came. Hamish climbed the stairs first, silently. He looked through the slit of the cracked door, then gestured for her to follow him.

On the ground floor, one of the guards had fallen over—that had been the thud. But both were unconscious.

“Go,” he whispered, taking her torch. “They’ll wake up any minute, and no one can see us together. Craig canna find out ye came here again.”

Amy nodded, shaking. She should tell Craig. She should just tell him about Hamish, and the whole truth about her being from another time.

She wouldn’t be going home tonight, and her heart ached with worry for Jenny, still left alone. But she would get to spend more time with Craig.

And that was the sweetest thought of all.

CHAPTER 27

“**W**here have ye been?” Craig whispered, pulling Amy closer.

Her skin felt a little chilly under the shift. Wrapped in furs and blankets, by the fire, he’d felt cozy and warm. The only thing missing had been her.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said.

“Something troubling ye?”

She kept silent, and he rose on one elbow, the last of his sleep gone.

“What is it?” he asked and gently pressed on her shoulder so that she would turn to him.

She did, and he noticed the tears glistening in her eyes.

“What?” Craig said.

“I need to tell you something.” She sighed and bit her upper lip, her face in a mournful grimace. “I’ve just seen—”

He covered her hand with his, his heart beating violently in his chest. She lowered her eyes and shook her head. She let out a deep sigh.

“That can wait,” she said at last. “There’s a more important thing, Craig. I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of what I feel for you.”

Something melted in his chest.

“What do ye feel for me, lass?” he said.

“I’m afraid to say.”

“Then show me.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. The opening of her shift fell, revealing the inside curve of one round, full breast. He longed to take it into his mouth and play with her nipple. She cupped his face, gently, caressing his jaw. Their eyes locked—hers were deep and dark blue, like the depths of a loch in summer.

And they shone, with something he had rarely seen in his life.

Love.

She leaned down and planted a kiss on his lips, so soft and gentle, he thought he was sinking into a cloud. He pulled her closer to him, the need for her body spinning and urgent.

She withdrew a little and regarded him, as though she wanted to say something. But she didn’t. Instead, she leaned down and kissed him, hungrier this time, and yet still slowly. He moaned from the sweet intensity of her, from the need he felt in her that resonated in him as well. His cock hardened for her, hot and ready. She rolled to sit atop him, straddling his hips. His erection jerked as he felt her hot cleft pressed against him.

She caressed his naked chest, then she traced her lips over his chin, down his neck and down his chest. She stopped at one nipple and licked it, sending the shudder of pleasure through him. No one has ever done that before, and it felt new and wanton and forbidden.

Intimate.

She moved to the second nipple and teased it with her tongue, too, softly nipping at it with her teeth. A jolt of pleasure shot through him, and he sucked in the air, absorbing the sensation.

“Ye wanton lass,” he murmured.

“You have no idea,” she whispered, glancing up at him.

Then she continued her exploration, trailing hot, burning kisses down his stomach. Her intention became clear when she didn't stop at the dark curls around his erection.

“Oh, lass,” he moaned when her mouth was on him, wrapped around him and teasing him.

He tilted his head back, his hands in her silky hair. Her tongue swept up and down and around, turning his muscles into warm, flowing honey that she couldn't seem to get enough of.

And soon he couldn't, either. His flesh sensitive, he was swelling, and growing, and almost bursting.

“Lass.” He sat up, pulling her with him, and had her straddle him again. “My turn.”

“Oh.”

“Let me show ye how much I love ye.”

Her eyelashes fluttered. “You love me?”

Nae. He didn't say that out loud—did he? He couldn't take his words back now. The truth was out there. “Aye, Amy. I fell in love with ye. My enemy. My wife. My captive.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. She pulled him to her, desperately. “Take me, Craig. I need to feel you. I need you inside. Take me, please.”

He understood because the same need burned in him. To be together, body to body, soul to soul, heart to heart.

Without breaking eye contact, he entered her, her sleek, soft, silky insides grasped him like a plush fist. He loved to see the moment she became his, again and again, the pleasure he brought her, the connection of their bodies that made them one in soul, too.

He began moving, in the same rhythm as her, plunging into her. He knew now that she liked it slowly at first and then quick and rough, without holding back. She wrapped her legs around his hips, and her arms around his torso, her fingernails digging into his back. He watched the bliss on her face as he

drove into her, again and again, melting, evaporating in the heaven he could stay in forever.

His pleasure was building along with hers, and soon she couldn't withhold her moans.

“Look at me,” he said. “I want ye to look at me as ye find yer release.”

Because he'd be looking at her, too.

She opened her eyes, dark blue and shining in the night, reflecting the light of the fire.

He sped up, feeling her depths quivering, and she tensed, her mouth opening, gasping.

“Oh, Craig!” she moaned. “Oh, Craig.”

And then, she tumbled over the edge, her body pulsing in waves under him, her fingers digging in, holding on. He was lost, too. With one final plunge, he reached his own release, bursting, shaking, lost in her eyes, seeing the depths of her soul.

He collapsed on top of her, heavy and hot. Tremors were still coursing through her body and they breathed together.

She turned and let him lie on his side, pressing into him with her back and her delicious behind.

“I love ye, lass,” he whispered into her hair, his arm wrapping around her and pulling her closer.

She whispered, “I love you, too.”

He smiled and sighed, releasing any remnants of worry and suspicion. Because really, he had nothing to worry about with her.

But as he was drifting into sleep, mayhap, he thought she said, “And I'm sorry.”

But he'd probably dreamed it.



**T** *he next day...*

THE FARM WAS QUIET THIS EARLY. THE MAIN HOUSE, THE shed, and the stables were plunged into fog as white as cotton grass. Hamish inhaled the humid air and kept it in his lungs, enjoying the feeling of expansion in his chest.

He could use a good cup of uisge today.

He'd almost won. This heavy, humid air, rich with the aroma of rotting leaves and manure, was the scent of freedom.

Hamish had all the information he needed to send the message.

He walked to the house and knocked on the door. Inside, feet rustled against the floor, and Amhladh, the farmer, opened the door. He frowned as he saw Hamish.

"I need the birds," Hamish said.

Amhladh's lower jaw went to the left and to the right as if he didn't have any teeth left.

His eyes shone as he looked Hamish up and down. "I need another shilling for that."

What Hamish hated was greed. It was why his foster parents had worked Fiona to death. It was what moved powerful men like John MacDougall to hire people like Hamish to kill their enemies.

Fast as a lightning strike, Hamish retrieved his dagger from his belt and pointed it at Amhladh's throat. The man's eyes widened in fear.

"I have paid ye enough for yer trouble," Hamish said. "I wilna be manipulated or blackmailed. Take me to the birds. Now."

"Aye." Amhladh stepped out and closed the door behind him. With a sheepish look, he led Hamish to the cowshed. Inside, the cage with half a dozen pigeons stood in the corner. The scent of cow manure and bird shite hung heavily in the air. Hamish walked to the cage and took one pigeon out.

He looked at Amhladh. "Ye can go."

The man nodded and walked out with relief on his face.

Hamish waited until he heard the door of the big house closing and left the shed as well. The farm was on the outskirts of the village, where the woods started. He walked into the woods and stopped when he thought he was far enough away.

He propped one leg on a rock and took out a small piece of parchment, then a thin stick of charcoal. "Secret tunnel found. Meet me in a sennight in the village."

He didn't trust the exact location of the tunnel to the bird. There was always the danger someone else would catch it. He attached the parchment to the pigeon's foot. The birds from Dunollie have been delivered to Amhladh a couple of days ago, and this one would have no problem finding its way home.

He let the bird fly, and it quickly disappeared into the mist. He was lucky it was foggy, and the bird probably wouldn't be noticed. And even if it was, no one would be able to shoot it down in this weather.

Last night, he'd poured more sedative into the guards' mouths to buy himself more time to see where the tunnel led to and if it was safe to use. He'd had to walk and then crawl in the complete darkness, but had eventually come out on the other side of the moat.

He would finally be successful in his mission. Even his mistake with Lachlan hadn't changed his plan much. Yes, he'd had to pay the red-haired woman almost all of his savings to keep her mouth shut. He'd smuggled her out while the debauchery was ongoing and the guards were distracted, then told her to go to France. With the money he'd given her, she could make a decent start. And he'd put the fear into her that if she ever told anyone anything, he'd come for her.

He'd known that threat would likely keep her quiet until he'd found the tunnel, at least—she didn't know he'd never harm her. Soon he'd get the MacDougall reward and be gone, and no one would find him.

He wouldn't harm the MacDougall lass, either. She hadn't done anything wrong, and she wasn't on Craig's side. His hunch told him she wasn't a threat. If anything, she could be useful to distract Craig if needed. It was clear to him now that the man had fallen in love with her.

In any case, she'd helped Hamish find the tunnel. Now he just needed to make it out of the castle alive when the MacDougalls came and Craig found out that Hamish had been to blame all along.

## CHAPTER 29

**O**ne week later...

“I WANT YE TO KEN SOMETHING, AMY,” CRAIG SAID ONE morning at breakfast. “I decided to allow ye to go to the storeroom in the Eastern tower alone. The guards will let ye pass.”

Amy stilled with her spoon of oatmeal in her hand. “What?”

“I said I love ye, but I didna behave like I did.” He cleared his throat, his eyes soft and light, the color of grass toasted under the summer sun.

The past week had been the happiest time of her life. She felt drunk with love and happiness, although the guilt of keeping something important from Craig weighed on her every second of the day.

But she couldn't bring herself to tell him the truth. How could she deliberately break his heart? That's why she hadn't yet tried to leave again.

And now, he'd taken the last of his defenses down.

He would let her go there alone.

He trusted her completely.

And she was going to destroy him.

Her throat clenched, her airways closing. She fisted the material of her dress.

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

She sucked in the air.

Her own lies were trapping her.

“And ye said ye love me, too. So I trust ye to stay. I trust ye to be on my side. Even though all my instincts scream at me not to. But I will.”

Amy had to close her mouth to stop herself from saying, “You shouldn’t.”

Because she was still leaving. For Jenny. And because sooner or later, Craig and everyone else would find out about her true identity. And about time travel.

And, most importantly, how could she bear seeing the hurt in his eyes when he learned she’d lied?

So it was better to go now. Today. Now that the way was clear, she only needed to figure out how to activate the portal. She wondered why Hamish hadn’t suggested trying again.

“Thank you, Craig,” she mumbled.

He covered her hand with his and squeezed it. It was warm and dry and so familiar. Even just the simple touch sent a wave of comfort and joy through her.

She was a traitor. Her father had been right—she was a coward. She was able to find and rescue people. She was able to search for others in confined spaces without letting a panic attack get to her.

But this. Telling Craig the truth. Hurting him.

She just couldn’t.

And she could feel the disaster at her fingertips.

When the breakfast was done and the great hall cleaned, she hurried to the eastern tower. Like Craig had said, the guards let her pass.

She would just take a peek. She wouldn't go yet. She just needed to figure out if the stone worked at all. Maybe it didn't. Then the problem would be solved. She'd stay with Craig. The idea sent a thrill of relief and joy through her, but she pushed it aside.

On shaky legs, she took a torch, opened the door, and descended the stairs.

From outside, she heard shouts and cries. Feet pounded across the courtyard. Weird. Maybe, Craig was starting a new military training routine. Even better cover for her. She opened the door to the underground storeroom. There was another source of light already there, in the furthest corner of the room. Amy walked in.

“Hamish?”

The tall, broad-shouldered figure in the warrior's coat and chainmail straightened from a crouched position.

“Lass,” he said, his voice disturbingly quiet. “Ye shouldna be here.”

“What are you doing?”

“Doesna matter. Ye need to leave.”

“Why? Craig told the guards to let me pass.”

“Aye, but it isna safe for ye here.”

“I just came to see how I can activate the—”

It occurred to her that Hamish had his cloak on. And he had a guilty look on his face. *No, silly.* She was just reading too much into this.

She frowned. It was strange that after all this time, with so many obstacles to get to the stone, now that it was finally free, the last thing Amy wanted to do, was to go.

She approached the stone, propped her torch against the wall and sank to her knees before the portal.

“What are ye doing, lass?” Hamish said, alarm in his voice.

But she ignored him. She carefully traced the cold, wet print with her finger. When she'd done that last time, she'd been thinking of Craig. Of loneliness. Of how she understood what wounds were.

The stone remained immobile and dead.

She put her hand into the handprint, completely.

Nothing.

“Lass?” Hamish said, his tone careful, as if he spoke to a wildcat.

But she couldn't pay attention to him now. She needed to figure out how to make this work.

What if she needed to think of someone dear to her? What if she thought of Jenny. Of her father. Yes, she hadn't talked to him for years, but he still was her father. She still loved him.

Jenny. Poor abandoned Jenny. She'd probably called the police over a month ago. Probably given up hope of ever seeing her again by now.

Suddenly the river glowed blue, and the road golden-brown.

“Amy, what the devil?” Hamish's steps sounded close to her.

The stone vibrated a little, and her hand began sinking...

Panic gripped her, a sinking feeling in her chest expanded.

Quick steps came from behind. “Amy!”

She jerked her hand back and jumped up.

Craig. In his coat and chainmail, a sword in his hand. Six more men stood behind him, all armored.

Screams rang from outside.

Amy's feet and hands went as cold as ice, shaking. The sickening feeling of falling through time clung to her even though she'd stopped herself—she knew that on the other side of that rock was a life where she would never see Craig again.

