

The cover features a rich, textured red background with a subtle floral pattern. A prominent, ornate gold border with intricate scrollwork and floral motifs frames the central text.

WILD
SCOTTISH
ROSE

THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS SERIES · BOOK 4

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

★ TRICIA O'MALLEY ★

WILD SCOTTISH ROSE

THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS

BOOK FOUR

TRICIA O'MALLEY

[LOVEWRITE PUBLISHING](#)

WILD SCOTTISH ROSE
THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS SERIES

Book 4

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*To Shona & Hedgie – I hope you find the connections here as
serendipitous as they seem. Sparkle on!*

Bloom where you are planted.

- Author Unknown

GLOSSARY OF SCOTTISH WORDS/SLANG

- Away and shite – go away, you are talking nonsense
- Bit o’ banter – Scots love to tease each other; banter is highly cherished
- Bladdered – drunk
- Bloody – a word used to add emphasis; expletive
- Bonnie – pretty
- Brekkie – breakfast
- Burn – river, small stream
- Clarty – dirty
- Crabbit – cranky, moody
- Dodgy – shady, questionable
- Drookit – extremely wet; drenched
- Eejit – idiot
- Get the messages – running errands, going to the shops/market

- Give it laldy/laldie – do something with vigor or enthusiasm
- Goes down a treat – tastes good; successful
- Hen – woman, female
- “It’s a dreich day” – cold; damp; miserable
- Mad wi’ it – drunk
- Och – used to express many emotions, typically surprise, regret, or disbelief
- On you go then – be on your way; get on with it
- Scunner – nuisance, pain in the neck
- Shoogly – unsteady; wobbly
- Spitting chips – angry, furious
- Tatties – potatoes
- Tetchy – crabby, cranky, moody
- Tea – in Scotland, having tea is often used to refer to the dinnertime meal
- Wee – small, little
- Wheesht (haud your wheesht) – be quiet, hush, shut up

CHAPTER ONE



SHONA

“I said I wanted calla lilies.”

I tensed as the bride’s voice cut through the din of chatter where my team, as well as the venue staff, were setting up the reception area for the wedding that evening. Turning, I pasted a polite smile on my face as the bride, Kennedy Williams of Dallas, Texas, bore down on me. Her pretty face was screwed up in anger, and her eyes were alight with battle.

Life is going to be difficult for Kennedy if she gets this angry over flowers.

“I’m certain that you didn’t. But I’ll just double-check the order form if you’d like confirmation?” I pulled up my phone and flipped through the orders that I had neatly organized in a file, even though I was well aware that *Miss* Kennedy Williams had ordered white roses for her centerpieces. The arrangements were simple and beautiful, as instructed on the order form, and I’d chosen roses at varying stages of bloom to add depth to the centerpieces. Even though white roses were the most common order I received from brides, I still enjoyed working with the flower. It was one of my favorites, after all. Even more exciting? An opportunity to decorate at Óran Mór, a fabulous reception venue in Glasgow housed in a renovated church. It was my first time traveling this far for a wedding, and I was hoping to enjoy seeing some of the city after we finished setting up.

Life in Loren Brae was lovely, and while I didn't mind small-town life, it was still nice to get to the city on occasion for some excitement. And *shopping*. My heart did a little dance thinking about the money I'd carefully saved to buy some extravagant lingerie. It was a secret passion of mine because much of my life was spent mucking in the dirt, and it was useless to buy pretty clothes that would just get ruined. Now, my earlier excitement at working with the incredible team at Òran Mór, and the prospect of a shopping trip, dimmed. Already I could see my chance to shop being pulled away from me as I mentally readied myself to change all the arrangements right before the reception. It would be a mad dash, and I'd have to call in some favors from local florists, but it could be done if needed.

“White roses?” Kennedy sneered as I pulled up her order. “How positively boring. I definitely ordered the lilies.”

“No,” I began, turning my phone to show her the screen.

“Lilies? Aren't lilies for funerals?” a voice interrupted us, and a shiver danced across the back of my neck.

“What?” A look of confusion crossed Kennedy's face and she whirled on the man who approached us.

I suppose “approached” was too casual a word for how this man strode confidently across the hall, outfitted in a perfectly fit tuxedo, with a tartan bow and matching pocket square. He moved like a panther, his eyes darting across the room, and seeming to take in every detail at once. When they landed on me, his assessment stopped, and a smile landed on his lips. Close-cropped dark hair, lively blue eyes, and broad shoulders completed the package and I found myself desperately wishing I'd dressed up today.

Which was silly, really, considering that dressing up didn't make sense with the amount of manual labor it took to decorate an entire reception hall with flowers. It wasn't just putting vases of flowers on the tables—there were garlands to be hung, vines to be entwined, and lighting to be added. Frankly, I wasn't even sure I owned anything that this class of man would find appealing. Either way, jeans, a T-shirt, and

trainers were the smart choice for my line of work. And that was me. Sensible to my core.

What was it about this man that instantly made me *not* want to be sensible?

“Lilies are traditionally used for funerals. You wouldn’t want people to think that your marriage is a death, would you?” The man turned to Kennedy, who looked up at him with annoyance on her face.

“Damn it, Owen. Why do you always come in and screw things up when I’m just trying to get things handled?” Kennedy demanded.

“Kennedy, if I may? It does say here on your form that you ordered the roses. See?” I brandished my phone, hoping to head off an argument between these two, but neither bothered to glance my way.

“See? The pretty flower lady says you ordered roses. Frankly, I’m surprised at that choice as well,” Owen said. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave Kennedy a wry smile.

“What’s wrong with roses?” Kennedy demanded, immediately jumping ship from the lily train to roses. Relief passed through me. If she was going to defend roses, then maybe I’d be off the hook and could get back to decorating. Easing back a step, hoping to leave them to their argument, I caught the eye of my assistant who hovered nearby with a vase in hand and a questioning look on her face. I gave her a subtle nod, and she continued to set up while I waited to hear the outcome of this discussion.

“Nothing, of course, as these vases are perfection in their own right.” Owen slid me a grin, and I’m pretty sure my insides melted. His American accent held a hint of the South and somewhere else, but I wasn’t sufficiently well-versed in accents to place it. I wanted to inch closer, to be drawn into his hemisphere, just to listen to him talk.

Never had I met a man with so much charisma before.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who felt this way, as I caught more than one of the event staff giving him

appreciative looks.

“It’s just that . . .” Owen continued, tapping a finger against his lips. “We’re in Scotland, right? I’m surprised you didn’t go with something more traditional to the venue.”

My stomach dropped. If I had to run out and find thistles, I would, even if it meant cutting them from the side of the road.

“You’re right,” Kennedy gasped and gripped his arm. “What was I thinking? What should I add in?”

“Haggis, naturally.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I pressed my lips together to hold back a burst of laughter. Surely the bride had to know that haggis was a dish, not a flower. My eyes widened as Kennedy whirled on me.

“*Shona*. I need you to get wild haggis for the centerpieces.” Kennedy snapped her fingers at me, her eyes bright with determination, and I blinked at her as I tried to come up with an excuse that wouldn’t embarrass the bride. She didn’t seem like the type to be able to laugh at a joke at her own expense.

“Well—”

“In fact, you’ll probably want haggis added to the bridal bouquet as well. Oh, and the boutonnières for the men. Maybe the bartenders could make a haggis drink?”

“Of course! Like my lavender-infused martinis that I love.” Kennedy turned and stormed across the room to the bar, and I was grateful for the momentary reprieve, though now I had to come up with a way to tell her that I wasn’t about to put meat flowers in her bouquet.

“I’m probably going to hell. But I do so love winding her up. I’m Owen, by the way.” Owen held out his hand, and I took it automatically, though my stomach twisted in knots about how to deal with this latest catastrophe.

“*Shona*,” I said, faintly, my eyes on where Kennedy berated one of the bartenders about a haggis martini.

“My apologies, Shona, that you have to deal with Kennedy. She’s not always this difficult ...” Owen trailed off as he squinted his eyes. “Actually, never mind, she is. In fact, I’m now warming to the idea of haggis in her flowers.”

“But ... I can’t ... possibly ...” I held my hands up, at a loss for words.

“I think you can do anything you put your mind to.” Owen pursed his lips and studied me, clearly used to people falling in line with his plans. I wanted to, I *really* wanted to, because there was something about the wicked glint in his eyes that made me want to be naughty even just for a bit.

I was *so* done with weddings.

It wasn’t that all of them were awful, or anything like that, I was just over doing flowers for weddings. The stress never lived up to the enjoyment for me. I’d much rather be back home, nurturing my plants, and selling my wares at farmers markets. It was my comfort zone and this ... well, *this* was not what I needed right now.

“Shona!” Kennedy shouted from across the room, stomping her foot, and Owen intervened.

“I’ll handle her. She’ll be happy enough once she’s married. Just get your decorations out as you see fit.” It came out as an order, and I found my attraction to this man instantly diminishing. Men like him? Yeah, they were used to dealing with women like Kennedy. He could very well handle it while I stuck to what I knew best—plants.

“Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir.” I infused enough syrupy sweetness in my voice, so Owen knew that I was annoyed with him.

“Sassy. I like it.” Owen winked at me. Damn it, but I found the wink sexy, and I hated myself for doing so. It was so cliché. The wink. The charm. The casual ease in a tuxedo. Owen was not my type of people. Why I even found myself attracted to him was beyond me.

“Your opinion matters little to me,” I surprised myself by saying, and the grin widened on Owen’s face before he

sauntered away. What was wrong with me? I'd just insulted a client's guest. That would *not* bode well for my business. Even if I'd promised myself that I was done with weddings, I still didn't want to get any bad online reviews.

"Why is the bride screaming about haggis?" my assistant whispered in my ear. I kept my eyes trained on Owen as he pulled Kennedy away from the bar.

"Who is that?" I asked, turning to unwrap the padding from around a vase.

"The one who knows exactly what he's about?" My assistant fanned her face, and I rolled my eyes. "That's the brother."

Of course it was. Nothing like directly insulting a family member. I'd have to apologize later. But for now, I needed to make a plan.

"Do we still have the extra bucket of white heather in the van?" The bride hadn't asked for it, but I typically brought some along in case any spots needed filling.

"We do. Are we adding it?"

"We are. If anyone asks ... it's wild haggis."

CHAPTER TWO



SHONA

“This is seriously the cutest, Shona.” Agnes, owner of Bonnie Books, and one of my childhood friends, beamed at me from across the cottage I’d finally finished renovating. With the help of a few of the local lads, and after watching countless YouTube videos, I’d managed to shine up an old stone cottage situated on the back corner of my property, and I had plans to let it on Airbnb for short-term stays. I didn’t think I was quite ready for a full-time tenant to be in my space, albeit all the way at the back of my land, so I’d settled on short-term holiday lets to get started. The extra income would fill the gaps in the long winter months—at least that was what I was hoping for—and Agnes had come by to photograph the space for the online listing.

“Isn’t it? I’m not sure what took me so long to fix this place up,” I said, smoothing the cheerful tartan throw folded over the back of the loveseat situated in front of the stone fireplace. The cottage was more of a studio, really, with the bedroom, living room, and kitchen all in the main room and a serviceable bathroom tucked behind a small door in the corner. With some creative design, I’d managed to fit a full-sized Murphy bed in the space, which could be lifted and tucked into a bookshelf, or pulled down and left open for sleeping. Along one wall was a compact kitchen, with a small cooktop, and a paned window that overlooked an outdoor sitting area in the garden. On the other side of the room, the loveseat and a leather lounge chair were arranged near the fireplace, with a

pretty rug in shades of muted reds and greens tossed over the hardwood floor. Exposed beams showcased a ceiling that was higher than it looked from outside, giving the illusion of more space. I'd decorated the walls with quirky paintings and had lined the bookshelves with books from Agnes's shop, funky candle holders, and obscure statues. The rain pattered down outside, but the inside was nice and cozy, and I couldn't wait to see what my future guests thought of the space.

"Och, I don't know ... maybe running two successful businesses and still trying to have a semblance of a life?" Agnes said.

"Yes, there's that," I admitted with a laugh. "And I don't know. It took me a while to get to this cottage. Gran and all."

"She'd be really proud of you." Agnes crossed to me, still holding her camera, and slung an arm around my shoulder, pulling me in for a half-hug. "She knew how much you loved this land. This was her gift to you, to do with as you saw fit. The gardens needed you the most. But now you've got that in shape, you can see to other things. Be patient with yourself, Shona. You can't do everything at once."

"I just don't want to fail."

It had been five years since my beloved gran had passed away and left me this land in Loren Brae. With an expansive garden, a two-bedroom cottage, a gardener's shed, and the cottage we now stood in, it had felt like a dream for a girl who had been living in a tiny studio flat in Glasgow. With the land had come a small inheritance that had given me the gumption to leave my boring secretarial job and hightail it back home to Loren Brae. It shouldn't have taken Gran's death for me to realize just how much I'd hated working in an office, but now I finally felt like I was coming into my own.

"What on earth are you talking about, Shona?" Agnes pursed her lips and looked up at me from where she was checking the settings on her camera. "You're an accomplished floral designer and your gardens grow the most delectable produce. Frankly, I don't know how you manage to do so

much. You're going to need to hire more staff soon. Your stall is always the first to sell out at the market."

Every weekend, well, when I wasn't booked for a wedding that is, I packed my van up with whatever seasonal vegetables and herbs I had growing in my garden and set up shop at the local farmers market. At first, I'd started small with a few bushels of snap peas, carrots, and small bags of fresh herbs. I enjoyed the community and comradery of the markets, and it forced me to join the land of the living on occasion and actually talk to people in real life. Some days, I felt like I could disappear into the gardens, wandering the land and conversing with my plants, and the people of Loren Brae would refer to me fondly as the garden witch who people caught glimpses of on rare occasions.

A shiver went through me, and I curled my fingers, digging my nails into my palm.

Garden witch. Green Witch. Hedge witch.

The words flitted through my brain, like luminous fireflies, ready to extinguish if I tried to catch them. *Things* ... had been happening lately that I couldn't quite explain.

"Shona? Are you all right then?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and gave Agnes a small smile.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine. Wool gathering, I suppose. I've been thinking about giving up the weddings, and it's making me feel like a failure."

"I thought you loved the weddings?" Concern crossed Agnes's face. "Did something happen to change your mind?"

Owen's face flashed in my mind. I'd never gotten the chance to apologize to him for being rude, not that he seemed to much mind, as he'd given me a cheeky wink when I'd delivered the boutonnières to the suite for the groomsmen. I wanted to be annoyed by him, and yet his easy confidence made it hard not to also find him a wee bit charming. Kennedy, predictably, had a few more meltdowns on the way to the altar, none of which had landed in my lap, and I'd been

able to escape once she was safely down the aisle. Even so, the stress of the day had lingered with me, and I couldn't help but feel like I was much happier digging in my garden than I was catering to fussy brides.

If *I* was ever to get married, I would just cut a mismatched bouquet of wildflowers and call it a day.

“I think I'm learning that just because I *can* do something, doesn't mean that I *should*.” I shrugged, giving Agnes a bemused look. “I think I'd be happiest selling a few bunches of posies at my market stall, even though there is more money in weddings. I'm not sure that the stress is worth the trade-off, you ken?”

“Aye.” Agnes sighed, checking the light. “Well, you've just shined this cottage up. Surely, you'll get enough renters through to make up for the lost income from weddings, don't you think?”

“That's the hope, at least. It's not like I'm skint, I can do just fine without the weddings. My needs are minimal.” It was true, too. Aside from luxurious underwear, that is. Otherwise, I had a serviceable wardrobe perfect for mucking in the gardens, new radiators in my house, and enough money left over to refurbish the cottage. So long as my trusty van held up, I'd be right as rain.

“Plus, it sounds like Lia might be sourcing from you more as the restaurant grows.”

Grasshopper, the new restaurant at MacAlpine Castle, offered farm-to-table elevated comfort food. Lia, the head chef who'd moved to Loren Brae from Boston, had increased her orders of various fresh herbs and vegetables that I could provide. It was enough to keep my small greenhouse busy, and I was grateful to her for using local produce in her meals.

“She is, and I'm happy for it. It's much easier for me to pop by with a few baskets from the garden each day than it is to deal with countless emails from worried brides about flowers. Granted, not all were difficult to deal with, but ...” I held my hands in the air. “I just don't like being on a computer.”

“You could hire staff, you know. An assistant to run interference and you just do the centerpieces.” Agnes held the camera to her eye and snapped a few photos. “Reckon you could start a fire?”

“I put some kindling in earlier, thinking it might be good for photos.”

“That’s grand, it will look right cozy then.”

I busied myself to the task of lighting the fire, and the tension in my neck unknotted, dissolving as easily as the shreds of newspaper in the fireplace. It was as though the fire consumed my worries over running the wedding side of my business, and as each scrap burned, the weight of responsibility lifted from my shoulders. Watching as the flames began to dance merrily in the fireplace, I felt the decision settle neatly in my core, and I exhaled a sigh of relief.

“I don’t want to hire staff.” I glanced up at Agnes who was squatting to get a better angle of the bookshelves. She looked up at me over her camera. “It’s the right decision. Maybe if a particularly special occasion calls for it. But otherwise, I think I’m done.”

“In that case, I’m pleased to hear it. Maybe I’ll actually be able to steal you away for a night out once in a while.” Agnes grinned at me, and the last of my worries over this decision slipped away. She was right. I shouldn’t be giving what little free time I had to strangers on the weekends when I could be spending more time with my nearest and dearest. It had been ages since I’d gone for a pint at the pub with Agnes.

“Should we go to the pub after this?”

I glanced at the sleeting rain outside, knowing that I likely had a million things to do, but now that I’d made the decision to close the wedding side of my business, it felt right to go enjoy myself.

After I’d tamped down the small fire, turned the lights off, and made a beeline for the house, I was ready for some celebration. I couldn’t wait to see if anyone would book the cottage. I’d close the calendar for new bookings for my

wedding business tomorrow. Endings and beginnings, I supposed, should be marked. What better way than with a meal at the pub with a good friend?

“I’ll need to clean up.” I gestured to my messy hair, and Agnes nodded. Turning, she looked around my cluttered living room.

“I’ll just see if I can find a space to sit?” It was more of a question than a statement, and I sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear as I walked to the small table in a cozy nook by the kitchen. Piled high with notepads, mason jars, and books, there was barely room for her to sit with her laptop.

“You might be right about hiring help,” I grumbled, as I cleared the table. Granted, it wasn’t like I’d been any tidier when I’d been less busy. I’d already enlisted the help of a cleaning service for changeovers for cottage bookings, but I hadn’t thought to do so for myself. Now, as I looked around, I realized things had perhaps gotten a touch out of control.

The cottage was built like a T, with the main entry, living area, and kitchen all one room, and then two bedrooms branching out from either side of a narrow hallway on the opposite side of the cottage. A stone fireplace dominated one wall of the cottage, with a rough-hewn wood mantel, and a rose-patterned couch pulled close. The kitchen had rustic wood cabinets painted in soft white, a small island with a butcher block top, and a round garden table with a pretty mosaic top that I had loved so much I’d dragged it inside and promptly covered it with too much clutter. Mismatched lamps cast warm hues around the room, lighting up the wood beams in the ceiling, and shading areas that could likely use a good dusting.

I sighed.

It wasn’t until I invited people over, which was rare, that I took the time to look at the clutter I’d accumulated. It wasn’t even that I didn’t care about tidying up, it was just that I’d overbooked myself. I couldn’t even blame it on poor time management skills, because I prided myself on being on time

with all of my orders and deliveries. It was, quite simply, overwhelming.

I was only one person.

Agnes was right, I didn't need to do it all, but I'd been running so fast, burning the candle at both ends, that I hadn't stopped to look at where my life was going in ages. The thing was, I wasn't even all that unhappy or even burnt out. However, I *was* tired.

Which was probably why *odd* things were happening to me. Bits of delusion was all it likely was. Lack of sleep would do that to a person.

"Do you want help, Shona? I could take a day and we could dig into all of these piles. You know ... sort, toss, clean?" Agnes wrinkled her brow in concern.

"No. But thank you. I'll book the cleaners. When I know they're coming, I clean. Clean for the cleaners." I winced. While I hadn't reached hoarder status, my piles had gotten a touch out of control. The only person who should have to sort through them was me.

"Well, the offer stands. It's okay to ask for help." Agnes gave me a pointed look as she pulled a small laptop from her bag and put it on the table. Opening it, she connected her camera and drummed her fingers while the pictures began to download. A slim woman with a riot of curls and dancing eyes, Agnes vibrated with energy even when she sat still. I resonated with that, used to being on my feet all day, and it hit me just how much I'd missed my friend. Crossing to her I squatted and threw my arms around her shoulders.

"I've missed you."

"Och, Shona, I've missed you too. I have so much to catch you up on. Like, big stuff. We really need to talk."

My thoughts flashed to when I'd been standing in the garden earlier this week, watching in shock as a rose bloomed from just my command, even though the bud had been tightly closed. *You can't tell her that, you eejit. She'll think you've*

well and truly lost it. What was I supposed to say? I think I'm a green witch?

That being said, if anyone was to understand, it would be Agnes. Not only did she deeply love all of the mythical and fantastical things about Scotland, what with owning a bookshop and all, she'd been one of the key people trying to carefully change the narrative around the Kelpies that haunted Loren Brae.

I'd never seen them, myself, but I'd been privy to their otherworldly shrieks a time or two, and I can attest to the fact that I wasn't interested in meeting one face to face. For centuries now, Loren Brae and the myth of the Kelpies went hand in hand, but only the locals believed it to be true. Mainly because of eyewitness accounts and the fact we could hear their cries carried across the frigid waters of Loch Mirren. Around Scotland, the myth of the Kelpies had almost reached that of Nessie proportions, without the shine to it. Nessie? Fun, non-threatening, cute dinosaur plushies sold at gift shops. Kelpies? Dangerous, screaming-in-the night, intimidating four-story sculptures built in their homage at Falkirk. The dark image of loch-dwelling monsters had done Loren Brae no favors at all. The tourist trade had declined to the extent that gift and craft shops were closing their doors for good, holiday rentals stood empty, and most of the remaining businesses were struggling to eke out a living.

“Just let me quickly freshen up, and I'll be ready to go.”

I left Agnes to select the photos, knowing she had an eye for it, and made my way to my bedroom. While I couldn't say it was uncluttered, it wasn't as messy as the main room. Aside from the perpetual stack of clean laundry on the chair that never seemed to make it into the wardrobe—why bother when you could pull from it each morning to dress?—the room was largely sparse. Likely because I didn't have much in the way of jewelry, makeup, or accessories to crowd any surfaces. An antique wardrobe, with lovely arched doors, and honey-gold wood dominated one side of the room, and those drawers held my lovingly cared for undergarments. Those I never left in a pile on the chair. Those were handwashed and hung out to dry,

then carefully put away between soft sheets of tissue paper. Granted, I didn't always wear silk for my everyday mucking in the gardens, but even then, I always, *always*, wore cute matching sets, in bright colors and pretty patterns.

Changing into dark jeans, a soft grey sweater, and Chelsea boots, I checked my appearance in the bathroom mirror. Stick-straight, wispy blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and cheeks that tended to show the cold, I rarely gave much thought to my appearance. Now, I ran a brush through my long hair until it shone, and then plaited it so it fell over my shoulder. Dashing some water on my face, I dried my skin and applied some tinted lip balm in a pretty poppy color. Good enough.

"Look at this, Shona. Doesn't this just look grand?" Agnes angled her computer when I returned to the kitchen, and I bent to look at the listing. I'd already written the description and added the amenities earlier that day.

Cozy, private cottage with magickal woodland garden.

The pictures matched the headline, beautifully conveying the size and charm of the cottage, and I couldn't be more pleased.

"Well done, you. I owe you a pint."

"Shall we get it listed then?" Agnes's finger hovered over the publish button, and my stomach twisted with nerves.

"Yes, do it."

We gave a small cheer when it published, and then Agnes slammed her laptop shut.

"Enough work for today. You deserve a break."

The sky had just darkened as we left for the Topsy Thistle, Agnes driving, even though I lived close enough to walk home from the pub. A few traces of the setting sun skewered the murky night sky, long red tendrils spearing the clouds like talons. Unaccountably, a shiver trickled across my skin, the hairs at the back of my neck standing up.

"Agnes ... slow down. Something's off." Already Agnes was steering the car to the side of the road, her eyes caught on

the frothing waters of Loch Mirren.

“There’s someone out there. Near the island. Shit, shit, shit.” Agnes whipped out her phone, leaving the car running, as she ran for the shore.

An otherworldly shriek split the night sky, and the waters near the island rose, reminding me of video I’d seen of a tsunami, before hovering over the single man rapidly paddling in a canoe.

For an instant, the water morphed, vaguely shaping the head of a horse, before it crashed over the terrified man.

My heart stopped.

I was out of the car and running, meeting Agnes where she screamed into her phone, a flurry of activity at the dock. A car streaked by as sirens wailed, and I could just make out Sophie and Lachlan, who lived at MacAlpine Castle, tumble from the car and jump into a small zodiac boat.

“What are they doing?” I grabbed Agnes’s arm, panic gripping me.

“Saving the eejit who got too close to the island. I just hope they get there in time.”

CHAPTER THREE



OWEN

Scotland was proving to be as enchanting as everyone claimed it to be. I'd only ever been twice before, literally quick in-and-outs to meet with a film production company based in Glasgow, so this was my first time truly experiencing the majestic beauty of the Scottish countryside. Knowing that I'd need some time to unwind after the stress of Kennedy's wedding, I'd scheduled a month off just to take some downtime.

Who was I kidding? I was already sketching out ideas for projects. It was hard not to. The moody ambience and stark contrasts of charming villages set against rugged landscapes was making me itch for my camera. My iPhone would have to do for now, as I framed out a video clip that panned a small white cottage set on the shores of a loch, with jagged green hills rising behind it. The wind gusted, bringing with it a kiss of rain against my cheeks, and I smiled, not minding the brisk autumn cold in the slightest.

I may have been born in Texas, but I'd left that state long ago. When my parents divorced, my mom had spirited me away to New England, while Kennedy had stayed with our father in Texas. It was an unusual move, splitting the children like that, but we'd both been obstinate in our choices.

My mother had needed looking after.

Kennedy had needed someone to spoil her.

Only later would I learn the real reason for splitting us apart.

And so the cracks in our family foundation had sprung, severing me from my base, and my life had splintered off in another direction from Kennedy's until we were largely strangers by the time we'd grown up. I did my best to relate to her, but over the years, the chasm had widened, and we'd both seemed content on letting the space grow. Until her wedding, that was. Suddenly thrust into the throes of bridal madness, Kennedy had decided we needed to work on our relationship and had even tried to reunite my mother and father once more.

That had gone as well as giving a cat a bath.

As if on cue, my phone rang, my mother's name flashing on the screen, cutting the video I was taking. I debated, briefly, on ignoring the call, as I always did, but then relented.

Like I always did.

"Hi, Mom. Did you make it back safely?"

"Hardly. The plane shook so much I was sure we were going to crash and explode like that plane that went down last year. Did I ever tell you that your great aunt Elizabeth was on a plane that went missing?"

Only every time she has to fly. Angela Elizabeth Williams did not fly well. Nor did she drive well. She didn't handle stressful situations well, or any situation that required a modicum of effort on her part. She said what she wanted to say, she took a daily "tonic" for her nerves, and pretended to be so fragile that I was ready to nominate her for an Emmy for her acting skills. Behind the guileless blue eyes and hair piled as close to God as she could get it, lay a stubborn backbone of steel, and an absolute refusal to learn how to function on her own. After she'd left my dear ol' daddy, she'd burned her way through a wide swath of husbands, like a hot knife cutting through butter, and I'd consoled her through each breakup like the good son that I was. For years, I'd parented her before I'd become old enough to understand a few simple truths:

One? Angela Elizabeth Williams did not want to work for a living.

Two? Angela Elizabeth Williams was incapable of telling the truth, and skirted around any narrative that didn't exactly suit her needs.

And three? Angela Elizabeth Williams was the bane of my existence, and despite her many, many, *many* flaws, she was still my momma, and I loved her.

It was no wonder I struggled with trusting the women in my life. No matter how hard I'd tried to not overanalyze a date's comments, I'd fall into old patterns of second-guessing their answers, trying to sift through the words to find the truth. In fact, I'd turned finding the truth into a mission of sorts in life, and my documentary films had won numerous awards. That being said, it wasn't a trait that was always the most helpful in my love life. Turns out women didn't like their character being called into question, and I'd had more than one date up and walk out on me.

Which was how I'd found myself here, taking a break from filming movies, and escaping from my most recent failed relationship. One of these days I'd get it right, or so my therapist hoped, but for now, I'd seek solace in the balm of Scotland's rugged landscapes.

"You've mentioned Elizabeth a few times," I said, certain that my great aunt had absconded with a swarthy rancher, leaving her husband behind. The official narrative was that her plane had gone missing.

Sometimes I envied Elizabeth's sudden departure from her real life.

What a treat that must be, to up and leave it all, cutting ties and never looking back. Only in my wildest of daydreams would I do that, but still, it was hard to resist the siren's song of no longer having to deal with my admittedly very messed-up family dynamics.

"Yes, well, honey, it's a miracle we made it home alive, I'll tell you that. And David snored the whole way. Can you

imagine? He didn't even think about the rest of us stuck in those tiny seats with him. Louder than a Mack truck barreling down the highway."

Tiny seats? I'd flown her first class, making sure David, who was also the full-time butler I'd hired, was seated next to her to see to her every need. David was a gift, a national treasure really, and I'd just increased the man's salary to ensure he wouldn't even think of leaving the position.

It was the year after I'd graduated from film school when my mother's demands had increased, and a friend had jokingly suggested a butler for her. It had been a lightbulb moment, a pivotal point in the beginning of me untangling my roots from hers, and I'd worked extra jobs through the years to ensure a salaried staff member could see to her needs. It had been, hands down, the healthiest thing I'd ever done for myself, and though I still made myself available to my mother, the buffer of having paid staff to help, had gone a long way toward healing the resentment I held for her.

"Didn't the airline give you ear plugs? They hand out those nice little toiletry bags in first class." I leaned against the hood of my rental, crossing my legs at the ankles, and watched a heron stalk a fish on the pebbly shoreline.

"Jam those rubber things in my ears?" My mother gasped like I'd suggested she get a job and look after herself instead of relying on alimony payments. "And what if they never came out, Owen Matthew Williams?"

"I'm certain they wouldn't design something for the ears that would be impossible to extract."

"Doubtful. I don't trust them, that's the truth. Now, did you see your father's latest? She's quite the little tart, isn't she?"

As she'd told me, repeatedly, through the entire wedding weekend. I'd done my best to run interference, having promised Kennedy that I wouldn't let our parents get into it, and I'd been largely successful.

Except for a minor skirmish in the women's bathroom, I'm told.

My mother won't admit to it, and since it didn't disrupt the flow of the day, I'd let it go. That being said, I did notice my father's new wife giving my mother a wide berth after, her neat updo slightly disheveled. I suppose if that was the worst of it, I could consider the weekend a success. Kennedy seemed happy, once she'd gotten married, that is, and her poor husband looked to be besotted with her. I wished them all the best, but by the end of the weekend, I was exhausted with navigating the tricky family dynamics. If it hadn't been for my best friend, Ryan, a childhood friend of mine, being at the wedding, I'd likely be in far worse shape. Instead, I'd surprisingly managed to have some fun, when I wasn't steering my mother away from the aforementioned "tart." Tomorrow, I'd meet up with Ryan, who had also stayed after to tour Scotland.

"What are your plans for today?" I couldn't bear another moment of talking about my father's new wife, or trying to determine said level of tartness, so I fell back on distraction.

"Well, I'm just too jetlagged to do anything, aren't I? I'll have David see to the laundry and get groceries. I need my recovery time after a massive international trip."

The flight from Glasgow to Maine was just under eight hours. While not the shortest of trips, I'd hardly categorize it as massive. I once did a trip from New York to Perth, Australia. The flights alone were over twenty-three hours, not to mention the layover times between connections. I tuned her out as she ramped up, complaining about all the inconveniences she'd experienced during her travels, and silently saluted the heron when it caught its meal. The rain kicked up, forcing me back inside my car, and I sat behind the driver's seat, making noncommittal noises, as I plugged in my next destination on the car's navigation system. A beep had me looking at my phone, and seeing a UK number that I didn't recognize, I interrupted my mother's flow of words.

"Gotta run, Mom. Call coming in. Glad you're home safe. Love you." I clicked over before she could respond, neatly cutting off her conversation. "Yes, hello? This is Owen."

“Hi, Owen. My name is Agnes, and I’ll start by saying that Ryan is safe.”

“What?” My heartbeat escalated, and I gripped the phone, my focus narrowing to the soft Scottish accent that came through the speaker. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re listed as one of Ryan’s emergency contacts on his iPhone. I’m calling from the hospital. There’s been an ... accident.”

“Oh my God. Where? What happened? Is he okay?”

“He’s unconscious, but stable. He almost drowned.”