“What is this glowing rock?” he asked. “Why is Hamish here?”

Amy’s ability to speak disappeared. Time stopped, every moment stretching into eternity. She let out a shaky breath, and her shoulders crumpled. Her chest caved in. She needed to sit down or lean against something for support.

She needed Craig.

There was nowhere to run now. He’d seen her using the stone.

She could still lie. She could still try to get out of this. Still protect his love and trust, which she’d earned with so much effort.

No. No more lies. She’d tell the truth. He’d hate her for it, but he deserved to know.

Her stomach flipped, as if she was skiing down a steep slope and didn’t know if she’d land on her feet or fall and break her neck.

“Amy, I demand that ye tell me!” he roared, his voice full of rage and helpless.

She breathed in, as if she could inhale his love, wanting to extend the last moment before Craig would hate her forever.

And she jumped.

“I’m not the Amy MacDougall you think I am,” she said.

Craig winced, as though from pain. “What?”

“I’m from the future.”

Craig shook his head in confusion.

“I traveled in time through this stone.” She pointed at the rock. “By accident. My name is Amy MacDougall, but I’m not the chief’s daughter. I’m a search and rescue officer from the United States of America. I’m sorry I’ve been hiding this from you, Craig. I was afraid you’d kill me.”

Craig stared, clearly bewildered. “I saw the rock glow just now—I see it must be some sort of magic...”



She nodded. "I'm from 2020."

He shook his head in bewilderment. "So if, as ye say, ye're nae the chief's daughter, why is he knocking on our door with five hundred men? Is it nae to retrieve ye?"

She felt the blood leave her face. Her heart thumped. Her stomach hurt as though pierced by a sharp object.

"No," she said.

Craig's eyes clouded with hurt. "I dinna ken why ye're saying all this nonsense, but it's clear I was right. Ye did betray me. Ye lied to me all this time—when I trusted ye with everything." He looked down for a moment. "What else to expect from a MacDougall?"

It was as though Amy's feet were sinking into mud, her chest being torn into painful shreds. "Craig, I'm so sorry—"

"I came to take ye to safety. The MacDougalls are attacking. What are ye doing here, Hamish?"

Hamish's hand slowly went to his sword.

Craig frowned, then stepped back. He looked at the stone lid that hid the tunnel, now lying beside the opening.

His face fell. "'Twas *ye*? Ye found the tunnel? Ye sent the message? Ye killed Lachlan."

Amy gasped and looked at Hamish. But he didn't even deny it. His eyes only darkened. Craig pointed his sword at the man who had been Amy's only friend...who she saw now had been using her all along.

CHAPTER 30

“**D**id ye two work together?” Craig said through the agonizing tightness in his throat.

“Lord, we must make haste,” Owen said from behind Craig. “The gates...”

Craig nodded, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. A bottomless hole somewhere in the middle of him smarted. He wanted to know the truth, the extent of the lies she'd woven around him. Because he wasn't sure which he was in love with, the net of her deceptions or the woman herself.

He needed to know which was which.

“We didna work together, lord,” Hamish said. “But I am taking yer dearie with me.”

He grabbed Amy's hand and yanked her to himself. The tip of his dagger was at her neck. Amy gasped, her eyes huge and desperate.

“Hamish!” she cried, indignant.

“Let us go, or I will cut her throat, just like Lachlan's.”

A low growl escaped Craig's throat. He should just attack Hamish before he escaped. Judging by the fact that the MacDougalls weren't pouring out of the trapdoor, Hamish hadn't told them where it was yet. He shouldn't care that Amy might get hurt or that Hamish might truly kill her. She didn't love him. She'd lied about everything.

No one had ever hurt him like she had.

And no one ever would again.

But he couldn't bring himself to let anything harm her.

"Craig," Owen whispered, "we can get him—"

"Stand back," Craig said.

"Let me go, Hamish," Amy spat and jerked her arm. "You won't kill me."

"Ye dinna ken me, lass," he said, moving towards the tunnel and pulling her after himself. "I will if I must."

It was as though Hamish was pulling Craig's heart out with his bare hands. Hamish let Amy go into the tunnel first, and as the woman Craig loved disappeared, his heart was torn in half. And what was left of Craig was a raw, open wound. Aching, whirling, endless agony.

He watched the lid close and stood still for what felt like an eternity.

He should go after them. He should save her.

He would, despite her betrayal. He'd still give his own life if it saved hers.

But he had the castle to protect. The men who relied on him.

"Put rocks, barrels, tables over the lid," he said. "Once Hamish tells the MacDougalls where it is, they will try to sneak in. I need at least a dozen men. Even if they manage to shift the weight, no more than one man will be able to come out at once. Now that we ken they're coming through here, they have no advantage."

"Aye, Craig," said one of his men.

"Let us go, Owen. The rest of ye, start covering the tunnel."

They nodded, and Craig and Owen hurried upstairs.

"Are ye all right, brother?" Owen said. "That was—"

"Not now, Owen," he said. "Dinna ask me about her no more. Not ever. I dinna want to hear her name or remember

that she existed. I have a castle to protect.”



AMY’S HEART SLAMMED AGAINST HER RIB CAGE, AND SHE inhaled the stuffy, cold air with an effort. The tunnel was like a coffin. Like endless, black desperation.

But the confinement of the tunnel wasn’t what caused her pain and panic.

It was that the worst had happened in the worst possible way.

Craig knew the truth.

She’d seen the unbearable hurt in his eyes, the death sentence of their love. And that was what she felt, too, the unforgiving lash of her own lies as they tore her soul and heart apart.

“Hold on, lass,” Hamish said. “I ken ’tis nae pleasant, no light here, but I have yer hand.”

“You were never going to kill me, were you?” she hissed. “I should have just run to Craig.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. Then he threw curtly, “Ye dinna ken me at all.”

“Clearly. How could you have murdered Lachlan like that?” she said. “And what about the woman he was with?”

“I thought he was Craig. Who else would have been in his bedchamber, with a red-haired woman?”

She shook her head. “So you are working for the MacDougalls?”

He kept silent for a moment, as if deciding what to admit to. Then she felt him shrug. “Aye. They hired me to find the tunnel and kill Craig. But I failed at both.”

“Why? You found the tunnel.”

“Aye, but now that Craig kens, he is never going to let them use it. ’Tis only good if ’tis secret, if one attacks unexpectedly, from within.”

“So what now?” she asked. “Are you going to give me to the MacDougalls?”

“Nae. I canna show my face to the MacDougalls now. They’ll kill me. Nae, ye and I, we run.”

“We?”

“Aye, I need ye as my protection in case Craig decides to come after me. He’d never let harm come to ye.”

It was as though something sharp stabbed Amy in the chest. “Really?” She chuckled bitterly. “Maybe that was true before. But I’ve hurt him too much now. I betrayed him. He hates me.”

Hamish sighed or chuckled, or something in between. “If I ken men—and I do ken men on account of being one—he does not hate ye. I hadna realized it before, but I see it now. He’d die for ye, lass.”

She choked a little from her sadness. “Not anymore.”

Soon, the air became fresher, and somewhere before her, over Hamish’s shoulders, she saw a little hint of light.

“Almost there,” Hamish said.

In a few more seconds they stopped, and somewhere above was a barely visible semicircle of light. Hamish climbed the stairs and pushed the lid to the side. Light flowed into the tunnel, blinding Amy for a moment. She closed her eyes, letting them adjust. When they stopped hurting, she sucked in fresh air.

Hamish looked around. “’Tis starting to snow,” he said. “Better hurry.”

## CHAPTER 31

**T**hey went north. Amy memorized signs of where they were going, to find her way back. But after a while, everything sunk in the white mist. She'd need to return to the castle and then to her time. Beg, bribe, or fight her way in.

Although the last option would be insane.

But without Craig, she didn't have any reason to stay. She had to get home where she could help people rather than cause them pain.

The snow intensified, and the northern wind bit at her nose and lips. She had her cloak on, thank God, but the rest of her clothes were completely wrong for long, snowy expeditions in the mountains. The skirts of her dress tangled around her legs and restricted her movements. The leather soles of her shoes were flat and slippery, and she stumbled over and over.

She didn't know how much time had passed when Hamish stopped and studied their surroundings.

They were high up a mountain. The snow was thick, and it was much colder than below. A few pine trees grew here, but mostly, a snowy vastness surrounded them.

"I am going to leave ye here," Hamish said. "'Tis up to ye now what ye will do. I dinna think Craig followed us."

"Of course he didn't," Amy said, her throat clenching with bitterness.

He shrugged one shoulder. “The siege might last a long while. Dinna ken how the MacDougalls will do. But I must hide from them now, so I canna take ye with me. They are a powerful clan and will find me if they wish to.”

She gasped. “Can’t take me with you? You bastard. You tried to kill Craig and did kill an innocent man.” She clenched and unclenched her fists helplessly. “I should kill you.”

He cocked one brow. “We both ken ye’re nae capable of murder.” He sighed. “I will never forget ye. There’s no one I’ve met like ye, lass. I hope ye find happiness, wherever ye end up.”

He waited for her to say something, but numbness enveloped her whole body. She hoped it was the cold and not the helpless rage, guilt, and heartbreak that shattered her.

“Go to hell. I don’t want to see you ever again,” she said somberly.

Hamish bowed his head, something that might have been remorse flashing in his dark eyes.

“Just go back quickly that way. The blizzard has already reached its worst and is calming down now. If ye hurry, ye will find the castle.”

He nodded to her, turned around and left. Amy stood watching him for a minute until he disappeared behind a slope of the mountain.

An overwhelming loneliness sank into her, the slow snowfall raging in her ears, deadly cold seeping into her bones.

She needed to move, or she’d freeze to death here.

She turned and went back south, towards the castle, following their tracks in the snow. Her feet were cold, and she’d stopped feeling her toes soon. Maybe because of that, or maybe because she went down the slope, she fell even more often.

She was wet, her skirts and cloak heavy from the snow that melted and saturated her clothing. At some point, her mind

became cloudy, the white numbness around her creeping into her heart and her mind.

Maybe that was why she didn't notice that she was walking way too close to the edge.

She stepped onto a flat stone. Her foot slipped. She slipped and slid, then rolled, bumping her sides against rocks, trying to cover her head.

Until she finally stopped.

Amy lay motionless on her side, scanning her body. Good news was, she wasn't numb anymore. Bad news was, everything hurt. She moved her legs and her arms. Nothing felt broken. She sat up, wincing. Her head thumped from a pulsing pain. She felt her scalp—no blood.

Good. She could count her blessings.

She looked around.

And swallowed hard.

Just a foot away, the rocky platform she lay on ended in a ragged edge.

And below was a white nothingness.

It was hard to see through the snow, but she was probably at the top of a cliff. The wind was stronger here, throwing snow into her face in hard gusts.

She looked up, back where she'd come from. A steep, rocky slope covered in snow and ice led up from the small ledge.

Cold desperation crept into her.

She was alone.

Just like in the barn.

And no one was coming for her.

There were no walls and no locked doors, but she was trapped just the same.

Her lungs began contracting, and her fingers went as numb as her toes. Her stomach churned, bile rising in her throat.



She crawled towards the slope, away from the unforgiving vastness beyond the small rocky platform.

Even though this wasn't a confined space, she felt more abandoned, more alone, more lost than ever before.

She was suffocating, her lungs struggling to get enough oxygen. Her head spun, and sweat broke through her skin even though she was ice cold. Everything around her was pressing in, burying her in desolation.

No one would find her.

No one was coming.

Just like those two terrible nights.

And then Craig's voice came to her mind.

*Ye lost yerself somewhere back in that barn... Ye must find yerself first.*

She put her head between her knees and breathed.

Find herself first...

What had she lost in the barn?

She'd been sure her father and mother always had her back. That was a given. No matter how scared she was, how naughty, or how sick—her mom and dad were there for her.

Until her mom had died and left Amy, Jenny, and Dad alone. No matter how much Amy had needed her mom, Mom wasn't there—and never would be.

And then her dad.

He'd changed, too. It was as though he, too, had disappeared and was replaced by someone else. From being a rock, a protector, a constant, he'd become a drunk. He'd stopped existing, lost in his oblivion. And instead of being a protector, he'd become an aggressor. He'd become the one who'd almost killed Amy.

So what had she lost in that barn?

Yes, she'd lost herself. The girl who'd believed that there was one person who would come no matter what. Who would

be a rock no matter what. Who would love her unconditionally.

Instead, out of that barn had come a girl who was scared of life and who thought she didn't deserve a person who loved her and would always be there for her. That what she deserved was to be abandoned, betrayed, and locked up. Left alone to die.

Tears burned in Amy's eyes.

But now she knew that girl had gotten the wrong idea. She'd taken the fault on herself when it was her father who'd been guilty. Having no resources and no capacity to deal with the death of his wife, he'd taken a destructive route. A route that had not only destroyed him, but also threatened to destroy Amy's and Jenny's lives.

Amy felt sorry for him. He'd been a good man, but he hadn't dealt with the grief, with the loss. And instead of searching for strength in his family, he'd sought escape in a bottle.

What would Amy have done, had she had enough resources not to panic? She'd have talked to him. And if he had still locked her up, she'd have calmly searched for a way out. Maybe she'd have tried to get through that hole in the roof, climb onto the roof and call for help from there. Maybe she'd have come up with some way to find water...

She could have tried a number of different things.