“Drowned?” I blinked at the raindrops splattering on the windshield. *Drowned?* Ryan was a highly capable swimmer, spending summers at his parents’ lake house, and he’d even been on the swim team in high school. An avid outdoorsman, he’d often be found fishing or boating in the summers. “That’s impossible.”

“Yes, well, the water here is quite cold. His canoe capsized. Hypothermia set in quickly, but luckily, we were able to get to him in time.”

“But ... he’s not awake? Not speaking?” My thoughts tumbled in my head as I tried to make sense of what I was hearing. How would his canoe just capsize? What had he been up to?

“Not yet, no.”

“Where are you?” I realized I had no idea what hospital Ryan was at, but I needed to get there, *now*. I was the closest thing he had to family in Scotland, and his parents would be terribly worried as they wouldn’t be able to get to Scotland quickly.

“We’re at the community hospital about thirty minutes outside Loren Brae.” Agnes waited while I typed in the address to the navigation system.

“I’m an hour away it says.”

“That’s grand then. This is my number, so you’re welcome to call me back. I’ll stay with him until you arrive.”

Grateful for this kind woman, whomever she was, I swallowed against the fear that clutched my throat.

“Thank you.” My voice was shaky, and I realized my palms were sweating. I didn’t make friends easily and didn’t deal with loss well. I couldn’t fathom a world without Ryan in it. He’d been the one constant in my life, frankly one of the few people I trusted as well as I could trust anyone, I suppose. He was whip smart, deeply funny, and missed nothing when it came to the cracks in my armor. “I appreciate you calling me. I’m on my way now.”

“Be careful on the drive. The doctors say he’s stable, so don’t rush. The roads are quite winding as you near the hospital.”

“I’ll be careful.”

With that, Agnes clicked off and I took a moment to steady myself before starting the navigation system. My mind whirled. What could Ryan possibly have been doing for a canoe to capsize under him? Unless he’d hit unforeseen rapids? He would have taken a kayak then, if he’d known he was going to be in rapids. None of it made sense, but what mattered was that I get to Ryan quickly. Keeping my eyes glued to the road, I decided against calling his parents, wanting to see him for myself before I reached out to them.

True to Agnes’s words, the road dipped and dived, curling through the hills and winding along a long stretch of a seemingly endless loch until I neared the location she’d given me. The rain continued, unrelenting, and I’d done my best to proceed at a careful, though hurried, pace. Even so, the trip had taken twenty minutes longer than expected, and by the time I’d reached the hospital, impatience and fear had knotted my neck and shoulders.

“Ryan James,” I said at the front desk, and a slim woman with curls just kissing her chin unfolded herself from a chair in the waiting room and crossed to me.

“Owen? I’m Agnes.”

“Oh, thank God. Where is he?”

“Am I good to take him back, Mary?” Agnes glanced at the nurse who smiled up at me, and she nodded. “Come on then. He was sleeping last I checked.”

“Do you work here?” I said, taking off my jacket and wiping the rain drops from my face.

“No, but it’s a small town. I know Mary from school.”

Agnes stopped at a partially open door and gestured for me to go ahead. I pushed inside, and stopped short when I saw Ryan, his face pale, the beginning of bruising marring his pasty skin, a white bandage wrapped around his head. His eyes remained closed, but his heart monitor showed a healthy beat, and his chest rose steadily with his breaths.

“I’ll get the doctor.” Agnes slipped from the room, and I crossed to Ryan, picking up a hand to squeeze it.

“Hey bud, it’s Owen. I’m here now.” I waited, but nothing happened, and I turned to see a chair by the bed. Leaning over, I pulled it close without letting go of Ryan’s hand and settled in to wait.

A fresh-faced woman with kind eyes appeared at the door in a white coat, her hands holding an open folder. Glancing up from her notes, she smiled at me.

“Owen? You’re Ryan’s friend?”

“I am. We were here for my sister’s wedding.” I wasn’t sure why I was telling her that, but I felt like I needed to prove that I could sit next to him.

“Any family in town?”

“No, the rest live in the States.”

“In that case, I can tell you that while he almost drowned, he’d only reached HT II from the cold water. Which means the unconsciousness isn’t a result of hypothermia, but blunt-force trauma. From what I can tell, he hit his head on the canoe, or perhaps the paddle, before going under.”

“But why ... what happened?” I asked, my eyes going back to Ryan. “He’s an avid paddler.”

“I can’t say, I’m sorry.”

“From my understanding, it’s your job to say, so explain yourself.”

The doctor’s eyebrow shot up at my tone, but I gave zero shits what she thought. I needed an explanation.

“It’s my job to treat the patient, sir, not to explain the details of the accident as I wasn’t on site during the time of trauma.” The doctor’s words had grown clipped.

“You’ll find out for me then.” It was a demand, not a question.

“I’m also not an investigative journalist, now, am I? You’ll need to ask your friend when he wakes.”

“When will he wake up?”

“Vital signs are good. Blood pressure is normal. We’ll monitor him for twenty-four hours for potential pulmonary edema, which can happen with fluid in the lungs, and then we wait on when he wakes up.”

“And his head injury?”

“A concussion, along with a few stitches. As I said, vitals are responsive, so we’ll just need him to wake up to see if there is any other trauma associated with head injuries. It’s likely the trauma, along with the shock of the cold water, is what is causing him to sleep now. He briefly awoke and spoke to me just before you arrived, before immediately falling back asleep. But it’s sleep, not unconsciousness, and that’s a good sign.”

“Am I okay to stay here?” I indicated the chair by the bed, and she smiled gently at me.

“Yes. As long as you don’t berate my staff, stay as long as you need.”

With that, I settled in for a wait, still holding Ryan’s hand, and called his parents. By the time I’d gotten through that phone call, a bone-deep weariness filled me. My exhaustion didn’t matter, though, not when my friend was hurting.

Determined to stick it out, I stood and let go of Ryan's hand, needing to use the restroom and find a cup of coffee.

"Owen."

I whirled at the door, racing back to the bedside, and grasped Ryan's hand. His eyelids flickered open, his brown eyes landing on my face. A hint of a grin settled on his lips. "Hey, bro."

"Hey, man," I echoed back, easing into my seat. "Doctors say you dove headfirst into a loch."

"No." Ryan winced as he shook his head gently. "I didn't dive. I was chased."

"Chased? By what, Ryan?" I glanced to the IV bag hooked up to Ryan's arm and wondered just what type of pain meds they were giving him.

"I don't know, man. You've gotta investigate. It wasn't ... real."

Concern filled me. *We need to wait to see what his brain injuries are.* Were these delusions?

"What do you mean?"

"Like ... something rose out of the water. Attacked. Like, I don't know, a Nessie or something. I'm telling you, Owen. You gotta investigate. If ever someone could find out what's going on here, you can. This could be your next big documentary." Despite his injured condition, excitement gleamed in Ryan's eyes, which told me that he believed this to be true.

"You're certain? You took a pretty big knock to your head, man."

"I know. I can feel it. It's true though, something's going on in this town, Owen. You gotta figure it out."

For the last ten years, I'd worked with many different types of people. Some, I wouldn't trust as far as I could throw them. I'd learned that from my dad as well. Very few gave me reason to trust them. Except Ryan. He was blunt, honorable,

and someone I trusted without a shadow of doubt. *And he was spooked by something he believes is real. I think.*

When his eyes fluttered closed again, and he drifted into sleep again, I plopped back down, my heart racing in my chest. Pulling out my phone, I looked up the name of the town again and then opened the Airbnb website. Searching for longer term, I landed on a brand-new listing.

Cozy, private cottage with magickal garden woodland.

I booked on the spot.

CHAPTER FOUR



SHONA

“A whole month?”

I blinked down at my phone, certain I was reading the dates on the new booking request for the cottage wrong. I thought I’d put a block on longer stays, not wanting to provide for long-term tenants, but now I realized in my haste to get the listing up I’d missed a few things.

“A month,” I repeated, my finger hovering over the Accept Booking button. I was going into a slower time of year for myself, so the extra money would be nice. I squinted at the tiny image next to the guest’s name. Owen Williams. Something tingled in the back of my neck, a recognition of sorts, but I couldn’t quite place it, and the image was too tiny for me to make out his face clearly. However, he had a good rating in his guest profile, and before the nerves that twisted my stomach in knots got the better of me, I clicked accept.

“There. It’s done. Oh, crap.” I realized that I hadn’t paid close enough attention to the actual booking date. “He’s arriving today. Today. Damn it. I didn’t know there was same-day bookings.” Panicked, I dialed Agnes.

“Hiya, Shona. I’m just home from the hospital now. Looks like the lad will be on the mend soon enough.”

Right, the lad who the Kelpies hurt. I shook my head, forcing my panic back to focus on Agnes for a moment. She’d been kind enough to accompany the hurt man to the hospital,

while Sophie and Lachlan ran interference on the shore. Luckily, it was midweek and a slow day for tourists. Nevertheless, Loren Brae was in full damage control mode and on full alert. I couldn't remember the last time someone had actually been hurt by the Kelpies, unless we took Lachlan's mother into account from decades ago.

"Thank goodness they got to him as quickly as they did. That was ... it was something else, Agnes. I don't quite have words for it."

Since the Kelpies were magick, did that mean other magick existed here as well?

I didn't say that, instead focusing on Agnes's words as I picked up the keys for the cottage, along with a basket of welcome goodies that she'd put together for her photos, and strode through my dark garden. I couldn't imagine who would be arriving so late to the cottage, but I wanted to have the lights on and everything ready for check-in.

"It's what I wanted to talk to you about. You've been so busy, and there's been so much going on ... it's about the Kelpies. We need more help. I'm on my way to the castle now for an emergency meeting. If my hunch is correct, we're going to be calling you soon."

"Me?" I stopped short at the cottage door, putting the basket down as I dug out the key. "I'm always happy to help when I can, you know that."

"I know. But ... well, let me just see. I'll get back to you after I talk to Sophie."

"Why was Sophie the one to ride out to help the lad in the canoe?" I pushed the door open, flipping the lights on inside the cottage, and carried the basket to the kitchen counter. "Isn't she scared? She hasn't lived here all that long."

"Part of what I want to talk to you about. Listen, I have to go."

"Wait!" I said, my voice panicked. "Before you go. I got a booking."

"Did you? Already? That's grand, Shona."

“No, like, it’s for today. Tonight. For a month. I don’t even know what to do. Am I ready for this? What if he’s super needy? Or a jerk? Or ...” My eyes trailed to the darkness outside. “A serial killer?”

“Today? Right, yes, I can see the concern, but maybe he’s just traveling through and needed last-minute lodging?”

“For a month? Who books lodging for a month on a whim with same-day check-in?” I demanded, nerves making the fine hairs at the back of my neck stand up. Headlights sliced the darkness outside, and my grip tightened on the phone. “Oh my God. I think he’s here.”

“Just stay on the phone with me until he’s checked in. Even if you have to put it down. That way I know you’re safe.” I could hear gravel crunch through the speaker, which meant Agnes was pacing outside MacAlpine Castle as she waited for me. I felt a bit silly, knowing she had bigger things to worry about than me getting my first guest, but still I appreciated her waiting for me.

“Yes, that’s the guest.” Hurriedly, I flipped on the other lamp by the fireplace, and scanned the room to make sure everything was in place. Popping my head in the bathroom, I noted that the soap and towels were appropriately placed, and the toilet paper was well stocked. By the time I’d come out, a car door slammed. “Eeek, that’s him. Okay, breathe.”

“You got this.”

A knock sounded on the door that I’d left partially open, and my heart hammered in my chest as it swung open. The moment hung suspended, my breath caught, and then Owen Williams stepped over the threshold.

Of course.

That was why the name had seemed familiar.

Owen Williams—brother of one Kennedy Sullivan of Dallas, Texas. Formerly Kennedy *Williams*. None other than the man I’d insulted to his face and had thought about more times than I cared to admit since. Dazzlingly, devastatingly hot, Owen Williams was a man who seemed to suck all of the

air from the room, bringing all the attention to him, and I was transfixed as recognition registered.

“I know you,” Owen said, a grin transforming his face from rugged to deeply appealing.

“Oh,” I breathed, and Agnes’s voice startled in my ear.

“What is it? You’ve gone silent. Is something wrong?” The alarm in her voice shook me out of my trance and I hurried to reassure her.

“No, that’s me sorted, Agnes. The guest has arrived. Turns out I’ve met him before. Just this past weekend. Owen is from the wedding that I worked up in Glasgow.”

Owen crossed his arms over his broad chest as I spoke, patiently waiting for me, and I realized I was being rude.

“Wait. Owen? Too hot for words, dark hair, eyes that turn your insides liquid?”

I swallowed.

“Um, yes?”

“He’s Ryan’s friend. The lad who got hurt. He booked here for an entire month? That seems ... odd ... to me. I don’t like it. Be careful what you say around him, Shona. We’re trying to keep this Kelpie rumor on the down-low.”

“Understood. I need to go, I believe I’m being rude.” I gave Owen a tentative smile, and he grinned, rocking back on his heels. Damn it, but this man was hot with a capital H. His masculinity seemed to overpower the charming cottage, throwing the delicate touches into stark relief, and there was something about the contrast, like when you saw a big, strong man holding a fragile teacup, that really did make my insides go liquid like Agnes had described.

I wasn’t sure I liked it either. He’d put me on edge since I’d met him, and now I had an entire month with him squatting in my garden. Well, not squatting. He was paying for the ability to stay there, but his arrival had thrown me all out of sorts. Disconnecting, I pocketed the phone and surreptitiously

wiped my damp palm on my jeans before walking forward and holding out my hand.

“Shona. It’s nice to see you again,” I said, and Owen took my hand, holding it a moment longer than was normal. Or maybe he didn’t. Maybe it was just that as soon as his skin touched mine, his large hand swallowing mine and making me feel as dainty as the aforementioned teacup—when I decidedly was not a dainty woman—made heat bloom inside of me.

“That’s right, it’s Shona. I’m sorry I forgot. It’s been a tough day. I’ve just come from visiting a friend in the hospital.” Owen released my hand, and I instantly missed his touch. My thoughts froze as I studied his handsome face, noting the exhaustion in his eyes. When the silence drew out, I jolted when he cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope he’s okay.”

“He’s pretty resilient. They’ve patched him up.” Owen looked at me expectantly.

“Och, right. Sorry, sorry. You’re my first booking and an unexpected one. I suppose I should have a welcome spiel down, but I’m new to this, so bear with me, all right?”

“Do your best.” Owen nodded at me to go ahead, and I turned to look at the cottage, needing to catch my breath. *Why did this man make me feel like an awkward teenager?* I gestured at the room.

“Welcome to the Enchanted Garden Cottage, though that’s a working title. I live at the cottage you passed when you turned at the front gate, and you’ll have your privacy back here.” Why would he need privacy? To entertain women? I pushed those thoughts away and continued. “This is a fully functioning farm, with an active greenhouse, though on a much smaller scale than commercial farms. Basically, I grow produce and flowers to sell at markets and area restaurants. I’m happy to give you a tour during the day. I’m usually around, mucking about in the dirt, so if you need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to find me.”

“You grew the flowers for the wedding?” Owen asked and I turned to see approval on his face. The heat ratcheted up a notch, and I gave him a small smile before turning away again. It was like looking at the sun, I realized, and I couldn’t stare too long before I did something foolish like ask him to carry all the new soil bags from my van to the greenhouse.

Shirtless.

“Mostly. It was a large order, so I had to source some from other places as well.”

“Impressive. Despite evidence to the contrary, Kennedy was very pleased.”

“Even though I couldn’t add wild haggis to the bouquet?” Despite myself, I grinned up at him, and he threw his head back and laughed.

“Man, she was pissed when she found out what haggis was. Glad I wasn’t the one who told her. I think she glared at me through the whole wedding ceremony.”

“Sister, right?”

“Correct.”

“Och, well, that’s some good banter between siblings then.” Turning, I crossed to the Murphy bed that was tucked into the wall. “Let me show you how the bed works, as well as where firewood is stacked. Otherwise, everything else is self-explanatory. I’ve left a welcome basket with some goodies for the morning, so you don’t have to rush out to find your brekkie. The shops in Loren Brae aren’t far at all, so you’ll be able to stock up on the rest.”

“Appreciate it.” Owen came to stand behind me as I reached for the handles on the bed. “Here, let me.”

I stilled as he reached over my head, towering over me from behind, and awareness rippled through me. There was something so intimate about a man standing behind you and reaching over your head, and I could blame Agnes for talking about liquid heat or whatever because now that was all I could think about. His chest brushed my shoulders lightly as he pulled the handle and unhooked the bed easily.

“Yup, just like that. It should pull down easily. Here, let me get out of your—”

I turned, bumping his chest, his arms still holding the bed above me, caging me. Helpless not to, I looked up, and our eyes caught.

He really had no right to be this handsome.

The fact that I was even caught up on his looks, his nearness, his very essence, instantly annoyed me. I was not some kind of simpering girl who tossed her hair over her shoulder and fluttered her fake eyelashes at a man to get attention. Those were the type of women that Owen Williams of Texas likely went for, and I'd seen more than one of those types openly flirting with him before the wedding had started. No, the Owen Williams of this world didn't go for the Shona Scotts of this world. We were like oil and water. A universal truth it was, and our kind simply did not mix.

“Sorry about that,” I finally said, ducking under his arms and stepping back as he lowered the bed to the floor. “Then, yeah, just flip down the leg supports as well.”

“This is great, thanks.”

“I hope so. I know it's not fancy, but ...” I found myself wanting to apologize for my darling cottage that I'd poured my heart into shining up, thinking about how Kennedy would have viewed the place. Likely found lacking by her standards.

“It's perfect. Truly. Charming, cozy, and private. Exactly what I need.”

“Oh, well, good. I'm glad.” I stood awkwardly, the bed looming between us, and wrung my hands. “I can't think of much else. Oh, Wi-Fi password is on the list on the mantel, along with local shops.”

“Perfect. Thanks, Shona.” Owen waited, and I stood, just staring at him, before I realized that I was being incredibly awkward. He wanted me to leave, of course, so he could relax after his tough day. What was I doing, standing in the middle of the cottage, and gazing at him like he was an alien that had just landed in my backyard?

“Right, I’ll just get on with it then.” Turning, I caught my shin on the corner of the Murphy bed, tripped forward, and sprawled face first across the bed.

My humiliation was complete.

I stayed a moment, frozen, knowing that my bum was up in the air, and my jumper had risen up based on the brush of cool air against my skin. *Grace was so not my middle name.* My face flushed with embarrassment. I wanted to lock Owen in the cottage, so I never had to see his face for the next thirty days.

“You okay down there?” Owen asked, amusement lacing his face.

“Yup, just checking the firmness of the mattress.” *You bloody eejit.*

“There’s other, much more ... satisfying ... ways to test a mattress, Shona.”

Dear God, was this man determined to make my insides light on fire? Because he was doing a damn good job of it. Maybe he didn’t even realize he was doing it. Perhaps he was one of those men who flirted as easily as he breathed. Oozed sexual innuendo.

The only thing I oozed was mud after a long day in the gardens.

“Yes, well, this is the Scottish way.”

Owen hooked my arms and lifted me from the mattress as though I weighed nothing, steadying me on my feet. My cheeks burned.

“Face-first?” Owen asked.

“Awkward, full throttle, often with a side of embarrassment.” With that I pivoted and marched to the door, praying I didn’t do something else stupid like ask him to leave so I could avoid a month of embarrassing myself in his presence.

Owen’s laughter brought a smile to my lips, even though I was deeply embarrassed, and I glanced over my shoulder.

“My phone number is on the list. Text or call if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Shona. I’m just going to crash for the night. I’ll let you know if I need anything.” He stood by the bed, an amused light still in his eyes, and I closed the door behind me, needing to gulp the cool night air.

“Bloody eejit,” I muttered, stalking across the dark garden, needing no light to find my way through the flower and vegetable beds which I knew every inch of.

Five minutes later, while I paced my kitchen and tried not to beat myself up for being so foolishly awkward, my phone buzzed with an incoming text message from a US number. Thumbing the message open, a laugh broke out.

An image of Owen, his face pressed into the mattress, accompanied the text.

You’re right, this is the perfect way to test a mattress. I stand corrected.

My finger hovered, but I couldn’t resist responding.

A tried-and-true Scottish tradition. You’ll fit in just fine.

That’s the plan. Good night, Shona.

Good night, Owen. Welcome to Loren Brae.

CHAPTER FIVE



SHONA

I t was a dark and stormy night when Sabrina went missing.

A rumble of thunder mirrored the mood of the true crime podcast that I was listening to as I finished potting the last of my dahlias to bring inside for the winter. Humming, I moved on to my chili plants, knowing that Lia liked to add some of the spicier ones to dishes at Grasshopper. Even though it was early autumn, I worried for an early frost that could harm some of my tender plants, and I'd already started the process of moving my more vulnerable plants into the greenhouse.

Dragged through the bushes, the police found footprints in the mud on the trail.

A blur of movement caught my eye, and I stopped, tilting my head at a bed of tomato plants across the greenhouse. A shiver of awareness rippled across my skin, and my hand tightened on the trowel I held. Not that I was sure what I'd do with said trowel, but the podcast had me on edge. If it was a rat, I'd have to set a live trap like I normally did, not bludgeon the poor thing to death with a gardening trowel. Despite many of the farmers at the market poking fun at me for my tender-hearted ways, I'd never been able to bring myself to use kill traps for rodents. I liked to think they'd developed a level of respect for me over the years, or maybe just enjoyed the scraps I left for them out front of the cottage and away from the gardens, but either way, I now rarely had problems with them.

A crack of thunder boomed overhead, and I jumped, a nervous giggle caught in my throat, as I bent and peered at the tray that held several large thriving tomato plants.

“Well, hello there. Who are you?” I laughed down at a gnome statue that one of my assistants must have tucked into the bushes. While the red hat was cheerful, the biker vest, tattoos, and tartan kilt threw me a bit. Not your traditional gnome, that was for sure, though the long grey beard looked on point. “Grumpy wee lad, aren’t you?” I booped his nose, then shrieked when he jumped backwards.

“The only thing wee is your smarts, lass.”

“What the—”

“Hey, Shona, sorry we didn’t knock, but it’s a dreich day out.”

I whirled, my heart hammering in my chest, as Agnes and Sophie rushed into the greenhouse, closing the door quickly behind them to keep out the rain.

Blood was spattered across the hood of the abandoned car.

“Yeesh, what are you listening to?” Agnes crinkled her nose as my podcast continued in the background, and I tried to catch my breath. Glancing back at the tomatoes, I saw that the gnome was nowhere to be seen. *Had I hallucinated him?*

“Are you okay?” Sophie, the American lass who had inherited MacAlpine Castle, asked. With strawberry-blonde hair, a curvy body, and an open smiling face, Sophie was as fresh-faced as my daisies on a pretty spring morning. She wore a tattered UCLA sweatshirt, jeans, and thick-soled boots along with a jacket. In contrast, Agnes looked like the funky bookshop owner she was, with slim-fit mustard-yellow corduroy pants, a deep teal jumper, and a slew of necklaces at her throat. “I could have sworn I heard a scream.”

“Maybe it was this grisly podcast?” Agnes mock shivered, and I reached in my pocket for my phone to turn the podcast off. My hand shook as I stared down at the screen, my thoughts piling on top of each other like cars colliding, and I

blew my breath out in a slow steady stream to calm my heart rate.

“You’re not looking so good. Might I suggest listening to a romance audiobook instead? Just as much tension as true crime, but the payoff is much sweeter,” Agnes continued. I met her eyes, blinking slowly as her words registered, and then shook my head to clear my thoughts.

“Sorry, my mind is on other things. Hoping things are okay with the new guest.” I glanced surreptitiously behind me, but the gnome was nowhere to be found. If there even had been a gnome.

“How did the check-in go? What did he say about his friend?” Sophie glanced between us, and I motioned for them to follow me to the small building attached to the greenhouse. That had been another new addition that I was quite proud of. My team and I spent so much time in the gardens and the greenhouse, that we’d soon learned not only did we need a place to pack and prep the produce, but it was nice to slip away for a spot of tea on a rainy afternoon without having to trudge back up to the house. The lounge area had a rustic wood table, with matching wood chairs, and a pretty tapestry in blush pink with threads of teal hung on the wall behind it. A vase of mismatched flowers cheerfully adorned the table. That’s where the strays went, as I called the flowers that fell from cuttings or needed pruning. Even without any planning, the bouquet of random flowers inevitably always looked great. At least *I* always liked it. There was beauty in imperfection.

“Tea?” I asked, needing a moment to calm myself down. I busied myself with filling the kettle and getting out the tea, along with a box of shortbread, while the women chattered behind me.

“I can’t believe just how many different types of plants you have in here,” Sophie said. “Archie put a small herb garden in for Lia, but already I suspect she’ll be wanting more if she gets a look at your setup here.”

“She’ll need to decide if she has the time to tend to something of that scale,” I said, waiting for the water to boil.

“I doubt it. Plus, she enjoys sourcing ingredients from locals, so I don’t think I’ll be needing to build a greenhouse. Yet.”

“The restaurant seems to be doing well. I’ve heard good things, at least.” The kettle clicked off, and I busied myself putting a small tray of cups together before returning to the table to join the women.

“It’s going great. Lia’s been, well ... she’s magick.” Sophie shot a weird look at Agnes. “In the kitchen that is.”

Magick.

The word sent another shiver through me, and I pulled the sleeves of my jumper down, wondering if I was coming down with something.

“So how did it go with Owen?” Agnes returned to the question she’d asked me before.

“Owen?” Sophie asked, trying to sip her tea, even though it had barely steeped and was still roasting hot.

“My new guest.”

“And the friend of the lad who got hurt by the Kelpies,” Agnes added.

At that, Sophie sobered. I glanced between the two women who were clearly having a silent conversation as they grimaced at each other.

“What? What’s with all the looks?” I asked. Were they scared to tell me about the Kelpies? I’d seen them with my own eyes now, hadn’t I? Well, *kind of* one of them. It was hard to say as it was all a bit of a blur what with the adrenaline coursing through my veins like a shot of tequila burning down my throat. I’d lived in Loren Brae most of my life. I was well aware that we had hauntings and a mysterious legend, but it was far different hearing about it growing up and being confronted with it in real life. I had tossed and turned for the last two nights, and every time sleep would creep close, I’d get a vision of the Kelpies in my head, and I’d spring wide awake again. The funny thing was, I couldn’t decide if I was fascinated or afraid.

“We need to talk.”

The way Agnes said the words had my stomach twisting. Wrapping my hands around my teacup for warmth, I took a deep breath, rain pattering against the roof of the greenhouse. Rarely was that phrase said when it was good news to be told.

“Are you sick?” I asked, breaking the silence, and Agnes jerked her head, shaking it back and forth. Reaching across the table, she put her hand on my arm.

“*No*. No, not at all.”

“It just sounds serious, and you’re making me worry. I’d really rather you just spit it out instead of dancing around whatever it is you have to tell me. Are they taking my land away or something?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s ...” Agnes squeezed her nose. “See, there’s ...”

“Did the lad from the loch end up dying?” I winced, thinking about Owen, and Agnes groaned.

“I’m bungling this.”

“Shona.” Sophie drew my attention to her. “In the middle of Loch Mirren is an island where, essentially, the holy grail is buried. The Order of Caledonia has existed for centuries in order to protect this magickal Truth Stone from falling into the wrong hands. If that were to happen, the consequences for the entire world could be catastrophic. Each member of the Order is given magickal powers or inherits them through their bloodline. These powers, as a whole, will help to protect Loren Brae, the Truth Stone, and keep the Kelpies at bay. We believe you’re the next woman to step into power in the Order of Caledonia.”

“Well, that’s one way to do it,” Agnes said, exhaling and slumping back into her seat.

I blinked at Sophie, her words cascading through me like I’d just stepped under an icy waterfall, both numbing and heating me at once. The shock to my system was instant, yet much like the frigid water, when the truth settled inside me, I felt oddly refreshed. Excitement bloomed, and my thoughts

could only pull one word out of everything Sophie had just said.

Magick.

“Magick?” I asked, holding up my hand and turning it this way and that in the air. “Like ... what kind of magick?”

“To be determined. It manifests differently for each member of the Order. Mine is my voice. Did you see the other day when Lachlan and I went on the boat to help the idiot who canoed too close to the island?” Sophie asked.

“Aye, I did somewhat wonder why it was you running out to help. Not that I don’t think you’re capable, of course.” I winced, not wanting to insult Sophie. It’s just that the Kelpies were so big and quite intense.

“I’m the Knight.” Sophie beamed at me when my mouth dropped open. She tossed her hair back and brushed her hands at her shoulders, preening for me. “I can tell you’re suitably impressed.”

“The Knight? Like with a sword and all that?”

“Correct. Though my weapon of choice is more of a dirk.”

“A dirk.” I nodded like I had any idea what a dirk was.

“And Lia’s is her chopping knife.” Agnes laughed at the expression on my face.

“Lia?”

“Kitchen witch,” Sophie said.

“Wait ... what? You’re a knight and she’s a kitchen witch? What kind of Order is this?”

“Excellent question.” Agnes laughed and leaned over to pull a stack of books from her messenger bag. “From what we can determine, while the Order of Caledonia has been fulfilled by both male and female leaders throughout history, it is at its most powerful when fulfilled by women.”

“The divine feminine and all that,” Sophie added.

“But wouldn’t you all just be knights? Isn’t that what an Order is?” I squinched my nose up.

“Not necessarily,” Sophie continued. “You’re thinking of the Knights of the Round Table, but historically speaking, Orders are formed for a variety of reasons with a multitude of roles assigned to their members. Because of Scotland’s roots in paganism, we believe that this Order is fulfilled by what we would call today ... witches.”

Green witch.

I clenched my hand, digging my short nails into my palm, and my skin flushed with heat, my stomach churning. “Witches?”

“More or less.” Sophie shrugged. “I don’t know that every person who joins the order will be a witch. I don’t really consider myself to be one in the traditional sense, but I definitely have power. I think it’s just a term we give to people who step into their magick.”

“What do you mean step into their magick?” I shook my head, drumming my fingers against the teacup, matching the intensity of the rain that hammered the roof.

“There’s a ritual that accompanies joining the Order. From my understanding, this ritual will trigger your latent power to manifest in full form,” Agnes said as casually as though she was commenting on the weather.

And what if your magick wasn’t latent?

The thought skidded through my head, slamming into my brain so suddenly, that I gripped the teacup hard enough that tea sloshed over the rim and onto my hand.

“It’s a lot to take in, Shona,” Agnes said, her voice soft, as she stood and crossed the room for a towel to clean up my spilled tea. Passing it to me, she pressed a hand softly at my shoulder. “I’m here for you, every step of the way. Yes, it’s scary and intense and weird, but also it’s magickal and wonderful, and you’re a part of something so much more. Just think of the incredible history behind the stone—the Clach na Firinn—and how the Order has protected it for centuries. It’s

not just about you, it's about being weaved into Loren Brae's history. And *you* can be an integral part in keeping the Clach na Firinn—and Loren Brae—safe.”

I blew out a breath and tried to steady myself. Not used to sitting for long, I stood, needing to be among my plants as I thought this through.

“I need to ...” I cocked my head toward the greenhouse. Digging in the soil settled me, calmed my thoughts, and that is where I needed to be. Without waiting for their answer, I returned to the greenhouse and began mixing my dirt to transplant some basil to bring inside for the winter. The women followed, teacups in hand, as they leaned against a worktop near where I scooped dirt.

“Tell me about this ritual.”

Rituals made me think of blood oaths and full moons, and I wasn't sure that I was ready for all of that. Maybe I had to be? If I was being called upon to enter this Order, I couldn't let my friends in Loren Brae down, could I? Conflicted, I continued to pot as Sophie spoke.

“Honestly? It's kind of wild. Listen, I didn't grow up here, so this was quite a shock to my system when I inherited the castle. That being said, Uncle Arthur did try to prepare me for what I would discover here because he was constantly tutoring me in all sorts of Scottish myths and legends. Even so, nothing really prepares you for the first time you confront the Kelpies. Or ... well, any of the other magickal beings that roam Loren Brae.”

At that, I whipped my head up, my heart pounding. Did she know about the gnome?

“Magickal beings? There's more than one?”

“Much to my surprise, and sometimes deep annoyance,” Sophie muttered.

“Like what?” I demanded, brushing the dirt from my hands as I turned to face them head-on.

“Lia has a kitchen elf. A broonie. His name's Brice, and he's a cheeky chappie,” Agnes volunteered, smiling when my

mouth dropped open.

“An elf?” I squeaked.

“Sure thing. The ugliest, cutest little guy I ever did see. If he shows himself that is. We’ve learned to love him, even though he tests our patience regularly.” Sophie sighed.

I nodded, my eyes wide, wondering if there was something in the water in Loren Brae that was driving us all a bit mad. *Says the girl who thinks she saw a gnome in her tomato plants.*

“Here’s the thing. Brice gave Lia an old book, passed down through generations, with recipes and spells in it. What’s most interesting is that in the margins are notes and annotations, some of which include information about the lives of the women writing in it. From what we can determine, it seems like some of the members of the Order will get a familiar of sorts.”