Just like she could now. Instead of giving into the panic, she could realize she was both the lost and abandoned girl in the barn and the resourceful girl she needed to be. And both were who she was, whole and complete.

And with both parts of herself united, she looked up and saw a clear path, free of snow and ice, that she could take. She would not wait for someone to come for her.

She would rescue herself.

## CHAPTER 32

**T**he battle was over. Craig watched the MacDougall forces turn around and walk away.

It had been a quick and bloody fight. The castle offered a great defense, even though still damaged. And the MacDougalls, confident that they'd have the advantage of sneaking in through the secret tunnel, hadn't brought a battering ram or many siege ladders. Without them, and without access to the tunnel, they'd had little chance—especially in the snowfall.

Craig stood on the southern wall, watching the troops retreat through the snow.

He'd protected the castle with no casualties among his men, just a couple of small wounds and scratches. He'd fulfilled his duty.

He looked east, where the exit from the secret tunnel was, and where he knew Hamish had taken Amy.

The hole in his chest where his heart used to be ached and burned as though vinegar had been spilled into it. Was she all right? What had Hamish done to her?

His fists clenched. His sister had been taken away—and now Amy. His stomach tightened, and a sour taste rose in his throat.

He didn't know anymore what was the truth and what was a lie.

There were many strange things in the Highlands. He'd grown up on stories of kelpies, faeries, and legendary warriors.

But time travel? Nae. That must be another lie.

Owen stood next to him. "We are safe, brother. What now?"

Craig's fingers clenched against the ice-cold stone of the parapet. Owen followed his gaze.

"Ye want to find her, don't ye?" he said.

Craig didn't answer. The sinking, dark feeling crawled in his gut. Something bad had happened to her. He felt it. She was in trouble. He didn't know where the feeling came from, but he knew it was true. Maybe Hamish would harm her. Maybe some of the MacDougalls had followed them. Maybe it was something else...

But Craig knew in his bones that if he didn't go after Amy now, if she died or something bad had happened to her, he'd never be able to live with himself.

No matter how much she'd hurt him, he still loved her.

"Aye," Craig said. "I want to find her."

Owen clapped him on the shoulder. "Then let us go."

Craig took Owen and two more men. They rode out and followed the remnants of Amy and Hamish's tracks, which were still visible even under the snow. They went northeast, into the mountains, following the glen. In the falling snow, riding was treacherous, so they went slowly, the horses carefully picking their way along the slippery path.

He didn't know how long they rode, but soon the tracks were hard to see, and Craig had to step down several times, using Amy's trick with the stick to find the next sign.

The tension in Craig's gut turned into spasms of worry.

Without knowing what he was doing, he silently prayed to God, *please let her live. Please let her live.*

Eventually, dusk fell, and the pre-evening darkness enveloped them. Craig knew he would no longer be able to

follow the tracks in the dark, and his heart plummeted at the thought of Amy cold and scared in this lonely place. Then, from behind a pine, a figure appeared, black against the snow.

She was in a hooded cloak, but he'd recognized her anywhere. She limped and leaned on a long stick.

Raising her head, she stopped. Although he couldn't see her face under the hood, he knew her beautiful eyes would be wide and bright.

He jumped off the horse and went to her on weak legs.

"Oh, Craig." She sobbed and dropped in his arms.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed her tight to his chest. She was cold and wet and heavy, her clothes saturated with melted snow and partly iced over. She shook slightly, her cheek cool and wet against his.

Relief mixed with heartache filled him and whirled within him in a confusing, head-spinning mixture. But whatever his feelings were for her, she was clearly hurt and frozen, and she needed help.

His instincts had been right.

"I have ye, lass," he whispered. "Ye're safe now."

"Thank you for coming for me," she said through tears. "I wasn't sure I'd make it."

"Aye, of course I came for ye."

He'd always come for her, he thought. He'd always come for her no matter what she did to him.

"Come now, we need to get ye warm quick. On my horse."

He lifted her onto his horse. She sat in front of him and he pulled her close to his body to warm her.



AMY LAY PEACEFULLY IN CRAIG'S ARMS, FIRE PLAYING IN THE fireplace in their bedroom. Her fingers and toes ached as the

warmth came back to them. But she was dry, she was alive, and she was safe in the arms of the man she loved.

Outside, the snowfall was turning into a storm, wind howling against the shutters and sucking warmth from the room through the gaps.

The last thing Amy wanted was to leave the cozy confinement of Craig's body. They were still in their makeshift bed, unable to bring themselves to get into the real one. Craig had sworn he'd burn the bed down, but he needed a new bed, and that had to be ordered from a carpenter.

They kissed, but they didn't make love—Amy was too weak for that. And what had happened between them, the unspoken, heavy weight of the lies and the pretenses, was like an invisible barrier.

“Do ye want more tea, lass?” he asked.

The pot with tea hung above the fire, ready to be poured and served.

“No.” She nuzzled against his chest with the back of her head. “I'm okay.”

He chuckled but didn't say anything.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing. It's just that word... ‘okay.’”

“What about it?” she asked, although she suspected what he'd say. It was a word from the future. Which was a giant elephant in the room they both avoided discussing.

“I dinna want to talk about it, not while ye're recovering.”

Her stomach clenched painfully, till it felt like a knife was stabbing her. The state of peaceful, happy drifting was gone. She sat up, wrapping the plaid around her shoulders, and turned to look at him. His face was calm but for the tiny wrinkles of pain and worry around his eyes.

“Spit it out, Craig.”

Of course, it was about her lies. About the time travel. About what was the truth and where she had just pretended.

He held her gaze with his, the dark intensity of a storm thundering in his eyes.

“Aye. Good. I want to ken, why did ye deceive me? How could ye not tell me from the beginning that ye weren’t the Amy MacDougall I thought ye were?”

“And have you kill me for witchcraft? How could I tell you upfront I’d traveled back in time? As though it’s such a normal thing to say. I didn’t believe it myself back then, and you would have never believed me. You’d have called me a lunatic and kicked me out of the castle, or just killed me.”

“I wouldna have killed ye,” he mumbled.

“But you wouldn’t have believed me, would you?”

“Nae, probably not. I still dinna.”

“Exactly. Because it’s crazy.”

He sighed. “How can it be true?”

“Didn’t you ask me where my accent came from?”

“Aye. Ye were dressed like no one I’d ever seen and talking strangely. Yer accent—never heard it before...”

“That’s because I’m American. My name is really Amy MacDougall, but I was born in 1989, in the country that doesn’t even exist yet, on a continent you’ve never heard of because it won’t be discovered for a couple of centuries.”

Craig continued staring at her. “Aye, ’tis hard to believe.”

“I know. Wait. Let me show you something.”

She got out of the blankets and furs, shivering from the chill in the air. She took her backpack and the clothes she’d come in out of the bottom of one of the chests standing by the wall, then came back to Craig, snuggling into the warmth of the blankets and his body.

She showed him her jacket. “See?” She pulled the tab of the zipper up and down. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

He frowned, studying the zipper. Then took it in his hands and tried zipping up and down. "'Tis a practical thing," he admitted. He took the jacket in his hands and looked closely at the material, then brushed his fingers against it. "'Tis smooth and light, yet must be warm, judging by the thickness."

"Exactly."

She demonstrated the backpack and opened the zipper as well. She revealed the flashlight, which she'd retrieved, and switched it on. Craig jerked back a little.

"This is just light, Craig," she said. "There's no fire."

He slowly stretched his hand out and took it. He looked into the light, then carefully touched it with one finger. "Aye, just a little warm. And doesn't look like fire."

"No. It's electricity, something that will be invented at the end of the nineteenth century, if I remember correctly. It gives power to different objects and mechanisms, like this one. They can be used to produce light, to create heat for cooking, and to do mechanical jobs for people, like mixing or sewing or removing dirt."

He directed the flashlight into a dark corner of the room. "Oh, aye, 'tis very convenient."

He turned the flashlight to other sides of the room, the ceiling, the door. Then he switched it off.

"What else?" he said, looking at the backpack, curiosity ringing in his voice.

She chuckled and presented the first aid kit. She felt like Santa.

She undid the zipper of the synthetic red bag and showed the contents to him. With wonder in his eyes, he took out and studied the packs with dressings for burns and trauma, a vented chest seal, gauze, an eye pad, the scissors, packs with ibuprofen and aspirin, and other stuff. She quickly explained what those were and why they were there. Then she showed him her pack of tampons, the pack of tissues she always had with her, the dead cell phone, her passport.



When he'd looked through every single thing, he shook his head and stared into space.

"Well?" she said. "Do you believe me now?"

He looked at her. "Aye, lass. I do."

But he said it as though by proving the truth, she'd somehow made it worse.

"I still dinna ken who ye truly are. Why are ye here? What was true about ye, and what did ye contrive?"

Amy nodded, the heat of embarrassment burning her cheeks.

"I'm sorry about that, Craig. I really am. I hated myself every time I had to lie to you. I wanted to tell you the truth so many times, but I was a coward. How I got here—I was on a school trip with my sister and her class. We visited Scotland, and I met this lady, Sineag, who told me about you..."

She told him everything. Words poured out of her like water out of a tap. She found his hand and held it, and he squeezed hers. She told him she was born on a farm. That her real mother died when Amy was ten. That her father really did lock her up in the barn. And about her sister. And the years living with her aunt and uncle after her dad was charged with abuse and neglect. Then she told him about the vet school in New York. How she'd found that lost boy and knew she wasn't born to be a vet but a search and rescue officer. Her marriage with Nick—how happy she'd been at first, and then how she'd started feeling trapped and suffocated when he'd gotten too close and she hadn't been ready to believe that someone really loved her or that she deserved love and happiness.

Then the divorce.

And now this.

She shut up and watched Craig. He looked into the fire, his face thoughtful. He ran both hands through his hair and left them there, lowering his head between his knees. Amy had to physically restrain herself from asking his verdict. Did he believe her now? Did he forgive her?

But if he did, what then? Was there any future for them?  
And if there was, what was it?

She couldn't stay here.

He could never go with her to the twenty-first century.

What was there for them?

He looked at her, shaking his head softly. "Aye, I believe ye now, Amy. I believe ye're a good person. I believe ye thought ye had no choice and couldna have confided in me. And I am sorry I made ye feel that way."

Her heart pulsed in her temples.

"And I love ye. Despite yer lies, I canna stop loving ye. I dinna think I ever will."

With a shaking hand, Amy pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

"But?" she said. "You sound like you're going to say, but..."

"But I canna forgive ye. I canna trust ye. And I will always be doubting ye."

She nodded. The verdict was delivered. And it was as though a concrete building fell on her, crushing her body and her heart.

*You knew he wouldn't forgive you, and even if he did, what then? You'd have to stomp on his heart anyway and leave as soon as you had a chance.*

Because staying in a time where she was so restricted, where she couldn't be her true self, would be like a prison sentence.

"Because I lied?" she said.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, there was such desperate, bottomless pain, Amy choked. "Because loyalty is everything to me. I canna be open again to ye and let ye betray me again. I will watch yer every step."

His mouth twisted mournfully. “Ye may be from the future, but ye’re still a MacDougall.”

## CHAPTER 33

**C**raig moved out of the bedchamber to allow Amy the space she needed to recover.

The next day, she was strong enough to get up and walk.

In three days, she came to him during supper in the great hall.

“I’ll leave tomorrow,” Amy said as she put a bowl of fish soup before Craig.

She took a seat next to him.

He didn’t look at her. It would hurt too much. Having her near him, even in the same castle, was enough to make him breathe easier, for his heart to beat faster.

“Thank ye,” he said and brought the bowl closer.

“For the soup or for leaving?” Amy teased, her voice jumping.

“For the soup.”

“What about me leaving?”

He met her eyes. And choked from the sadness in them.

“We both kent it was a matter of time,” he said. “The time has come.”

She nodded, her eyes watering, her lashes fluttering. “Yes. Of course. It has.”

She began eating her soup. Silence hung between them. Craig physically felt the distance between them, the aching urge to touch each other, to talk.

To forgive.

“What if I stayed, Craig?” she said. “Have you thought about that?”

He looked up from his bowl. “Aye. I have.”

She raised her eyebrows. “And?”

“And I wouldna be able to hold myself back from ye. But I’d never be able to forgive ye. Yer lies cost me dearly. If ye’d told me the truth from the beginning, I wouldna have marrit ye. Lachlan may be still alive. Hamish may have never discovered the tunnel. The MacDougalls wouldna have come storming the castle. The Earl of Ross must think Bruce and all of us liars.”

A frown of pain crossed her face.

“I would keep my heart close, Amy. I would doubt yer every word. Ye said ye felt suffocated with Nick. If we were together, I would suffocate ye, Amy. Again. More.”

She shook her head, tears in her eyes. “No. I don’t believe that.”

“Ye should. ’Tis better to be cautious. ’Tis my caution that saved my life and the castle. And ’tis my trust in others that led to Lachlan’s death, my grandfather’s death, and my sister being raped. ’Tis trust that led to my heart being shattered by the only woman I ever loved.”

Amy blinked. “So you’d rather be miserable and alone than to try to change? To give me the benefit of the doubt?”

“I’ll be miserable and alone either way.”

She nodded and stood up with her soup. “Then be miserable and alone, Craig. That’s what Sineag said. That you’ll marry someone to strengthen your clan, but you’ll never love her. That you’ll die a lonely man.”

The words drove painful nails into the coffin of his hope.

Amy nodded. "I'll go tomorrow before breakfast. Good night."