“A familiar?” I raised an eyebrow.

“You know, like when a witch has her talking black cat help her with spells?” Sophie said, and I nodded, now understanding what she meant.

“What’s yours then?” I asked Sophie. Her shoulders slumped.

“I didn’t get one. Unless you count Clyde.”

“Is that the ghost coo that supposedly haunts the castle?” I’d heard tell of this mysterious ghost coo through the years, and the thought had always sent me into fits of giggles. Even now, despite the seriousness of the discussion, I wanted to giggle.

“Oh, it’s not supposed. He definitely haunts it. Like a toddler hopped up on too much sugar,” Sophie grumbled.

“Amazing,” I said. “But, again, why me? What led you to think that I was the next in line?”

Because you can talk to plants and make them grow?

I pushed that thought away and wondered just when the right time would be to share some of this information with my

friends. I'd have to, I realized, because it probably took a lot of courage for them to come to me with this tale of legends and magick.

"It's interesting, because you've already started to form a partnership with Lia that is mirrored throughout history in her book. The garden witch and the kitchen witch always worked hand in hand together. You've, very naturally, already started supplying Lia with herbs and flowers for her tables, and so this would be a natural extension of that." Agnes held out her phone and I bent to peer at the screen. There, a photo of an old book thrown open to a loose sketch of two women standing at the kitchen table, and my eyes caught on a name.

"Seònaid." Warmth bloomed as I saw my grandmother's name. *Of course*. She'd tended her gardens as fiercely as I did, and I came by my green thumb through her. It had skipped a generation, my mother wanting nothing to do with plants, whereas I'd been drawn to them since the moment I was born. My mother always said I was a fussy baby until she'd learned that I calmed when she placed plants on my nightstand. A tip from my grandmother, I'm told.

"Aye, your grandmother," Agnes said, meeting my eyes with a small smile on her face.

"I miss her," I admitted.

"She's *here*. In these gardens she built, and with what you continue to grow. Seeds fall to the earth, and blossom once more, generation upon generation. You're never too far apart." Agnes squeezed my shoulder.

"So, Gran was magick? I wonder if she left anything for me in the house. I still have boxes to sort through," I said, a note of guilt tingeing my voice. If I ever got through the clutter in my daily life, that is.

"We'll take a look at some point. The first step, and what is somewhat time sensitive, is you doing the ritual," Agnes said.

The women fell silent, while they waited for me to make a decision. The drumming of the rain against the greenhouse

intensified, as though rising to a crescendo, before I finally spoke, rushing the words out in one single breath.

“What if I already have magick?”

“Badass,” Sophie said, giving me an admiring look at the same time Agnes’s mouth dropped open.

“You do? And you haven’t told me?”

“Um, I guess? I don’t know. Things have been happening that I can’t explain, and I felt odd bringing it up because how are you supposed to tell people that you think you have magick? Or that weird things are happening to you? It’s just ... I didn’t know what to do or say and I’ve been so busy that I kept shoving it aside, and then it kept happening, and well, now, you’re here. Right, so, yes. That. Magick.”

“Show me,” Agnes said, moving forward until she stood shoulder to shoulder with me. “You have to know that I’ll always support you, Shona. Just like I told you that it’s time to clean your cottage and that one day I’m going to show up and just do it myself, I’d tell you whether you’re doing something wrong or not. If magick has been happening for you, it’s not wrong or bad. It’s part of your bloodline. You never have to hide these things from me.”

Friends could be family too, couldn’t they? Turning, I gave Agnes a quick hug, needing her to steady me before I turned back to the table.

“Right. I’m not certain I’ll be able to replicate what’s been happening, but let’s give it a go, shall we?” I took a small pot from the tray with a seedling that had just poked above the dirt, its half-discarded shell still clinging to its tender green shoot. Sophie stepped forward so that she and Agnes stood on either side of me as I brought the small pot to my face.

“Hey, pretty baby,” I crooned to the plant, reaching deep inside of me for all of my love and light that I held for plants, and poured it into my words. “You’re safe here, beautiful. If you’re feeling up to it, I’d love for you to grow for my friends. It’s your choice, of course, and I support your decision.”

I wasn't one to badger my plants into submission. I'd talked to my plants for as long as I could remember, and I'd always innately understood that they craved love, nurturing, and acceptance from me.

Sophie gasped and grabbed my arm when the tender green shoot shifted, unfurling and flinging the last of the seed cap off, before climbing steadily toward the sky, small leaves unfurling as it grew. Within thirty seconds, it had reached about fifteen centimeters high with a few brilliant green leaves, and I spoke once more.

"That's just fine there, sweet one. You've done an amazing job. I'm going to give you a lovely spot next to your friends now." I busied myself by gently removing the plant, taking care with the roots, and putting it in a bigger pot, before tucking it amongst similar plants. The women stayed silent as I worked, and my heart hammered in my chest as I waited for their judgment. Finished, I dusted off my hands and turned.

"That is so freaking cool," Sophie exclaimed, excitement dancing in her eyes.

"*Way* cool," Agnes agreed, her eyes lighting.

The tension that had coiled inside me loosened, and I breathed a sigh of relief, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ears.

"When did this start happening for you?" Agnes asked.

I shrugged.

"It's hard to pinpoint it. Sometime over the last year. Maybe the last six or eight months? It's still new to me."

"That's when I arrived." Sophie twirled a lock of her hair around her finger, tugging it as she tapped a finger against her lips. "I wonder if my arrival kicked off a new wave of the Order and triggered your magick."

"I have no idea how to answer that." I laughed, despite the seriousness of the conversation, and Agnes grinned.

"That's fair. The real question is, are you willing to still do the ritual? Do you want to become a member of the Order of

Caledonia? Loren Brae needs you.”

“When you say it like that, I mean of course I do, but what are the responsibilities?” I asked, worry filling me that much like my inability to keep my cottage clean, I’d also fail to help the Order.

“Once you do the ritual, you’ll accept your role as a member of the Order, and step into your power. At that time, you’ll choose your magickal weapon.”

“Weapon?” I shuddered.

“This role comes with a responsibility to protect Loren Brae.” Sophie’s voice sobered. “The Kelpies are a very real threat. The more power we have to push them back, the better.”

“You want me to fight a Kelpie?” I was so not prepared for this.

“God, no. Please don’t. The reason the Kelpies are here is because the Order isn’t filled. Our job is twofold. Fulfill the Order of Caledonia, thus banishing the Kelpies into rest, and protect the Stone of Truth. It’s our job to make sure nobody, and I mean nobody, gets too close to that island.”

“Lachlan’s mum.” A memory from childhood surfaced of a stricken Lachlan, his mum having drowned in the Loch.

“Yes, it was the Kelpies.” Sophie’s face held sadness for her man.

“Och, the poor lad.”

“It’s also why they surfaced when Owen’s friend got too close. We have to keep people away at all costs,” Agnes said.

“Right, so no small challenge, is there?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Speaking of challenges, you’ll have to pass three of them before the Stone accepts you as a member of the Order.” Agnes grinned when I looked at her askance.

“Challenges? Like I have to fight someone?”

“One would hope not. The Stone determines the challenges. Mine were more challenges of the heart—emotionally driven ones based on courage and generosity. Traits aligned with the Knight. Lia’s were healing and nurturing. We’re not sure what yours will be yet. That is a path you must follow,” Sophie said.

“Och, that’s a lot, isn’t it then? Do a ritual, pick a weapon, pass some challenges, pick up a familiar, banish Kelpies, and protect the Stone of Truth at all costs. Anything else?” I asked, dryly.

“Aye. Keep your new guest from asking too many questions.” Agnes angled her head toward where we could just make out Owen racing from his cottage to his car in the rain. “If his friend starts talking, we need to do damage control.”

“And hide all mystical circumstances from my new guest who plans to stay for a month.” I nodded my head maniacally. “No big deal.”

“You got this,” Agnes promised me.

She might have more faith in me than I did, but nevertheless, I gave her a stressed smile.

I might be a woman of power ... might step into the power of The Order. To “help to protect Loren Brae, the Truth Stone, and keep the Kelpies at bay.”

Well, Gran, is that your ultimate legacy or what?

CHAPTER SIX



OWEN

I'd mostly slept well, though it had taken me awhile to fall asleep. As promised, the cottage was as cozy and welcoming as could be, but it was the image of Shona, bent over the bed, her sweater riding up her back and revealing the thin silky hot pink strip of a thong that had my mind careening directly into the gutter. The flash of hot pink silk had been so unexpected from a woman who was dressed monochromatically that I had quickly reassessed my image of her. Not that my initial impression had been bad, however.

When I'd seen Kennedy harassing the poor woman across the banquet room, it hadn't been my need to soothe my sister that had drawn me across the hall. No, there was something that had captivated me about the woman with silky straight hair, wide blue eyes, and pert, pink mouth. I'd liken her to a porcelain doll, but once Shona had spoken, she'd eradicated any thoughts of fragility right out of my mind. No, this was a woman who knew her own mind, adeptly handling Kennedy, and giving it right back when I teased her. Her image had come to mind more than once since I'd left the wedding, and I couldn't have been happier when happenstance had led me to Shona's doorstep.

Granted, what had happened to Ryan wasn't a happy event, but I could separate the two in my mind. In any case, if I was going to settle in for a while, having a beautiful, albeit temporary, landlord didn't hurt.

Ducking through the near constant rain that had hammered the little cottage all morning, I scrambled into my rental car and brought up the address of the hospital again in my navigation system. Rain pummeled the windshield, but when I turned on the engine and the wipers, I could just make out three women standing in the warm glow of the greenhouse. It looked cozy in there, a beacon of warmth and greenery on a dull day, and I realized that I wanted to see inside.

It was the way my brain worked. I'd never given much thought to gardening or greenhouses before, but once my mind landed on something new, I wanted to investigate and learn more about everything involved with it. This trait was likely what made me a good filmmaker, a relentless need to discover the truth, but it also had led me down some really fascinating paths in my life.

Once I'd turned my mind to filmmaking, nothing had been able to stop me in pursuit of success. In an unusual move, I'd been able to straddle both the world of feature films, as well as documentary filmmaking. It had taken me eleven years, but I'd had great success in both, which allowed me to choose my projects at a whim, and it was what had also given me this ability to take some time off between projects. A much-needed rest, away from the hustle and bustle of the film world, and Scotland had promised to be the perfect place for a recharge.

Or so I'd thought.

I hoped Ryan was more coherent today and could expand on what he'd hinted at yesterday. Maybe it was just the drugs talking, and he wouldn't be able to remember what he'd said to me, but either way, I had no problem settling in at Loren Brae for the next few weeks. From what I could gather as I drove, the little town tucked at the shores of pretty Loch Mirren was charming. Paired with my beautiful landlord and a cozy cottage, Loren Brae might be the perfect place for me to unwind for a while.

Or discover a deep-rooted mystery.

Because my senses were tingling, I had a feeling the latter would consume my time, because it was the same feeling I got

every time I launched into a new investigative documentary. There was just this sense of knowing that lit me up inside, driving me to uncover the truth, and that same energy now hummed through my body. If Loren Brae had secrets to share, I'd be the one to uncover them. Soon, little Loren Brae might just be world-famous.

By the time I reached Ryan's hospital bed, it was mid-morning, and he was awake and arguing with a nurse.

"My man!" I exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder and giving the nurse a sympathetic look. "Is this guy bothering you?"

"Och, he's a bit tetchy this morning." The nurse gave Ryan a stern look. "He's insisting on having a coffee with his brekkie, but that just won't do. It's tea or nothing I've told him."

"Tea," Ryan scoffed. I was just happy to see him looking more like Ryan. Yesterday he'd looked as pale as death, and now the color had returned to his cheeks.

"Better than nothing. Plus, the Scots make a great cup of tea, don't they?" I winked at the nurse, who gave me an equally stern look before departing from the room.

"*Lovely* woman," Ryan grumbled.

"Might I recommend not giving the people who saved your life a hard time over a cup of coffee?" I dropped into the chair next to his bed, my eyes going to the monitor. A steady heartbeat, normal blood pressure, and oxygen levels seemed good as far as I could tell. Not that I was an expert, but I'd been in and out of the hospital enough with my mother for any number of overly dramatized incidents to be able to read a patient monitor quickly.

"Now that you're here I can pick on you instead."

"Sitting in bed getting to you?" I guessed, leaning back, and resting my ankle on my knee. If I knew anything about Ryan, it was that he chafed at being forced to sit still. He often took his meetings on the phone, while walking, to avoid sitting at his desk.

“Hate it.”

“What did the doctor say?” The bruising had darkened across his forehead, and they’d removed the bandage to reveal a few stitches.

“I’m cleared for release later today. My parents should be arriving around now and driving down from Glasgow. I told them not to come, but you know Mom.”

“She’s a worrier,” I agreed, smiling at the thought of his mother. She’d been a second mother to me, nurturing me in ways that I’d wished my own mother was capable of, and I’d always envied Ryan’s easy relationship with his parents.

“Yes, they’re making me stay at a hotel with them in Edinburgh while they explore the city for a few days, then we’ll all fly back together. I’d wanted to hang here longer, but I picked up another gig.”

“Did you? Anything good?” In a happy turn of events, Ryan had followed me into the film world, but was a showrunner instead of a director.

“A romcom, actually.” Ryan laughed at my stricken expression. “Hey man, don’t knock it. The world needs love, you know.”

“Does it though?” Sure, I was probably a bit wary on the whole love thing, after watching the revolving door of my mother’s marriages. *And my father’s*. And if I was honest, my relationships had followed suit. Except without the expense of marriage ceremonies and divorce lawyers. *That showed true wisdom in my mind*.

“Aw, man, you’re way too young to be so jaded.” Ryan shook his head sadly. I just shrugged. He wasn’t wrong.

“I’m on a sabbatical from dating.” The image of Shona, with that damned pink silk thong peeking out of her jeans, popped into my head. *Nope, no. Down boy. Definitely not going there*.

“Like that will last.” Ryan snorted.

“I’m tired of it all,” I admitted, tapping my fingers on my leg as I thought about it. “Nobody is honest anymore. The last three, no, four women I dated all wanted something from me.”

“What? Like your time? Attention? Affection?” Ryan laughed when I glared at him.

“No, you dick. A movie role. Meeting famous people. Career advancement.”

“I know, I know.” Ryan waved a hand in the air to stop me as I ramped up. “That’s my least favorite thing about Hollywood. Everyone is using each other to get somewhere. That being said, it’s also my most favorite thing about Hollywood. Connections are king.”

“I just want someone who is real with me. Is that too much to ask?”

“Maybe you need to look outside Hollywood, bro.”

Again, that image of Shona flashed into my head, and I stubbornly pushed it away. The last thing I needed to do was look in the direction of my pretty landlord. She lived in a small town in Scotland. I lived, well, everywhere, really, depending on my shooting schedule. We were worlds apart, and I’d rather not complicate my life more than necessary.

“Moving on,” I said, tilting my head to study his face. “Everything good? The doctor was worried for brain injury. Did they do any tests?”

“Yup. I passed with flying colors. Just a bad concussion.”

“You’re lucky.” My stomach twisted thinking of Ryan knocked out in the frigid waters of the loch. This could have ended so much worse.

“I know it. But, man, you have to look into things here. It was wild, I tell you. *Wild*. There’s something crazy going on in this town.” Ryan looked around and lowered his voice. “It’s ... I don’t even know how to explain it.”

I pulled out my phone and hit the record button. “Tell me everything that happened with your accident. You said some ... interesting stuff yesterday, but I can’t help but wonder if it

was the drugs talking. If not, I need to know all the details you can remember so I can look into it for you.”

“You’re staying?” A look of concern flashed across Ryan’s face.

“You asked me to investigate.”

“Did I? I don’t remember that.” Ryan shrugged one shoulder gingerly. “What else did I say?”

“You said you were chased, and you think there’s something like Nessie in the loch.”

“I do.” Ryan’s eyes met mine, and they were clear from any medication. “I didn’t make that up.”

“I don’t think you did, but you also had a trauma, potential brain injury, and I have no idea what meds you were on for pain, but I’m asking you now, with a clear head, if you can explain to me what happened.”

“Bro, it was wild,” Ryan repeated as he shook his head. Glancing at the door that was partially open, he leaned closer and lowered his voice. “There really is something in that water.”

“Yes, you mentioned like a Loch Ness Monster of sorts?” I asked. I was careful to keep my face expressionless.

“Maybe. It’s hard to say. It all happened so fast.”

“Walk me through it.” I stretched my legs out and crossed my arms over my chest, my eyes trained on my friend’s face.

“Well, I rented a canoe from a shop by the docks, and it was a fairly nice day. Some rain, but nothing that was all that annoying, you know?”

I nodded, motioning for him to continue. No one in their right mind would normally rent a canoe in Scotland in the fall. *Except for Ryan.* He had always loved being on the water, and it didn’t matter what the temperature was. He was almost part fish.

“And I just went for a paddle. You know I love being out on the water. It was easy enough as the water was calm. No

currents, nothing. Kind of like our lake back home. Just easy.”

“Then what happened?”

“There’s this island in the middle of the loch, and I had a thought to paddle there, get out, take some pictures of the village from a different vantage point. It looked easy enough to get to, and from what I could tell I should have been able to pull my canoe up on the small beach. So I went that way. Even though—”

“Even though what?”

“Now that I think about it, the boat guy did tell me to stay away from the island. He was pretty emphatic about it. Which is likely why I went that way. You know how I am when people tell me what to do.”

I made a note to interview the man at the boat rental place on the Notes app in my phone.

“I do. You’re stubborn.”

“I am. Plus, I couldn’t see any reason he was warning me away. No currents, no bad weather, nothing.”

“And yet, here you are.” I nodded to the stitches on his face, and Ryan gave me a sheepish look.

“Right, so I get close, and then it was just like ... a blur of fricking water and movement and, I swear to God, I saw a huge horse rise out of the water. I think it was a horse.”

“A what now?” I coughed, covering my mouth with my fist. “Did you say a horse walked out of the water?”

“Nope. Not a *horse* horse. Like a horse made of water.”

“I’m trying here, Ryan. But I’m struggling.” Maybe he had hit his head harder than anyone realized.

“The water took the shape of a massive horse, it charged me, and knocked me out of the damn canoe.” Ryan lifted his chin, and his expression took on a mulish look I knew quite well because I often wore the same.

“Did you see anything else? Any other details that you can add?” I stayed in interview mode, offering no other feedback.

“I feel like maybe a soft glow of light? On the island. A glimmering of something? But it happened so fast, Owen. Like, I don’t even know. Calm water then, boom! Water horse stampeding at my face. Oh, and it shrieked. That was it. That is what caused me to freak out and try to get away. The shrieking. It was like ... I don’t know. Made my blood cold, you know?”

“I don’t, but I’ll take your word for it. What happened next?”

“The horse hit me. Felt like being hit by a truck. I went flying, and the next thing I know is I’m in a boat with some people around me. After that, I woke up here.”

“You’re damn lucky.” I let out a sigh, and pressed my lips together, letting my thoughts assemble. “You realize this sounds crazy, right?”

“No doubt about it. I’d say the same if I was sitting where you are.”

“I’m going to have to investigate this, aren’t I?” A grin rose on Ryan’s face.

“I expect nothing less from you, man. If anyone can figure out what’s going on here, you can.”

“I booked the cottage for a whole month. Sure, you don’t want to stay on?”

“Can’t. Mom’s already up in arms about evacuating me, like we’re in some third-world country.”

“But she’s willing to stay in Edinburgh for a few days?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Apparently, that city is civilized enough for her.” Ryan chuckled, shaking his head, and I did the same. “One bad road trip, and she refuses to stay in small towns anymore.”

“I’ll order my camera equipment in. I already have a few people I can talk to, starting with your boat rental company.”

“For sure. They clearly know something as they warned me away.”

“Either way, I think this is going to be an interesting stay. So much for taking a break.” I gave Ryan a wolfish grin, and he laughed. My mind whirled. Was it possible that there really was a Loch Ness Monster of sorts hiding in Loren Brae? I needed to do some digging.

“You and I both know you’re shit at taking breaks. Might as well do something interesting while you’re here. Find out what did this to me, Owen. I’ll owe you.”

“On it, brother.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



SHONA

My walking stick?

My eyes hovered between my favorite trowel and beautifully crafted walking stick that had been my grandmother's. And, yes, I do have a favorite gardening trowel if you must know. It has a pink handle and flowers etched into the metal, and I love it because it's frivolous and makes me smile. I picked both up, weighing them in each hand, and tried to see if I could feel which would be a better choice for this supposed weapon that I needed.

I was meant to be on my way to the castle to start my ritual, yet was hung up on deciding on my weapon. In the end, I went with the walking stick, which had intricate vines carved around the handle and down the length of the staff. I was just opening the door to leave the greenhouse when a voice startled me.

"It's about time you got your head out of your arse."

"Pardon me?" I demanded, almost dropping my stick. Caught halfway out of the door, I peered into the palette of greens by the wall. Leaves shifted, and red flashed between the greenery before the gnome poked his head out.

"You heard me, lass."

"You're quite rude, sir," I scolded the wee gnome, narrowing my eyes when he glared up at me. Was I really lecturing a gnome?

“Who are you talking to?”

When I say I shrieked, I mean that my body must have levitated off the ground, and I threw my hand out, catching Owen in the legs with my walking stick, while almost punching the gnome at the same time.

“For flower’s sake,” the gnome hissed.

For flower’s sake? He must have replaced one F word with another. The ridiculousness of the situation caused a giggle to lodge in my throat, and I choked, gurgling, and making an odd sound as Owen looked at me like I was unhinged.

“Oh, so arse is just fine, but you can’t say the F word?” I hissed back and the gnome froze as Owen loomed close.

“Cute little guy,” Owen said, peering over my shoulder at the gnome who had returned to what must be his resting statue mode. The gnome’s eyes shifted slightly, glaring at Owen’s words.

“Yes, he’s just *darling*, isn’t he?” I gushed, suspecting it would annoy the crabbit beastie, and stepped outside, pulling the door to the greenhouse tight behind me. What I needed to do was get rid of Owen before I investigated the appearance of this creature further.

“I’m sorry that I lashed you with my walking stick there,” I said, trying to pretend like everything was normal and he hadn’t caught me carrying on a conversation with a walking, talking garden ornament. Or that I was about to go partake in an ancient ritual that would apparently level up my magick like I was eating special mushrooms in a video game. “I’m not used to having people on the property yet. Is everything all right then? Cottage cozy enough for you?”

“Yes, it’s great. I just got back from the hospital to see my friend. He got hurt here recently. You may have heard?” Owen’s eyes searched mine, and I busied myself with turning to lock the greenhouse.

“I had heard that a lad ran into some trouble on the loch the other day. Was that your friend then?” I could just make out the gnome through the frosty glass of the door, and when

he raised his finger at me in a well-known salute, my mouth dropped open. Why that tetchy little—

“It was. He almost died. He seems to think that it wasn’t an accident.”

At that, I swallowed, glad I was turned away, and then faced Owen with a concerned look on my face. Damn it, but he was *so* handsome. The air around him seemed to crackle with energy, and I wanted to move closer, to feel what it would be like to be pulled into his orbit.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Owen. I haven’t heard the details of the situation, but I do have to run. I’m away up to the castle just now, and then to get the messages. Are you needing anything from the shops?”

“Get the messages?” Owen raised an eyebrow at me, sidetracked from his line of questioning. At his question, I laughed.

“A Scottish phrase. It just means popping ’round the shops for a few things. Maybe stopping at the post office. That sort of thing.”

“Interesting. Maybe a recommendation for a place for dinner? If you’re free, I’d love to treat you. I have so many questions about this town.” There was a gleam in Owen’s eye that was putting me on my back foot as Agnes’s warning loomed in my mind.

“Ah, I can’t tonight. I’m not sure how long I’ll be out.” Which was true, since it was hard to say how long ancient magickal rituals took. Maybe, after all these years, efficiency would prevail, and I’d be on my way within an hour. It was hard to say. “But I recommend the Topsy Thistle for good comfort pub food, and Grasshopper at MacAlpine Castle for fine dining.”

“Is that where you’re going then? Grasshopper? Since you’ll be up at the castle?”

“Ah, no.” I glanced down at my faded jeans and worn sweater. “Just to have a wee chat with a friend who lives there.”

“Lives in a castle? Imagine that.” Owen crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. I was certain that he would stay here all night, asking questions, until he got the answers that he needed, and I didn’t like how this made me feel. I wasn’t one for deception, and I suspected that his questions had to do with what had happened to his friend. To protect Loren Brae, I’d be forced to lie, something that I hated doing. Yet, Agnes’s instructions had been clear.

Owen was an outsider. And that was where he needed to stay.

“That’s right. Someone has to see to keeping the grounds neat and running the tours. Is there anything else you need, Owen? I’d like to crack on before the day gets away from me.”

“Nope, I’m all good. Nice to see you again, Shona.” I froze as Owen reached out and brushed his finger across my face.

I was right. As soon as he’d invaded my space, my senses had gone on high alert, my skin tingling beneath the smallest of touches.

“An eyelash.” Owen held his finger in front of my lips. “Make a wish, Shona.”

My eyes held his as I blew automatically. *I want you.*

That was *not* what I needed to be wishing. Scolding my wayward inner hussy, who had clearly not gotten any action in a while, I shuttered my eyes, breaking the moment and brushing past where Owen stood, his hand still outstretched.

“If you need anything or run into any trouble, call me.”

“I’ll do that. Have a nice day, Shona.”

“You as well.” I gave a cheerful wave and all but ran for my car, desperate to leave before he asked me something that would reveal what a horrible liar I was.

On the drive to MacAlpine Castle, my thoughts whirled as I tried to calm my racing heart. First off, it seemed like I had one of these “familiar” that the ladies had been talking about. Of course, I’d get the swearing grumpy gnome. Of all things! What about a sweet cat or something less aggressive? In order

to grow my plants the way I did, I needed to give out love and light and joy. Not be harassed by a gnome who scurried through the plants and threw out flower curses.

No, this would not do.

Though it was a brisk day, the sun filtered through moody grey clouds, the promise of rain ever close. If I had to choose a season as a favorite, it would be autumn. Even though most gardeners loved the spring when tender shoots poked above the dirt, unfurling their little green leaves to the sky, I couldn't help but love the cozy moodiness of the season settling in for a nice long sleep. Nights turned cool, fires were built, and the sun always took on this wan light, as though it too understood that it was time for a rest. Now, as the light speared Loch Mirren in long, straight rays, the moody dark water rippling against the wind that gusted over the hills, I sighed in contentment. I was never unaffected by the beauty of where I lived.

Turning up the long drive that led to MacAlpine Castle, I tried to calm the nerves that tumbled low in my stomach. I really had no idea what I was about to walk into, but I drew the line at anything involving blood. The only rituals that I was familiar with were the kinds they did in the movies where they'd cut their palms and press bloody hands together under the light of a full moon. Seeing as how the sun was doing its best to shine through the blanket of clouds, and neither Sophie nor Agnes had mentioned the need for medical care, I had high hopes for a blood-free afternoon.

MacAlpine Castle was imposing and heightened my nerves, a grand dame of a building that appropriately demanded your respect. Built in a rectangular shape, with a tower on each of the four corners, and cheerful saltire flags fluttering in the breeze, the smooth grey stone of the castle mixed nicely with the luscious green gardens and old growth forest that hugged it. Archie and Hilda, the main castle caretakers, were rigorous in their upkeep, with Archie maintaining the gardens and the grounds while Hilda ran the interior with ruthless efficiency. The castle was open for tours on the weekends, with half of it kept historically accurate as a

museum, while the other half had been modernized into various flats and lounge areas for the caretakers and staff to live in. Sophie, the new owner of MacAlpine, lived there with her boyfriend Lachlan, who directed all things tourism when it came to the castle and Loren Brae as a whole.

I always enjoyed my visits, though more often than not, Archie would pull me away to discuss garden-related things, and I always left with new inspiration for my own plantings. That being said, Archie was working with a far bigger budget than I, and he was lucky enough to be able to test out new designs for the tourists to enjoy each year. We got along famously, and often Sophie had to drag me away from Archie for a moment of girl time. Otherwise, we'd be talking mulch blends all evening.

Two furballs raced across the lawn when I got out of my car, and I grinned as Lady Lola, a corgi-mix with an adorable bum that she couldn't seem to maneuver well, and Sir Buster, a chihuahua who was regularly sporting a kilt, raced toward me. With very different manners of greeting, Sir Buster snarled, while Lady Lola licked my ankle and smiled up at me. Once I'd appropriately given Lady Lola her due respect, Sir Buster had worked himself up into enough of an annoyance at the attention she was getting to deign to allow me to give him a few scratches behind the ear before he sniffed in disdain and stalked away.

“There's a lovely lass on a fine autumn day.”

I smiled as Archie approached, his shock of white hair ruffled by the wind, with worn denim pants and a heather-grey sweater. Bending, he pressed a quick kiss to my cheek, and squeezed my shoulder.

“Archie, how are you getting on?”

“Well enough. Better now that you're here. The girls tell me that you've come for the ritual?”

I sucked in a breath, lifting my eyes to scan the clouds, my heartbeat picking up once more.

“I am.”

“Nervous?” Archie, never one to mince words, asked.

“Can’t say I’m excited. Maybe it’s the word ritual? Sounds kind of cultish, no?”

“Sophie will tell you that the only cult she’d join is one dedicated to cheese.”

“The man’s not wrong. In fact, if there isn’t already a cheese cult, I may need to start one,” Sophie said, joining us on the lawn and catching the tail end of Archie’s comment.

“What would your tag line be? How would you convince people to join?”

“Like I need to convince people to eat cheese,” Sophie scoffed. “You know all those free samples at the market? Nobody turns those down. I’d recruit those people first, as they’re already pushing the goods. Tag line? In Gouda we trust?”

“You are the cheesen one?” I asked. Sophie’s eyes lit.

“Cheesy does it,” Sophie offered.

“That’s enough, ladies. We’ve got more pressing matters to attend to.” Archie glared between the two of us, his thick brows drawn low over his face.

“Of course.” Sophie struggled to withhold a smile. “Time to cheese the day and all that.”

Archie sighed and pinched his nose. “We need to get started. The lass is nervous.”

“Cheddar crack on with it then,” Sophie agreed, her face solemn.

“Don’t make it so hard.” Archie scowled at Sophie. Silence drew out, and Archie turned away with a satisfied nod.

“That’s what cheese said,” Sophie rushed out on a breath.

“Damn it, Sophie,” Archie barked.

Despite myself, I laughed, and it helped to ease some of the knots in my stomach. Whether it was Sophie’s intention or not, the fact that she could joke about cheese right now made

me feel marginally better about whatever I was about to step into.

Together, we wandered around the side of the castle, Sophie still trying out cheese jokes until we got to Archie's garden shed where Agnes and Hilda waited. Hilda, a trim woman with friendly eyes and a nurturing air, pulled me in for a tight hug.

"I'm so glad it's you," Hilda said. "You're just the right woman for the job. The Order of Caledonia will be lucky to have you."

"Will it? I don't yet understand what my role will be."

"Accept your power, pass your challenges, strengthen the defenses for the Clach na Firinn," Archie said, summarizing quickly.

"No big deal," I muttered.

"It is a big deal." Archie's tone was serious, which immediately tied more knots in my stomach. "But nothing you can't handle, lass."

There was something about the calm assurance in his words that eased some of my tension, and I smiled weakly when Agnes gestured to the staff I held.

"Is this your weapon of choice?"

"I mean, I guess? It was that or the gardening trowel. But this was Gran's, and is well loved, so I figured maybe it would hold any extra power?" I shrugged, feeling a touch silly about talking about power passed down to a walking stick.

That being said, I'd just been having a conversation with a wee gnome in my greenhouse, so my barometer for what was weird was exceptionally skewed at the moment.

"It's perfect. Now, did you get a good explanation of what the Order is? Do you have any lingering questions before we start?" Hilda asked, and I traced the gravel path in front of the shed with the walking stick as I thought about it.

In some respects, this was all very new knowledge.

In others, it felt like the concept of magick was imprinted on my bones. I had no other way to explain it. It was as easy as accepting that I loved to dig in the dirt, I supposed. It wasn't all that much of a shock now that I understood that power could be hereditary. I think, if anything, it was the responsibility to the Order, and to my friends, that was making me nervous. Already overwhelmed, I was in the process of taking things off my plate because I was stretched so thin. Would I be able to handle what was required of me to be a helpful and functioning member of the Order?

"Not questions so much as concerns," I said. "I'm worried that I won't have a lot to give to the Order. Are there weekly meetings? Do I have daily duties to attend to?"

"Weekly meetings." Sophie pursed her lips. "I didn't think about organizing things to that level. We just end up having meetings when there's a crisis or something that needs attending to."

"A crisis? What would that look like?" Nerves made me gulp. I continued to trace the stick in the gravel, needing the movement to soothe me.

"Basically, what we just went through with Owen's friend who almost drowned. We needed an immediate response from Sophie, who, being the Knight, can push the Kelpies back the fastest. Lia would have been there with some sort of tea or medicine had she not been on a trip to Glasgow for kitchen supplies."

"And me? I was there, and I did nothing," I pointed out. I had been there, and had frozen, my first exposure to the Kelpies an earth-shattering one. How was anyone expected to respond quickly in front of these otherworldly creatures?

"You didn't have the knowledge or the tools to help. You did exactly what you were supposed to do. Not get in the way," Archie barked, picking up a basket and motioning us to follow him.

"And after this ritual?" I hurried to keep up with Archie, trusting him to give it to me straight.

“You’ll know what to do.” Archie passed me a serious look. “Don’t overthink it.”

Obviously, Archie didn’t really know me if he thought it was possible for me not to overthink things. Worry gnawed, and I subsided into silence as we crunched along the path, veering from the gravel to stomp across the soft bank that ran along the burn that cut through the property. Birds fluttered about, stopping for a drink, and the sunlight shimmered across the surface of the stream. Three crows took flight, diving dangerously close to Sophie, but she just wagged a finger up at them.

“I’ll be with you gentlemen later. Go see Lia. She’s taking deliveries today, and I bet she’ll have snacks for you.”

At her words, the birds veered off and flew back toward the castle. My eyes widened. Could Sophie talk to animals? Seeming to hear my unspoken question, Sophie glanced at me with a grin.

“I trained them to come to me. They bring me gifts now.”

“Do you understand them? Like can you talk to them?”

“Not in the magickal sense, no. This was plain old bribery.”

“What kind of gifts do they bring you?”

“Mmm, all sorts of stuff. Coins. Marbles. Beads. Anything flashy or interesting they can find really.”

Archie drew to a stop by a low stone wall, where he placed his basket, and pulled out a bundle of what looked to be sage. The clouds shifted, and sunlight speared us, enveloping us in a soft glow.

“Now, lass. You’ll repeat after me. We’ll do this at the four cardinal directions on the property. Once finished, you’ll be initiated into the Order, and then we wait to see how your magick manifests. As a garden witch, your power may focus in the areas of nurturing, growing, healing, and providing. To pass your challenges, you’ll need to demonstrate, unequivocally, your ability to shine in one or more of these skill sets.”

I shifted on my feet at his words, unease making me antsy. Archie lifted what I saw now to be a bunch of dried thistle and lit it. Agnes, Sophie, and Hilda ranged next to me, silent.

“Repeat after me,” Archie said. “I, Shona Scott, the third member in the Order of the Caledonia, announce my arrival.”

I dutifully repeated what he said, pausing as a strange hum began to vibrate inside of me. “I accept the responsibility of protecting the Clach na Firinn and promise to restore the Order to its fullness. In doing so, I show myself worthy of the magick of Clach na Firinn.”

I repeated the words, the hum growing stronger in my core.

“It is with these words I establish the Order of Caledonia as the first line of protection for the Clach na Firinn and alert the Kelpies to my arrival. I accept the power bestowed upon me.”

When I finished speaking, the hum had reached a dull roar inside of me, and I physically felt myself shaking as energy coursed through me. Unable to speak, I followed Archie silently as we continued to the next spot. Finally, unable to contain myself anymore, I grabbed Archie’s arm.

“What if you already have magick?” I rushed out, giving voice to the worry that continued to niggle at me. At that, a whisper of a smile crossed Archie’s face.

“Nae bother, lass. You’ll just become more powerful.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



SHONA

I felt lovely and loose inside, like I'd had a few drinks, but instead of alcohol buzzing through my veins, it was magick, apparently. I still couldn't believe that *I*, little garden hermit Shona, was a garden witch.

A freaking witch.

Like ... where does one even start with something like this?

After the ritual was complete, we spent an hour in MacAlpine Castle's gorgeous library, where I learned more about the history of the Order of Caledonia and how the Stone of Truth had called upon the people of Loren Brae to protect it. It was an honor, I was told, and I couldn't help but agree, even though fear of the Kelpies lingered deep inside of me. At one point, Lia had popped in to say hello, bringing with her a tin of cinnamon chocolate chip cookies for me to take home, and she'd suggested that I dig through Gran's stuff to see if I could unearth anything now that I knew more about my lineage.

It wasn't a bad idea, and with the knowing look that Agnes had given me, surely remembering how cluttered my cottage was, it wasn't unlikely that I'd missed a box or two of Gran's stuff. Deciding to dig through the storage at the greenhouse first, I wandered through my gardens, strands of twinkle lights affixed to the fencing illuminating my path, and a soft mist of rain dampening my cheeks. These were my favorite type of

evenings, with a hint of chill in the air, and the promise of more rain on the horizon.

“Get in line, lads, get in line. She’s coming!” A gruff voice pulled me up short, and I stopped in my tracks. Turning, I scanned my presumably empty gardens, and tried to place where the voice had come from. I shivered, wrapping my arms around my body, and waited, hoping for another clue. “There you go. All in formation now. And ... go.”

A soft shuffling sound, interspersed with odd chirping noises, had me rounding the corner of the greenhouse. I gasped.

“One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. That’s right, lads. Just like I showed ye.”

The gnome stood in front of a line of hedgehogs, which were currently marching in formation. As a gardener, I was delighted by the presence of hedgies among my plants, as they were known to eat unwanted pests, and I didn’t mind them having a wee dig about in the dirt. But to see so many of them, synchronized in their movements, gave me serious pause.

“Um,” I stuttered, my hand at my heart, “just what, exactly, is going on here?”

“Damn it, Eugene. Keep up the pace.” The gnome snapped his fingers and growled at a hedgehog that was moving a touch slower in the back of the formation.

“Be nice to Eugene,” I said immediately, feeling bad for the wee beastie. *He was doing his best, wasn’t he?* Wait, was I sympathizing with a hedgehog? What the hell was happening?

“He needs to keep up.”

“Keep up for what? Wait. Stop, stop, stop.” I waved my hands in the air as the front row of hedgehogs ground to a stop and the others ran into them, tumbling over each other like bowling pins being knocked down. Eugene stayed on his feet, wisely having taken up the rear. “What is this?”

“Your hedgehog army, of course.” The gnome sniffed, crossing his arms over his chest, and shook his head in disgust

as the hedgies extracted themselves from the pile and shook their wee round bodies.

“My ... what? My hedgehog army?” My voice rose on a high note, and I was dangerously close to laughing, but the stern expression on the gnome’s face prevented me from doing so. “And why is it that I’ll be needing an army of hedgies?”

“You’ve accepted your power. This is part of it.” *He knows? Already?*

“Is it though?” I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes at the gnome. “Because I can’t recall a single word being mentioned about a hedgehog army in all of the information I was given today.”

“Maybe I took creative license.” The gnome shrugged.

“Creative ...” I trailed off, shaking my head. “Let’s back up just a moment. First of all, do you have a name? Or should I just call you Grumpy?”

The gnome shifted, pulling his shoulders back, and scoured me with a look that would be terrifying if he wasn’t the size of a kitten.

“The name is Gnorman. The G’s silent.”

I paused, mentally working out the spelling.

“Gah-Norman?” I smirked. “Gnorman the Gnome?”

“The G’s silent, lass. You know, they never mentioned that my garden witch would be lacking intelligence.”

My eyebrows rose to my hairline. Sassy little shite, wasn’t he?

“*Your* garden witch?” I said in disbelief.

“Yes, *my* garden witch.” Gnorman parroted my tone, tilting his head to match my stance. Oh, boy, this wee lad was in for it if he kept poking at me. I briefly imagined punting Gnorman over the fence.

“Wouldn’t it be the other way around? Doesn’t the witch have a familiar? That would make you my gnome, if I’m correct.”

“It’s open to interpretation,” Gnorman assured me.

Headlights sliced through the darkness and Gnorman hissed.

“For fern’s sake. He’s home. Disperse. Disperse!” Gnorman ordered.

The hedgies turned in all different directions at once, running into each other and toppling over, their little legs waving in the air.

“Damn it, *move*. Go on, lads,” Gnorman hissed, craning his head to look for the car.

Crouching, I righted a few of the hedgies that were having a more difficult time of it and tapped wee Eugene on the forehead. He grinned up at me, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, and I beamed. Gnorman may be a jerk, but his hedgehog army was endearing.

“Don’t let him badger you,” I warned Eugene. His eyes widened a bit, and he looked hurriedly around. I realized I had scared him. “No, no, no. There’s no badger here. I’m just saying don’t let the gnome tell you what to do.”

Eugene froze as the car door slammed, and footsteps crunched in the gravel.

“What are you doing?” Owen asked at my back, and Eugene took flight, his wee legs scurrying as fast as they could across the grass. “Holy ... what *is* that?”

“Uh ...” I straightened to see Gnorman in his resting gnome face and realized that Owen was staring after Eugene. “Oh, the hedgie?”

“A hedgehog?” Owen’s voice lifted in excitement, and I caught myself staring at his handsome face.

“Yes? Don’t you have hedgies at home?”

“Nope. Maybe. But I’ve never seen one.”

“Seriously?” I turned to see Eugene tumble under a bush, vanishing from sight. “They’re quite common here. Or used to be at least.”

“I’ve only seen them online. Wearing those cute little hats, you know?”

I squinted at Owen in the faint light and shook my head.

“No, Owen. I don’t know. Hats?” I snuck a glance to Gnorman, who had rearranged his face into a snarl.

“Yeah, like cowboy hats. Or little outfits? Then they smile at you all cute?”

“I’ve yet to see a hedgie in a hat, but I’ll be sure to report if I do.” Though, based on what Gnorman seemed to have planned, I wouldn’t be surprised if army uniforms were next in line. I should probably move Owen away from him before he gave the gnome any ideas.

“Hey, there’s the gnome again. How many of these guys do you have? The other one was in a different position, wasn’t he?” Owen crouched to pick up Gnorman, and I grabbed his bicep to stop him.

His very hard bicep that is. My palm tingled where I touched him, and I stared at his arm, fascinated with the way the muscle flexed under the flannel shirt he wore.

“He doesn’t like to be picked up,” I explained when Owen glanced at my hand and then up at me, his mouth quirking in a surprised grin.

“A fussy gnome, is he?”

Oh, I bet Gnorman would just love being called fussy. Amused that the gnome was forced into staying silent, I dropped my hand from Owen’s arm and rocked back on my heels, determined to enjoy this moment.

“Very. And quite delicate too. He breaks very easily.”

“Maybe not the best for a garden ornament then,” Owen said, straightening. “Does he have a name?”

“Of course. Gnorman. With a silent G.”

“No way.” Owen laughed. “What’s up, G?”

Oh, yes, I was deeply enjoying this. While Owen likely wouldn’t notice, I could just see the gnome’s eyes narrowing

to slits and his cheeks pinkening with rage. I made a note to call Gnorman “G” whenever possible.

Wow, who *was* I? I’d gone from questioning my magick to plotting ways to anger my cantankerous gnome. *I guess one had to find their fun where they could.*

“Join me for a glass of wine?” Owen asked and I blinked at him, pulling my thoughts away from the glaring gnome.

“Wine?” I repeated and could just make out a small snicker from Gnorman. I inched my foot closer, threatening to nudge him over on his bum.

“You know ... a drink made from grapes. A libation? Often used to relax or paired with a perfect pasta dish?” Owen grinned. It was the grin that did me in. He had one dimple, on the left-hand side of his face, that turned his smile lopsided and endearing. Until I looked in his eyes, that is. There, I could sense a restrained heat, simmering just under the surface, that likely fueled the energy that seemed to crackle around him as he moved through the world. It was that same energy that had drawn all eyes to him when he’d crossed the banquet hall to deal with Kennedy at the wedding. I’d like to say I was immune to it, but I’d be lying.

“Cute,” I said. “Does insulting your dates lull them into complacency so they accept your invitations?”

“Oh, so this is a date?” Owen slid an arm through mine and steered me toward his cottage before I could even agree to joining him. I should be annoyed with the way he took control, but a small part of me thrilled to his touch. Glancing over my shoulder, I caught Gnorman glaring after us, his hands now on his hips, and I motioned with my chin for him to move. Instead, he gave me a two-fingered salute, going British this time with his insult, and rumbled off into the bushes after his army. I could not believe that of all the familiars that I could have gotten, I was given a gnome that had the attitude of an old man furious with kids playing on his lawn.

“What? No.” I pulled my attention back to Owen, stumbling as my foot caught on a rock in the path. Owen

steadied me, and I grimaced, annoyed with myself. There was something about this man that always had me off kilter.

“It could be a date, if you wanted it to be.”

“I’m your landlord, Owen. It wouldn’t be prudent.” God, did I sound like a buttoned-up prissy or what? I flashed back to the leggy blonde openly flirting with Owen at the wedding. *She* was likely a fun time.

Unlike down-in-the-dirt Shona, who spent more time talking to her plants than humans. Well, now there was also the gnome and his hedgie army. Yup, I was the real life of a party. I pressed my lips together, annoyed with where my thoughts had gone. I didn’t like to get down on myself in such a manner, but sometimes when I was faced with someone who contrasted so sharply with my very existence, it was easier to shine a light on my flaws than to just accept our differences. Maybe not the best habit of mine, but hey, I was only human.

And a garden witch.

That thought sent a little zing of pleasure through me, and I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin, and tossed my hair over my shoulder. That’s right. I had power now. No need for self-belittling monologues in my head. No, ma’am. I was better than that now.

“All done?”

I blinked up at Owen, realizing that we’d come to a stop in front of the cottage and that I was quietly muttering to myself while I worked through my thoughts. I jolted, heat flushing my cheeks, and took a deep breath.

“Apologies. I promise I’m not batty. Just a bit scattered lately.”

“Come in. Tell me all about it.” Owen unlocked his cottage, and I waited while he held the door for me. It was an interesting feeling, walking into a space that I owned, but technically was occupied by another. It felt like I was intruding. Happy to see he was a tidy sort, not that I could remotely make any comments about neatness, I hovered by the doorway, uncertain what to do.

“It’s a nice enough night if the rain holds off. Shall we sit by the fire pit?”

“Perfect, I’ll go get it started,” I turned to go, basically ready to run, and caught my elbow on the door handle. A sharp pain knifed up my arm, and I hopped up and down, cupping my elbow with my hand. “Damn it.”

“Are you okay?” Owen said, coming to my side, increasing my nervous energy.

“Just the funny bone. I’m just going to ... fire ... outside.” I stumbled out of the door, holding my numb arm, deeply annoyed with myself. Even for me, this was a bit much. I’d have to walk around wrapped in cotton wool if this was the effect Owen had on me. Grumbling, I hurried to the stone patio behind the cottage. Twinkle lights hung between the cottage and the fence, the soft light highlighting two low-slung chairs, a generous sized fire pit, and a covered wood rack. The rainy mist had disappeared, the sky clearing of clouds, and a few stars shimmered overhead. Lifting the cover on the firewood rack, I pulled out the box with matches, and grabbed several small bundles of kindling. Setting the kindling in the pit, I hummed to myself to soothe my nerves while I worked.

“You need to tell him the G is silent.”

“Damn it!” I hissed, dropping a piece of firewood, just missing my toe. Turning, I glared at where Gnorman stood in the hedges that lined the fence. “You’re moving into creepy territory, G.”

“I don’t see what the problem is here. Isn’t being creepy part of a gnome’s job?” Gnorman crossed his arms over his chest, his tattoos standing out on his bare arms, and I rolled my eyes.

“You can’t let Owen see you.”

“See what?” Owen asked and I froze, mentally berating myself for talking to the gnome when I knew Owen was coming out.

“Just continuing to convince you that I’m normal by constantly talking to myself.” I blew out a breath as I turned,

wood in my arms. “Sorry. It’s a bad habit. I’m used to being by myself, and I talk to my plants constantly.”

“Is that the same gnome?” Owen followed my gaze to where Gnorman sat in resting gnome mode.

“Of course not,” I scoffed. Walking to the fire pit, I dropped the wood on the pavers and crouched. “The same model, though.”

“Big sale at the garden store?”

“Something like that.” I struck a match, bringing flame to the kindling, and watched as it licked up the wood. Smoke trailed from the small tent of sticks I’d built, and I inhaled lightly, happiness filling me. There was nothing quite like the scent of fire on a crisp autumn evening.

Once I’d had the fire properly sorted, I shot Gnorman one more glare while Owen couldn’t see my face, and then joined him. Taking a seat, I accepted the glass of wine he offered me and clinked my glass ... wait, no, not glass. I narrowed my eyes at the plastic juice cups he’d filled with wine.

“I thought, given your propensity for running into things, that plastic would be the smarter choice.”

Annoying. But he wasn’t wrong.

“Slàinte,” I said, instead, and took a long sip of my wine before settling back in my chair and watching the flames dance toward the sky.

“So, Shona.”

“So, Owen.” I couldn’t help but grin at his tone. He smiled back, the fire flickering in the reflection of his eyes, and I caught my breath, realizing just how comfortable I felt sitting here in this moment with him. With how busy I’d been over the last several years, not to mention grieving my gran, it felt like forever since I’d done this. Simply enjoyed a quiet, blissful moment with a handsome man. Maybe the time Owen was here would be good for me.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s going on in this town?”

Or not.

CHAPTER NINE



OWEN

“The gnomes? I promise you that’s just a me thing, not a town thing,” Shona said, brandishing her cup in the air as she spoke. Firelight cast a rosy glow over her face, making her perfect doll lips look kissable and soft. “Did you not like the Tippy Thistle then?”

“The pub? No, it was fine. Great, even. People were friendly enough, food was good.”

And nobody had given me a direct answer to any of my questions.

“It’s a grand spot, isn’t it? Steeped in history, and Graham’s done his best to keep the tradition going. He’s made a good run of it, though we weren’t certain he’d last. Turns out he’s perfectly suited for the job. Flirtatious, a good listener, and a hard worker. It suits him.”

The way Shona spoke of the handsome bartender, who I’d dearly love to cast in a movie, grated at me.

“Old boyfriend of yours?” I guessed, distracted from my line of questioning.

“What?” Shona started, her wine slopping in her cup, and then threw her head back and laughed. The sound took my breath away.

I wanted to laugh with her like that.

In bed, preferably, after a particularly healthy round of naughty play.

“He’s not one of your exes then? I’m sure you’ve got loads of them. A beautiful woman like yourself.” I couldn’t help myself, my need to charm was as built in as my need to seek the truth.

Shona tilted her head at me, a considering look in her eyes.

“I can’t decide whether to be flattered or insulted. Either you’re insinuating that I’m quite a catch and everyone wants to be with me, or you’re suggesting that I’m loose with my morals and scatter my past lovers behind me like a trail of discarded sweetie wrappers after I’ve eaten my fill.”

I winced.

“Um, neither was my intention. Let me throttle back a second and circle around to the start. Basically, yes, I’m asking if you dated Graham. Because he is extremely handsome and charismatic and because you are such a beautiful woman, I figured you two would be a good match. There, is that better?”

Shona’s mouth dropped open slightly before she shook her head slowly.

“God, no, I’ve never dated Graham. He’s a complicated one, and I have no interest in dipping my toe in that pond.”

“What kind of ponds do you like to swim in then?”
American-made ponds with trust issues?

“None as of late,” Shona admitted, somewhat sidestepping my question. “I’ve been much too busy. Part of why I’m so scatterbrained, I guess.”

“Tell me more,” I said, leaning forward. I couldn’t stop myself. A damsel in distress called to the deep-rooted need in me to help. *Thank you, Mother.*

“Have you ever run your own business, Owen?” The way Shona said it suggested that she thought I hadn’t, and I pushed my shoulders back.

“Actually, I have. Not all of my films are studio produced. With investors, I need to manage everything from the budget

down to the script.” Shona waited for more, but I gestured for her to continue. This was about her, not me.

“What kind of movies do you make?” I applauded Shona’s attempt to change the subject, but then I smiled.

“Tell me about your business.”

“Well, I have three of them, actually. Two now, I guess.” Shona shrugged one shoulder and tucked a silky strand of hair behind her ear. It looked as soft as spun gold thread, and I wanted to touch it to see if it was as smooth as it looked.

“Wedding flowers, the guesthouse, and ...”—I nodded toward the gardens—“produce I’m guessing?”

“Correct. Though I’m certain I’m done with weddings. I don’t know.” Shona shrugged again, twining that strand of hair around her finger and tugging. That single movement shot a bolt of lust straight to my core as I imagined diving my hands into her hair and tugging. Hard. Pulling that doll-mouth to mine and kissing her, back pressed against the stone wall of the cottage, while the fire crackled behind us.

“From what I could tell, you did a great job with the flowers. Don’t want to deal with brides anymore?” I shifted my thoughts away from devouring Shona’s mouth and took a sip of my wine, focusing on the notes instead of on Shona’s delectable lips.

“Partly. I guess it’s the administrative aspect of it. I love putting the flowers together. But that’s *all* I want to do. I don’t enjoy the hundreds of emails back and forth to arrive at a final idea, which, inevitably is white. Which is fine. *Really*. It’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with white flowers.” Shona winced, perhaps remembering that Kennedy’s flowers had been white, and my mouth went dry when she shifted, and the collar of her sweater slipped to reveal a brilliant red bra strap. Once again, the sharp contrast between bright underwear and worn jeans and a holey sweater piqued my interest. I had to wonder if I pulled that loose thread on her sweater, would she unravel under my touch?

This was not good, these thoughts of mine. I was well aware of that. Yet, I couldn't help where my mind went. Shona was stunning in the way of women who had no idea the effect they had on others. I found her unmanicured appearance refreshing, and deeply intoxicating. It was so different from the perfectly coiffed women who swam in my proverbial pond, that I found myself wanting to grab on to Shona like a lifeline, just to remember what was real in this world.

It was what I craved, after all. The very thing that drove my work, the search for the truth, was also what I sought in a woman. Not that I minded all that much if a woman wore makeup or did herself up, it wasn't that. Women should make themselves feel good in whatever manner they chose. It was more that between the influencer culture that dominated Hollywood, plus thinly veiled attempts to use my movie connections for personal gain, I'd become a touch averse to the overly plasticized version of women that hit on me. Again, to each their own. If they felt good, that was all well and fine. But for once, it was nice to be wildly attracted to a woman who seemed to hold a faint disdain for me. Or at the very least, wasn't trying too hard to impress me.

"What kind of flowers do *you* like?" I asked, intrigued.

"I'm kind of a contradiction there," Shona admitted. "I love unruly flowers, messy bunches of mismatched flowers where their contrast creates perfection. But if I had to choose ..." A look of embarrassment crossed Shona's face.

"Go on," I prodded her, amused that she would be embarrassed over a flower.

"A rose," Shona sighed, shaking her head, a self-deprecating smile on her face. "I know. I knooooow."

"What's wrong with a rose?" I asked as Shona threw her hands up in the air. The wind picked up a bit, pushing the flames of the fire higher, and I leaned over to stoke the wood.

"It's just ... I guess it's a boring flower. I'm a gardener. I should pick something exotic like a bird-of-paradise. But no. My heart belongs to roses."

“I like roses. Particularly when in full bloom. It’s like a woman lifting her skirt.”

“Owen!” Shona threw her head back and laughed, and I made a note to try and drag more laughs from her when I could. When she laughed like that, with her head thrown back, she revealed the lovely expanse of her pretty neck. I wanted to kiss her just there and see if she shivered under my touch.

“What? Am I wrong?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

“No, I suppose not.” Shona smiled into her glass of wine. “Now I’ll have to call my roses hussies every time they bloom.”

“I’m sure they’ll love that.”

“Depends. They can be moody. The red ones will likely love it.” Shona smiled when I shot her an incredulous look. “Oh yes, they all have their personalities. Which is another thing I love about them. You can’t just treat each rose bush the same. You have to tend to them differently, depending on their needs.”

“And you like moody, demanding flowers?”

“Something like that,” Shona said, finishing her wine. “I just love the allure of a rose opening to bloom. The softness of their petals hides the strength of their stems. Their thorns remind you to treat them with care, that the beauty they choose to give you comes at a price and must be protected.”

Would it be weird to buy a gardener flowers? Because right now, I wanted to go out and buy her dozens of roses.

“I think that’s a perfect explanation, and you certainly don’t have to justify why you love a flower. In fact, you can love all the flowers equally. I won’t tell. Can I fill you up?”

Shona blinked at me, her mouth rounding into a perfect O, and then a guilty look flashed across her face when I brandished the wine bottle I’d brought out with me. It took everything in my power not to laugh when I realized where her thoughts had gone.

Ahhh, that was interesting. Not entirely unaffected by me.

The thought crossed my mind, briefly, that the more I seduced her, the more likely she'd be to reveal the secrets of Loren Brae. But the minute I thought it, my stomach twisted, and distaste filled my mouth. Even though I was a bulldog about discovering the truth, I didn't like to do so through despicable means. I'd rather create honest connections than weasel a story out of an unwitting participant in my research. *And didn't that make me just like the women who hit on me?*

Which meant I should probably be clear with Shona about what my intentions were in Loren Brae. It annoyed me, but if I sought the truth, I had to model it myself, didn't I?

"Thanks," Shona said, passing me her cup and I filled it. "Anyways, I'm pretty convinced I'm stopping the wedding business."

"What's holding you up on making that choice?" I asked, standing and grabbing more wood to toss on the fire. Sparks drifted into the air, and the flames began to devour the new offerings.

"Money," Shona admitted. "The wedding business is a big one for a reason. It's scary to turn my back on a viable source of income because I don't want to answer a few emails."

"Are the gardens doing well otherwise?" I asked as I sat and steepled my fingers, thinking through Shona's problem.

"They are. Too much, so. I've hired a few assistants who can work when I'm selling at markets or run deliveries for me. They've been super helpful during wedding season as well. I could see more growth in that area if I built another greenhouse. I'd have to plan for the cost of a build, as well as justify the expense by expanding with new accounts. I'm nervous about it," Shona admitted.

"What happens if you don't grow? Can you afford to live?"

"I can, yes. If I'm careful with my money. My needs are simple. I just ... I never really saw myself running my own business. I didn't go to university—"

“Really?” I cut in, surprised. In my world, it was virtually unheard of not to attend college, even if I’d taken the less traditional route by attending film school. It was never a question of *if* someone wanted to go to school, it was where.

“Aye, really.” Shona’s face closed up, and I realized that I might have offended her. “Not all of us are meant for school, something I learned when I was growing up and barely able to read.”

“You can’t read?” Again, another look from Shona, and I realized I was bungling this. I held up my hand. “No judgment, Shona. I’m just trying to get to know you. I’m well aware that we all learn in different ways. I directed an entire documentary film on an indigenous tribe that teaches only through spoken word and stories, with very few written documents being passed between generations. I’m interested in your past and what makes you who you are, but please know I’m not judging.”

“Thank you,” Shona said, tipping her glass at me in a small salute, the tension around her eyes easing. “No, I can read. It’s just not how I learn, I guess? I prefer watching movies, listening to audio books, music, that kind of thing. Or physical learning. Digging in the dirt, putting bundles of flowers together, coaxing tomatoes from finicky plants. Those are where my strengths lie. Reading and responding to emails is an excruciating task for me, which is why I’m so eager to offload it.”

“So, you’re a hands-on and auditory learner. That makes sense.” I nodded and held my hands up as though to frame a shot of the fire. “It’s how I see things in my mind as well. Concepts played out as visual stories. I do like to read, but I’m really a movie buff. It’s in my blood. It’s what drew me to making films.”

“I’m certain I’ll have a million questions about your career, but I’ll start with this one. Favorite movie?” Shona asked me and I shook my head, a smile playing at my lips.

“That’s impossible. I have too many. I’m a mood watcher. Sometimes I want scary and sometimes I want to be swept

away on passion.”

“I *like* romcoms,” Shona admitted.

“My friend Ryan just got signed for one. Seems to be a popular thing at the moment.”

“And I, for one, am here for it. I want fun and lightness in my world,” Shona said, then her face sobered. “Is Ryan the friend that just got hurt?”

“He is. It’s also why I’m here.” I hated to shift the lightness of the moment, suspecting she would close up on me once I told her I was investigating Loren Brae. Even if there was nothing going on in this town, I’d discovered over the years that most people didn’t like their spaces to be the subject of an investigation. Both figuratively and literally. Loren Brae was Shona’s world, and I was about to peel back the outer layers and peek inside at the inner workings.

“To take care of him?” Shona asked.

“No, his parents came today and collected him.” I stretched my legs out toward the fire, taking a deep breath, and then looked up at Shona. “He asked me to investigate here. Perhaps to make a film, or just to dig deeper. He told me that something ... chased him in the water that day. Something perhaps unexplainable. I’m here to uncover what that is.”

Shona’s mouth rounded in that perfect O again. For a second, I saw a flash of recognition in her eyes before she threw her head back and laughed.

It wasn’t the same laugh as before. The tone of it had changed.

“Och, you Americans. Always falling for the enchantment of Scotland. It’s not uncommon you know. We have so many myths and legends, that it’s quite fun to believe in the magick of it all, isn’t it? Hell, Loch Ness makes a killing in tourist dollars each year for those hoping to see Nessie.” Shona shook her head and stood, rolling out her shoulders and stretching. “Thanks for the nightcap, Owen. That’s me off to bed though. It’s been a long day, and I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Quick to leave, I noted, and rose as well.

“I’m sure that’s probably what it is,” I agreed, reluctant to lose the thread of my questioning. “Just another fake Nessie sighting.”

“Likely so,” Shona agreed, moving so quickly, she caught her foot on the leg of her chair. I leaped forward and wrapped my arms around her waist, catching her before she fell into the fire, and pulled her a few steps backward. Her body plastered against my chest, and she wore a shocked expression. I wanted to make a joke, to ease her embarrassment over being clumsy, but instead I fixated on that perfectly kissable mouth. What would happen if I leaned in, for just a taste? Would she spit at me and kick me off her property? Or would she warm to my touch, welcoming me in? Desire raged through me, and despite the sense I got that she was hiding something from me, I couldn’t resist.

Just one taste.

One small kiss.

A sample, if you will, to ease the knot of desire that had kept me on edge all day.

Bending my head, I hovered my lips over Shona’s.

“Doesn’t the princess bestow a kiss on the man who rescues her?” I asked, my pulse kicking up as Shona softened in my arms.

“I do *not* need rescuing.” Shona’s breath puffed against my mouth, and I smiled, appreciating her annoyance with me.

“You would have fallen face first into the fire.”

“I would have caught myself in time.”

“Answer the question, Shona.”

“The princess can do whatever she wants,” Shona began, and shifted in my arms. Again, she didn’t make a move to pull away. “She doesn’t owe anyone anything. Isn’t it the nature of commonfolk to always take care of the princess?”

“If you are a follower of the monarchy, then yes, it would be a given that you save the princess.” I brought one hand up,

flicking my finger across the soft skin at her neck, and lifted her chin. “Answer the question.”

Time hung suspended while I watched Shona war with herself. She had a fascinating face, her moods flitting through her expressive blue eyes, and I mentally catalogued how I would film her if she was an actress.

“Fine, you may have a kiss,” Shona said, and I did not wait for her to change her mind, because I could already see her wanting to take the words back.

Her lips were soft beneath mine, as cushiony as they looked, and they parted under my gentle caress. I nipped lightly, angling her head slightly, and tasted the hint of wine that still lingered. Desire raced through me, licking up my body like the flames that devoured the wood behind me, and it took everything in my power not to hitch her up so that her legs wound around my waist, and I could press her back to the wall and kiss her like I wanted to.

A soft moan escaped Shona’s mouth, and she reached up, threading her fingers through my hair and pulling my head more tightly to hers. My control snapped. Running my hands down her body, I cupped her generous butt, enjoying the feel of her curves beneath my hands. Lifting her, I did what I’d just imagined, and walked her a few steps backward until I had her pressed against the stone wall of the cottage.

Shona squeaked in surprise, and I deepened the kiss, pressing myself against the soft spot of her legs, hunger for more consuming me.

She was everything. Hard and soft, pleasure and pain. A study in contrasts. I was dying to slip my hands under her worn sweater, to feel her skin heat under the silky underwear I knew she wore. I wanted to take her apart, piece by piece, until she quivered beneath my touch, spent and satiated.

Thunder boomed, and Shona broke the kiss, blinking up at me. Her lips had deepened to a rosy color, swollen with my kisses, and I bent my head for more.

“No, wait, I think that’s a storm.”

Lightning flashed overhead and the skies opened up.

“Shit, shit, shit.” I turned, ready to carry Shona into the cottage, but she dropped her legs and stepped back. Reluctantly, I released her.

“I have to ... my place.” Her chest heaved as the rain intensified. “Thanks, and all ...” Shona waved a hand in the air and disappeared around the cottage without another word. I grimaced, hating that was the end to our first kiss, and turned my face to the rain, hoping the wet would cool the lust that raged inside. When that didn’t help, I made sure the fire was out and returned to my cottage, leaving my sodden clothes in a pile at the door, berating myself for not going after her.

There was a line, however. Chasing a woman to her cottage was likely crossing into creepy mode—*especially when said woman didn’t invite you to go with her*—and I hadn’t known her long enough to know how she’d respond to that.

But damn it, that *kiss*.

It had woken something long dormant inside of me, and I felt like a randy teenager, desperate for anything to ease my urges. I took to the shower, soothing my desire the only way I knew how, and revisited Shona’s kiss over and over while I pleased myself, wondering if she too, did the same in her house.