Craig watched her hair sway, her beautiful round arse move as she walked out of the great hall.

Maybe, it was the last time he'd see her.

Craig lay twisted in his bedding, sleep eluding him that night as memories of Amy riding him, gloriously naked, lust and love mingled in her eyes, filled his mind. She'd be gone tomorrow. Only a night separated him from the biggest loss of his life.

Yes, he'd resolved he wouldn't see her. But this was stronger than him, beyond what he was capable to resist.

He rose soundlessly from his bed in the lord's chamber as Owen and the rest of his clan who slept there wheezed and snored. Climbing the stairs to the bedchamber, he opened the door carefully.

She was lying in the heap of furs and blankets in front of the fireplace. The fire was already dying, and it crackled softly. He walked soundlessly towards Amy and stood for a moment, watching her. She lay on her side, her long hair spilled over the white fur.

But she didn't sleep. A small whimper and a sniff reached his ears.

She was crying.

*"Oh mo gaol,"* he whispered. *My love.*

She turned to him, her eyes bloodshot, eyelids swollen. He slid down next to her, into the welcoming warmth under the blankets, and brought her into his arms. She enveloped him with her feminine, sweet scent of forest and nature and cooking.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice hoarse from crying.

Her breath was warm and humid against his neck.

“I couldna keep from seeing ye...” He lifted her chin. “What is it, Amy? Why are ye crying?”

“You know why...”

“Nae, I dinna.”

“Because I lied to you. Because I must leave, and yet it breaks my heart. Because...”

She swallowed, then exhaled softly.

“Because I love you.”

The words washed over him, reaching the very depths of his soul. He brushed the tears off Amy’s wet cheeks, then reached out and kissed one tear away. If he could, he would take away all her sadness, all her troubles, all her misery.

But he couldn’t.

What he could do, was show how much he loved her despite everything that had happened between them. Despite the fact that this would be the last time.

He planted the softest of kisses from her wet cheek slowly down to her mouth, then kissed her on her lips as gently as he could muster. And even this tender brush of her skin against his sent a fiery current through his veins.

He deepened the kiss, dipping his tongue into her mouth. She tasted salty, of pain and heartbreak, and they echoed within him, making his chest ache.

She wrapped her hands around his neck and brought herself closer. He could feel her soft breasts and her hardening nipples through the thin fabric of her shift.

He ran his hands down her back, slowly, savoring every inch of her graceful body, the curve of her lower back, the firm roundness of her gorgeous arse. He squeezed the cheeks of her bottom and kneaded them. She writhed against him and threw one leg over his hips, and pressed her sex into his.

He was already hard. His cock swelled for her, jerking impatiently.

But he would be patient. He would be everything she wanted him to be.

Craig pulled her shift up to her waist, then higher, and removed it completely. He looked down her body, those perfect, soft, round breasts, her milky skin glowing in the darkness. He removed his own shirt and then his pants, and they lay skin to skin, nothing to hide, nowhere to run.

He lowered his head and took her breast in his mouth, the velvety skin sweet and delicious. He circled her soft nipple with his tongue, feeling satisfaction as it hardened. He sucked on it and bit gently, over and over, until Amy started giving out kitten-like throaty whimpers.

Then he moved to the other breast and repeated the same on it while massaging the first. She arched into him, giving him even more access.

Her hands ran through his hair, something he always loved.

He then slowly continued his way downward with his mouth until he found the sweet triangle of soft hair. He lifted her leg over his shoulder, opening her for his touch.

He spread her gentle folds, marveling at the beautiful center of her.

“So soft, so warm,” he murmured and kissed her there with the exact pressure he knew she liked. She shuddered, and he put her other leg over his shoulder, as well, keeping her hips steady with his hands. He kept teasing her, savoring the feel of her against him, stretching every moment into an eternity.

She stiffened in that way that meant she'd find her release soon, and he withdrew. He turned her over, with her buttocks to him. Like that, he'd be able to give her pleasure with his hands where he knew she'd love it.

He placed his throbbing erection against her hot, sleek sex. An intense jolt of pleasure ran through him. He was thick and aching for her.

Brushing his hand against her long, graceful back, he gently entered her and moved slowly. She gasped, pushing



back to meet him.

He pushed until he was completely enveloped, squeezed by her sleek tightness. She arched her back, and he cupped one breast with his hand. With the other, he found her hot folds and the knot of her pleasure and began massaging it.

She trembled, and a deep, guttural moan escaped her mouth.

“Aye, my sweet lass,” he said. “Take it in. Ye’re so beautiful.”

He began moving slowly out of her, and then as slowly, back in again, circling his hips to reach the deepest places within her, and to give her the most pleasure.

“Ohh, Craig,” she moaned. “Ohhh...”

He increased his rhythm slightly, both greedy to have her and willing this to never end.

He worshiped her with his body. Every thrust a praising song to her beauty. Every brush of his fingers a prayer to her. Every breath a confession of love.

He was stretching this. Each plunge in and out bringing him closer to her, soothing the pain, expanding the boundaries of his body and soul. He was a ship becalmed on a stagnant sea and she was the wind.

He was the ground, frozen after winter, and she was the first sun of spring.

He was the iron, and she was the fire, melting it and turning it into a sword.

Together, they were one.

At least for now.

And he wanted this now to last forever.

But too soon, her body was trembling on the edge of release, and he knew she needed him to be rough at the end because that would give her the most pleasure.

He sped up, in a smooth, relentless rhythm, just enough to heighten her sensations but not so hard as to cause her pain.

He was close himself, intense heat pulsing through his blood from the points of their connection, from where he owned her and she owned him.

She clenched around him, crying the sweet, urgent sounds of her need for release. Everything tightened within him ferociously, and without stopping, he leaned forward and turned her head to him, finding her mouth and sealing a desperate kiss on her lips.

The orgasm ran through him in a fiery gust of bliss, releasing him in a charring wave. Amy convulsed and unraveled in his hands.

He spilled himself into her, their moans melting together, their breath one song.

He crushed her to him, pressing her harder, as though to make her part of himself. They breathed together, their chests heaving in the same rhythm.

“I love ye, Amy,” he whispered.

“I love you, too,” she echoed.

He closed his eyes, letting the words wash over him, trying them on to test their truth, but not quite believing them.

Slowly, she turned to him, silky in his arms.

“Craig...” she said.

He marveled at her, trying to memorize every small detail of her face. The big eyes, the full lips, the nose, a little pointy.

She cupped his jaw, then planted the softest, sweetest kiss on his lips. She buried her face in his neck and he felt something hot and wet on his skin. He brought her to him, tighter, and felt her uneven breath as she cried gently in his arms.

They fell asleep like that.

And when he woke up, the space by his side was empty and the fire was long dead. He sat up, cold sadness creeping

into his heart.

He looked around the room, but it was empty save the first aid kit and Amy's shift on the bed.

Was she gone?

Was that it? No goodbye, nothing?

He supposed last night was all the goodbye they could have said, but still, why did it feel like he'd lost something more valuable than his life?

Mayhap she wasn't gone yet. He stood and hastily shoved on his clothes. If he hurried, mayhap he'd still catch her...

But why? What would it change? He didn't know. All he knew was that he couldn't bear the thought that she'd be gone forever, that he'd never see her again.

He rushed down one flight of stairs, then down another, then across the courtyard into the eastern tower, past the guards and into the underground storeroom. He shoved the door to the back room open.

There she was, crouching by the rock, in her jacket and her tight trousers, with her strange bag on her back. Her hand was on the stone.

She already looked slightly faded, like the color was being washed out of her.

Everything inside Craig screamed at him to run to her and stop her. To drop to his knees and beg her to stay. These were the last moments he'd ever see her in his life. Could he truly not see past her name? Could he not give her another chance?

It took every last drop of his willpower to stay, to not take another step towards her.

The rock glowed again, blue and brown. She was vanishing, like fog blown away by a strong wind.

She looked back at him, their eyes locking, hers full of panic, sadness, and loss.

"Amy!" He took a step towards her to grab her wrist and yank her back to him, away from anything that would bring

pain to her.

But the next moment, she was gone.

He ran to the rock, unable to believe she'd just disappeared.

She had. Not a trace of her remained.

He knew the realization would take him like an avalanche later. Like the disastrous news of Marjorie being kidnapped and raped, and the experience of seeing his dead grandfather. The pain would crush him, devour him, change him.

But for now, he just stared at the carved waves and the road and the handprint.

And wondered if he'd ever forgive himself for letting the love of his life go.

## CHAPTER 34

**S**towe, Vermont, late January 2021

AMY LET OUT A FULL BREATH IN A PUFF OF STEAM. THE brilliance of the snow against the rich green, almost black, pines on the slopes of Mount Mansfield hurt her eyes. The day was bright, the sky that sort of winter blue it only gets a few times per year.

She wished Craig could see it.

Every time she had a nice moment, her first thought was to share it with Craig.

Craig, in his green-brown Highlands.

Craig, who was long dead.

As always, a spasm of pain ran through her at the thought.

“So, where to?” Jenny asked, closing the door of Amy’s house behind her. “Wow, it’s cold.”

Amy pulled her sister’s thick knitted hat deeper over Jenny’s ears. “How about we walk to the pub instead of driving. It’s just fifteen minutes.”

“Oh yes, and the air is so fresh. Bites my ass really nicely.”

Amy laughed. “Oh, come on. Don’t be a drama queen.”

Jenny chuckled. “I only arrived yesterday. Let me get used to this cold. Are you sure this is the lowest temperature

possible?”

They began walking towards the town center. Snow crunched pleasantly under Amy’s shoes. Houses of white wooden panels and red brick, their roofs covered in snow, lined the street.

“Wait till the end of February,” Amy said. “Then most of my work is fighting hypothermia in lost skiers and hikers up in the mountains.”

“Oh, I’m not waiting till February. Not staying longer than I have to. In fact”—Jenny winked—“my secret plan is to pack you up and take you with me to North Carolina.”

The scent of Stowe—crisp snow and nature mixed with a whiff of freshly baked muffins, pies, and meat casseroles—wasn’t welcoming as it used to be. It was a painful reminder of the comfort of home she’d felt in Inverlochy, when she had been happy with Craig.

The comfort she’d lost.

The man she’d lost.

She’d happily trade the scent of muffins and pies for the scent of stew, and the warmth of her cozy home for the coolness of the castle walls.

And the touch of his hands, his body, his moss-green gaze, and being called “lass” a hundred times a day.

“Ah well,” Amy said through a forced smile. “My home is here. I’m needed.” She gestured at Mount Mansfield.

“I’m so glad you got your old job back,” Jenny said. “And sorry it took me so long to come and see you.”

“No, no, please don’t apologize. You have a job. You cannot babysit your older sister. I’m fine.”

Amy felt her sister’s inquisitive eyes on her. “You don’t look fine, hon.”

She glanced at Jenny quickly. “No? Well, I am.”

Amy looked straight ahead of her, her shoulders tensing. She wanted this freedom, right? She didn’t want to be in a

relationship. She'd told herself that many times after she'd come back. This was the right decision.

"If I'm not yet, I will be," she said, decisively.

"Okay, I feel like there's something you're not telling me. What are you hiding?" Jenny asked, concern in her voice.

Amy swallowed. Her nose was freezing, so were her cheeks. She'd told Jenny she'd gotten lost underground in the tunnels in Inverloch, and when she woke up, the class was gone. She said she'd been tired of babysitting and had decided to stay alone to explore the Highlands and got lost in the mountains. That's what she'd told the Scottish police, too.

But Jenny had never bought that story. She hadn't asked many more questions over the phone, but Amy knew they had been brewing in her sister's head and waiting to be asked when she arrived.

Amy was tired. All that time she'd lied to Craig had made her miserable. She didn't want to lie to Jenny.

"I'll tell you once we have something alcoholic in front of us. You'll probably think I'm a lunatic and never speak to me again for the rest of your life."

"That sounds ominous," Jenny said.

"You have no idea."

They arrived at the pub, one of three in Stowe. It had the classic, dark-wood interior of a ski resort. The scents of beer and bleach surrounded Amy. A hockey game was on the TVs, and rock music played over the speakers. The familiar scene where Amy had come hundreds of times with her SAR buddies, and Nick, felt tense and small and confining. How had she felt cozy here before?

They took a booth by the window, and Amy bought a beer for Jenny and a scotch for herself. They clinked glasses, and Amy took a sip, letting the liquid burn her mouth and throat and settle like a small fire in her stomach. It was richer and more sophisticated than the uisge she'd had in Inverloch with Craig, and it was only an echo of the taste that reminded her so much of her adventure.

But she craved anything, anything at all, that might bring her closer to Craig in some way. She closed her eyes for a moment, imagining she was drinking from a silver cup in the great hall of Inverlochy Castle. The whiskey was like a part of him she wanted to absorb into her system.

Daily desperation, sadness, and loss were like heavy cast-iron handcuffs on her wrists. Her shoulders ached, her muscles were tense. Would she ever stop hurting?

“I see you acquired some Scottish tastes,” Jenny said. “Don’t remember you ever drinking scotch before.”

Amy chuckled. “Especially since it was Dad’s poison of choice.”

“Yeah.”

They kept silent for a moment.

“So, what happened?” Jenny said carefully.

Amy took a deep breath and met her sister’s eyes. They were blue like hers, but Jenny was dark haired like Mom, whereas Amy had Dad’s coloring.

“Okay, before I begin, just please know that I’m well aware of how insane all this is going to sound.”