If I’d reacted faster, I might have been able to invite her in.

Too soon, I told myself, as I toweled off and returned to the living room to start the inside fire. Shona was like a gift to be unwrapped, someone I’d have to take my time with.

Or not at all.

She’s your landlord, and you’re overstepping boundaries.

She hadn’t said no, had she?

I kept arguing with myself as I poured a glass of water and changed into a comfy pair of grey sweats. When my phone dinged with a text, I read it while standing up, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Sorry to run off like that. This princess melts in the rain.

My mouth quirked in a smile. Shona was as skittish as a newborn colt. But if she needed to hide behind that guise, no problem. While I hadn't lived on the ranch in Texas since I was a child, I'd still learned a thing or two about being around horses. Patience, kindness, and trust-building was the name of the game here.

Sweet dreams, Princess Shona.

**Rolling my eyes.*

I laughed, happy that she seemed cool about this.

I'm just your lowly peasant, here to serve.

Okay, that's enough out of you. I'm off to bed.

Night, princess.

Grrrrrrr.

CHAPTER TEN



SHONA

I'd like to say that I'd gotten a good night's sleep, but after the day I'd had yesterday, I'd been wired, like I'd had seventeen cups of coffee, and I didn't fall into a restless sleep until well into the wee hours of the morning.

I mean, let's be honest, as days went, it was a firecracker.

Becoming a part of a centuries-old magickal order? Discovering my familiar is a cranky gnome with a hedgehog army? All but melting into a puddle of lust over a man that's investigating the Kelpies? Yeah, I had a lot on my mind, to say the least.

But today was harvesting day, and I had to cull my plants and pack my bushels for the farmers market tomorrow. That, and I'd promised Agnes that I'd dig around in Gran's stuff to see if I could find anything magickal. I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking for, but Agnes had assured me I'd know if I found it.

Whatever *it* was.

I glanced at a photo of Gran and me that I kept in the kitchen while I waited for my coffee to brew. It had been taken when I was sixteen, my hair plaited down the side of my head, hers piled in a messy bun, and we were both laughing up at the camera as we knelt by a rose bush. I still had that rose bush, even though I didn't have Gran any longer. I paid careful attention to the plant, making sure she was well tended, and

she rewarded me with the prettiest flowers in the garden. I liked to think it was a bit of Gran's love coming through, and I swore the cut blooms lasted the longest of any.

“Well, Gran? Is that the truth of it then? You were magick, and now, so am I? Where would you have left something for me to discover?”

The garden shed was the first image that popped in my head, and my gut said to follow that instinct. It was where Gran had spent all her time, and subsequently, I also spent most of my time. Hence the state of my house. I sighed as I glanced over the piles of clutter, reminding myself that I would need to tidy before the cleaners came through, and poured my coffee in a thermos and grabbed a scone to go. I wasn't much of a breakfast person, and I'd nibble at the scone through the morning until hunger pulled me away from my work and I remembered that, yes, I loved food, and then I'd devour a hearty lunch. More often than not, it was a chopped salad and some type of vegetable soup made from whatever I'd harvested that week, along with a thick crust of bread that I'd wheedled Catriona up at MacAlpine to bake for me. Lia had hired her on to bake mouth-watering scones, and in exchange for select herbs and produce, Catriona had also agreed to make a few extras for me each week. The woman was a genius baker, and I built my meals around whatever she offered up each week.

The sun was just making her appearance known, fighting desperately with the moody grey clouds that hovered at the horizon, and the wind that whistled down the hills that shrouded Loch Mirren held the promise of encroaching winter. A naturally early riser, I loved this time of morning when the world was at a standstill, only the birds awake to keep me company as I walked the rows of my garden. I stopped to check my squash, pleased to see that I had enough butternut and delicata to take to market tomorrow.

“Watch it, lass.”

I jumped, almost dropping my thermos on Gnorman, and he glared at me, hands on his hips.

“Och! Gnorman, you can’t just pop out of nowhere. Despite your big attitude, you’re quite small. I don’t want to step on you.”

“Small?” Gnorman flexed his arms, the tattoos on his biceps rippling. “I’ve never had any complaints.”

“Seriously? You sound like one of the guys I dated in Glasgow.” I couldn’t help but glance toward the cottage in the distance, where the curtains were still drawn closed, and picked up my pace. While I had told Owen that I talked to my plants, I didn’t need my muttering to a gnome statue be the first thing he hears the morning after we kissed. Gnorman trotted after me.

“Sounds like a good man. It’s a shame you couldn’t keep him.”

At that, I whirled, shaking my thermos at the wee gnome.

“Couldn’t keep him? I didn’t *want* him, you bloody eejit.”

“That’s what all the lasses who can’t keep a man say.” Gnorman shrugged, as though he had any clue about my dating history. Or did he? Had he been following me for far longer than I’d realized? The creep factor just went up.

“How long have you been following me? Were you with me in Glasgow?” I briefly pictured Gnorman jumping on a train, a hobo stick with a satchel over his shoulder. Narrowing my eyes at his leather vest and tattoos, I amended that picture to him on a wee motorcycle, his red pointy hat and long mustache streaming behind him. Damn it, but it was a cute image even if he was a deeply annoying gnome.

“Nae. You weren’t mine then.”

“What does that even mean?” I said, exasperated as we rounded the corner of the greenhouse to where the entrance to the attached garden shed was located. I pulled up short at the rows of hedgehogs waiting patiently in formation. Well, most of them were in formation. Eugene, once again in the back, seemed to have been distracted by a beetle.

“Go on then, show her,” Gnorman barked, and the hedgies stiffened, before fanning out in a V shaped formation and

racing into the garden in synchronized rows. Except for Eugene, that is. He still stalked the beetle at the edge of the garden, completely unaware that his brethren had departed. Gnorman sighed.

“For flowerpot’s sake. *Eugene!*”

Eugene jumped, his back hunching, and he turned slowly, his lopsided grin disappearing when he saw the other hedgehogs had left.

“Can’t you follow orders just once?” Gnorman continued, stalking closer to Eugene, and I frowned.

“That’s enough, G.”

“It’s Gnorman.” The gnome swung on me, distracted, while Eugene cowered awaiting Gnorman’s wrath. “And if he doesn’t learn, then I have to send him away. His life is better here. In this garden? With me? I can keep him safe. He *needs* to learn.”

My perception shifted a bit, as I realized that Gnorman wasn’t entirely being a little twit toward Eugene, but even so, I was feeling fiercely protective of Eugene. It reminded me of my days back in school when I couldn’t quite keep up with everyone else and my grades had suffered for it. Lifting my chin, I pointed at the hedgie.

“Can I pick him up?” I asked, and Eugene sidled closer, giving Gnorman a wide berth. I took that as an agreement from the wee hedgie, and bent, laying my hand flat on the ground. Eugene saw his out, and raced for it, tripping over his feet at the last moment and splaying into my palm.

A hedgie after my own heart.

Charmed, I picked him up and cradled him close, happy to see the smile back on his wee face. “You’re looking a little shoogly there, lad.”

“You can’t coddle him,” Gnorman said.

“We all learn differently, G. Screaming at him clearly isn’t doing much. I’m going to take Eugene inside with me, if he doesn’t mind?” The wee hedgie vibrated with excitement in

my hand, so I took that as agreement. I had no idea how to feed or care for a hedgehog, but if I left the door of the shed open a crack, surely he could waddle in and out of the greenhouse at his own will. For now, I was feeling the need to nurture the cutie, and he could keep me company while I had my coffee and dug through the closet in the shed.

Cradling Eugene in one hand while Gnorman grumbled behind me, I unlocked the door and flipped on the lights. Eugene turned, burrowing his face into my arm, and I remembered that hedgehogs were nocturnal animals.

“Do the lights bother you, buddy? I’ll find a good spot for you.”

Placing my thermos on the table, I crossed to the sink to fill a small bowl with water in case Eugene was thirsty. His head popped up, and he scented the air, and scrambled so fast that I almost dropped him on the floor. Instead, he landed on the counter and made a beeline for a small bowl of fresh cherry tomatoes I’d picked the day before.

Eugene skidded to a stop, and glanced to me, his eyes lit with excitement.

“Do you like tomatoes? Sure, go on then, have at it, lad.” It wasn’t like I was lacking in that department. Eugene needed no further prodding and launched himself face first into the bowl of tomatoes. Upending his wee body, he got his head stuck, and his back legs flailed in the air. His spikes rose, which I assumed meant he was uncomfortable, and I quickly placed my hand under where his limbs scrambled for purchase. Once he was steady, he inched backward, a perfectly plump tomato clutched in his wee paws.

“Is that the one? Perfect. Let’s bring it with us.” Taking the bowl of water, a few dishtowels, and Eugene, I opened the door to the large walk-in pantry closet and flipped on the light. It wasn’t as bright in here, and I looked around for a shadowy spot for Eugene to eat his snack in peace.

Unlike my house, the closet was fairly organized, mainly because I didn’t spend enough time in here to mess things up. Rustic wood shelving lined the stone walls, empty baskets

were stacked on a narrow table, and a tool bench held various gardening needs. Spying the shadowy corners under the table, I crouched and made a small bed with the towels, put the water bowl next to it, and then gently deposited Eugene. His little paws still clutched the tomato, and I appreciated that he hadn't eaten his snack while next to my shirt.

“Does that suit you, wee man?” I asked. Eugene made a small chittering noise, a sound caught between a snort and a grunt. He raced to the dark corner, surprisingly fast for what I'd seen from him, and tucked into his meal.

“Okay, that's sorted then.” Standing, I brushed my palms against my jeans, fetched my coffee, and took a few gulps of the life-affirming liquid while I studied the contents of the shelves. Airtight, glass jars held row upon row of seeds, and there were several worn wooden boxes stacked behind the jars. It all looked fairly normal to me, though I never gave this area much thought other than to come in for seeds or a tool on occasion.

A flash of red caught my eye, and I angled my head to see Gnorman sitting on top of a box, his legs dangling, and his arms crossed over his chest.

“How did you get up there?”

“You know, you're being very size-ist,” Gnorman said, and I squinted at him.

“Size-ist? Is that a thing?”

“Of course it is. Just because I'm short doesn't mean I'm not capable of the same things you are. In fact, more, because I stepped into my magick long before you did. You're just a wee bairn when it comes to magick. A fledgling, with fluff still under your wings. A bear cub barely able to—”

“I get it.” I held up my hand to stop his flow of words. “Yeah, yeah, lucky you. You know your magick. Cut me some slack. As a familiar, aren't you supposed to help me? Or does your job just include hurling insults all day long?”

“I can do both.” Gnorman winked at me and patted the top of the box. “I believe this is what you're looking for.”

“Is it? That’s easy enough.” I reached for the box, fully intending to grab it from the shelf while Gnorman was still sitting on it, giving him a wild ride, but he scrambled off with a huff of disgust.

“You’re becoming a real scunner, hen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said, absentmindedly, as I brushed the dust from the lid of the box and carried it over to the table. A snorting grunt sounded, and I peeked beneath the table to see Eugene grinning up at me, looking like a serial killer with blood red tomato dripping from his face. He sighed, contented, and spun himself into a ball and burrowed into the towels, having made a little nest for himself.

The box itself was made of walnut, polished and worn, with an intricate design scrawled across the top. Vines of leaves curled around the corners, and gnomes peeked from behind raucous blooms. It was stunning, and the longer I looked at it the more details I discovered. Like the small hedgie poking his nose out behind a strawberry. Frankly, I was surprised I’d missed something of this caliber sitting right in front of me.

“Has this been here all along?” I asked Gnorman, who was currently shimmying down the arm of the shelf like a fireman sliding down a pole. I could have helped him, but that would be me being size-ist, wouldn’t it? The gnome landed with a huff on the table, toppling over, before righting himself and brushing the dust from his leather vest. “Nice landing. I’d give it a six.”

“Better than you almost flying face-first into the fire last night.”

My cheeks pinkened. I’d forgotten the stupid gnome was there, which meant he’d also seen ...

“How long were you in the bushes?” I asked, bending close until I was almost nose to nose with Gnorman.

“Och, lass, if you’re fussed about me watching you try to swallow the man’s face like he was a chocolate sweetie, I left once I saw the way of things.”

“I was most certainly not trying to swallow—” I held up a finger in Gnorman’s wee face. “Enough out of you. That was not what was happening.”

I mean, it was a toss-up who had been devouring whom, if I was to be honest about it, and now my thoughts landed squarely back in the Owen camp, nerves twisting low in my stomach, as I wondered how to act around him today. *Everything well at the cottage? Is there anything you need?*

No, I definitely couldn’t let something happen between us again. Agnes had been very clear about keeping Owen in the dark about the Kelpies, and since I was a terrible liar, it was best that I steered clear of the man altogether. I had bigger things to focus on anyway, like trying to figure out what sort of challenges I needed to pass to be a full member of the Order of Caledonia.

Not daydreaming about a sexy American producer who kissed like he had the power to unlock every secret desire I had hidden away.

Shaking my head, as though I could somehow physically remove the thought of the toe-curling kiss from my mind, I unhooked the small wrought-iron latch that held the lid tightly closed. Easing it open, I blinked at the contents, my heart pounding in my chest.

Seeds.

Well, packets of seeds that is.

The packets were the most elaborate I’d ever seen, rendered in a beautiful deep purple canvas-like paper, with green velvet ribbons wound around each, and a red wax seal stamped to keep the flap closed. A small scroll of parchment paper was affixed to each, and I gingerly unrolled one, nerves kicking up.

THYME FOR GRIEF

It’s said time heals all wounds, though grief lingers the longest. Grow, dry, and bundle. Burn on the night of a new moon to ease grief’s clenches.

I UNFURLED another roll of paper, intrigued.

LAVENDER FOR LOVE

It's said that a calm mind and spirit is a safe haven for love. Grow, dry, and bundle. Burn on the night of a full moon to clear old energies to welcome in new.

“SHONA?”

I snapped the box closed as my assistant, Louise, popped her head in the closet. “Ah, there you are.”

“Good morning,” I said, turning to greet her even though all I wanted to do was keep reading through the magickal box of seeds. I had so many questions—like would they grow faster than regular seeds? Where had they come from? Had my gran put a spell on them? I knew, for a fact, that we had lavender growing in the garden and that the seeds were in a jar on the shelf. There had to be something that set these apart.

“Oh, who is the wee guy?” Louise, a perky teenager who was saving up money for uni, asked. Praying that Gnorman kept his resting gnome face on, I turned but realized she was crouching to look under the table at where Eugene slept with a soft rumbling sound of contentment.

“This is Eugene. We’re friends now.”

“Brilliant. I love hedgies.” Louise beamed at him, but made no move to disturb him, understanding that hedgehogs weren’t daytime animals. “Shall we crack on? Looks like loads to be harvested today.”

“Aye. The squash alone is already ready. We’ll be some of the first at the market.”

“The butternut?” Louise asked, reaching for a pair of gardening gloves on the shelf.

“And the delicata. I need to put some aside for myself.” I loved nothing more than slicing up a delicata squash into little C shapes, brushing them with olive oil and salt, and baking them with the rind on. They came out crisp and were a delicious snack that I munched on through most of the autumn.

“Don’t worry, I’ll sort you out.” Louise grabbed a stack of the empty baskets.

“I’ll be out shortly.”

“Nae bother. I’m a bit early as it is. It was such a nice morning that it was hard to stay home.”

Louise, in perverse nature, didn’t like to sleep in like other teenagers her age. She hummed a light tune and hoisting the baskets at her hip, wandered out to the gardens. Once she was out of sight, I went into the greenhouse and grabbed a small herb pot, filling it with my special blend of soil. Returning to the closet, I carefully opened the envelope with the grief seeds, and gingerly dabbed a singular seed into the pot. Patting it down into the dirt, I watered it gently and then just stared at the soil for a moment, wondering if there was something else that I should do. It wasn’t like there had been any ritual attached to the seeds.

Closing my eyes, I gripped the pot in both hands, and took a few deep breaths, seeing if I could center myself. Once I did, that flow of energy I’d felt yesterday hummed through me, and I pulled at it with my mind, seeing if I could redirect my thoughts down through my hands into the seed.

“Grow, wee one. Your time has come to shine.” The palms of my hands warmed, and the pot trembled softly, and when I blinked my eyes open, I was rewarded with ... nothing. Just dirt. Laughing at myself, I shook my head and brought the pot into the greenhouse with the other seedlings, tying a small red ribbon around it to separate it from the others, and then donned my gloves.

My garden was not going to harvest itself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



OWEN

It had taken me most of the day and a solid hour of driving, but I'd managed to wrangle up a beautiful fall bouquet of roses. And as it turns out, the trip had been fruitful for more than one reason. The clerk at the flower shop had been particularly chatty, and when I'd inquired about any interesting stories coming out of Loren Brae, I'd been treated to a slew of local gossip.

Did I need to know that Sophie and Lachlan, the apparent owners of the castle, had been caught half-clothed in a field?

I did not.

But did I need to know that there was a dark rumor that clung to the little town, pushing tourists away, that might hold more truth than fiction?

I absolutely did.

Kelpies, I was told, are mythological water beasts that haunt the loch and terrorize anyone who draws too close to the banks of Loch Mirren. Though I was withholding judgment on whether I believed that Kelpies were actually real, the story tracked with what Ryan had related to me. Which meant, real or not, there *was* something in the waters of Loch Mirren that was scaring tourists away.

I just had to find out what it was.

My phone rang, and I sighed, clicking the speaker button as I followed the road that wound along the banks of Loch

Mirren. The loch itself was quite large, bigger than any lake we had back home, and it seemed to carry on for miles. Stunning green hills hugged the banks, jutting up into the air like proud protectors of the water below, and moody clouds did their best to hide the sunshine. God, the light here was killer. I could see why so many people returned from their travels inspired. Inspiration abounded, and even if I didn't do anything with this myth of the Kelpies, there were likely a hundred other stories I could come up with.

“Owen.”

“Mother.” I mimicked her serious tone as a few colorful leaves swirled in the wind across the road. I loved when the wind would gust hard enough to shake the trees, gold leaves fluttering, mother nature's glitter.

“When are you coming home?”

“Not for a while. I told you that.”

“That's too bad. I met the loveliest woman yesterday. She's a lawyer.”

“Mom, why were you speaking with lawyers?” My thoughts skidded away from the leaves and back to my mother's constant issues.

“Your father is contesting his alimony payments again.”

As he rightly should be seeing as how my mother had screamed her way through a slew of husbands since then. I filed that thought away in the “Things you don't say to your mother unless you want her to dissolve into hysterics” pile.

“I'm sorry to hear that. Anything that I can do?”

“Steal that tart of his away from him?”

Well, this was new. I paused, gulping for air, as I tried to steady my hands on the wheel. Surely my mother had not just asked me to pursue my own stepmother romantically. Even for her this was far-fetched.

“I have to go.” For the first time in years, I hung up on my mother midsentence. There was only so much a man could take, and since any response to a comment like that wouldn't

be in the neighborhood of polite or respectful, silence would have to do. Not that she was being particularly respectful of me with her shitty comments, but it had never been about me, had it? The focus had always been on Angela, and I was never to forget it for a moment.

When the phone immediately buzzed again, I ignored it, turning up the radio, and hummed along to a Flogging Molly song that I hadn't heard in a while. The Celtic lilt and heavy guitar perked my mood, and by the time I pulled into the gravel driveway at Shona's, I had largely put my mother's comment to rest.

Not entirely. But enough that I could compartmentalize it.

I suspect my therapist would say that was not healthy, but he'd likely applaud me for hanging up on her.

Movement caught my eye, and Shona exited her house with a laundry basket on her hip. Charmed, I slipped from the car, the bouquet of flowers at my side and wandered up the path to her patio where lines hung for laundry. There was something so provincial about hanging clothes out to dry. It just wasn't as common in the States. I watched as she put the basket down and reached up for her clothes and my mouth went dry. I'd been so fixated on her that I hadn't noticed the brightly colored underwear pinned to the clotheslines.

My imagination had a field day.

Putting the flowers down on a small table, I crossed the patio in two steps, and stopped Shona in midreach.

"What the ... *Owen*," Shona gasped, startled, as I whirled her to me. Before she could speak another word, I crushed her lips to mine, needing the taste of her kiss more than I needed my morning cup of coffee. The world stilled, all thoughts faded away, and all I could do was feel.

Her kiss lit me up in a way that I hadn't known that I'd needed. Had a part of me been dead inside for so long that I'd needed someone with some sort of proverbial special key to unlock my emotions again? Perhaps. My therapist would likely call it a defense mechanism based on a trauma response.

All I knew was that I'd felt numb toward women for quite a while now, but kissing Shona ignited me, and made me, for the first time in a long time, crave someone. I wanted to peel back her layers, to learn what made her tick, to figure out how her brain worked.

Much like the roses she so loved, I wanted her to bloom for me.

She pulled back, her chest heaving, and I let her go, knowing that I'd been rude with stealing a kiss without warning and hoped I hadn't angered her.

"I'd apologize, but that would imply I regretted kissing you and I do not," I said, brushing my thumb over her lip. Her eyebrows lifted, and she visibly swallowed.

"Um," Shona began, but then stalled, just looking up at me with those eyes that reminded me of the sea on a fresh spring morning.

"I got you something," I said. Retrieving the flowers, I presented them to her. Her eyes widened, and that luscious mouth of hers rounded in surprise.

"You bought *me* flowers?" Shona looked from the bouquet to me with surprise. She didn't reach for them, instead wringing her hands in front of her as though she was unsure what to do with flowers.

"You did mention that roses are your favorite flower."

"But I have roses. Out there." Shona gestured weakly to the gardens behind us. I didn't dare turn to look, knowing I'd fixate on an emerald-green bra that would look decadent against her skin, and kept my eyes trained on hers.

"And now you have roses. For *in* there." I nodded toward her cottage, hoping she'd invite me in while she put them in water.

"But why did you get me roses?" Shona persisted, confused. "Nobody's ever bought me flowers before."

"Now, that's just a crying shame, darlin'," I said, shaking my head sadly. "And may I apologize on behalf of all men?"

“I’m sure it’s just because I’m a gardener,” Shona continued, nibbling at her lower lip. “Why bring a gardener flowers when she already has them?”

“Because you clearly love them? And you’re a beautiful woman, so why shouldn’t you be surrounded by beautiful things?”

Shona narrowed those sea-soaked eyes at me and tapped a finger on her lips.

“I can’t decide if you’re purposely turning on the charm or if this is just who you are as a person.”

“Sorry.” I laughed, rocking back on my heels, the flowers still clenched in my hands. “If I had to wager, I’d say it’s a bit of both. I think charm is engrained in my DNA. I’ve got a womanizing father, and a mother who hooks and discards men like she’s a professional fisherman. I suppose I’ve learned from the best.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Because of that, I’m also not a liar.” I extended the flowers. “These roses are a close second to your beauty, Shona. And I’d very much like for you to have them.”

“I can hardly say no now, can I?” Still Shona wiggled that lower lip between her teeth, slowly driving me crazy, while she thought it over.

“Definitely not. It would be rude,” I agreed, and Shona sighed, the most reluctant gift receiver I’d ever met. She took them from my hands. “This is where you thank me and invite me in while you put them in water.”

“I’m not inviting you in.” A look of horror crossed Shona’s face as she glanced over her shoulder at her cottage. Even more intrigued, I sidled closer again.

“Why not? Got a dead body in there?”

“What? A dead ... no.” Shona shook her head empathetically. “Och, it’s just the place is a mess. I need to tidy it up, but no time.”

“I can help,” I offered, reaching up to unclip the bra that I’d had my eye on and watching as Shona’s cheeks flushed a delicious shade of pink. “I like this underwear you have, Shona. It’s like you’re a whole different woman underneath your gardening clothes. I wonder why that is?”

“Because dirt is impossible to get out of silk,” Shona grumbled, grabbing a pair of thong panties before I could snag them. “Seriously, Owen, I can do this.”

“Many hands make less work,” I intoned, nipping another bra, this one black and white polka dots, from the line.

“Owen,” Shona all but growled, her face flaming, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. Ducking between her outstretched arms that reached for another pair of panties, I dropped a cheerful kiss on her mulish pout.

Shona froze, sinking into the kiss for a moment, and then batted me away like I was a fly buzzing a picnic lunch.

“You can’t do that,” Shona said, looking around. I followed her gaze to the empty garden.

“Why not? Is someone watching us?”

“No, I mean yes.” Shona backtracked, hurrying her way through the rest of the laundry until her basket looked as lush and richly full of colors as a stall at an exotic bazaar. “I have staff on site today helping with the harvest. And I need to get back to it. I was just bringing these in in case the rain came on.”

“Here, I’ll help you.” I snagged the basket before she could stop me and grinned at her when she put her hands on her hips.

“Put that down.”

“My mama would be furious if I let a woman carry a heavy basket without offering to help.”

“It’s hardly heavy.” Shona crossed her arms over her chest, glancing between the basket at my hip and the flowers she’d put on the table.

“Look at those poor flowers. Crying out for water. Can’t you hear them? Help meeeeeee.” I pretended to cry, and Shona’s expression landed somewhere between annoyance and amusement.

“Damn it, Owen. My place is not—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re a trash goblin that would give Oscar the Grouch a run for his money.”

Shona blinked at me.

“He was a puppet, not a goblin.”

“He was a monster of sorts, and a cranky one. Much like you’re being.” My grin widened as her scowl deepened.

“You’d be tetchy too if someone was trying to barge into your messy house,” Shona grumbled.

“Tetchy? I like that word.” I rolled it around on my tongue, enjoying the feel of it. Not often did a word sound like it felt, but this one did. Just a touch abrasive on the lips.

“Shona? Hey, sorry—” A pretty young woman smiled and waved from the edge of the patio.

“Yes, Louise?” Shona said and Louise looked between me and Shona.

“Hi, I’m Owen,” I said, waving. “I’m staying at the cottage.”

“Oh! Right! You’re the new guest. An American, I hear. What’s New York like?” Louise marched forward, bouncing on her feet.

“Very crowded and dirty,” I said, laughing at her crestfallen expression. “But exciting if you like the rush of it all.”

“I bet. Probably *so* much more to do than here,” Louise said.

“I’m just finishing up and am on my way back to help,” Shona interjected.

“It’s all sorted. You’re good to go. About tomorrow though ...” Louise turned to Shona with an apologetic look on her face. “My boyfriend surprised me with tickets to a concert in Edinburgh. I know it puts you out, but do you mind?”

“Nae bother.” Shona waved it away. “Go have fun.”

“What’s tomorrow?” I asked Louise, knowing Shona would likely not tell me since she appeared to be in a tetchy mood.

“It’s the market. I usually help Shona on Saturdays because she has the busiest booth.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve done it before on my own,” Shona assured her.

“I’ll help,” I said, beaming when Louise clapped her hands in surprise.

“Would you? That would be grand.” Louise beamed.

“No, I don’t need—”

“Not a problem. It will help me get to know people in town.” Shona’s look was mutinous, and I was enjoying every moment of this. If I had to guess, I’d thrown her off by not only not ignoring our kiss from last night but following up with flowers and more kisses. She seemed a steadfast sort, who liked to know the lay of the land, and I was clearly setting her on her back foot.

I didn’t mind in the slightest. *You tend to get the truth when people are reactive rather than prepared.*

It never bothered me to shake up people’s expectations of me. Maybe it was my perverse nature, or maybe it was because I’d forged my own way by following my instincts instead of listening to what the world told me I was supposed to do with my life. Either way, I didn’t mind keeping people guessing.

Not that Shona had much to guess about if she actually looked at my actions.

I’d brought her flowers.

I'd kissed her.

I'd offered to help at the market.

One thing I'd learned about people a long time ago was that they followed what interested them. If a man was interested in a woman, *truly* interested and not playing stupid games that is, he'd make time for her. He'd show up. I couldn't even begin to count the number of times I'd counseled women friends of mine when they cried over a man they had thought was interested in them. If he was interested, he would show it, I would repeat over and over. One way or the other. Unless he was too shy, but that wasn't the case here.

Shy I was not.

Slightly smitten, I was.

And for some reason, that thought seemed to set Shona on edge. I wanted to dig deeper and discover why that was. Unless she already had a man in her life, which in that case I'd steer clear. I never liked to swim in other people's ponds. Call me a glutton for punishment but there was something about a woman playing a little hard to get that got my blood flowing. Not that I think Shona was playing necessarily, but her reticence had caught my interest. If she told me to stop or back off, I'd totally respect that. But she hadn't, so at the moment, I was entirely charmed by one Miss Shona Scott of tiny Loren Brae.

"Seriously, Owen. You're on holiday here. No need to help me, I've got it handled," Shona insisted.

A delivery van pulled into the driveway behind my car, offering a sharp beep.

"Hmm, what's Sam doing here? I didn't order anything." Shona started toward the van. Reaching out, I snagged her arm to stop her.

"That's for me."

"For you?" Shona looked up at me, a confused look on her face.

“I had some of my camera equipment overnighted,” I explained. A shadow crossed her face, and again, I had to wonder if she didn’t like my job for some reason. She’d had a similar look in her eyes the night before when I’d asked her about what was going on in Loren Brae. Leaning closer, I squeezed her arm lightly where I still held her.

“What time tomorrow, boss?”

“Seriously, Owen, I don’t need you to help.”

“She likes to pack up by half past seven,” Louise offered helpfully, and I turned to nod my thanks at the teenager.

“Enjoy your concert. I’ll see you in the morning.”

With that, I left Shona glaring after me and whistled my way to where the delivery driver unloaded a pelican-style protective box. It was a risk shipping my equipment, but I suspected I was going to need something more than my iPhone for documentation of whatever I hoped to uncover here.

It looked like I’d have some afternoons with my tripod and camera down by the “bonnie” banks of Loch Mirren ahead of me. Excitement warmed my blood, and that familiar tingle of anticipation made me want to get started now. But first, I had a date with my laptop and the comfortable lounge chair by the fire.

Step one was research. Always. It was time to learn about the Kelpies.

CHAPTER TWELVE



SHONA

I could have killed Louise.

Okay, that wasn't fair. Louise was awesome, and I'd miss her terribly when she went off to uni. And she deserved to have fun and go to concerts and live her life and not hide in the garden like the hermit I was slowly becoming.

I blinked blearily at the vase of flowers sitting on my now clean kitchen table.

Yes, that's correct. I'd cleaned.

I think it was the shock of potentially having company that had driven me into a whirlwind, even though I was dead on my feet after a long day of packing bushels. Yet once I'd come inside and put the stunning bouquet in a cheerful blue glass vase that had been my gran's, I'd looked around at all my clutter and sighed. *This* was a bouquet that deserved better than to be placed in the middle of a stack of notebooks and old receipts. At first, I'd moved it to the bedroom, which was somewhat less messy, but then I'd caught myself staring at it and wondered if I would be able to sleep what with thoughts of Owen clamoring for attention in my brain.

My God, but that man could kiss.

It shamed me, really, just how much I already *craved* his touch. It was like sensible thoughts left the building once his lips were on mine, and all I could do was feel, like I'd been plugged into a wall socket, desire taking the wheel. I had spent

a good portion of my evening imagining what it would be like to be with him, and pent-up lust had fueled my cleaning frenzy.

I wouldn't say that my cottage sparkled today, or was ready for a spread in *Architectural Digest*, but the surfaces were clean, order had been restored, and the worst of the dust had been tended to. I'd likely destroy all my hard work within a week, but I was proud of myself for tackling the worst of it. Usually, my mind was so fixated on one thing or another with work, that I drifted easily past any piles of clutter while I tried to work through whatever problem was plaguing me. The one great thing about living alone was that I didn't have to apologize to anyone for it.

If the gnome could claim people as being size-ist, could I call people clean-ist? How come people who managed to keep their homes neat and tidy were held in high regard while I was shamed for a cluttered home? I couldn't do *all* the things *all* the time, nor was I interested in trying. My gardens were gorgeous and hugely productive, weren't they? Why wasn't being a successful gardener and business owner enough for the world? I had to be a good housekeeper on top of it as well? Why was an untidy home viewed as some sort of moral failing?

When I realized I was standing in the kitchen staring at my coffee pot and arguing with myself, I shook my head to break my ruminations. Pouring myself a cup, I took it with me into the shower and took my time letting the heat of the pounding water ease some of the tension in my shoulders. By the time I'd finished up, I felt marginally more human, and went to get dressed for the day. Reaching for the same jumper I'd worn the day before, I paused.

Owen was going to be with me in my booth today. Shouldn't I try to look more presentable? The thought made me cross, and I went to grab the same jumper but spied a hole in the sleeve. My thoughts flashed back to Kennedy's splashy wedding, and annoyed with myself, I poked a finger through the hole. What would Owen care if I had a hole in my jumper? What did *I* care if Owen cared if I had a hole in a jumper? It

wasn't like I was a pauper. I just wasn't as fancy as Owen and his family. I bought serviceable clothes that lasted for a long time, and I'd had this jumper for ages now. Sighing, I went to my closet and dug around until I found a pretty fair isle jumper that I'd bought on a whim at an artists' market a few years ago in Inveraray. It was robin's egg blue, with a white and black triangular pattern across the chest and arms. I didn't wear it much, likely because I was worried about getting it dirty, but now I pulled it over my head. Automatically, I started to plait my hair, but then paused, looking in the small mirror hanging over my chest of drawers.

Growing up I'd always wished for long flowing locks of curly hair, but I'd been given stick straight hair that mostly refused to curl, even if I used an iron. I'd been told that I had nice hair by my friends who constantly used straightening products, but I'd secretly always wanted brilliant red Rapunzel-style hair. I'd never even dyed my hair, and most days I just plaited it back to keep it out of my face. But now, I ran my hands through my hair, fluffing it a bit, and admired how the jumper brought out the blue of my eyes. Surprising even myself, I reached for a tube of mascara and swiped it on before I could lecture myself that I didn't need to wear makeup for a day at the market. Before I could do something ridiculous, like add blush and swipe on lip gloss, I stomped from the bedroom and grabbed my thermos.

I did *not* need to impress Owen.

He'd interrupted my dreams last night, and I'd popped awake, skin flushed, need pulsing through my body. I'd barely had to reach a hand down to brush across myself before I'd flown over the edge, a gentle river of pleasure rippling through me.

I definitely didn't need to wear blush today. One sight of the man was likely to make my face flame. Another annoying thing about being fair skinned was that I had a tell-tale blush that often gave my thoughts away.

Grabbing my thermos, I slipped a scone with a dab of strawberry jam into a lunch sack, and then paused. Thinking about Owen, I added another to the bag. *Not that I needed to*

feed him. The market had plenty of stalls with food and takeaway items. Still, it would be rude not to offer a scone if I was eating one. Annoyed with myself, I stomped to the greenhouse, my mood best described as growly.

Agnes had warned me away from him.

When I'd told her that he'd had camera equipment delivered and what he was after here, she'd asked if I could terminate his rental agreement. That was how adamant she'd been about getting Owen out of Loren Brae. It was so uncharacteristic of her that I'd been happy we'd been texting because I'm not sure I would have been able to formulate a response in person. Was getting rid of Owen really the only option? It wasn't like keeping the Kelpies a secret worked all that well for Loren Brae when we really had no control when they appeared. While I understood her concern, I now felt caught between two worlds—protecting Loren Brae and my desire to learn more about this man who had woken something inside of me.

Hence my tetchiness today.

“It's about time you cleaned yourself up, lass.”

“If you keep jumping out at me, I'm going to punt you over the fence,” I snarled at Gnorman who hurried to keep up with me when I breezed right past him.

“One would think you'd be in a better mood after your boyfriend brought you flowers yesterday.”

“He's not my—” I whirled, stabbing a finger in the air toward the gnome. “I don't have time for this today.”

“Too bad, the lads wanted to show you something.” Gnorman lifted his chin behind me, and I turned to find the hedgies in a lightning bolt shape.

“G, what are they doing?” I asked, charmed despite my annoyance with Gnorman.

“Gentlemen! Attack!” Gnorman bellowed and the hedgies took off in a mad scramble, disappearing into my garden.

“What are they attacking?”

“Why, all the pests that would kill your plants, of course. What did you think they were doing?”

“You never clarified what the army was for, G.”

“I’ve told you the G is silent.” Now the gnome was sounding as growly as I was.

Eugene rushed out of the slightly open door of the greenhouse, his little face panicked, and went sprawling as he caught his paws on a loose stick.

“For flora’s sake, Eugene,” Gnorman growled.

“Leave him alone. He’s doing just fine. He can be my inside pest control, right, Eugene?” I bent to pick up the hedgie, and he beamed up at me. “You’re now officially Chief Indoor Pest Officer.”

Eugene bristled in my hands, preening if a hedgie could do so, and Gnorman sighed.

“You can’t wrap the lad in cotton wool.”

“I hardly think promoting him to chief is wrapping him in cotton wool.” I carried him inside the greenhouse, Gnorman at my heels, and skidded to a stop in front of my tray of seedlings. The gnome ran smack into the back of my shin and bounced off.

“Damn it, hen. Sort yourself out.”

“Look,” I breathed. Putting down the thermos and lunch sack, I cradled Eugene closer as I bent to the pot of thyme with the red ribbon wound around it.

The plant had fully grown.

Overnight.

Its spiky stalks with short leaves jutted proudly upwards, forming a nice-sized bush, and I could see where a few flower buds were starting to bloom. In fact, it was so large, that it threatened to spill out of the pot, and I immediately crossed the room to look for a better sized option for its expanding root system. My heart hammered in my chest as my mind whirled.

I'd been able to help a seedling along in the past. Revive a dead flower, that kind of thing. But this? The growing of an entire plant overnight? It was unheard of. The possibilities were endless. Remembering the words on the scroll, I made a mental note to clip and dry some of the thyme so I could bundle it for any rituals as needed.

“Good morning.”

I almost dropped Eugene, so caught up in my thoughts. Whirling, I blinked at where Owen stood just inside the greenhouse.

Damn it, why did he have to be so handsome? It would be better if he stood out in some way, like wearing a tux to the market or something, but instead, he must be one of those men that adapt seamlessly to any situation they were in. Today he wore perfectly worn dark jeans that hugged his legs nicely, thick-soled work boots, which actually looked like they'd been used, and a tartan flannel shirt peeked out from under a grey fleece-lined jacket. He'd tugged a knit cap on his head, and I briefly remembered threading my fingers through his hair and pulling his mouth more tightly against mine.

My cheeks flushed.

I could feel it as soon as it happened, and when his eyes crinkled at the corners, I knew he saw the effect he had on me as well. Damn it. Of course he did. Men like this? Built to charm? They were well aware the response women had to them.

“What up, G?” Owen said, booping Gnorman's nose where the gnome had frozen in resting gnome position. The move made me grin, knowing that Gnorman would be furious.

“Good morning. You're early.”

“I didn't want you to do something silly like try to load all the bushels without help. Hey, who is this little guy?” Owen's attention caught on Eugene, who I'd clean forgot I was carrying, and wandered closer. “Isn't he a cutie? Does he bite?”

“I don’t think so. Do you bite, Eugene?” I looked down at the grinning hedgie. His spines were laid down, so I had to assume he was comfortable.

“I love him,” Owen decided, scratching Eugene’s tummy, and the hedgie made a happy grunting sound. “He’s a happy boy, isn’t he?”

I angled my head as Owen’s voice took on that tone that dog owners use when assuring their pets are, indeed, the best dog in all the land.

“He’s been promoted to Chief Indoor Pest Officer,” I explained. “Do you want to hold him?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.” I deposited Eugene in Owen’s hands and a delighted grin spread on his charming face. He held the hedgie up until they were almost nose-to-nose, and his face took on a look of childlike wonderment. “Who’s the bestest boy? A big job for a big man, isn’t that right? I bet you get all the little beasties out of the greenhouse don’t you, buddy?”

Eugene puffed up a bit, and did a little dance in Owen’s palms, and Owen’s grin widened.

“You’ve landed yourself a sweet deal here, buddy. Shona’s the best.”

Be still my heart.

Pressing my lips together before I said something stupid like *please stay here forever and don’t leave me because you’re quite possibly the sexiest man I’ve ever met in real life*, I crossed back to the pots and picked one out for the thyme. At the rate it was growing, it could see some serious damage if I kept it in the seedling pot. I hefted a larger pot, bringing it to the table, while Owen made shmoozy talk with Eugene.

“What are you doing?” Owen asked, leaning casually against the table while I added soil to the pot.

“Well, you see, this is a pot. And this is dirt. And this is a greenhouse. So typically, one will put a plant in said pot,” I said, deadpan, as I carefully extracted the thyme bush and added it to the larger pot.

“Color me shocked, I say.” Owen took my sarcasm in stride. “And what particular plant is this and why are you repotting it, my garden queen?”

I rolled my eyes, but barely held back a smile.

“This is thyme. And I’m repotting it because it wants to grow and if I keep it in the starter pot, I can hurt it.” *Also, I grew it with magick, and it can be used in rituals.*

“Ah, we wouldn’t want that.”

“No, we wouldn’t.”

“Okay, where should I put Eugene so I can get started on my duties?” Owen turned in a circle, studying my greenhouse. “It’s really nice in here, by the way. Quite an elaborate system.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said, glancing over my shoulder to see my place through fresh eyes. It *was* nice. A wide variety of healthy plants thrived here, and I was the one who made it happen. Along with some help of course. Pride filled me. It wasn’t often that I stepped back and gave myself a pat on my back for all the work that I did. “Here, let me take Eugene, I’ve got a nest for him.”

Dusting the dirt off my hands, I took Eugene and deposited him in a second nest of towels I’d made for him in the greenhouse under a table. He snuggled right in, likely already past his bedtime, and his little body vibrated with snores almost instantly.

“Well, boss? Put me to work.”

Instantly, my mind flashed to a few different ways I would enjoy making him work, and my cheeks heated. Owen caught my look, and a wicked smile spread slowly across his face. Stalking closer, he caged me against a table, bringing his hands on either side of me. I froze, all conscious thought fleeing my mind again, as desire took over.

I was really going to have to have a stern talk with my inhibitions.

Or lack thereof.

“Do you like being the boss then, Shona?” Owen angled his mouth over mine, dropping his voice until it was a husky rasp in the early morning quiet. “I won’t mind if you want to tell me what to do.”

“Um.” *Seriously, brain, this would be the time to form coherent words.* “Are you good at following orders?”

That? *That* was what came out?

“It depends.” Owen smirked, lightly nipping at my lower lip. His teeth grazed my sensitive skin and I shivered under his caress. “Sometimes I like to rebel. Don’t you enjoy breaking the rules once in a while?”

“I sensed that about you,” I said. Seriously, this man had leader written all over him. People followed him. He was the type of man to effortlessly part a crowd without knowing it, his very charisma drawing people to him. Yes, oh yes, he most definitely made the rules.

“Are you a rule follower, Shona?” Owen’s breath was warm on my lips, and my body trembled, need inflaming me.

“I like rules. Keeps things neat and tidy.” Except in my house as evidenced by the many piles of clutter. Frankly, I’d never given it much thought, but I suppose I had mostly gone my own way in life. But I hadn’t really broken the rules to do that. Unless you counted the societal rules that preferred women to spend their days looking for a man to take care of them.

“Even better. There’s nothing hotter than watching a woman break her own rules.”

I honestly had no words, my brain basically flatlined, and then there was nothing more to think about because Owen’s mouth was commanding mine, his kiss rendering me immobile, and lust consumed my entire body. I wanted to climb this man like a tree, topple him over, and then unbutton him until I could savor every inch of his gorgeous body. I was ravenous for him, bending backwards as he dove his hands into my hair and kissed me until stars danced across my eyes.

When he broke the kiss, stepping back, a smug smile hovered at his lips while I gasped for breath. Gently, he pulled me up so I wouldn't crush the tomato vines behind me and steadied me on my feet while I worked to calm my pounding heart.

“Seriously, how do you do that?” I asked, waving a hand limply in the air.

“Do what?”

“Kiss a woman until she can't think straight? That's a skill, isn't it?”

“In certain circles, yes.” Owen ran a hand down my arm, looking pleased with himself. “But I wouldn't say it's a practice of mine. Honestly, I think it's because you're the last thing I think about before I fall asleep and the first thing on my mind when I wake up. *Seriously, how do you do that?* I'm not certain of it, Shona, but I just may be addicted to you.”

And just what does a woman say to that? Out of my league, I didn't respond, instead pointing to the bushels stacked against the far wall of the greenhouse.

“Those can go in the van.” Much to my annoyance, I was still slightly out of breath.

“Yes, boss.” Owen gave me a jaunty salute as he wandered away, a bounce in his step. Turning, I braced myself on the table and found Gnorman glaring at me with his hands on his hips.

“Not a word, G. Not a word.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



SHONA

“What is that?” I grimaced at the camera slung around Owen’s neck as he settled in the passenger seat of my van.

“Could you be more specific?” Owen asked.

“Around your neck?” I raised an eyebrow at him, not amused.

Owen glanced down at the camera and then back up at me, a considering light in his eyes.

“This is a Sony A7 mirrorless camera, highly regarded among filmmakers as a capable and portable camera to capture footage on the go.”

“Footage?” My mouth dropped open and I could kick myself for not putting more makeup on today. Had I known I’d be on camera, I would have taken more time with my appearance. As soon as the thought entered my head, I wanted to beat it into a bloody pulp and toss it out of the back door of my mind. I was *so* not that woman. Not the type who preened for Hollywood producers and made them shoot me from my best angle.

“Yes?” Owen said it like a question, as though I was about to get him in trouble. Which was stupid, really. Tourists often strolled through the market and took pictures at the stalls. There was no reason he couldn’t do the same. And if I tried to stop him, I’d likely look like I was trying to hide something.

Silently berating Agnes for putting me in this situation, I shifted the van into gear and headed toward town.

“Why filmmaking? What got you into that?” I asked, wanting to shift the conversation. Plus, I was curious. I don’t know if I’d ever really had a conversation with someone in the film world before, and now I realized I had a ton of questions.

“The search for the truth,” Owen mumbled, futzing with the settings on his camera. His words cut through me, and my stomach twisted.

“When did you start making films?” I wasn’t about to unpack the whole truth question, not when I was the one hiding something. Well, several things. It wasn’t just the secret of the Kelpies I was hiding anymore.

“After my parents divorced. I went up north with my mother, and Kennedy stayed with my father in Texas. Mom was so fixated on the breakup, endlessly caught in a cycle of reliving her pain, that I had to channel my energy into something, or I was going to lose it.”

I snuck a look at him, but his face was set in stone as he continued to fiddle with his camera.

“The first time I turned a camera on my mother, she stopped talking. I asked questions, wanting to find the answers behind her endless well of pain. I just sat there, in silence, the camera trained on her. She couldn’t handle it. Being faced with the camera broke something in her. It was then she told me that Kennedy was my half-sister due to one of my father’s less-than-discreet liaisons. It was the first time I felt powerful. And the last time I ever really trusted anyone.”

My heart hurt for the teenaged boy who needed to hide behind a camera to control the world around him.

“I’m sorry, Owen. That’s pretty heavy for a kid.”

Owen shrugged one shoulder, his lips pressed together in a thin line. “It is what it is. Can’t change the past.”

“Aye, but you can learn from it.”

“So they say, yet both of my parents continue to make the same mistakes, over and over. I think my mother is on her sixth or seventh husband. My father not far behind. I’ve lost count.”

I grimaced. My upbringing seemed quite simple and unproblematic compared to his. A part of me wanted to be the one who soothed that ache inside him, yet I sensed he wouldn’t be open for too much coddling on my end.

“And so you went into documentary filmmaking?” I asked. I was lying there, too, because I’d spent a good hour googling Owen last night after my cleaning binge, and I was well aware he’d made a variety of films that spanned from thrillers to documentaries. Coined a wunderkind of sorts, he’d pulled off a feat that many filmmakers hadn’t been able to—he hadn’t been pigeonholed. It seemed he’d proven himself as a capable and adept producer and was highly regarded.

“Among other things. Along the way I discovered I had a knack for storytelling and a passion for films. I didn’t like to be caged in with one particular genre, so I dabbled in it all. At the end of the day, it’s about the story for me.”

“It sounds fascinating. You get to travel the world and make beautiful films.” Unlike my boring little life. Again, another intrusive thought that I wanted to backhand. What was with me today? My life must seem so routine and staid compared to someone who rubbed elbows with famous people and traveled all over the place.

“I do. It’s pretty great. When it’s not also a pain in my ass.” Owen craned his neck as we crested a hill. “Hey, would you mind slowing down so I can get a shot of the lake as we head into town?”

“Loch,” I corrected automatically, checking my rearview mirror as I slowed the van to a crawl.

“Loch,” Owen echoed me, capturing the accent, as he rolled the window down and brought the camera up. “God, the light here is just killer. I’ve thought that since day one. There’s something about the clouds and how the sun filters through to the water that just makes for deeply cinematic moments.”

I glanced out of the window. Though I'd seen this view thousands of times in my life, I tried to look at it with fresh eyes, or at the very least, through the eyes of a filmmaker. The loch swept out, her waters still and reflective in the early morning light that kissed the green hills that hugged the banks like protective sentinels. Cottages and buildings, done up in cheerful colors, dotted the shoreline like someone had flicked a paintbrush full of color onto a muted green landscape. Puffy clouds meandered through the sky, allowing the sun passage, and a soft wind rustled the trees, tossing their gilded leaves into the breeze.

“Bonnie Scotland,” I murmured, inching the van along. “She’ll grab on to your heart, that’s the truth of it.”

Owen turned the camera on me, and I almost drove us off the road.

“Och, enough of that,” I complained, half flattered, half annoyed.

“Just say bonnie Scotland one more time,” Owen pleaded.

Sighing, I complied, refusing to look over at the camera, and picked up the speed of the van so we could get to the market in time. Grateful when he dropped the camera back to his lap, I let out a small breath.

“Tell me what to expect today.”

“Well, it’s usually quite busy right after we open because everyone wants first pick,” I explained, turning onto the main street that led toward a main square that was used for the weekend markets and any other festivals the town held. A flurry of activity greeted us, as a line of parked vans with their doors thrown open hugged the square, and people scurried about unloading their goods. Easing the van into a spot at the end of the square, I stopped and turned to Owen. “Basically, if there are any produce-related questions, direct them to me. Otherwise, I’ve already listed the prices on the blackboard, and there’s a few bundle options. Like if someone wants two squash and a bunch of carrots.”

“Got it. So basically, I should just sell the crap out of your goods, and you’ll be the brains behind the operation?” Owen threw his shoulders back and lifted his chin, putting on that charming smile of his that made me want to unbutton my shirt. “Ma’am? Excuse me, ma’am? But this poor bushel of sweet potatoes is crying out to go home with you. You wouldn’t want to leave them alone and sad here, would you? Of course not. I bet you have the perfect recipe for them too, don’t you? You’ll have to tell me all about it.”

I sucked in a breath, pressing my lips together. The man was a natural.

“Aye, lad. You’ll kill it.” I shook my head. Already I suspected the ladies of Loren Brae would be flocking. I couldn’t well blame them, could I? I was equally as enchanted with one Owen Williams ... *as I am sure many women across the world are. And have done more than just kiss the man.* Annoyed where my thoughts had gone, yet again, I got out of the van and opened the doors at the back. Clearly, I needed a good night’s sleep, or to chug my entire thermos of coffee, otherwise I was going to scare off any potential customers.

“Yes, I’m helping Shona today.”

I peered around the open door to see a woman with a small baby in a pram beaming up at Owen. My God, it had been two seconds since we’d stepped out of the van. It was like flies to honey with this one. I cleared my throat, and Owen snapped to attention.

“That’s the boss calling. We need to set up. Be sure to stop back. We’ve got the best produce in Loren Brae.”

“Oh, I will,” the woman promised Owen, openly admiring him, as her baby began to cry.

“Cute little guy,” Owen said, bending over to make faces at the baby. Instantly, the cries stopped, and a deep gurgling chuckle rattled out of the pram.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

It was like Owen had the Midas touch but with people, and I honestly had no idea how I felt about it. What was fake and

what was real? He charmed as naturally as he breathed, so where did that leave me? Just another one of his conquests on his travels? The thought was unsettling, and I snapped at him when he joined me at the van.

“If you’re going to help me today, then you actually have to work.”

Owen paused, looking me up and down when he heard the bite in my voice, and then a smile bloomed on his face.

“Awww, pretty Shona. Were you jealous that I was talking to that woman?” Owen ran a hand down my back, and I wanted to arch into his palm like a cat asking for more cuddles.

“We’re here to work. Not to flirt,” I grumbled, grabbing hold of one edge of the table and sliding it toward the door. Immediately, Owen nudged in front of me, lifting the table easily from the van and resting it on the ground as he continued to smile that knowing smile at me.

“She has a wedding ring on. And a child,” Owen pointed out. Both facts I was well aware of.

“Let’s just stay focused, shall we?”

“I wasn’t flirting, Shona. I was being friendly.” Owen stayed where he was, blocking me from moving past him.

“You probably don’t even realize you’re doing it.” I sighed, running a hand through my hair and tugging at the ends. “And that’s fine, really. I get it. You’re just so damn handsome that anyone you speak to is going to fall in love with you. And you’ve said it yourself, you’ve got charm by the bucketload. I know it’s not intentional. It’s just—”

“Just what?” Owen leaned forward, his face hovering closer to mine, and my heart rate sped up. Was he really going to try and kiss me here? In front of everyone?

“It would be nice if it wasn’t in front of me is all.” Damn it, I hated myself for even saying it. Who was I to stop this man from flirting with other women? We’d shared a kiss or two. That was it. There was nothing more here. And now I was

acting like a possessive housewife convinced her husband is out philandering?

“Shona.” The tone in Owen’s voice had me raising my eyes to his. There I found empathy, but also seriousness. “I don’t toy with women’s feelings. I’ve watched, too often, men who do that to people I care about. And I’ve had to be the one to clean up the resulting messes. I may be charming, but I am never misleading. I won’t lie and tell you that I like you if I don’t like you. I don’t play games, I don’t have some sort of endgame, and I never, ever cheat. I’ve been very clear that I like you, I’m attracted to you, and I want to get to know you better—even when *you* haven’t been clear on how you think about *me*. If, at any point, I’m doing something that doesn’t make you feel good, just tell me. I’d rather you be straight with me than hide it.”

My breath left me, like a balloon deflating, and I just looked helplessly up at Owen. *How is a woman supposed to respond to that?* I’ve never been spoken to so directly in my life. Was I this far out of the dating game that I stumbled when spoken to like this? Or was the harsh reality that I’d dated immature men before and Owen was, well, he was all grown up. What was I supposed to tell him? That I’d dreamt of him the night before and pleased myself to the memory of his kiss?

“I won’t lie and tell you that I like you if I don’t like you. I don’t play games ... I’ve been very clear that I like you, I’m attracted to you, and I want to get to know you better ...”

Why couldn’t all men be as clear in their intentions? How surreal that a man so charming and handsome was interested in me. I wasn’t sure if I could give him a clear picture, especially with all the other things I was still processing, of what I thought about him. But I did owe Owen *some* truth.

“I don’t know how I feel about you,” I said instead, and then could have kicked myself when I saw the brief flash of hurt in his eyes. I rushed to diffuse it. “All good things so far, Owen. I’m just ... overthinking things I guess.”

“That’s fair, I suppose. And by your own admission, any woman I speak to is going to fall in love with me, so I’ve got that to look forward to with you.”

“Have I mentioned you’re impossible?” I asked, annoyed at the shit-eating grin on his face. Shocking me, he bussed my lips in a lightning-fast kiss that had my cheeks heating once more and then hefted the table that usually took Louise and I both to carry it. “Where to, boss?”

“Last stall on the corner.” I pointed, happy to have him walking away so I could gulp air and try to clear my head.

Love? What had prompted me to bring up love?

I was so in over my head it wasn’t even funny.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



OWEN

Watching Shona work was a dream.

She was a vision in her pretty blue sweater that made her eyes light up in her face like brilliant orbs of seawater, her silky hair fluttering down her shoulders. When she smiled, her whole face lit, like the sun rising over the hills, and I snuck as many photos and videos of her as I could when we weren't tending to customers.

Which wasn't all that often—Shona's booth was slammed.

Grateful I'd come along to help, as I had no idea how she would have managed the line just on her own, I quickly devised a system to help. Shona would be at the front, answering questions on the produce, and I'd be at the bagging station ready to take the money and pack the goods while she moved on to assisting the next customer.

She never rushed anyone, no matter how long the line was, but at the same time moved people efficiently along. I admired that skill, noting she took extra time with the elderly who seemed particularly choosy when it came to their autumn squash of choice.

"You're good with people," I told Shona, when she stopped the line to stock more brown paper bags by the check-out station. "You take your time with them."

"A lot of people here are on a limited budget. What they buy matters. I'd rather have them take their time and pick the

perfect ingredients for their healthy meals this week than buy some cheap overly processed crap at the store just because that's all they can afford. So, I don't rush them and make sure they have a brow day. There's something nice about coming home from the market with your purchases, knowing you've bought direct, and where your food comes from, you ken?" Shona left my side before I could answer, returning to the line, while I dutifully rang up the next customer.

Everyone wanted to speak to me.

I was a new face in town, which meant I had new stories to contribute to the local gossip, and I made sure to be careful in what I said. Though this was likely a landmine of opportunity to learn more about the Kelpies, now wasn't the time to ask those type of questions. Instead, I focused on making connections, knowing that when the time came to ask more prodding questions, I might be given better information.

"This is for free," Shona instructed me, pointing to a basket a woman about the age of fifty held.

"It's for Greta. She lost her husband a month ago and is having a really rough go of it," the woman explained to me as though I had any idea who Greta was. "Her grief is consuming her."

"What did you just say?" Shona turned back, having caught the tail end of the woman's words.

"I said Greta's grief is consuming her. She can barely function. Her wee kids are struggling. We're all doing the best we can, but the poor lass can barely get out of bed."

An odd look passed across Shona's face and then she nodded once, as though to herself, and reached out to squeeze the woman's arm.

"I'll pass by to see her this week."

"That would be grand, I'm sure any help will be appreciated."

"Here you are," I said, handing the woman the sack full of green beans, sweet potatoes, squash, and kale. I grabbed a bouquet of blossoms wrapped in brown paper and tied with

brown twine and handed them over. “Give these to her with our condolences.”

“This is just lovely. We’ll cook up something nice for her.” With that, the woman left, and I smiled at the next person in line.

By late morning, Shona’s booth had sold out and I looked up at her as I helped her stack empty bushels.

“You could sell ten times this, couldn’t you?” I asked, amazed at how quickly she’d gone through what I had thought to be mountains of produce.

“I’m not sure about ten times, but I could be selling more, yes.”

“What would that look like for you?”

“You mean in overhead?” Shona stopped, tilting her head as she considered it. “I guess it’s part of why I wanted to get out of doing wedding flowers. I think I have to pick an area to focus on if I want to grow.”

“Your flowers did sell out almost immediately,” I pointed out. On top of her produce, she’d had buckets of mixed bouquets, each more cheerful than the next, and they’d been some of the first items to sell. Of course, once people were there and buying flowers, they saw all the delectable produce and inevitably bought something else. “They’re a great way to catch people’s attention, and then you can upsell them on the produce.”

“That’s the idea.” Shona laughed. “But honestly, I don’t know. I could expand the florals and just sell plants and flowers, you know? But I love having produce as well. I eat from my garden, and I like that I can provide healthy food for the community.”

“And you deliver to restaurants too?”

“I do. Both florals and produce.”

“But you need to build more if you want to grow?”

“It’s that or rent space at a commercial greenhouse, but that would require me to commute. I like my cottage garden.”

The way she said it, like she had a few rows of herbs behind her house, made me laugh.

“Far more than just a cottage garden, Shona. I’m really impressed. You’ve got an incredible thing going here.”

“I do, don’t I?” Shona beamed at me, and I lost a breath for a moment. When she directed her light at me, I wanted to bask in that warmth for days. You couldn’t recreate that type of beauty—and *I’ve seen many try*—and I doubted that she understood how utterly beautiful she was.

“Are you afraid that expanding it will ruin what you have?” I asked as I bent to fold the table.

“What do you mean by ruin?” Shona paused in her stacking.

“Just that ... sometimes growth isn’t always better. Keeping things small can be just as satisfying and productive as expanding. I’ve seen a few of my friends who have gotten over their heads with trying to go too big too fast. They took on too much and the added costs ruin their business.”

“I do think about that,” Shona said, crossing her arms over her chest, and worrying her lower lip. “I’m already at my max when it comes to my time. If I hire more people, then I have to manage more people. It feels like a catch-22. And for what? I like my life as it is.”

“Nobody says you *have* to do more.”

“It feels like that’s the natural progression of things, doesn’t it?” Shona shrugged. “People want more so you deliver more.”

“But at what cost? Your own happiness? Maybe there’s other ways to provide more without it requiring more lift. Like what about if you went into preserves?”

“Jam?” Shona tilted her head at me.

“I don’t know. Whatever the word is for when you put the vegetables in the jar and eat out of them all winter?”

“Canning, preserves, that kind of thing.” Shona’s lip worrying intensified, and I wanted to kiss the tension away. “I

can't say I haven't thought about it. If I built another greenhouse, I could focus those plants solely on product to be jarred and eaten through the winter. I do have a recipe ..."

"For?" I asked, intrigued.

"A spiced aubergine chutney."

It took me a moment.

"Eggplant?" I asked.

"Och, right. You don't call it aubergine."

"No, and I have never heard of an eggplant chutney before, but I am here for it. When can I try some?"

"I don't make it all that often. It's just an old recipe of Gran's."

"Even better. Invite me over for wine and chutney. I'll go buy us a baguette. Look"—I nodded to a bakery booth—"I bet they have perfect bread for a chutney."

"But ..." Shona looked around the booth.

"What else needs to get finished today?" I asked, coming forward to put my hands on her shoulders. "I'll help you."

"Usually, I take an hour after my booth sells out to visit the other vendors. It's nice to say hello to everyone. Then I'll have to go back and check anything that needs taken care of at the gardens. Then, yes, maybe we can have some chutney."

"Ohhh, it's a date."

"*Maybe*, I said." Shona rolled her eyes.

"A maybe date. Even better. Keeps you on the edge of excitement all day, doesn't it?" I grinned at her when she wrinkled her nose at me.

"You're a bit like an annoying puppy, aren't you?"

"Puppies are known to be very cute," I said, threading my arm through hers and tugging her toward the stalls. "Come on, Shona. Show me around."

The market was a delight for the senses from home-baked goods and seasonal produce, to artisan-crafted candles and

home goods. I bought Shona a candle for the autumnal equinox from a pagan candle company and a little felted hedgehog for Eugene. It looked up at me, a sweet smile on its face, reminding me of the hedgie.

“You think Eugene will play with it?” I asked Shona, tucking the stuffed toy into my bag.

“I honestly have no idea. But it’s sweet of you to think of him. They’re quite active at night, so maybe you can give it to him later and see if he likes it.”

“I love that you have a pet hedgie,” I said, watching as Shona’s eyes widened at the word “love.” She was as prickly as a hedgehog when it came to matters of the heart. *Has she been hurt before?* Or was she reluctant to invest her heart in someone like I was?

“He’s new to the yard,” Shona admitted, picking up a hand-knit scarf in the same shade of blue as her eyes, with pink edging. She held it for a moment, seemingly at war with herself, and then put it back. I snagged it from the table and smiled at the kindly grandmother type who was knitting in the chair by the table.

“This is lovely. Do you make all of these yourself?”

“I do.” The woman put her needles down and beamed at me. “It’s been a real blessing to me in my retirement. Keeps my mind and my thoughts busy.”

“Edith, good to see you. You haven’t been out in a while,” Shona said.

“Knits don’t sell as well in the summer, dear.”

“I’d like to buy this one for my friend here,” I said, passing the scarf to Edith.

“Owen, you don’t have to buy me—”

“And the matching hat, please,” I said, spying a blue hat with a colorful pink bon-bon on top.

“I don’t need a—”

“And whatever else goes with this until my friend here learns to say thank you instead of shooting daggers at me with those lovely blue eyes of hers.”

Edith’s eyes turned calculating as she looked over her booth.

“Well, you’ll want to get her mittens, of course. And perhaps something for you to match? It would be such a shame if you got cold. The hat you’re wearing is fine enough, but the yarn is a bit threadbare,” Edith said, narrowing her eyes at the knit cap I wore.

“I absolutely agree. Why don’t you pick something out for us?”

“Owen, I don’t need—”

“Doesn’t this color just match her eyes perfectly?” I asked Edith, holding the scarf to Shona’s face.

“It’s perfect for you, dear. Like it was meant for you all along,” Edith assured her. Then she handed me a dark navy knit cap, with edging in the same brighter blue color as the scarf. “Here, try this one. It will compliment Shona’s but is a touch more masculine.”

“I don’t mind the pink,” I promised Edith, pulling on the bright blue cap with the pink pom-pom instead of the one she handed me. Edith chuckled and clapped her hands together.

“You know what? It does suit you. Mind if I take your picture for Instagram?” Edith asked, pulling out a sleek iPhone.

“You have an Instagram account?” Shona asked.

“Of course. It’s called: Get Knitty with me.”

“Love it.” I grinned for the shot and then promptly purchased the scarf, the hat, the gloves, and the navy hat as well. By the time I’d left, Edith was promising to make something for my mother, and Shona’s grumbling had reduced to a minimum.

“Edith.” Shona paused by an empty stall. “Where’s Derek?”

Edith's expression grew grim. "No apples. His orchard isn't producing."

"Seriously? That's a shame." Shona shook her head. "He has the best apples."

"He's distraught. It'll be a tough winter for his family now."

"And they don't know what's happened?"

"Not that I've heard, but I've been away." More customers approached Edith's stall, cutting off the conversation, and Shona fell quiet as we moved among the stalls until we returned to the baked goods table.

"You can take the hat off now," Shona said, now that we were out of sight and standing in line.

"You don't like it on me?" I asked, tilting my head and crossing my eyes at her. Finally, she laughed.