“Okay...” Jenny said slowly.

“Okay.”

And Amy began. She told Jenny about Sineag, about the rock, about the siege, and about Craig. And everything that had happened to her. They asked for another round of drinks, then another. Night settled behind the window, and the pub began filling with people, many of whom greeted Amy.

They were on the fourth round of drinks when Amy finally finished telling how she’d gotten back. It felt good to tell all of this to someone, to stop pretending like nothing extraordinary had happened to her.

It had. And it had changed her. In fact, this would almost certainly be the greatest event of her whole life. How sad



would it be if she couldn't share it with the person she was closest to?

Sad and smart, judging by the wide-eyed expression of disbelief on Jenny's face. She gulped her beer, already a little tipsy, and simply stared at Amy.

"Do you have any proof?" Jenny said finally.

"Proof?"

"Yeah. That you didn't imagine it all or hallucinate. I mean, I totally understand that you believe it happened. But, I'm sorry, hon, it's just really hard to imagine time travel being real."

Disappointment coiled in Amy's stomach. She shrugged. "I don't have proof, Jen. I get that you don't believe me. Had I heard a story like that, I wouldn't have either. So I don't blame you. And you have no idea how I wish this were a hallucination and not the truth."

Jenny frowned. "Why?"

"Because then Craig would be a product of my imagination. And I would be able to stop wondering if I made a mistake by leaving."

Jenny swirled her beer in the glass. "You love him, huh?"

Amy slowly nodded. "Yeah. Unfortunately, I do."

"You loved Nick, too."

"Exactly. That's the point. I did. I had the most perfect guy in the world, who wanted to be married to me. Who didn't live hundreds of years in the past."

"No kidding. But is this different? With Craig?"

"If I say it is, will you think it's wishful thinking? Like, I wish it were different, but really, it's the same? That even if I'd stayed with him, I'd have ended up escaping the marriage just like I did with Nick?"

"I don't know, hon. Somehow, I don't think so."

"Why?"

Jenny looked out of the window for a moment. “Because you are different.”

“I am?”

“I think so. You are calmer, and...happier.”

“Happier?” Amy cried. “I don’t think I’ve been more miserable in my entire life.”

“Well yeah, you’re sad. But the haunted look you’ve had ever since you were ten—like you’re a wild animal being hunted, and all you need is your safe cave—it’s gone.”

Amy shook her head, looking into her glass. “I had no idea I had a haunted look.”

“Whatever that Craig did—in reality or in your head—he changed you.”

Amy raised her brows and kept silent. Maybe she’d feel that change if not for the constant pain in her heart and soul. But wasn’t that what Sineag had said?

*...the one man that ye truly love. The one ye change for.*

Had she changed for Craig? She had found herself back on that mountain in the Highlands.

And, strangely, she thought of Dad. And instead of the resentment and contempt she’d felt for him her whole life, she felt pity. It probably hadn’t been easy for him, when Mom died. And then finding out what he had done to his daughter—that he’d almost killed her.

“How’s Dad?” Amy asked.

Jenny cocked her head, puzzled. “Dad? He’s fine. Why?”

“I think I’m going to go with you to North Carolina. To see him.”

Jenny’s face went blank. “Seriously?”

Amy nodded. “Yes. I think so. I haven’t seen him for a long time. And, I think, I’m finally ready.”

CHAPTER 35

**I**nverlochy Castle, January 1308

“BROODING, AGAIN?” OWEN SAID.

Craig turned to him, one eyebrow arched. Owen was walking from the Comyn Tower onto the northern wall overlooking the river and the loch. The tops of the hills and mountains were white, the bottoms still brown and gray.

“Aye,” Craig said. “And ye’re disturbing me.”

Owen came to stand by Craig’s side and leaned against the parapet as well.

“Brood as much as ye want,” Owen said. “Mayhap I came to brood, too.”

“What do ye have to brood about?”

“The general absence of women in my life.”

“I hope Lachlan’s death taught ye a lesson about that.”

Owen looked at him out of the corner of his eye and said nothing.

“Ye ken I’ll never trust ye again.”

“Ye dinna mean that, brother, surely.”

Craig held Owen’s eyes for a long time. “I do mean it, Owen. I would go against any enemy with ye to fight, knowing well that ye’ll have my back in a battle. But other

things... Ye kent well why ye shouldna seduce village girls. And ye did that anyway. How can I trust ye?"

Owen nodded. "Fair enough. But ye will still fight at my side in a battle?"

"Aye."

"So ye ken I wilna betray ye to the enemy."

"Aye. I canna imagine ye would. Why would ye?"

"Right. I wouldna. But if ye ken I wouldna deceive ye, why do ye not allow Amy the same benefit?"

Amy.

The name slashed him across his abdomen like a sharp sword.

"Because I grew up with ye," he growled. "And she—"

"And she isna yer enemy. She wasna raised with the MacDougalls. She wasna even born here. She's an outsider."

"Aye."

"So she hasna a reason to be disloyal."

"But she was. She lied. And the MacDougalls are still her family even if they are her ancestors. She might want to help them after all, for all I ken. Why do ye protect her, anyway?"

"I dinna protect her. I protect ye."

"From what?"

"From yer stupid stubbornness."

Craig wished now he had something in his hands he could throw over the wall and watch it smash on the ground.

"Loyalty is important to me. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Except, ye're confining yerself to a lifetime of misery."

His words resonated painfully in Craig's chest. It wasn't like Craig hadn't imagined Amy in his life. She was his wife. They'd never even divorced, never said the words. But he thought about spending long, warm nights together, the trips to

the mountains they'd take together, how she'd meet Marjorie. Marjorie would love Amy. Both had a very strong core. Both had gone through a lot but had survived and come out stronger. He imagined his and Amy's children. Would they be red haired like her? Or dark haired like himself?

And he imagined many days, months, and years when he'd be thanking God for the gift of love and happiness.

But he couldn't have that. Because every minute of every day, he'd doubt her.

How could he ever trust her again?

Not that he'd see her again in his lifetime, of course.

Craig stood upright and faced Owen, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Why are ye concerned about my misery or happiness? Did ye suddenly become such a believer in love? Ye, who canna miss a skirt."

Owen looked down. "Nae," he said. "But I can see that ye, without her, are a much more stupid arse than ye are with her."

Craig shook his head. "Ye're definitely a more stupid arse with women around."

"But it isna about me. 'Tis about ye."

"Aye, aye. Try to change the subject."

"Nae, I'm serious. Ye need to learn to trust people ye love, brother. Ye canna live like that anymore. Ye will regret it."

"If the price for peace is regret, I'll take it."

"I dinna think ye will, though. One day, ye'll be on yer death bed, as will we all. Will ye not regret driving Amy away? Will ye not regret missing a lifetime of happiness with her and risking the possibility she'd make a mistake?"

Craig exhaled, trying to think. He was angry at Owen for talking about it, for raising the doubt in him again.

The questions that had spun in his head ever since he'd found out the truth.

What if he was strong enough to believe her? What if he was brave enough to allow the possibility that she could be loyal? That she was an honest person. That she would rather die than break his trust.

Like he would for her.

He'd already made himself believe in her once—and look how that had turned out.

But life without her would be empty.

Life without her wouldn't be a life.

It would be waiting for a miracle. The miracle he'd had in his arms but hadn't had the courage to believe in.

Loving was being open to heartbreak and suffering like that. Loving was risk. Happiness was risk.

He would never have complete assurance in another human being—Owen, Amy, Bruce, or even himself.

He was betraying himself right now by sticking to his old habits and beliefs. If he was truthful to himself, there was nothing he wanted more than to forgive Amy and beg her to stay with him forever.

He'd give her all the freedom she wanted. He'd make sure she felt safe. He'd worship her every day and ask nothing in return.

“Aye,” Craig said. “I very much will regret it. In fact, I already am.”

## CHAPTER 36

**T**hornberry Hill Farm, North Carolina, February 2021

THE HOUSE SMELLED OLD. OLD CARPET, OLD WOOD, OLD memories. The familiar pale-green walls and kitchen cabinets; the dark-wood furniture; the dingy lampshades; the faded landscape paintings of mountains, fields, and lakes. The whole interior looked faded, as though Amy was looking through a sepia filter. The floor planks sank and squeaked a little as she stepped on them.

Amy took a deep breath, preparing herself. She counted to four, gathering her strength, and finally, after more than twenty years, looked into her father's eyes.

An old man stood before her, hunched, wrinkled, and weathered. She was taller than him now. Like the house, he looked faded, washed out. Sharp pain pierced her chest.

"Amy," he said, his pale-blue eyes watering.

"Hi, Dad," she said.

Jenny walked past Amy into the kitchen. "Hi, Dad, I'll boil some water for tea."

"Yeah," he said, distracted. "Come in, Amy, please."

He gestured into the kitchen and Amy nodded and walked in. She sat at the round table they'd had many dinners at. The memory of her mom, bustling about making food flashed

through her mind. Everything looked smaller now. Everything looked surreal. Like she were in a dream but still didn't know if it would turn out to be a nightmare.

Dad took out the cups and a box of tea bags, his hands shaking.

They settled at the table with their teacups. Silence hung.

“How are you, Amy?” Dad said, his voice soft.

“I'm good. I'm sure you know about search and rescue and Vermont and all that from Jenny.”

“I do. I do. Good for you.”

This felt weird. Like stepping on eggshells. As if every word was heavy with meaning, and every change in intonation might break this temporary truce and reveal the old aches and heartbreaks.

“And you, Dad?”

“Holding up, holding up. Rented the fields out—I can't do the farm work no more.”

Amy wondered if he'd also rented out the barn, or if it still stood empty and abandoned.

They lapsed into silence.

Jenny stood up. “I'll go see if the bedrooms upstairs need any cleaning,” she said.

Amy watched her sister walk out of the kitchen, almost wanting to run after her.

“Your health okay?” Amy asked, turning back to her dad.

“I have the cirrhosis, you know. But it's stable for now.”

“Well, you let me know what you need. I'll always send money.”

He looked down and nodded, his expression mournful. “You've been too good to me, Amy. I don't deserve it.”

His chin trembled a bit, and tears welled in Amy's eyes. Who was this man? He was a shadow of who he'd been when



she'd seen him last. There wasn't any malice in him, not a sign of aggression.

Just pain. Regret.

Amy reached across the table and covered his hands with her own.

"It's all right, Dad," she whispered.

He met her eyes, and his were filled with tears. Amy had never seen Dad cry. Not even at Mom's funeral.

"I'm so sorry for what I did to you. I'll burn in hell, anyway, for locking up a little girl and forgetting about her. But if you'd died there, I'd—"

He broke into tears and slouched over the table, covering his face with his hands. Amy moved to sit next to him, wrapping her arm around his shoulders, his back shaking under her palm. She pressed her head to his. Her own tears fell, and she didn't mind.

Her face burned, her heart bleeding, her stomach quivering.

They cried.

They cried for Amy's mother who had died too early. For the man Dad used to be—the man who had died with her mother. For the girl he had locked up in the barn. For the years they'd lost, the years she'd rejected Dad's attempts to contact her.

For the broken life he'd lived and the broken life that Amy had. For the little time he had left.

After a while, their tears dried, and they just sat like that, pressed against each other.

He wanted her forgiveness, she knew. He'd wanted it for years.

But Amy hadn't been able to forgive him. All she'd been capable of was distracting herself and not thinking of it anymore.

Maybe she'd been doing the same as Craig. Unable to forgive. Unable to forget.

But she was able now, she realized, because she'd found the girl she'd lost in that old barn.

"I forgive you, Dad," Amy whispered.

He straightened up and looked at her with puffy bloodshot eyes. "You do?"

"Yes, I forgive you. Whatever happened, it made me who I am now. It's part of me. That's why I'm good at finding lost people. I help them, saving their lives, returning them to their loved ones."

"I am so proud of you. I was sick. Had I not drunk, I'd never have..."

"I know. It's okay. I wish you had had the strength to abstain from the bottle. I wish I hadn't been scared of monsters under the bed. We both did the best we could given the circumstances."

He nodded.

"Thank you for understanding. Thank you for your forgiveness. You don't know what it means to me, Amy. All these years, I spent with regret eating me up like acid. I don't have much time left, Amy. And your forgiveness is the biggest gift you could ever give me."

Amy found the strength to smile.

"It's also a gift to me," she said.

They sat in silence for a while, letting this new reality sink in—where there wouldn't be any more resentment, and the lost parts of them both could come back and live again.

"What now?" Dad said. "Do you have a man in your life?"

Amy sighed, the memory of Craig resonating in her in a dull ache. "Sort of. But I...I thought we wouldn't be compatible because I couldn't be happy in a relationship. My previous marriage didn't work out—I felt trapped. And I

didn't think I'd ever meet someone I would feel like myself with."

"But you did?"

"I did. I think so."

"And you aren't together?"

"No. We broke up. But now... I don't know, something changed in me."

The truth was, she looked at Dad and she didn't want to end up like him, full of regret in the last years of his life. He'd lost his wife, the love of his life, and it had broken him. What if Amy lived her life here, as broken and as regretful as he was?

This reconciliation with him, it shifted things in her soul. She wasn't afraid of closed spaces anymore. She wasn't afraid to talk to him anymore. Forgiveness opened places she'd locked within herself many years ago. And what she found wasn't scary.

It was healing.

It was bravery.

It was acceptance of herself.