"No, it suits you. Everything suits you. I'm not sure you'd look bad in anything you wore."

"Wait until you see me naked then." I winked at Shona, and that delectable pink flush filled her cheeks.

"I am not going to see you naked," Shona hissed, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from a couple who was eavesdropping.

"You might, if you play your cards right. I don't show it off for just anyone you know. I'm a gentleman after all."

"Owen, I am *not* trying to get you naked," Shona insisted.

"If you're not, I'm happy to." A lovely woman, easily in her late seventies, beamed at me over the table of baked goods.

"I like to be wined and dined first," I told the woman, silently laughing as Shona bristled next to me. "I'm not a cheap date."

"What if I bake for you? My sticky toffee pudding has charmed more than one man into my bed."

"Catriona!" Shona exclaimed.

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” Catriona advised Shona, arching an eyebrow.

“She’s not wrong,” I assured Shona.

“Of course I’m not.” Catriona smirked.

“We’re looking for whatever bread you have that will go best with chutney,” I said, sensing Shona was ready to turn tail and leave. “And I’m fairly certain I’ll need several boxes of that shortbread of yours.”

“No problem. I’ll give you a focaccia and a baguette, that way you can toast some up if you want.”

“Perfect, thank you.” I paid Catriona and winked at her when she blew me a kiss goodbye as we walked away.

“You know where to find me.”

I laughed, charmed by her, and hooked Shona’s arm with mine.

“Shameless,” Shona muttered.

“Charming,” I countered. “And why not? She’s a beautiful woman.”

“She’s like over twice your age, Owen.” Shona slid a glance up at me.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate beauty,” I said, my eyebrows winging up when Shona glowered at me. “What? Don’t believe me? Women age like fine wine. Beauty comes in all packages, my sweet.”

“I honestly wasn’t expecting that from you.” The way Shona said that, as she bent to pick up a stack of bushels to take to the van, had me putting my back up.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just figured you for the fancy Hollywood type, I guess. I imagine a lot of perfect actresses throw themselves at you.”

I thought through her words as she walked away to put the baskets in the van. I couldn’t say it stung, but I also wasn’t

partial to her thinking that I had a rotating door of beautiful actresses visiting my trailer on set.

“Shona,” I said, when she returned from the van, the wind lifting a strand of her hair and whipping it across her face. I nudged it back, winding the silken piece around my finger, and tugged lightly until her eyes met mine. “I’m not your typical Hollywood type. It’s why I don’t live there. I find artifice off-putting.”

“I’m sorry,” Shona said immediately, a guilty expression on her face. “I shouldn’t assume these things.”

“You’re not necessarily wrong,” I told her. “A lot of Hollywood is solely focused on image. But I’m not. I like real people, and I think everyone can be beautiful.”

Shona sighed.

“Damn it, Owen. You’re making it really hard not to like you.”

I beamed.

“Come on, let’s go give Eugene his toy. I want to see if he likes it.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



SHONA

*O*f course Eugene loved the hedgie toy. How could he not? I'd yet to see anyone who didn't topple under the weight of Owen's easy charm.

"Look at the little guy go!" Owen exclaimed, laughing as Eugene did laps around the greenhouse, pouncing repeatedly on the mini stuffed hedgehog. "I think he likes it."

"No doubt." Eugene skidded to a stop, ducking behind a pot of basil, and then divebombed the toy, rolling with it until he landed at my feet, grinning up at me with his new hedgie friend in his arms.

"I had no idea how fast they were," Owen observed, coming to lean next to me, shoulder to shoulder. "He zips right along, doesn't he?"

"They're nocturnal. You don't see them out and about much during the day, but they are super active."

True to his word, Owen had come home and spent the afternoon helping me while I continued the task of winterizing my garden, a seemingly never-ending task of repotting plants, getting bulbs ready for planting, and pruning back perennials that were ready to rest for the winter. Night had crept in while we were working, the days growing shorter now, and I was ready for a glass of wine. Owen had been a competent helper, asking questions as needed, not caring if he got dirty, and easily handling some of the heavy lifting.

All while wearing that damn hat with the pink pom-pom.

I shouldn't find him as charming as I did, but it was becoming increasingly hard not to fall under his spell. He exuded confidence in the way of a man at ease with the world, even when he had no clue about gardening, and fit seamlessly in with the daily tasks. Was this what made him such a good director? This ability to be a chameleon and adapt to any environment he was in? Either way, he'd spent an entire day of his holiday helping me, for free, and at the very least I owed the man some chutney.

"It's quitting time. Would you like to come over for—" My breath caught as Owen caged me in at the table, his hands on either side of me, a smile at his lips. "Um, come over for ..."

"Yes?" Owen asked, a heated look in his eyes.

"Chutney." My brain finally landed on the word I was looking for. "Well, more than chutney. We can't just eat chutney for dinner."

"We have bread too," Owen pointed out, running his hands loosely up and down my arms and I wanted to purr with contentment at his touch.

"That's hardly a dinner."

"I can run to the store—"

"I've got plenty here. I'm a gardener, aren't I?" I nudged him back, his nearness short-circuiting my brain. "I'd like a shower, and then if you want to come by, in like a half hour or so?"

"Ohhh, I get to see where the trash-goblin lives. I can't wait." Owen rubbed his hands together, and I glared at him.

"I've since cleaned, or you wouldn't have been invited."

"I wouldn't have judged you either way, darlin'." Owen winked at me, rocking back on his heels, as delighted as if I told him we were going bungee jumping or something far more exciting than a glass of wine and some homemade chutney. "This will be great. I've got a load of questions for

you too. I've been doing a ton of research on the area. You might be able to help."

What was I supposed to say to that? The man had just spent ten hours helping me with my work, and now I was supposed to ignore his very obvious request that I do the same with his?

"Yeah, sure, I'll do my best." I shrugged, non-committal. "I'll just close up here and see you shortly."

Owen disappeared, humming a cheerful tune, that stupid pink pom-pom bouncing on his hat. Sighing, I crossed the greenhouse, Eugene scampering after me with his toy in his arms.

I mean, the man gave my hedgie a toy.

My poor heart. I was a goner already.

Sighing, I scrubbed my hands over my face, uncertain how I was going to navigate the conversation tonight, which I was sure would be about the Kelpies. I needed to talk to Agnes. Maybe there was a better way to navigate this than outright lying.

Stopping by the thyme plant, which had grown substantially during the day, I snipped off several pieces and clipped them to a clothesline, hanging them to dry. I'd bundle them in the morning and then see if I could move forward with how I thought I could use Gran's magick.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I took it out to see Agnes calling.

"Just calling to check if you found anything of your gran's."

"I did! An old box filled with seeds for various things. I think I'm meant to grow them and create herb bundles, oils, and candles. All meant to cure a variety of troubles." Even with my unease about Owen and his interest in Loren Brae, I couldn't help but feel excited about the potential of what my magick could do.

“Och, that’s grand, Shona. Brilliant. When will you crack on with it? Do you need any help?”

“No, I don’t think so just yet. I’ve started one and am going to look more deeply into another tomorrow. I think I know how I can use them to be of help to a few people who need it.”

“Even better. The Stone of Truth really seems to reward altruism. If you can ease anyone’s suffering, that will be a huge step forward.”

I had an idea who I might be able to help.

“I think I can. And, I mean, how cool is that? And I love knowing that Gran was magick too. It’s just ... it feels good.” I traced my finger down the side of the pot holding the thyme, remembering how much Gran had loved her gardens.

“How’s it going with Hollywood?” Agnes asked, shifting the subject, and I bit my lip, unhappiness unfurling inside of me.

“Good. He’s really great, Agnes. He helped me all day at the farmers market today.”

“Did he ask anyone about the Kelpies?”

“No, not that I’m aware of.”

“Be careful there. Do you have any idea what a man of his stature can do to Loren Brae? I googled him. I don’t think he hasn’t had a winning movie, like, ever. If he puts out a film about us, we’re doomed.”

“Or maybe it would be really good for tourism? People are curious. It might draw in more crowds,” I suggested, hoping that maybe we could put a different spin on things that didn’t end with me lying to the man I was falling for. My hand tightened on the phone.

Falling for?

Where had that thought come from? I mean, I’d been having some intrusive and unwanted thoughts all day long, but nothing like this. This ... it was life-changing. Earth-shattering.

Heartbreaking.

Owen was the type of man that women didn't get over.

At least not easily.

If I fell for him, if, no, *when*, he left, I'd always compare every man I met in the future to him. And they would come up lacking. Because, truly, how could anyone compare to this devastatingly handsome, easygoing, whip-smart, ambitious man?

"Sophie's on the marketing campaign to bring people in to visit the castle. I hardly think shining a light on murderous water horses that have killed and have injured others, one very recently I'll remind you, is going to be the boon for tourism that you think it would be."

Agnes's words sliced through me.

"No, you're right. I understand."

"Listen, I've got to run. Good luck with the seeds. Brilliant job, Shona."

I disconnected the phone and stared blindly down at Eugene who was currently rolling around with his pet hedgie, and sighed.

"Be honest with him."

"Damn it, G." I whirled on the gnome, my hand at my heart. "You've really got to stop doing that."

"For farm's sake, lass, it's not like you don't know you have a gnome in here. Seriously? Have I been given the dullest witch of the lot? Surely you can't be that dense."

"I'm aware you're here. You just move around a lot, so it's unsettling to have someone talk to me when I think I'm alone." I sighed, holding up my hand to stop the gnome from continuing. "I'm not up for banter with you right now. I'm tired, and I'm feeling a touch emotional. Just tell me what you meant."

"To be honest with him? It's not a hard concept, hen. See, you just tell the truth." Gnorman crossed his arms over his

chest, an annoyed look on his face.

“I’ve been advised that the truth will hurt a lot of people.”

“Maybe you can trust him to make the right decision,” Gnorman suggested in a tone like he was explaining an easy concept to a toddler.

“I’m under strict orders to say nothing.”

“From whom? Your boss?” Gnorman mocked looking around, stalking over to a plant and peering under a leaf. “I don’t see anyone here who controls you.”

“It’s complicated, G.”

“So uncomplicate it.”

I glanced at the time on my phone, my precious shower time running out.

“I have to go.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“What are you, some freaking gnome oracle?” I stomped to the door, annoyed with both him and Agnes.

“I just might be. About time I get some respect around—”

I slammed the door on his words.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



SHONA

It was just chutney.

And wine.

Maybe I needed more cheese? I'd already added a thick block of aged Irish cheddar and was warming some burrata to go with the tomatoes I currently had sizzling in a pan on the stove.

Owen's flowers were featured prominently on the table. Did that look too purposeful? Racing across the room, I moved them from the table to the counter. Or maybe I should put them by the fire? *Yes, that would be less obvious.* Picking up the vase, I strode across the room and put them on a small table under the window overlooking Loch Mirren.

A knock at the back door stopped my fussing, and I ran a quick hand over my hair, steadying myself, before crossing the cottage. I wore my comfy slippers, jeans, and an oversized sweatshirt that screamed that this was Not. A. Date.

I didn't want to read into anything with Owen. He was only here for a few weeks, and the reasons that kept him here were complicated. The gnome's words echoed in my head, and I hated that I was being put in the position of choosing my home over my heart.

There's that heart word again.

He was just a charming man who kissed well. That was it. No reason for hearts to get involved.

“Hey,” I said, opening the door to Owen brandishing the bag of bread and another bottle of wine. His hair was still damp from the shower, and he looked at ease in a relaxed grey jumper similar to mine. My anxiety lessened. He hadn’t dressed up for coming over either, so this was fine. It was all fine. Just friends having a glass of wine.

Owen leaned forward, poking his head through the door and dramatically looked around before he let out a huge breath.

“Phew, I don’t think I’ll get buried in mountains of trash.”

“I’ve got plenty in the bin. So, you know, better be on your best behavior.” I made a pretend threatening move toward the trash bin, and he laughed.

“This is a nice place, Shona,” Owen said, stepping inside and brushing a casual kiss across my cheek while I froze and forgot how to be a functioning adult for a moment. He was the kind of man that sucked the air from a room, and I suddenly became hyperaware of his every movement.

“Um, thanks,” I said, shutting the door behind him, the slice of wind carrying a spattering of raindrops with it. “It was my gran’s.”

“This her?” Owen leaned in to look at the photo on the counter while I busied myself opening a bottle of wine.

“Yes, it is.”

“How old were you here?” Owen tapped the frame.

“Mmm, maybe sixteen or so?” I handed him his glass and returned to the stove to turn off the heat. Adding some fresh basil, a drizzle of balsamic, and the burrata to an old blue chunky porcelain dish, I brought the tomatoes over to the butcher block island. “Would you like to eat at the table here or by the fire? I can start one up if you’re cold.”

“Table is fine. Though the weather is getting brisk, isn’t it?”

“Typical for this time of year. Soon it will be dark by mid-afternoon.”

“That’s crazy to me. Your light lingers so long in the summer.” Owen helped me carry the food over to the small table and when we sat, I instantly realized my mistake. A bistro-style table, it created an intimate environment. I could easily lean forward and kiss him if I wanted to.

Not that I would.

I mean, of course I wanted to. Every woman under sixty wanted to kiss him. Thinking of Catriona, I amended that thought to include every woman with a pulse.

“What’s got that grumpy look on your face?” Owen asked, gesturing to the bowl of chutney.

“Is it grumpy?” I shook my head, pulling my thoughts away from other women kissing Owen. “Sorry, wool-gathering. Yes, that’s the infamous chutney you’re so determined to try.”

“I’m excited. I’ve never had eggplant chutney before. What spices do you use?”

“Mmm, cayenne, chili, cinnamon, onion. Some brown sugar.”

“Interesting. Spicy and sweet, then. May I?”

“Please do.” I held my breath as he scooped some on a crusty bit of bread and took a bite. He savored it, chewing slowly, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Not to your taste?” I cut a piece of the cheddar and added a dollop of chutney on top.

“No.” Owen’s face broke out in a smile. “I love it actually. This is incredible. Where did you learn to cook?”

“I wouldn’t say that I *cook* cook. But I try to use what I grow,” I said, watching as he loaded the grilled tomatoes and burrata onto a thick slice of baguette. “This is my gran’s recipe.”

“You mention her a lot, but not your parents. Did you grow up with your gran instead?” Owen’s tone held no judgement, just curiosity, and I realized just how easily he must be able to

pull secrets from those he was interviewing. It was a swift reminder to not get too comfortable with him.

“No, I grew up here with my parents. We lived not far down the road from Gran. But my dad got an important job in London when I was sixteen, and I asked if I could stay here.”

“Not a city girl?”

“At the time I wasn’t. I had friends here. A life here. I wasn’t quite ready to move on out. Gran took me in, and it was easy enough to finish out school. I moved up to Glasgow for a bit after, but Loren Brae will always be home.”

“And your parents?”

“Mmm, still in London.” I shrugged one shoulder when Owen just raised an eyebrow at me. “What? There’s not much to say. They are nice people who seemed somewhat surprised to be parents and put in the minimal amount of effort when it came to doing so. There is nothing inherently wrong with them. They’re just kind of ... distant.”

“I envy you that.” Even as he said it, his phone buzzed, and I caught the word Mom on the screen before he turned it off and ignored the call.

“You can answer her call.”

“God, no. I’m pissed at her.”

That was interesting. I’d yet to see anything that rattled the seemingly unflappable Owen, and I was dying to dig deeper. Treading carefully, I picked up a piece of bread and slathered some of the burrata on it.

“Want to talk about it?”

“What’s there to talk about?” Owen huffed out a laugh. Leaning back, he drank deeply from his wine glass, his eyes affixed on a spot across the room. “My mother is heavily narcissistic, she never should have been a parent, and she sees nothing wrong with inconveniencing everyone else so long as she gets her way.”

“She sounds *lovely*.”

Owen grinned, easing some of the lines of tension that had sprung out across his forehead.

“She has her moments. It’s taken years of therapy for me to extricate myself from her clutches, and she still doesn’t see how she constantly oversteps in my life. For example, when she suggested that I steal my father’s new wife away from him.”

I sputtered, choking on the piece of bread I’d just taken a bite of, and Owen leaned over and whacked me helpfully on the shoulders.

“I’m sorry.” I wiped my mouth with a napkin and held up a finger. “Did you just say that your mother suggested you try to sleep with a woman who is technically your stepmother?”

“She did.”

“Och, Owen. Bloody hell, that’s awful, isn’t it? I’m sorry you have to put up with that.” Sympathy filled me. Sure, my parents were distant, but they weren’t toxic or harmful of this nature. I thought back to Kennedy’s wedding where Owen had spent a lot of time hovering around an older well-kept woman dripping in diamonds with a sour look on her face. I’d only spoken to her briefly, but she’d addressed me as the help and had shooed me away to fix a bouquet. Now I realized that was Owen’s mother. “I remember her. Face like she’d just sucked a lemon?”

Owen’s eyes widened, and then he threw his head back and laughed.

“That’s the one. Perpetually finding fault with everything around her.”

“I’m glad you declined her call.”

“I can’t do it forever, but at least this grants me a reprieve.”

“Why?” I asked Owen and he paused in scooping more chutney onto his bread.

“Why what?”

“Why can’t you just stop talking to her? She’s clearly an adult. And you’re ... how old?”

“Thirty-two.”

“So, why is it that you can’t stop speaking to someone who clearly doesn’t respect you?”

“Um.” It was Owen’s turn to lean back and think through his response. He steepled his fingers. “I wish I had a better answer to that. In some messed up way I guess it is because I feel I owe her.”

“For what?”

“For taking me with her when she and Dad divorced.”

“But that’s the job of a parent, Owen. They’re meant to take care of you. Not the other way around. You didn’t choose to have a mother. She chose to have a child. You don’t owe her anything.”

“Not according to her.”

I wanted to push the point, to protect Owen from his mother, but I realized that I was getting too heated, too personal, and this would be his own battle he had to fight.

“I’m glad you ignored her call. Maybe she just doesn’t get front-row access to your life anymore. Maybe you can stick her in the nose-bleed seats.”

Approval shone in Owen’s eyes, as he regarded me like I’d spoken something miraculous. Leaning over, he cupped the back of my neck and kissed me so gently that I swore tears almost pricked my eyes.

“That’s an incredible way to look at a very difficult situation. Thank you for putting it in that light for me. It’s certainly something to think about.”

“Glad to help.” And I meant it, too. I liked Owen when he was cheerful and charming, but the darkness that swam into his eyes when he spoke of his mother saddened me. It added a new layer, one where I wanted to protect him from those who would hurt him, and my heart shimmied in my chest, seeming ready for the task.

Oh yeah, I was going down.

“I enjoyed today. Loren Brae is a pretty cool little town, isn’t it? Seems like a lot of good people here. The variety at the market was fascinating too. For such a small place, you’ve got a slew of talented people living here, don’t you?”

I understood the sudden shift in conversation to be a protective mechanism, but I allowed it. Already I felt I’d overstepped a bit, and I didn’t want to make him feel uncomfortable talking about topics that made him unhappy.

“I think so. We’re a pretty tight-knit community. We need to be. It’s not uncommon to have to rely on your neighbor for one thing or another.”

“I’ve been reading about the town a bit. The history. Loch Mirren. The Kelpies.” I could feel the intensity of Owen’s gaze on me as I slathered more tomatoes and burrata on a piece of bread.

“Cool, right?” I aimed for flippant and took a big bite.

“The Kelpies? Mythologically speaking, yes, they are fascinating. Yet it seems some people still think they are real.”

I continued chewing, shrugging.

I hated this. I didn’t like lying. Frankly, I was shit at it anyway.

“Some people believe in them. Some people don’t.”

“And you?”

I shrugged again, taking a sip of wine to clear my suddenly dry mouth.

“I don’t know where I land with it all.”

“Really?” Owen leaned back and stretched his long legs out in front of him, crossing his feet at the ankles. “For living here your whole life you’re not sure what you think about a rumor that Kelpies are real?”

“I haven’t seen them.” That at least was the truth. I think I caught half of a glimpse of one that attacked his friend, but it

all happened so fast. Otherwise, I, personally, had never seen a Kelpie.

“But you believe?”

“I don’t know what to think. Honestly, the whole thing makes me uncomfortable.”

“Does it? Interesting. Why would you say it makes you uncomfortable?”

I leveled a look at him and stood, crossing to the kitchen to grab the bottle of wine, and returned to top up our now empty glasses.

“I feel like I’m being interrogated.”

“I’m sorry.” Instantly, Owen straightened, a sheepish look on his face. “Bad habit of mine. I’m curious by nature and I grew up having to ask a lot of questions to get a straight answer. I think that just spilled over into my work life.”

“I googled you,” I admitted, blushing when he winked at me.

“Did you now? Like what you see?”

“You’ve done an incredible amount of work for being so young. Do you ever sleep?”

“Not when I’m buzzing on a project,” Owen admitted on a half laugh.

“You did this one ... with the elephants? What was that like?”

“Oh, man, they’re just incredible creatures.” With that, Owen was off and running, and I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping I’d diverted him from asking more about the Kelpies, at least for tonight. I hadn’t fully lied to him, and I admitted it made me uncomfortable. Hopefully, that was enough to stop any further lines of questioning.

By the time we’d finished the food, and a bottle and a half of wine, I’d learned so many fascinating things about documentary film making, but my exhaustion finally caught

up with me. I blinked at him, forcing my eyelids to stay up, and Owen laughed when I stifled a yawn.

“I’m sorry.” I stood, embarrassed. How rude of me to almost fall asleep on a guest. “I’ve had a few nights of poor sleep and long days in the garden. I think it’s all catching up with me.”

“I’d be offended, but I’m wiped out as well. I haven’t really had a day to relax and do nothing for weeks now, so I think I’ll plan for just that tomorrow.” Owen stood and surprised me by nudging me back until my butt hit the butcher block island in my kitchen. I squeaked when he bent and lifted me easily, settling me on the island so he could ease in between my thighs. My mouth dropped open. “I was hoping for dessert.”

“You were?” My breath came out in small pants as he ran his hands up my arms and then threaded them into my hair. Tilting my head, he captured my lower lip in his mouth, biting lightly, sending a hot spear of lust straight to my core.

His kiss was exploratory.

Purposeful.

Commanding.

Even though he took his time, like I was a gift to be unwrapped, his touch was masterful. One thumb traced the back of my neck under my hair, rubbing rhythmic circles as though to soothe while his kiss ignited me. I moaned into his mouth as he angled his head, deepening the kiss, dancing his tongue across mine.

He tasted of wine and the promise of sweaty nights and sultry mornings.

I arched into him, running my hands down his chest, and hooking my legs behind his back, pulling him tightly to me until I could feel just how much he wanted me. The brush of his hard length against the sensitive spot between my legs made me want to do depraved things to him or beg him to do them to me. I didn’t really care either way.

Owen pulled back and brought his forehead to mine. We stayed like that, our breath hitching.

“I’m going to go,” Owen said, and I’m embarrassed to say that I mewled in distress. “You’re dead on your feet, and I don’t want to take advantage of your exhaustion.”

“I hear you can lie down on a bed,” I said hopefully, and Owen laughed. He kissed his way down my neck, sending a rush of sensation across my skin.

“Soon, pretty Shona. Soon. I want to take my time with you and watch you blossom under my touch.”

“Oh God,” I gasped, lifting my chin to give him a better angle to where his mouth did wicked things at my neck. “I had no idea gardening metaphors could be hot.”

Owen laughed, the timbre of it vibrating against my skin.

“Is this where I suggest I plow your field another night?”

I winced.

“Och, maybe you need to work on those a bit.”

“You’re right. I’ve shamed myself.” Owen hung his head, and I giggled as he stepped back. He paused, looking me up and down where I sat, legs still sprawled open. Bringing his knuckles to his mouth, he bit. “Damn it, Shona, you make it hard to walk away.”

“Then don’t.”

Damn, who was this woman? I’d been worried all night about falling for this man and now here I was practically begging him to stay and have his way with me. *Hypocritical much, Shona?*

Owen strode forward and captured my lips in one last searing kiss that left us both gasping for breath before he stormed from the cottage.

“Sweet dreams, lovely lady.”

“Good night, Owen.”

I stayed where I was, willing my heart rate to return to normal, as I stared at the vase of flowers he'd brought me.

A singular rose petal fell, swaying gently to the floor.

Was that a sign? That if I fell, I'd be left even more alone?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



SHONA

Surprisingly, I did manage to sleep even though my mind wanted to replay the sexiest kiss I'd ever had in my life. If I could pinpoint one thing about what had made the kiss so soul searing, it was the very essence of Owen. Yes, I understand that sounds weird. But there was something about Owen as a whole—his charisma, his warmth, his smarts—that lit me up inside. When he'd pulled back the curtain to reveal his vulnerabilities, well, that had just endeared him more to me. From the outside, he was like a perfect slice of cake, and telling me about his issues with his family was like turning the cake around and seeing someone had stuck their finger in the icing. It soothed me, understanding that he was just as real and human as the rest of us, and because of that, I'd felt much more connected to him.

And yet I hadn't given him the same back, had I?

It burned in my gut, having this newfound knowledge of my magick, and not being able to share it with someone that I was developing feelings for. I couldn't blame Agnes for wanting to protect Loren Brae, and me, from an outsider. It still didn't make me feel great.

That being said, I hadn't spoken to anyone about my magick, except for those already in the know, so it wasn't like I was just keeping it from Owen. It was hard, this whole living in your truth thing. Particularly when you discover your truth is far outside what most people can accept as normal.

“Normal is boring,” I muttered under my breath as I stepped inside the greenhouse to find Gnorman holding the felted hedgehog toy over his head. I opened my mouth to yell at him.

“Go long!” Gnorman shouted and Eugene raced to the other side of the greenhouse, which, in my opinion, was overly optimistic for Gnorman’s throwing capabilities. This wasn’t me being size-ist, by the way. This was me being *sexist* about men and how they liked to think they were the next great rugby player who could launch a ball a gazillion yards.

Gnorman threw the toy, and much like I’d expected, it flew a few feet in front of him, not reaching the other side of the greenhouse by any stretch of the imagination. Eugene, undeterred, scuttled back across the greenhouse and snatched it up, depositing it back in front of Gnorman like a puppy playing fetch.

“Quite the throw there, G.”

“The toy is not aerodynamic,” Gnorman grumbled, glaring up at me. “You can hardly expect me to throw something as awkwardly shaped as this.”

Eugene tottered over to me and put his little paws on my boot. Bending over, I scooped him up and scratched his belly until he was writhing in joy.

“How’s the army today, G?”

“Are you hard of hearing, lass? I’ve told you my name is Gnorman.”

“Is there or is there not a G in the spelling?”

“It’s silent.” Gnorman slammed his boot on the ground, his kilt flapping with the motion, and I bit back a smile.

“If you work on your attitude, I’ll work on mine.” I carried Eugene over to the tomato plants and let him select the perfect cherry tomato. Seriously, could he be any cuter? The wonderment that crossed his wee face when he held the tomato up was enough to make me pledge to take care of the wee lad forever. Bending, I put him by his nest so he could enjoy his snack.

“I don’t have an attitude.” Gnorman followed me. “I’m a gnome. This is just our personality. It’s known as our resting gnome face.”

Thinking back to how Owen had opened up to me last night, I decided to change tactics. While Gnorman was deeply annoying, he was also a magickal being that lived in my greenhouse and commanded an army of hedgehogs. It wouldn’t kill me to get to know him. I paused for a moment and then walked to the other side of the greenhouse where I was growing a batch of mushrooms. Slicing one off with my pocketknife, I returned to where Gnorman stood on the table, his arms crossed.

“Here. Tell me about being a gnome.”

Gnorman’s eyes widened, and that same look of wonderment flashed through his eyes before he snatched the mushroom from my hands. It was about the size of his head, and he held it up in front of him, almost drooling with excitement.

“Och, this lad is going to sleep well tonight!”

“Gnorman, did you do this?” I’d just now registered that the thyme I’d left to dry was no longer hanging up, instead packaged in small bundles wrapped intricately with twine, and ready for burning. Peering closer, I saw a small paper seal at the bottom with an outline of a bright red gnome hat.

“Of course I did. It’s what you were wanting it for, no?” Gnorman settled down on the table, crossing his legs out in front of him and took a huge chomping bite of the mushroom. A delighted grin spread across his face as bits of mushroom fell everywhere. “Och, lass. You’ve outdone yourself here.”

“Thank you,” I said, somewhat absentmindedly as I studied the bundles of thyme. Would it be weird of me to perform magick at someone’s property without them knowing? My stomach twisted as I thought about how to accomplish what I felt I needed to do.

“Gnomelife isn’t for everyone,” Gnorman said, startling me from my thoughts. “It’s a tough job. You have to

constantly be on the lookout for pests in the garden, protecting the plants.”

“Wait,” I said. “Are you the reason I don’t have a problem with moles or mice?”

Gnorman saluted me, and I shook my head in disbelief.

“And here I thought it was because I was leaving scraps out front away from the garden.”

“Och, everyone enjoys those scraps, lass. Particularly the birds.” Gnorman chuckled at my look. “But ’tis me that’s keeping the riffraff away. Well, and my army of course.”

“I had no idea.”

“Clearly. We’ve been waiting for you to pay attention for a long time now. It’s been years since Seònaid passed.”

“You knew my gran?” My eyebrows winged up my forehead.

“Of course I did. She was mine as well. Lovely woman. Much less cantankerous than you.”

“I am not cantankerous, G. Ever consider that you’re the difficult one?” I pointed out and he just shrugged.

“I know tetchy when I see it.”

Though I bristled at his words, I also realized that now was not the time to get into it with my gnome.

“How come I, well, we, were yours? Do you get assigned to us by some gnome overlord?”

“No lords in our world. No religion. Just nature and their beautiful energies. Mother Earth, Sister Sun, Father Moon, Brother Ocean, they’re all a part of this. Family. But this place? Here? This is my land. And you live here, so you’ve become mine.”

“Wait, does every piece of land have a gnome?” Struck, I thought about all the thousands of gnomes that could be running around Loren Brae.

“Nae, lass. Just the enchanted ones. I have a small community here. Several of my cousins are up at the castle. We meet at the full moon and have ourselves a mead or three.” Gnorman laughed, spewing mushroom bits, as he slapped his knee.

“You have cousins at the castle,” I repeated slowly. “Does Archie know about them?” Archie and Hilda were the castle caretakers and Archie mainly looked after the expansive gardens.

“He’s onto us, that’s for sure. Love that cranky old man. He doesn’t take anyone’s crap.”

“No. No, he does not.” I held up a bundle of thyme. “How did you know that I needed this to be done like this?”

“Because that’s what the spell wants.”

“And I’m just meant to go burn it?”

“That and state the intent. Intent is everything in magick, lass.”

“Can I screw anything up? Make it worse?”

“Nae.” Gnorman shook his head and picked mushroom bits from his beard. “Again, it’s about intent. If you’re intention is to do good and to help someone, you’ll be just fine.”

“Brilliant,” I said, picking up the bundles and putting them into my handbag. I left Gnorman with his mushroom while I returned to the closet where Gran’s magickal box of seeds was housed. I hadn’t had enough time to look through everything in the box and another thought had popped in my head. Rifling through the seed packs, I found what I was looking for.

“Chili seeds for the unblocking of negative energy. Be it anger, a curse, or negative thoughts, diffuse chilis in oil and follow the attached spell,” I read out loud. Opening the packet, I gently tapped two seeds out, and closed it carefully before returning the box to the shelf. Then I returned to the greenhouse, retrieved two seedling pots, and my potting mix. Bringing it all to the table where Gnorman sprawled out,

looking satiated even though he'd only gotten through half his mushroom, I began to pot the seeds.

“Gnorman, can you leave here?”

“Are you booting me out then?” Gnorman asked, sitting up with an indignant expression on his face.

“No, not at all. I’m just wondering if you can come help me with something.”

“If it’s related to a garden, I can.” His tone inferred that I would be unable to do any good on my own without him anyway.

“Great. If you don’t mind being assigned a task then?”

Gnorman popped up, surprisingly agile for his full stomach, and saluted me.

“Aye, lassie. Ready to serve.”

“I’ll need these peppers to grow and then they must be infused in oil. Can that be done ... relatively quickly?” Normally, this process would take weeks, but apparently, the rules weren’t the same when magick was involved.

“Just leave it to me, hen.”

Owen’s car was already gone when I got to my van, and I wondered where he was off to today. Not that it mattered. The man could do what he pleased with his time. I stopped short when I saw a piece of paper and a pretty gold leaf, the points just tingeing to red, tucked under my windscreen wiper.

The leaf said to the tree, “I’m falling for you.”

A garden pun.

My heart warmed, feeling like a balloon expanding in my chest, and I pressed the paper to my lips for a moment before carefully folding it and tucking it in my handbag. Holding up the leaf, I twirled it, a shaft of sunlight spearing it and igniting it like a flame in my hand. That’s how I felt, I realized, when I was around Owen. Lit up inside, burning from within, aching for his touch. His kiss last night had knocked me off the ledge

of attraction into the quicksand of desire that threatened to swallow me whole.