What Craig had said. *Ye lost yerself somewhere back in that barn... Ye must find yerself first.*

Well, she finally had. Now, talking to Dad, she'd found the girl she'd lost.

And she felt complete. Strong. Loved.

The only thing missing was the man she loved.

"Yes, I think it did. Does he deserve you?"

"Oh yes. He's the kindest and strongest man I know. You'd like him."

"Maybe we can meet someday? I'm sorry, I don't want to insist or anything. It's up to you."

Amy smiled. "I'd have loved to, but he lives in Scotland."

Dad's eyes lit up. "In Scotland? Coming back to your roots then, Amy. You're Scottish through and through."

"Not sure." She chuckled. "He'd probably disagree."

"Does he love you?"

"Yes. Yes, he does. He's just as afraid to commit. I was, too. But I'm not anymore. And I think I can make him see he doesn't need to be, either."

She imagined herself with Craig, living with him in the Highlands. Exploring mountains together. The family they'd have. He'd be a wonderful father. He'd never do anything to hurt her or their children. He'd protect them.

It would be a hard life, back in time, no doubt. A life full of hard work without modern comforts or modern medicines.

But Amy wasn't afraid of that. She'd take that any day for a chance to be with Craig as long as she could.

She sighed.

Was she considering going back to him?

Not just considering. She'd decided.

No matter what he said about not being able to be with her, she'd go. She'd make him see. She'd stick with him, and eventually he'd realize she'd never lie to him again. She'd be loyal to him.

Yes, she just needed to make him see that.

He needed time to trust her.

And she'd give him that time.

And if he still couldn't trust or forgive her, at least she'd know she'd given it her best shot. She'd come back to her own time with no regrets.

"That's good," Dad said. "Maybe you two can reconcile then?"

"Yes, maybe we can," she said.

She took her father's hand in hers and squeezed it. How strange it was that it was her father, the man she'd blamed for

her misfortunes her whole life, who had given her the greatest resources of all.

Forgiveness. Strength. And bravery.

## CHAPTER 37

**I**nverloch Castle, late February 2021

AMY LOOKED AT THE EMPTY COURTYARD, THE RUINED TOWERS, the crumbled walls. There was no moat, no kitchen, no great hall. No stables where Craig and she had made love for the first time. The Comyn Tower looked like a stump again. It was quiet, just the wind rustling the bare branches of the trees.

The smells of a working castle were gone. As were the people she'd known. Craig. Owen. Hamish. Fergus. Elspeth.

She wondered if the rocks held memories of everything that had happened since then. The people who had lived here. Loved. Struggled. Died.

Amy adjusted her backpack. It was heavy with medicines, binoculars and other search and rescue tools, books on herbalism and how to do useful stuff like make paper. And she'd packed tampons. Many, many tampons.

Jenny had insisted Amy take as many as possible. Smart girl. What would Amy do without her? Amy's heart ached at the memory of her sister and the knowledge that they'd never see each other again.

Jenny had had a hard time letting Amy go, and Amy still felt guilty leaving her sister to take care of their dad alone. She had put her house and all her possessions in Jenny's name so

that she could sell them if she wanted to. They'd cried for what felt like hours.

"I still have a hard time believing it," Jenny had said through her tears.

"Just imagine I'm in a foreign country with no phones, no email, and no communication possible."

Jenny sobbed. "It will be like you've died!"

"No, no! I'll live a great life with the man who makes me very happy. Something I can never have here."

Jenny sighed and hugged Amy. "You're insane. But I love you all the same."

They said their goodbyes, and Amy still saw doubt in Jenny's eyes when she threw her sister one last glance from the airport security line.

Amy breathed heavily. Not because she'd walked, but because in a few minutes—if everything went right—she'd see the man she was supposed to be with.

"I told ye, ye hadna met the man yet," a woman said next to her. Amy looked to her side.

Of course.

Amy smiled. "Hello, Sìneag."

"Hello, dearie. I see ye decided to go back."

"Yep. Decided."

Sìneag turned, grasped Amy's hand, and squeezed it. "I'm so glad ye did! Oh, ye and Craig are such a great match."

"Are we?"

"Oh aye, lass. And I'm so impressed ye were brave enough to change. Now ye're living up to yer potential, living a full life."

Amy smiled. The woman's positive energy was contagious, like a burbling fountain of joy.

"Who are you, Sìneag? Clearly, you're not just a tour guide."

Sineag shook her head, little wrinkles forming around her eyes as she smiled.

“If I tell ye, will ye keep it a secret?”

“Sure. Fair warning, though. I’ll tell Craig. If he ever wants to talk to me again, that is.”

“Aye. I trust Craig.”

“So?”

Sineag sighed. “I’m what ye call a faerie. A time traveler, I suppose, like ye.”

Amy raised her eyebrows, not sure if she believed her, but listened openly, nevertheless. Time travel was real after all, why not faeries?

“I was there when the Picts carved those stones,” Sineag continued. “In fact, I gave them the idea. I am a hopeless romantic, mayhap ye’ve noticed.”

“Yes.” Amy chuckled. “But why are you helping me?”

Sineag sighed. “I’m not human, see. I will never have what you can have—love. There is nae one for me.” She smiled sadly. “So I decided if I canna be happy, I’ll help humans. ’Tis not often I have couples who I can make happy. Not everyone is like ye, ready to cross time for the man ye love. But those who do...”

“They live happily ever after?”

Sineag laughed. “As long as they open up to love and each other, they certainly have all chances for that.”

“Well, life still happens, right?”

“Right, dearie.”

In a sudden surge of gratefulness and warmth, Amy turned and hugged Sineag, and a fresh, natural scent of herbs and lavender and trees wafted into her nose.

“Thank you,” Amy said. “Craig might not want me back, I know. I’ll do everything I can to change his mind. But whatever happens, thank you.” She looked into those eternal



green eyes. “You helped me meet the love of my life. And have an amazing adventure. And change. I’ll never forget that.”

Sineag’s eyes watered, her face spreading in a broad, lovely smile.

“Aye, lass. Ye’re welcome. And now, go get yer man.”

## CHAPTER 38

**I**nverlochy village, February 1308

CRAIG LAID THE SILVER PENNY ON THE TABLE OF THE carpenter's workshop.

"Aye, lord, much obliged," Fingal, the carpenter, said.

He was a powerful man, not much older than Craig, with an intelligent face and big, work-roughened hands.

"I thank ye," Craig said. "And once the bed is done, I would thank ye to work on the roof in the great hall."

What Craig meant was, once the bed was done well. Although, judging by the good, solid furniture in the carpenter's house, he was a master of his work.

Owen chuckled. "Told ye there was good folk in the village."

"Aye, I ken." Craig threw a glance at Fingal. "But ye can never be too careful."

"Dinna worry about me, lord," Fingal said. "All I want is honest work to feed my family."

Craig nodded. Fingal's wife was just getting bread out of the oven, the scent mouthwatering. Two boys and a girl huddled shyly by the single bed in the corner and watched Craig.

“The Comyns are nae coming back,” Craig said. “’Tis best that everyone moves on and gets used to the new situation. Including me.”

“Aye. The bed will be ready in two sennights.”

Craig nodded, they said their goodbyes, and Owen and he walked out of the house into the streets of the village.

The day was cold but sunny. Children played outside, running and screaming. The air was crisp and smelled like fresh snow, which covered the ground in a thin layer.

“New bed?” Owen said. “New woman, then? I can introduce ye.”

Craig chuckled. “Nae. Nae women. I canna stand that bed. I dinna sleep in it. When I look at it, I see Lachlan. It reminds me of Hamish, of Amy. Of my mistake.”

As if he needed more reminders of Amy. Thinking of her was like breathing through a broken rib. Necessary to live.

But painful.

So the bed needed to go. The truth was, he and Amy had never even made love in that bed. All it reminded Craig of was pain and heartbreak. It was time for a new start. Also, a new start with the villagers.

He’d been very suspicious of them. But he was ready to begin to trust more. Owen was right. Craig needed to open up to people. And even if someone from the village was in contact with the Comyns or the MacDougalls, Craig would learn of it more easily if he was closer with the people. He could even ask those he’d come to trust to let him know if they heard something suspicious. He would win them over with kindness. And definitely not by behaving as though they were the enemy.

“What mistake?” said the sweetest voice in the world.

He spun around, his stomach turning, his throat tight.

There she stood, in her strange dark-green coat from the future. Her hair was tied in a knot at the back of her head, fully exposing her beautiful face and neck. Her large blue eyes were

as bright and dear as forget-me-nots, her cheeks rosy from the cold, her lips in a shy, sweet smile he was ready to kiss for an eternity.

People around them were stopping and staring, but all Craig could see was her.

“Are ye standing before me?” Craig asked.

Surely, this was a trick of his imagination. How else could she be here?

“Yes, I am.”

She stretched her hand out and touched him. The sensation was so shocking, it felt like he'd been hit by some powerful force. Except no pain came. Instead, gentleness and love spread through him.

“Why?” He couldn't seem to find the right words. “Did ye forget something?”

He couldn't have said anything more foolish. He was a stupid arse after all.

“I mean—” he started.

“Yes, I forgot something.” She laughed, the sound like a brook in spring, fed by the melting snow in the mountains.

Craig swallowed hard, but his mouth remained dry. “What did you forget?”

“I forgot to tell you that I'm not going anywhere unless you go with me or I with you. And if you don't trust me, you will. I'll stay and cook and clean and do anything until you start to believe that there'll never be anyone more loyal to you than me. Your wife.”

Craig's head spun, his mind as hazy as if he'd drunk several cups of uisge. She'd come back. She sounded like she wanted to stay. She sounded like she wasn't going anywhere.

“So ye came back?”

“I came back. Because I love you and I belong with you. And I'm going to prove it to you, however long that takes.”

Craig laughed. “Ye don’t have to prove anything, lass. I was a fool to let ye go. I never should have. I’ll have ye in any way I can, as long as ye’ll have me.”

“Oh, Craig,” she whispered.

She kissed him and he wrapped his arms around her, drawing her closer. He inhaled her scent, the woody, herbal scent of nature and flowers and spring. And her. She tasted as divine as he remembered. Their bodies and tongues entwined, he kissed her without reservation, as though this was the first and the last time.

Because mayhap it was.

“I will never let ye go again,” he mumbled against her lips. “I hope it doesna sound like I’m locking ye up.”

“You can lock me up as long as you want,” she said. “As long as you’re with me in the same room, naked.”

“Oh, aye, lass. Then consider yerself my captive.”

And as he kissed her again, to the delighted sighs of the villagers, he didn’t think he’d ever been happier.

## EPILOGUE

**I**nverlochy Castle, June 1308

AMY Poured sauce over the crust of the boar roasting on the spit. The fire hissed and filled the kitchen with the most mouthwatering aroma. She was already hungry, thanks to her pregnancy. But she wasn't nauseated like many women would probably be.

She was ravenous.

All the time.

She glanced back at the busy kitchen. Cooks and kitchen maids chopped vegetables and kneaded bread. No one was looking at her. She took a knife, cut a tiny piece, blew on it and put it in her mouth.

It burned her tongue a bit, but she chewed, her eyes closed in sheer bliss.

Oh-oh. She'd better get out of the kitchen before she ruined the food for the feast and made a poor impression on her father-in-law.

"Everything looks great, team!" she said.

The kitchen staff answered her with cheerful exclamations.

"Dinna worry, lass," Fergus said, looking up from the fish he was cleaning. "The feast will be successful."

She smiled. "Thank you, Fergus."

Amy went outside, where warm summer air full of the scent of flowers enveloped her. In the courtyard, tables and benches that had been carried out of the great hall were decorated with bouquets of wildflowers and covered with plates of cheese and bread. Chattering voices filled the space, and a lyre played in the background. The gate of the castle was wide open.

Craig and she had decided to hold the feast in the fresh air, to enjoy the summer and because they'd fit in more people. The whole Cambel clan had come as well as the villagers from Inverlochy and some representatives of allied clans who weren't essential to the war.

The castle was now fully repaired and ready for whatever would come. Robert the Bruce had recovered after his sickness and managed to destroy the Comyn clan in the east, his biggest enemy besides the English. Thanks to that, the Cambels could come back west for a short while and attend the clan gathering.

Craig caught Amy's hand, whirled her around, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Where are ye going so fast?" He kissed her, making her legs wobble and her stomach squeeze in euphoria.

She brushed his chest with both her hands, her mouth sinking in the deliciousness of his.

"Searching for you," she said.

"Oh, aye? Ye found me. Come with me. I want to announce something."

She giggled as he took her by the hand and tugged her after him. They sat at the honorary table of the lord and lady of the castle. Near them sat Dougal, Owen, Domhnall, Marjorie, her eleven-year-old son Coilean and Lena.

Amy had already met Marjorie, who'd arrived two days ago, and the two had immediately understood each other. Marjorie wasn't a cheery, chatty woman, but there was something so kind and sweet about her. Lena was a pretty

young woman, happily married to a MacKenzie up in the north.

Warmth spread through Amy as she looked around at her new family. They all seemed to have accepted her. Amy had liked Owen from the beginning, and as they'd spent more time together during the last four months, they'd gotten closer. She appreciated his humor and lightness, and they bantered often.

She was still a little wary of Dougal, her father-in-law, but in the way she respected a great military leader.

None of them knew about her being a time traveler, only Owen and the four warriors who'd heard Amy's confession in the underground storeroom. And every single one of them had sworn on his life to never tell the secret. Craig trusted them, which was saying a lot. They'd told everyone she was a distant cousin of the MacDougall chief, with the same name as his daughter, and that she had not corrected their assumption because she needed to protect herself during the siege. She'd been raised in Ireland and had never even met the Scottish MacDougalls, but someone in her family was a friend of the Comyns. Of course, since then, Dougal had reservations about her, and she was anxious to make him like her and forgive her.

"Friends, family," Craig announced, and the hum of voices quieted. "Ye all ken the reason to gather here. 'Tis to see my family and say goodbye, because my wife and I move to my estate in Loch Awe. But there's also another reason we wanted to have ye here. To announce that my wife is with child."

The courtyard filled with cheers and congratulations. People clunked their cups and drank. Dougal stood up and clapped Craig on the shoulder and hugged him. Then he came to Amy, his eyes bright and shining, and took both her shoulders in his hands and held her at arm's length.

"Lass," he said. "Congratulations. I couldna be happier for ye."

"Really?"

He smiled. "I dinna think I welcomed ye in the family well enough. And I ken ye had to lie at first. But I trust my sons,



Craig and Owen, who both think highly of ye. So I trust ye are a good person and will be a good mother to my future grandchildren who will continue the Cambel clan.”

Joy blossomed in Amy’s chest. “Thank you, Dougal,” she said. “This means a lot. Truly. I don’t have much contact with my father, so I’m glad to find one here.”

She hugged him, taking him by surprise. He gave her a bear hug, almost crushing her rib cage.

“Aye, lass, ye can always rely on me.”

He let her go and squeezed her shoulders again, then turned to the table and poured uisge down his throat, grunted in appreciation, and moved on.

Marjorie was next, her long dark hair in a braid, her green eyes sparkling. Colin stood by her side, tall and scrawny, though already broad-shouldered. He had Marjorie’s dark hair—a thick, shiny mane with bangs that covered his forehead and reached his slightly slanted green eyes fringed with thick black lashes. The boy had a wooden sword at his belt, and Amy had seen him playfully wield it with Owen.

It was the Middle Ages, and since Colin had been born out of wedlock, Marjorie bore shame in the eyes of the Catholic church and society. It didn’t matter to Marjorie or her family because they all knew it hadn’t been her choice. And it certainly didn’t matter to Amy.

“I’m so glad for ye,” Marjorie said, squeezing Amy’s hand. “I canna wait to meet my future niece or nephew.”

“Thank you, Marjorie.” Amy returned the squeeze. “That’s what my sister, Jenny, would have said.”

“Oh, aye, I’m sorry she isna with ye.”

“I hope we can visit you in Glenkeld soon,” Amy said.

“Aye, I’d love that.” She looked down at Colin who fiddled with the handle of his wooden sword. “Colin would love a cousin, wouldna ye, lad?”

Colin beamed at Amy, his green eyes shining. “I hope ’tis a lad, and he’ll be fostering with us. I can teach him to fight

with a sword and shoot arrows. We can hunt together.”

Amy ruffled his hair. “Of course, Colin. He won’t have a better teacher.”

“Aye. Mother taught me sword-fighting and archery, and there isna a better teacher than Mother. While Grandfather and my uncles are gone fighting for Bruce, ma and I will hold Glenkeld Castle and protect it from anyone.”

Marjorie raised her eyebrows and exchanged a glance with Amy. “I do hope no one attacks us, Colin. The king will be in the west, and all of the action is there.”

Colin sighed.

“Dinna worry, lad, yer time to be a strong warrior will come. Come on, go and congratulate yer uncle.”

Colin moved to hug Craig, and Marjorie lingered. “God, I do hope no one kens I’m the only Cambel left in the castle. But if anyone thinks a woman canna defend her home and her son, they’ll get a very unpleasant surprise.”

Amy nodded, impressed with Marjorie’s spirit and determination, though as her sister-in-law moved to hug Craig, there was a flash of fear and uncertainty in her eyes. She was probably showing more courage than she really felt.

The rest congratulated them, and everyone drank some more. Music and the hum of voices resumed, and Craig wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

She felt protected. She felt complete. She felt like herself.

“Do you want to get out of here for a moment?” she asked. “Looks like they don’t need us to have fun.”

“Aye, Amy, anytime ye want,” he said. “Do ye want to go to the stables?”

She laughed. “No. Come, let’s get some air on the wall. The view over the mountains must be beautiful today.”

“Aye, dear.”

They went through the western tower to the wall, where they could see the sun descending over the mountains. The

Highlands were green and lush now, and River Lochy glistened red and orange from the reflection of the sun.

The view was breathtaking but not as gorgeous as the man standing next to Amy. His gaze more intense than ever, starting a fire in her veins, he glanced over her with heat that would melt an iceberg. He stood behind her and hugged her, laying his hands on her still flat belly, then kissing her neck.

“Are you not going to be sad to leave this place?” Amy asked.

“The view from yer window isna going to be much worse, lass. Aye, ’tis nae a castle but ’tis a home.”

“I’d be happy with you even if we lived in a cave.”

He laughed. “I’d make even a cave a castle for ye. Ye ken ye’re never going to need for anything.”

“I know. I also know that I’ve never felt happier in my life, or more complete.”

“Even though ye were born hundreds of years from now? Dinna ye miss yer time?”

“I’ve never cared too much about conveniences. And I’ve never felt I belonged anywhere as much as I do here, with you. It could be a thousand years in the past, or a thousand years in the future. You’re my home.”

“And ye’re mine,” he said.

He kissed her then. And she sank into the warmth of her man’s mouth and hands.

With him, she would never feel like a prisoner, lost and abandoned.

But her heart was his captive.

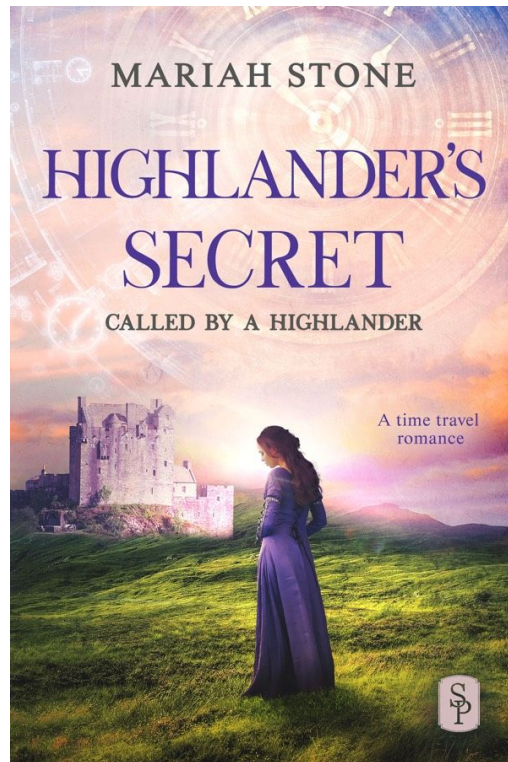
And there was no sweeter prison.

THE END

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## GLIMPSE INTO HIGHLANDER'S SECRET



**He's fighting the demons of his past. She's defending her home and her son. Can two warriors from different centuries find a loving future?**

Scotland, 2020. Former Marine and bodyguard Konnor Mitchell is on a whiskey tour through the Highlands. But a woman's cries for help lead him tumbling down a steep ravine. Before he can get his bearings, a Highland faerie pitches him back in time to 1308. Wounded and confused, Konnor is confronted by a breathtaking woman brandishing a sword.

Scotland, 1308. Entrusted with holding her clan's castle while her kin fights for King Robert the Bruce, Marjorie Cambel discovers a secret plot to attack her stronghold and kidnap her son. She swore never to let another man victimize her. But when she sees a wounded stranger at the bottom of a ravine, she helps him. Despite her attraction to Konnor, she's not sure she can trust him.

As Konnor's feelings for the mesmerizing warrior grow, the horrors of his childhood remind him he can never be the husband Marjorie deserves or the father her son needs. And

while Marjorie's heart lifts at the war veteran's courage, she struggles with the memories of her own violent past.

Can two wounded souls forge an alliance that leads to lasting love and win the battle of their lives?

*Highlander's Secret* is the thrilling second book in the Called by a Highlander time travel romance series. If you like steamy encounters, strong heroines, and stories full of historical details, you'll love Mariah Stone's captivating tale.

Buy *Highlander's Secret* to find a path out of darkness today!

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## HIGHLANDER'S SECRET - CHAPTER 1

Lands near Loch Awe, Scotland, 2020

The best thing about a guy trip through the Scottish Highlands was the absence of technology. Even after seven years of civilian life, Konnor Mitchell's Marine training kicked in, and he had no problem orienting with or without a map, fishing, cooking on a fire, and sleeping on the ground.

Actually, the best thing about the whole man-against-nature thing was that it occupied his mind, leaving little time to think of his life back in Los Angeles or his past. With no cell phones, no TV, and no electricity, he had nothing to rely on but his brains, his muscles, and his best bud Andy.

"How much longer to the Keir farm?" Andy looked up at the sky. "The clouds are coming in darker than your best mood."

A leaden sky hung above the dark-green pines and ashes like an iron ceiling. Nature around them stood still, as if waiting for something. Branches didn't rustle, and grass didn't waver. The air was humid and warm, full of the scent of forest and moss and something strange...lavender, though Konnor didn't notice any around.

He glanced down at the map in his hands, and a flicker of a movement caught his eye. Something green flashed between the trees. He blinked but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Must be all the whiskey he'd consumed during the last week.

"We're probably going to be soaking wet either way," Konnor said. "It'll take us until the evening."

He and Andy had hiked along the loch up north towards the farm. The map showed there was a small ruin at the bottom of the glen behind them, and if they made their way back towards Loch Awe, they'd come to the ruins of Glenkeld, a medieval castle.

They'd interrupted their whiskey tour with what was supposed to have been a three-day hike. But due to their relaxed pace and drinking the samples of whiskey they'd acquired from several distilleries, this was their fifth day out already. Between setting campfires, assembling and disassembling the tents, cooking hot dogs on an open fire, and fishing in Loch Awe, they'd gotten carried away and lost track of time.

The trip was kind of a long bachelor party for Andy, who was getting married to Natalie, his girlfriend of eight years and the mother of his child. After the kind of childhood Konnor had experienced, he hadn't thought it was even possible to be so deliriously happy, but Andy was a good man, and he deserved every happiness in the world.

Konnor was happy for Andy. But he had no idea how his friend did it. Perhaps others possessed the secrets to a happy relationship and how to be a good husband and a good dad.

Konnor certainly didn't.

Andy frowned at the sky. "It might still pass," he said, though with no conviction.

Konnor said, "Let's hit the road. I need to call my mom."

As much as he was enjoying this hiking trip, Konnor needed to get back to civilization. He knew how a thirty-three-year-old man needing to call his mommy might sound to some, but his best friend knew better than to make jokes about it. Konnor supported his mom financially, and it was most important to him that she knew she was safe and protected, that he would never let anyone hurt her ever again. Right before they'd gone hiking in the wilderness, he'd told her he'd leave the cell phone in the hotel but call her in three days.



Andy hurried after him. “Come on, bro, you’ve left her alone before. You were in the Marines for Christ’s sake.”

Having the most perfect folks in the world, Andy had no idea how it had been for Konnor and his mom. He’d never had to watch the closest person in the world to him be beaten to a pulp and not be able to do a single thing about it.

Konnor’s stepfather was dead, but he’d taught Konnor a valuable lesson that he lived by to this day. He could never let his guard down, never trust that those he cared for would be safe without his protection. As a child, he hadn’t been able to protect his mother, but he could do it now.

“Leave it alone,” Konnor said.

Andy nodded but didn’t look impressed. “If you say so, brother. You know, when we get back to LA, Natalie has a friend she wants you to meet.”

Konnor groaned. *Here we go.* At least every six months, Natalie wanted to set him up with someone.

“Andy...” Konnor said by the way of warning.

“I’m with you, man, but will you please go, just this once? Or she’ll drive me crazy.”

Konnor scoffed.

“Word on the street is you’re a catch. Successful business owner and apparently *man candy*.” Andy put air quotes around that. “Put me out of my misery, man.”

Konnor scoffed. “You’ll be more miserable if I go out with her once and never call her again, then Natalie will kill you. I’m not looking for a relationship. Never will be.”

Why would he? Every relationship he’d been in had ended up bringing pain to the women because of what they’d all called his emotional unavailability.

Andy clasped him on the shoulder. “After all these years, I still think you’re a puzzle.”

“There’s nothing puzzling about me. I’m simple. I have no intention of getting married or having a girlfriend. Ever.”

They walked in silence for a while. A soft whisper of leaves and branches rustling went through the woods, and the sky darkened even more. A small shiver ran across the back of Konnor's neck.

Andy shook his head. "I will say one last thing. You're miserable, and you know it."

"I'm fine," Konnor growled. "I'm great. I have everything I ever wanted."

Thunder rolled in the distance, and they both glanced up to the dark-gray sky.

"Let's get a move on," Andy said. "Come on."

He sped up, but Konnor didn't. Seeing his friend moving off in the distance, he realized he needed a break from him for a while.

"You go on, Andy. I need to take a leak. I'll catch up with you."

Andy stopped and glanced at him with suspicion in his eyes. "Are you sure?"

Konnor sighed. "I'm sure the summer rain won't melt me."

"All right."

Andy hurried down the track. Once he was out of sight, Konnor took in a lungful of air and breathed out. He didn't really need to piss. The cold wind picked up, and the scent of lavender and freshly cut grass rushed by him.

Suddenly a woman's voice broke the silence. "Help! Help!"

Instinctively, Konnor reached to where he usually kept his gun. But of course, it wasn't there. The only weapon he had was a Swiss Army knife in his backpack.

He looked around. Andy was nowhere to be seen. Trees swayed, hissing in the wind, and leaves and branches flew by. One narrowly missed his eye and scratched his cheek. Thunder rolled closer, and the granite sky flashed with lightning. The storm was almost right over him. Was the woman stuck?

Rocks crumbled from somewhere behind him. Konnor squinted back down the trail but couldn't see anyone. The wind brought the woman's scream again. Or was it just trees moaning as the emerging storm assailed them?

The scream came again, and his pulse accelerated. It was coming from behind him, up the trail. He sprinted in that direction as fast as he could with his backpack on.

“Help!”

Trees and bushes flashed by as he ran. Twigs cracked, and pebbles rolled under his feet. The scent of lavender and freshly cut grass grew stronger. The voice was louder now, so the woman must be somewhere nearby, but he still couldn't see who was calling.

“Down here!”

The voice came from behind the trees and bushes. Through the gaps, he saw the edge of a cliff. He stepped through the undergrowth and looked down a ravine that was about two hundred feet wide. It was as though an ancient earthquake had cracked the ground in half here. There was a steep, rocky slope of about twenty or so feet right in front of him. A few pines grew straight out from the rocks. The ravine was shielded by a steep slope on the other side. A creek flowed along the grassy bottom below. It looked fertile and cozy, like a small, secluded piece of heaven. Something about it was magical and mysterious and unreal.

Down in the ravine, a woman was sitting on a small pile of rubble and holding her shoulder.

“Are you okay, ma'am?” Konnor called, trying to shout over the wind.

She looked up, and even from here, he could see a bright smile. She had long red hair and wore a medieval-looking green dress.

“Oh, lad, can ye help me?” she said. “I hurt my arm and canna go up.”

The wind picked up, and the next gush stole Konnor's breath. He looked the slope over. It was really steep, but he

could more or less see a path down. The question was whether he could bring an injured person back up.

First, he needed to get down there and see what was wrong with her arm.

“Don’t move,” he said. “I’m coming.”

“Oh, bless ye, lad!”

Thunder shook the world, and lightning split the sky in half. Thick raindrops began to hit Konnor’s face. He needed to hurry.

He laid his backpack on the ground and began making his way down the slope. Rocks and rubble crumbled under his feet. He hung on to bushes and the occasional pine that grew in between the hard rocks. Heavy raindrops fell faster now, and he had to blink rapidly.

His leg slipped, and he tumbled down. Earth and sky flashed. His military training kicked in, and he kept his arms close to his body to avoid his organs being hit. Something smacked against his ankle, and red-hot pain blinded him. He got a hard blow to his head, making the world explode.

Finally, he stopped rolling and lay still. He felt like he’d been put through a meat grinder. Willing the dizziness away, he opened his eyes. Raindrops fell from the leaden sky, and he blinked. His left ankle hurt like hell. Was it broken? With a groan, he sat up. When he moved his leg, fire shot through his veins. Goddamn it. His first aid kit was up in his backpack.

His wrist ached, too. No doubt, there’d be a bruise there tomorrow. His Swiss watch, a gift from Andy, had a hair-thin crack on the glass. Thankfully, it was still working. It was waterproof and as reliable as a German car. He’d hate to lose it.

He looked around. There was a heap of rubble and gray mortar nearby. The woman sat and stared at him with an emphatic grimace. Rain fell heavily all around them, but while Konnor’s clothes were getting soaked, the woman didn’t look wet.

*Weird.*

“Does it hurt?” she said.

Suppressing another wave of nausea, he swallowed. “You bet. I have bad news for you. I don’t think we’re getting out of here without help, not with me like this, and not in this storm.”

As though to confirm this, lightning flashed and thunder cracked above them.

Konnor cursed. “I don’t suppose you have a phone?”

She bit her lip and widened her eyes. “I dinna have a phone. ’Tis the one thing from yer time that scares me.”

He blinked. Had he heard her right, or had he whacked his head so bad he was having audible hallucinations? “What’s your name, ma’am?”

“They call me Sìneag.”

“Sìneag. I’m Konnor Mitchell. Nice to meet you. We need to find some sort of a shelter until the storm passes, and I’ll need to take a look at your shoulder.”

“Oh, aye. Mayhap here by the ruin.” The heap of rubble formed an alcove where it connected with the cliff. An ancient oak tree grew there, its thick crown forming a sort of a ceiling.

“Yeah,” Konnor said. “That’ll do.”

He tried to stand, but the pain in his ankle was excruciating. She jumped to her feet and rushed to him. She put his arm around her shoulders and lifted him up with strength that surprised him. Was she in any pain at all? As though he weighed nothing, she helped him towards the small shelter and then let him slide down the wall of the cliff by the rubble.

It was a relief to be out of the hammering rain and wind. The ground here was cold and dry. The air was thick with the scent of rain and wet ground, but the predominant smell was lavender and cut grass. It seemed to be coming from Sìneag.

She sat next to him, and now that raindrops weren’t making him blink every second, he studied her. She pushed back a strand of hair from her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were large, and she had a strawberry-shaped mouth, and

freckles dotted her milky skin. Her hair was red and played in the small gushes of wind that reached her. She looked like Red Riding Hood, except her hood was green, and she had no basket.

“Your shoulder is fine, isn’t it?” he said.

A guilty expression crossed her blushing face. “Aye. But I can help ye.”

Konnor grimaced. She’d lied and put his life at risk. For what?

“I almost broke my neck trying to help you,” he said, his voice ringing with restrained anger. She must have a good reason for the ruse, and he didn’t get a dangerous serial killer vibe from her. He hoped Andy would come back to find him once the storm passed. He should see the backpack by the track easily enough.

Sineag managed to look both sheepish and a little upset. Her green eyes darkened and became as hard as rocks. “Ye dinna have love in yer life, do ye?” she said.

Konnor blinked. He must have smacked his head really good, because this conversation was unbelievable. “What?”

“Do ye have someone? Love someone?”

*Shit.* He had to be reading her wrong. “Look, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, but I’m not looking for anything here. I’m just on a guy trip with my friend.”

She laughed, the sound sweet and pure.

“Oh, nae!” she said. “’Tis nae what I meant with the question. Forgive me. I canna be with a mortal anyway.”

A mortal? What did that mean? Was she some sort of a celebrity here and meant that in a mocking way? Nausea rose in his throat. Yeah, he probably had a concussion.

“Okay,” he said. “As long as we’re clear about that.”

“I just wanted to ken if someone like ye—a man with a strong soul and a soft heart—has someone in yer life?”

A grunt started deep in Konnor's gut, but he stopped it. Was today "let's grill Konnor about his love life day"? First Andy, and now a complete stranger?

"I don't."

"Good," she exclaimed and clapped her hands. "I dinna see anyone in yer heart, but I just wanted to be sure."

"What is the point of this?"

"'Tis all for yer own good, ye'll see."

Getting hurt was for his own good? She was really testing his patience. As the owner of a personal protection agency, he had to deal with all kinds of clients. Sometimes his company was contracted by Hollywood celebrities and billionaires to protect them and their families, so he'd met his share of eccentric people, but he'd never had a conversation like this. Could the concussion be causing him to hallucinate?

"What are you talking about?" he said.

She giggled, and the sweet laughter reminded him of the ringing of small bells.

"I'm testing yer patience, aye? Ye're a good man. I wouldna have done this for a bad one. 'Tis like so..." She pointed at the huge pile of rubble and what looked like the remnants of a wall. "'Tis here was an ancient Pictish stronghold. 'Twas built upon a magical rock."

She looked pointedly at a large, flat rock that lay sunken in the dirt. It had what looked like an old, simple carving on it—a flowing river in a circle with something that looked like a road piercing it. Near the carving was the clear imprint of a hand. Just like the imprint of a shoe in cement before it got a chance to dry. Weird.

"They say there's a tunnel through time that opens for those who touch the rock. On the other side is the person who's destined for them."

Konnor raised one brow. "Wonderful," he murmured. "That's a looney story."

"There's a person for ye, too," Sineag said.

“Oh, really?”

“On the other side of the tunnel of time, there’s one person who’ll make ye happy. Someone who can help ye soothe all yer wounds and stop running from all ye secrets. A woman ye can truly love. A woman who can love ye.”

“Back in time? Do Highlanders have stories about time travel?”

An owner of one of the distilleries on their whiskey tour had been very enthusiastic about local folklore. She’d told them stories of kelpies, faeries, and silkies. But none about time travel.

“Aye, though nae many ken them. The woman I’m talking about is as hurt as ye are, and she needs someone who’ll help her get back on her feet. Tell me this isna something you need, too?”

He shook his head. “What I need is to be left alone.”

She smiled. “Ye humans amuse me. Ye make all kinds of excuses to cling to yer beliefs. Destiny will show ye, Konnor Mitchell. Remember, Marjorie will soothe yer soul.”

He propped his hand against the ground. Was he hallucinating, or was the rock with the carvings glowing? No. Not hallucinating. There was a faint glow coming from the indentations of the carving.

“What the hell?” He looked up, but Sìneag wasn’t there. He looked around. “Sìneag?”

The noise of the rain drumming against the ground and the leaves was the only sound, and the scent of lavender and cut grass was gone.

*Where the hell did she go?* “Sìneag?”

It seemed like the rock was vibrating. His pain and discomfort forgotten, Konnor stared at it. What was happening? The carvings were glowing clearly now—the waves blue, the straight line brown. And the handprint... It called to him to put his palm into it. What was the harm? Slowly, he moved his hand and placed it into the indentation in



the rock. A buzz went through his fingers, like the distant rumble of an earthquake. It was as though his hand were made of metal and the rock was a magnet. Strangely, his head was full of one name.

*Marjorie.*

He fell forward, and the hard, wet surface disappeared, replaced with cold, fresh air. He saw nothing. Heard nothing. His ears were muffled, as though he'd been plunged into water.

He was falling and falling, and darkness consumed him.

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## SCOTTISH SLANG

**aye** – yes

**bairn** - baby

**bastart** - bastard

**bonnie** - pretty, beautiful.

**canna-** can not

**couldna** – couldn't

**didna-** didn't ("Ah didna do that!")

**dinna-** don't ("Dinna do that!")

**doesna** – doesn't

**fash** - fuss, worry ("Dinna fash yerself.")

**feck** - fuck

**hasna** – has not

**havna** - have not

**hadna** – had not

**innit?** - Isn't it?

**isna-** Is not

**ken** - to know

**kent** - knew

**lad** - boy

**lass** - girl

**marrit** – married

**nae** – no or not

**shite** - faeces

**the morn** - tomorrow

**the morn's morn** - tomorrow morning

**uisge-beatha (uisge for short)** – Scottish Gaelic for water or life / aquavita, the distilled drink, predecessor of whiskey

**verra** – very

**wasna** - was not

**wee** - small

**wilna** - will not

**wouldna** - would not

**ye** - you

**yer** – your (also yerself)



## HOW I WROTE THIS BOOK

This book, actually, the whole Called by a Highlander series was inspired by you, my readers. When I asked you, what would you like to read next from me, the most popular answer was Highlander time travel romance. Ever since *Outlander*, I've always wanted to write about brawny Scots of my own.

To me, one of the most fascinating periods in Scottish history is the First Wars of Sottish Independence. The story of Robert the Bruce is remarkable. He was completely destroyed by Edward I in 1306, and yet already in 1307, he started rising against England like David against Goliath, with virtually no army, no money and no hope.

In many ways, he owed his success to the Highlanders who supported him no matter what. Among them, was Cambel clan (Campbells is the modern use), and the more I read about them, the more interesting their story was. By the end of 1308, Bruce won against his Scottish enemies: the MacDougalls, the Comyns and the Earl of Ross.

So I thought, what a fascinating period to travel back in time to!

When writing Time Travel Romance, certain beloved tropes and themes are difficult and even impossible to write. One of them, is *enemies to lovers*. Usually the time traveler is a complete outsider and has no reference and no relationships with the people living in the past.

But I wanted to take on the challenge, and I think I found one of the few instances where the time traveler can be an

enemy of the locals.

Another fascinating element to writing historical fiction is research. I enjoyed learning how search and rescue officers track people, researching the war, and especially writing Scottish accents. Aye!

I hope you enjoyed the book and stay with me to wait for the next instalments in the series, because you have truly inspired so many fantastic ideas, and I cannot wait for you to discover more!

Love,

Mariah

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book is similar to giving birth: it's exciting, exhausting and rewarding. In the end, it needs a final push, and it's meant to be done in a team. Or maybe it's just me, after all, I wrote this book while I was pregnant with my daughter.

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**My readers** who make it possible for me to not live the life of a business consultant and spend my life in hotels and airports, but to do what I love and be with my family every day.

Thank you!

Mariah

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five minutes leaving a review on the book's Amazon page.

Thank you very much!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When time travel romance writer Mariah Stone isn't busy writing strong modern women falling back through time into the arms of hot Vikings, Highlanders, and pirates, she chases after her toddler and spends romantic nights on the North Sea with her husband.

Mariah speaks six languages, loves Outlander, sushi and Thai food, and runs a local writer's group. Subscribe to Mariah's newsletter for a free time travel book today!