The thing that worried me the most was, if I let this man into my bed, my heart—*my life*—what would happen when he left? There would be this gaping Owen-sized hole where I'd once been relatively happy with my day-to-day life. Shaking my head, I rounded the van and got behind the wheel, my thoughts pinging around my head like ping-pong balls in one of those lotto machines.

Agnes was likely right, and I needed to proceed with caution. Why reveal my magick to Owen only to have him leave anyway? It would save me from potentially getting rejected for who I was, while also protecting Loren Brae. As much as I hated it, I was beginning to agree that we needed to shield the truth from Owen.

See? This was why I hung out with plants. Plants I could understand. Instinctively, I knew when they needed more water, more shade, when they needed to be nurtured, and those that needed to be left alone. Humans were complicated. Nature was my happy place, and it is the reason I was convinced I'd eventually ascend to becoming a forest witch hermit that the local kids whisper about when they run past my cottage.

Well, you're already the witch.

The thought almost had me driving off the road, and despite all my misgivings, I laughed. Slamming my hand on the steering wheel, I let the laughter keep coming, because damn it, yes, I was a witch.

And I was off to do some witchy shit.

Loving this turn that my life had taken, even if it complicated matters, made me feel powerful in a way that I hadn't even known that I'd needed. But now, as I pulled in front of Greta's house, I felt lighter. In charge. I'd heard that someone was struggling, and now I could do something about it.

It was a cute, white stone house with deep green shutters and a children's bicycle leaning on the gate. I paused, realizing

I should practice what I was going to say, and then just decided to wing it. I'd already checked, and luck would have it that tonight was a new moon. Or maybe everything had lined up to bring me here, in this moment, to try and ease a woman's suffering. The weight of what I was going to try to do settled on my shoulders and I took a steadying breath before grabbing my garden staff and walking to the front door. Having the staff with me calmed me, and the handle warmed to my touch, as though energy flowed through the wood. And maybe it did, for all I knew. I was magick now after all.

A child of about seven answered the door, looking up at me with owlsh eyes. A sticky red stain surrounded his lips.

"Is your mum home?"

"She's not well," his voice rasped, as though he'd been talking too much, and I smiled gently at him.

"I know. That's why I'm here. Can you take me to her?"

The child did as I asked, and while I made a mental note to discuss security with him on the way out, instead I followed him through a living room cluttered with toys and books. A second child, a girl, watched cartoons on the television while coloring in a book. I followed the boy down a narrow hallway that led to a door that was half-open. When I poked my head in, I found a dimly lit room, and a woman lying on a bed staring at the ceiling.

"Mum, someone's here."

"Tell them to go away."

"Greta, I'm already here. It's Shona. You may remember me from the market? I sell the flowers and the produce?"

Greta simply turned her head and looked at me, and even from here her grief was palpable.

"Go on, Jacob, I'll see Shona."

I closed the door after Jacob left and crossed to Greta, feeling awkward standing over her. Greta shifted, sitting up and propping a pillow behind her.

“I can guess why you’re here.” Greta twisted the band on her finger, staring down at her palms. “You didn’t have to come by. I’ll be fine.”

I pressed my lips together as I considered my words.

“Your friends are pretty worried about you, Greta. Have you been able to talk to someone, maybe a therapist?”

“I finally have an appointment next week.” Greta shrugged as though to imply it wouldn’t do much.

“I ... I think that I might be able to help you. A little bit, at least.”

Greta turned empty eyes on me. “Unless you can bring him back to me, I’m not sure there’s much you can do.” She said it in such a steadfast manner, as though she just accepted she would always hurt this much.

“Listen ... are you open to nontraditional ways of healing? Like, you know, if I maybe sage the place and just kind of move some of the stagnant energy around. Would you be open to that?”

“What do you mean move the energy around?” Greta reached out and grabbed my arm, her grip surprisingly strong. “I don’t want to forget him. Do you understand me? If he’s here, in whatever form, I don’t want to lose that.”

It took me a moment to realize she meant that his ghost might be here. My eyes darted around the room, because now I was wondering the same thing. Sophie and Agnes hadn’t mentioned anything about ghosts, though they’d told me there was a ghost coo named Clyde that haunted the castle.

“I don’t think that’s what this will do. What I’d like to do is to help you with your grief. To make it a touch more manageable, at the very least, so you can feel like you can breathe.” I eased onto the bed as Greta’s grip tightened.

“If I stop grieving ... I don’t want him to think that I didn’t love him.” Tears slipped down her cheeks, and I realized she was using her grief to prove she’d loved her husband. Or perhaps it’s more than that. Grief was a multi-layered emotion. I was still grieving the loss of Gran, but it didn’t feel as raw as

it had five years ago. There was still a Gran-sized hole in my heart that would never be filled, but the gaping wound didn't feel as grim. *I didn't feel as grim.*

“I don't think that's how it works. Love is love, Greta. It's always there. He knew, and knows, you love him. But you're stuck right now, drowning in this emotion, and I'm hoping that I can help you take a tiny step forward is all. It's not about forgetting him or not loving him anymore. If anything, it's to celebrate your love for him by living.”

“He'd hate to see me like this,” Greta whispered. Gently, I pulled her hand from my arm and gave it a squeeze.

“Let's see what we can do about that, shall we? Mind if I prop the window open?”

“No.” Greta shook her head, tears coursing down her face. I swallowed against a thick lump in my throat. Her grief was a palpable, living thing, so consuming, that no wonder everyone was worried about her. She'd drown in it if something didn't shift soon. I hoped to be that shift.

Standing by the window, I pulled out the bundle of thyme and lit it. At first, we both said nothing, simply watching as the smoke unfurled from the dried leaves, curling up into the air. I did my best to focus on that thread of magick coiled inside of me.

“What do you want, Greta? Right now, in this moment? We can't bring him back. But what do you want?”

“I want to breathe without it hurting,” Greta gasped, holding a fist to her chest as tears poured down her face. “I want to be able to get up. To move. To think without every step, every second, reminding me he isn't here. And it makes me feel so ... guilty.” The last word was barely a whisper. “I don't want to forget him. He was a gift to my very soul. But I can't breathe. Through the loss. Through the grief.”

There it was. She would feel guilty if she didn't grieve him.

“What if we tried to take the guilt out of it? You're allowed to feel how you feel. And instead, we see if you can move

forward by just focusing on the love you had for him.”

“I’d like that.” Greta bawled. “The kids ... I’m not being a good mother.”

“You’re being human. And that’s very much allowed.” Focusing on that power inside me, I pulled it upwards, feeling it flow through my hand and into the bundle of thyme. Walking around the room, I waved it into the corners, and thought about what I wanted her to say.

“Repeat after me.” I looked to Greta, and she nodded. “I want to move on, but never forget. Love won’t lead me wrong, and this is the intent I now set.”

Greta repeated my words, her eyes on me. Granted I couldn’t claim to be a poet or a wordsmith, but it was the best I could come up with. Drawing close, I waved the bundle of thyme around her softly, and she closed her eyes, breathing deeply. The magick inside me swelled, and it rushed through my hands, and for a moment I saw it shimmer, curling among the tendrils of smoke, before winking out. My eyebrows shot to my hairline, and I went back to the window, tamping the bundle of twigs out and then left it there in case she wanted to burn it again. Really, I just needed a moment to steady myself from the heady rush of magick. Actual magick. I knew I had it, I’d seen my plants grow at my request, hadn’t I? Yet, this was ... different. Powerful. A bit dizzying, really. A part of me wanted to squeal and jump up and down and race around the room. But now was not the time for such behavior.

“You know what, Shona? I do feel better.”

“Do you?” I turned to her, wondering if she was just saying that. Because secretly I was trying not to freak out that I’d just seen glitter magick hover in the air.

“I do. Like ... lighter maybe?” Greta shrugged. “Maybe I just needed someone to tell me that it was okay to not feel guilty if I stopped grieving as hard.”

And maybe that was just it. Either way, by the time I’d left, Greta was sitting on the floor coloring with her kids, her eyes much brighter than when I’d first arrived. I couldn’t help but

feel that maybe, just maybe, I'd helped. Magick or not, at least she was a step closer toward finding whatever healing path she landed on. I drove home, barely seeing the road, my own grief over the loss of my gran having surfaced. *I miss you so much, Gran. You were taken too soon.* Thoughts of her baking came to mind, and it brought me a moment of peace. *I can make one of her pies tonight.* That could honor her and I'd put on some of her favorite music while I cooked. Decided, I hopped from the van when I got home and reached for my walking stick.

My heart stilled.

Just beneath the handle a singular oval agate stone was now embedded in the wood.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



OWEN

The boat rental place had a kid that looked no older than twelve manning the front and when I'd casually mentioned the Kelpies, he'd bolted into the back room only to have a grizzled older man with heavy-soled work boots and worn denim overalls come out to speak with me. His dialect was so thick that I was having trouble understanding him.

I'd resigned myself to pointing at a canoe, and then to the loch, and he'd just shook his head.

“Ye cannae, d’ye ken?”

Smiling, because I had no clue with the man was saying, I left feeling like I'd been very neatly redirected from my line of questioning. Making a note in the Notes app on my phone, I walked down the street, following it as it curved along the banks of Loch Mirren. Based on my research, she ran nearly thirty miles long, was connected with the Sound of Jura, and hosted an abundance of sea life. Renowned for its oysters, summers usually brought hordes of tourists looking for good seafood and the pretty atmosphere.

Leaning on the railing that hugged the path and prevented anyone from falling into the water, I studied the small island in the center of the loch. It was an unusual spot for an island, now that I'd done some research on Loch Mirren. Her waters ran deep, over six hundred feet at her deepest, and according to my calculations that was where that little island was. I imagined one long pillar of rock, spearing from the murky

bottom, barely holding the island in place. I didn't know enough about topography to understand the makeup of islands and how lakes were formed, but I had an email off to a friend to look into it for me.

When in doubt, I asked people smarter than me.

Well, smarter than me in their given field, that is.

I picked up my phone, typing a quick text to check in on Ryan. He'd managed to get back home just fine and had promised me he was improving. Nevertheless, he was keenly interested in my discoveries, or lack thereof, in Loren Brae. I updated him on the boat man's rudeness, and he sent a picture of a bulldog back, reminding me to be stubborn.

Like I needed reminding.

Today was one of those glorious early fall days that craved apple cider, hayrides, and bonfires. It was cold enough to require a thick coat and cap—not the pink pom-pom one today but the navy one with the blue edging—and enough sun filtered through the clouds to keep the worst of the cold away. The trees that blanketed the hills on the other side of the loch were just shifting from gold to red, and their reflection spread across the smooth surface of the water. I snapped a few photos, because how could I not?

Was there really a monster lurking under the calm surface of Loch Mirren? It was so far-fetched that I had a hard time, in the light of a sunshiny fall day, to think there was. Yet that didn't account for people's weird behavior here anytime I mentioned the Kelpies. I'd been to the bakery, the corner market, and the boat rental shop and not a single person answered my questions about Kelpies. I had one more stop on my list for the day, and then I hoped to maybe find some takeout food and convince Shona to have dinner with me.

Shona knew something.

I could already sense that. She'd avoided my questions twice now, but since she'd told me the subject made her uncomfortable, I just had to figure out how to make her trust me enough to share what she didn't want to talk about. Which

was fair. If there really was something nefarious going on in Loren Brae, I couldn't exactly expect people to just welcome me in and tell me everything about it.

Particularly when I had a camera around my neck.

Turning, I set my sights on the last stop of the day—MacAlpine Castle. The main tourist draw of the town, aside from the lovely Loch Mirren that is, MacAlpine Castle was settled onto a hill and towered over the town like a pretentious grand dame. Tall hedges lined the driveway that curved up the hill spilling out into expansive manicured gardens. On the weekends, the castle threw its doors open and welcomed tourists to peruse the side of the castle kept historically accurate. From what Shona had told me, the other side had been converted into apartments for the staff and caretakers. A gnome peaked out from a bush, this one in bib overalls with a plaid shirt, and I grinned, thinking of Shona's gnomes. They must be a popular garden decoration in Loren Brae.

A sharp bark brought my head up, and I turned to see a chihuahua in a kilt race toward me. He skidded to a stop by a bush a few feet away, and growled at me, lifting his leg to pee as he did so.

“Excellent entrance, buddy. I'm suitably impressed,” I said. His lip curled back, and his growling increased. Another dog, this one a hybrid corgi type, waddled over with a loose tartan bow at her neck. She stopped at my feet, dropping into a sit, and looked up at me, her tongue lolling out in a smile.

“Hi, cutie.” I bent to give her a pet and the other dog let out a series of sharp barks.

“Sir Buster. That's enough.”

The dog stopped mid-bark, though he still let out short bursts of growls. I turned to see an older man with a shock of white hair, a flannel shirt with the cuffs rolled back, and gardening gloves on his hands. He smiled at me, his thick eyebrows raising in question.

“Can I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Owen. I’m staying down at Shona’s cottage.” I assumed he might know Shona since she supplied herbs to the restaurant here and had been up the other afternoon.

“Och, right. The filmmaker.” The way the man said it didn’t necessarily make it sound like a good thing. “I’m Archie, caretaker of this fine castle. What can I do for you?”

“Wow, you take care of this place, huh?” I craned my head up at the parapets where saltire flags fluttered in the wind. “What an incredible amount of history there must be here. Is it fascinating to work here?”

“Tours are on the weekend if you’re interested in the history.” Archie slapped his gloves on his hands, ignoring my question about if he enjoyed his work.

“I’ll be sure to take one. Does the tour mention anything about the Kelpies?” I asked, keeping my eyes on his face to gauge his reaction.

“You’ll have to take it and see.” Archie leveled me a look.

“That’s fair.” I nodded. “And yourself? Any old stories running through the legends of Loren Brae you’re keen to share?”

Archie slapped the gloves on his hand again, rocking back on his heels.

“Since you’re a guest of Shona’s, I’ll tell it you straight,” Archie began, and I got the sense that he would gladly kick me ass over end down the hill if I said anything that aggravated him. “We’re a friendly sort, us Scots, but you’re new to town. We don’t know you all that well. Most of us won’t take too kindly to you asking too many questions, you ken?”

Loud and clear.

At least I could appreciate him being straight with me.

Interestingly, Archie looked to be of the same vintage as the gruff boat man, and yet, I could *almost* understand every word. *It would be fun to listen to him tell his stories, whether it be about the Kelpies or not.* He had, however, been the first

person to be so direct with me, so I thought it best to be direct back.

“And how would you suggest that one circumvent such a dilemma then? If one were so inclined to continue seeking answers to their questions?”

Another man appeared behind Archie, younger and handsome, walking with the confident air of someone who lived on this land. Sir Buster ran to him and growled, but the man just bent and scooped him up.

“Hello.”

“Lachlan, this is Owen. He’s renting Shona’s new holiday cottage. He makes movies. And he’s asking about the Kelpies. The lad’s wondering why people aren’t answering his questions. If there’s a better way to get us to open up to him.”

“Och, well, there sure is, lad.” Lachlan clapped his hand on my shoulder then placed the still-growling Sir Buster on the ground. He raced off, but I was sure I saw him toss me a growly look over his shoulder first. “How deep’s your wallet?”

“Ah, it’s like that then.” I reached for my wallet, but Lachlan waved it away.

“Not here, lad. To the pub we go.”

“To the pub?”

“That’s right, let’s say, we just need to test your mettle first before we have a wee chat.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked to Archie.

“Well, lad? Do you want answers or not?”

I had a feeling I was about to get very drunk. Resigning myself to a wicked hangover, I shrugged.

“All right then, to the pub it is.”

“That’s grand. I’ll just call my mate, Munroe, and we’ll be on our way.” Lachlan whistled for the dogs and disappeared around the corner of the castle, and I couldn’t decide if I was about to be royally hazed or if this would lead to answers.

“Do you like whisky?” Archie asked, rocking back on his heels, an amused light in his eyes.

“Luckily, I do.”

“You’ll do just fine then, lad. Keep your chin up. We’ll sort it out one way or the other.”

Honestly, I couldn’t decide what was more terrifying, going on a bender with a group of Scots I didn’t know who were trying to decide if they could trust me, or whatever it was “sorting it out” entailed in the eyes of Archie.

Either way, I was about to find out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



SHONA

“You’ve passed a challenge.” Agnes squealed and gave me a quick hug before lifting the walking stick to examine the agate. “Och, it’s a pretty stone. Moss agate, if I had to take a guess.”

“Ah sure, is that the lovely design then?” The stone looked like moss, now that I examined it further, a pretty green band unfurling through milky white.

“Aye, certainly we could have it tested, but I think that’s what it is.”

I’d stopped at Bonnie Books a few minutes before closing time, walking stick in hand, and was lucky to find Agnes alone in the shop. A welcoming space, with arched windows overlooking the loch, high ceilings, and low-slung chairs by a fireplace that invited cozying up, Bonnie Books was one of my favorite spots in town. Moody art hung on the brick walls, and strategically placed shelves of books created pockets of sitting areas around the store. Celtic music lilted lightly in the background, and soft white twinkle lights added ambience.

I traced my finger over the agate. It was astonishing, really, how neatly the stone melded into the wood as though it had always been a part of the cane. It served as a stark reminder that I had a lot to learn about magick.

“What happens once I pass the challenges?”

“You’re officially a member of the Order. This is like a trial basis, I guess. Once you’re in, we continue on to find the next member. When the Order is complete, we can banish the Kelpies for good and Loren Brae will return to peace.”

“Banish the Kelpies? Cool, cool. That doesn’t sound terrifying in the slightest.” I ran my finger over the agate, the stone warming to my touch.

“It might be. Or it could be a simple ritual. Archie has his thoughts on it, but I’ve got mine. Research is showing different ways it has been handled through the centuries.” Agnes nodded to a stack of books on her table. “Has Owen been asking more questions? I heard he was down by the boat rental place today.”

“Was he?” My stomach twisted as I thought about the cute note he’d left on my windscreen earlier. “Agnes, do I really have to keep this a secret from him? Why can’t we trust him with it?”

Agnes’s head flew up from where she was adding her till for the day in a ledger. The light of battle shone in her eyes.

“Absolutely *not*, Shona. You can’t be serious, can you?”

“It’s just that ...” I rubbed the agate for luck. “He’s really nice. I think he’s a good guy. If we expressed our concerns, I don’t think he’d really make a movie about it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Agnes stood, throwing her hand out. “This is the exposé that documentary filmmakers would *kill* for. To break this type of feature around the world? Can you imagine the eyewitness testimonials? Or, God forbid, he actually records one of the Kelpie’s screams in the night? Let alone does something stupid like tries to go to the island to film?”

“He wouldn’t go out there, I’m sure.”

“Are you? Because his friend seemed pretty keen on him staying here to get answers. And where did his friend get hurt? The island.”

“But—”

“No, Shona. We’re not talking to him about this. That’s mental. Do you want to put a bullseye on Loren Brae’s back?”

“No,” I said, miserable.

“This could be catastrophic for us. You *have* to manage him.” Agnes tilted her head at me, taking in my expression. Her eyes widened. “You fancy him, don’t you?”

I gave a noncommittal shrug.

“It’s hard not to. I think he’s really great, Agnes.”

“Well shag him if you have to, Shona. Get it out of your system. You don’t have to take the whole town down with you because you fancy a lad.”

“Damn it, Agnes. This is so not like you. What’s gotten into you?” I demanded, surprised to feel tears of frustration well. Seeing my look, Agnes rounded the table and put her arms around me, patting me on the back.

“I’m sorry. I’m a bit tetchy is all. Having Owen here is stressing me out. We’re working so hard to keep these rumors under wraps, and it feels like trying to stop a burst dam with a sieve. I know I sound harsh, but this is coming from a place of caring.”

“I get it.” I did. I really did understand. Agnes wasn’t wrong, but I was hoping we could find a different way. One that didn’t force me to hide who I was from Owen.

Trust the lad.

Gnorman’s words echoed in my head, and I changed the topic of conversation.

“By the way, have I mentioned that I also have a familiar? His name is Gnorman, with a silent G, and he’s a gnome.”

Agnes pulled back, her mouth dropping open, and she shook my shoulders until I squealed.

“You. Have. A. Gnome. And this is the first I’m hearing of it?” Agnes demanded. “We need to go see him. I’m obsessed already. Tell me everything.”

“I will, I will.” I eased out of her grip. “How about a pint? I could use one after today.”

“Perfect. Let me just finish up the till, and we can go.”

I took the time while Agnes finished closing to calm myself down. There was no use in getting out of sorts about Agnes’s decision for us to keep the Kelpies from Owen. The reality was, he was a famous filmmaker and a wildcard when it came to what he’d say about Loren Brae. Knowing Owen’s passion for the truth, I could hardly ask him to lie on our behalf. A thought occurred to me.

“Say, Agnes?” I turned from admiring a shelf of wee ceramic flowerpots to see Agnes with her handbag on her shoulder.

“Aye?”

“What if we control the narrative? Wouldn’t you prefer to be the one to talk to Owen about this? The more he hears ‘no’ the more he’ll dig in, don’t you think? Wouldn’t it be better if it comes from us?”

Please say yes, please say yes.

“That’s a thought, I suppose. I’ll have to run it by Archie and Hilda. If anything, it’s them that should be talking to Owen. They know the full history, they’re sort of the caretakers of the Order as well. If it comes from anyone, it should be them.”

I breathed out a small sigh of relief. At least it hadn’t been a straight no. Maybe there was a way around this that didn’t involve me lying to Owen.

A blustery night, the wind cut across the loch and buffeted the buildings, spraying a smattering of sea water onto the pavement as we crossed the street to the pub. Light bloomed from the paned windows, inviting us in, and when we pulled the thick wooden door open, we were hit with the warm scents of bacon and garlic from the kitchen. Hanging our coats at the rack in the narrow front hall, we walked through a stone passageway that spilled us out into the main pub.

A true Scottish pub, the Tippy Thistle was a hodgepodge conglomeration of rooms that had been built out and added on through the years. Thick grey stone walls showcased vintage whisky and Guinness advertisements, a fire crackled in the large fireplace, and worn wooden tables with tartan chairs completed the ambience.

A chorus of voices greeted our arrival.

“Och, bloody hell. What have we got here?” Agnes grumbled.

At the gleaming wood bar that dominated the main room, Lachlan, Archie, Munroe, and Graham all leaned in around a very smiley, and very drunk, Owen.

“Shona!” Owen crowed, and almost toppled off his stool before Lachlan caught his arm. “Look, guys. It’s my beautiful landlord. Isn’t she just the prettiest thing you ever did see?”

My face heated, and Agnes swiveled her head to look at me, an eyebrow raised.

“You did *not* mention the fact that he fancies you back.”

“Yes, um, we didn’t get that far in our conversation.”

“Hmm,” Agnes hummed. “This may change things.”

I perked up, hoping that Agnes might be able to see things from my point of view now.

“Shona Shona bo-bona, banana fama fo fama,” Owen sang, enveloping me in a hug that almost toppled me over when I drew close. Grinning, I looked down at where he’d wrapped his arms around me and clung to me like a monkey on a tree.

“What have these lads done to you?” I made a tscking sound. Glancing up, I narrowed my eyes at Graham, the handsome bartender that Owen was worried I’d once dated, and he gave me a cheeky wink. Munroe, owner of Common Gin and best friends to Lachlan and Graham, shrugged.

“I’m just along for the ride, Shona.”

“You own a distillery, Munroe. Shouldn’t you promote responsible drinking?” I chided him. His shoulders hunched, and I immediately felt bad. Criticizing Munroe was like kicking a golden retriever. I narrowed in on Graham again. He owned the establishment, so this was technically his fault. “And you, Graham. What kind of pub owner do you call yourself then? I could get you in trouble for overserving.”

Graham winced, wiping the bar with a towel, his shirt rolled back to reveal tattoos on his forearms.

“Sorry, Shona.”

“Oh, Shona gets an apology, does she?” Agnes took a seat at the bar and glared at Graham. “I’m still waiting on one for the mess of yours I had to clean up yesterday.”

“What mess?” Distracted, I patted Owen’s back lightly as he nuzzled into my side. I couldn’t lie, it felt damn good to have the hottest man in the bar wrapped around me. And based on the combined handsomeness of the men in my vicinity, that was saying a *lot* about Owen.

“Och, come on, Agnes. It was nothing.”

“It certainly was not nothing,” Agnes seethed. “Here I come in for my after-work glass of wine and next thing I know I’ve got my arms full of a crying woman, broken-hearted over this one’s rejection.”

“In fairness, she’d come in well past tipsy, and I refused to serve her,” Graham explained.

“At which point she mentioned that you slept with her and snuck out of her house in the middle of the night.” Agnes arched a brow at Graham, and his scowl deepened.

“That’s not very nice,” Owen observed and Graham slid him a glass of water.

“Not that you’ll believe me, but I told her that I couldn’t stay the night as I had an early morning appointment the next day. And we both knew the score. She was just using me to feel good about herself after her breakup.”

“And you? What were you using her for?”

Graham leveled Agnes a look that had my own insides heating.

“Distraction.”

Agnes rolled her eyes, but I couldn't help but catch a hint of longing flash through her eyes.

“When was this?”

“Yesterday,” Agnes bit out.

“You had a one-night stand yesterday?”

“No, it was like two years ago.” Graham sighed. “It's hardly my fault the lass has a long memory, is it? Can I get you ladies anything?”

I looked down at the beaming Owen and smiled.

“Glass of cab for me, please.”

“Same,” Agnes said, turning to skewer Lachlan with a look. “What did you do to the poor lad?”

“He came to the castle. Asked some questions we weren't ready to answer. Needed to see what the lad was made of first,” Archie said.

“Or you just wanted to get him pissed and throw him off track,” Agnes said, sighing and resting her head in her hands.

“Shona won't let me plow her field,” Owen announced, and my cheeks heated.

“Is that right? I didn't take you for a prude, Shona.” Graham grinned at me as he passed me my glass of wine, and I took a slurping gulp to cover my embarrassment.

“She's not. It's a ... a gardening pun. I want to make her bloom for me. Like those pretty flowers,” Owen insisted.

Agnes mock fanned her face.

“Och, Shona. Why won't you bloom for this fine gentleman?” Lachlan leaned in, and I glared at him.

“Oh, so now he's a fine gentleman? You've gone and gotten him pissed, so now that's enough for you to like him?” I asked.

“It’s what men do,” Owen insisted, looking up at me. “They didn’t like me asking about the Kelpies, but I think they’re warming up to me.”

I met Archie’s eyes. He shrugged.

“The lad’s got the gist of it.”

“Is that true? You’re warming up to him?” I looked to Lachlan. He’d always been the unofficial mayor of this town, leading tours at MacAlpine, and Sophie was his partner. Most of us, I believed, would follow his lead.

“I mean, he’s worked with Ewan McGregor,” Lachlan explained as if that said all I needed to know.

“He’s a good guy,” Owen offered. “Knew his lines. Kept his focus. Professional. And had the best stories.”

“Is that all it takes then? He needs to know famous people and he’s one of the gang now?” I asked, amused. I couldn’t help but feel some relief, hoping that now I could be more open with Owen about the Kelpies.

“It doesn’t hurt. Ewan was in the Star Wars movies.” Graham shrugged.

“Not the good ones,” Archie said, and he might as well have thrown a match on a puddle of petrol the way the lads erupted.

“Not the good ones? Are you kidding me?” Lachlan sputtered.

“Arguably, *Return of the Jedi* is a cinematic masterpiece,” Archie said, downing his pint and holding it in the air for Graham.

“But the plot holes! The lack of attention to gravitational forces ...” Munroe shook his head.

“Yeah, but that’s what also makes it so great. You can’t make movies like that these days, not without immediately being fact-checked on everything.” Warming to the discussion, Owen extracted himself from my arms and took a drink of his water. “Back then, you could just ride high on a great story

and let the viewers sort out the details when it came to whether the science checked out or not.”

“It’s a space opera. Built for emotion, not for precision.” Archie nodded his thanks as Graham slid him another pint. I blinked around at this group as they bent their heads to argue Star Wars. Hadn’t we just been terrified of revealing the Kelpies to a filmmaker? And now they were sitting around drunkenly dissecting space operas and ranking films?

What kind of parallel universe was I in?

“Yeah, but Baby Yoda ...” Agnes paused when all heads swiveled to look at her.

“His name is Groggu,” Graham said, in the same tone as if he was telling a two-year-old not to touch a hot stove. “That’s like calling every human baby—human baby—instead of by their name.”

“Is he not then? He looks like a baby Yoda, doesn’t he?” Agnes griped.

“He is, but that’s not his name. Listen, it’s not even ... he’s not even in a movie, Agnes.”

“*Empire Strikes Back* is the greatest Star Wars film of all time,” Munroe said, and Archie snapped his fingers, lifting his pint in a toast.

“There’s a good lad.”

“He’s not wrong,” Owen agreed.

“I can’t believe this,” Lachlan said. “You’re just going to ignore the movies that our mate, Ewan was in?”

“Oh, so he’s your mate now?” Agnes observed.

“He’s always been our mate. He’s Scottish, isn’t he?” Lachlan explained as though it made perfect sense that a famous actor would be his bestie simply by the default that he was Scottish.

“That does not make you mates,” Agnes argued.

“It does, Agnes. You don’t understand how lads work,” Lachlan argued.

Owen held his phone to his face, and I could see he was calling someone. When the caller answered, I gasped.

“Hey, man, how’s it going?”

“Is that—” Graham’s voice went up a level.

“Good, mate, good. Are you at the pub?” Ewan smiled when Owen turned the phone around to see everyone’s gaping looks.

“Yeah, bud. I’m in Loren Brae. It’s in Scotland,” Owen explained helpfully, and Ewan chuckled.

“I’ve heard of the place.”

“These guys claim that you’re one of their mates because you’re Scottish and therefore that makes you mates by default. The ladies disagree. Care to settle it so we can get back to our pints?”

“Hey, I didn’t disagree,” I said, throwing Agnes neatly under the bus.

“No problem. As much as I hate to disappoint these bonnie lasses, I’ll have to agree with the lads.”

“Did he just call me a bonnie lass?” Agnes whispered, her eyes shooting hearts at the phone screen.

“Thanks, bro. Good to see you.”

“Cheers, mate.”

Owen disconnected and we all took a collective breath before exploding.

“Ewan freaking McGregor! You heard that, right? We’re mates.” Lachlan jumped up, dancing around the pub.

“That’ll do, lad. That’ll do.” Archie clamped a hand on Owen’s shoulder, giving him an approving nod.

“Bonnie lass,” Agnes hummed.

“I call you a bonnie lass all the time, Agnes,” Graham growled.

“Pshh. You call every woman with a beating heart a bonnie lass.”

“I stand by that,” Graham said. “Women are beautiful.”

“None so pretty as my Shona here,” Owen put in and everyone quieted, casting speculative looks in our direction.

“Right, time to go. Owen, let’s get you home.”

“Oh perfect, I don’t think I can drink anymore.” Owen hung his head in shame. “I had hoped to keep up with the guys, but nope.”

“In fairness, we fed you whisky while we drank beer,” Lachlan said, and Agnes swatted him lightly on the head.

“That’s not playing fair.”

“Och, calm down. We needed to get an idea of the lad. Now we know.”

“Come on, you. Let’s go for a wander.” I looked to Graham, and he waved a hand at my glass, letting me know the drink was taken care of.

“You’ve got my card,” Owen said, pointing at Graham. “Just keep it open for the group here. I’ll collect it tomorrow.”

“Not a problem,” Graham said.

“Och, come on,” I said, hooking an arm through Owen’s. “That’s not fair. He shouldn’t have to buy rounds when he isn’t even here. You’re all better than that.”

“We won’t be putting any more rounds on his card,” Archie barked, and everyone nodded dutifully. With that, I dragged Owen outside, snagging our coats and walking stick on the way, and we started toward home. Luckily, the cool night air seemed to sober Owen a bit, and he was steady on his feet.

“I think you made their night. No, probably their year,” I said, bumping Owen’s shoulder. He looked at me, his blue eyes lighting up.

“It’s not a tool I use often, but I will deploy it when necessary.”

I pulled up short, grabbing his arm, and leaning in closer. Staring into his eyes, I scowled.

“Why, Owen Williams. You’re not drunk at all!” I exclaimed, seeing the amusement in his eyes.

“I wouldn’t say I’m entirely sober.” Owen laughed, stealing a quick kiss while I sputtered. “But I’m nowhere near as drunk as I made out to be.”

“You faked it.”

“Just a bit. It made them feel more comfortable, and I don’t mind looking like a fool on occasion.”

“I thought you didn’t lie.”

“True.” Owen tilted his head as he thought about it. “I suppose that’s a bit of a lie, isn’t it? Don’t worry, I didn’t ask a single question. I let them interrogate me and gave nothing but the truth.”

“Promise?” I asked.

“Of course.” Owen swung an arm around my shoulders, pulling me in as we turned down a lane with cobblestone streets. “Sometimes you just have to play the game, Shona. I’m new in town, I’m asking questions they don’t like. If it helps them to feel more comfortable with me, then I’m game. Next time I have a talk with them, maybe they’ll open up more. But I’ll be sober when I do it and they’ll know what information I’m after. It’s a win-win.”

“But—”

A blur of light and fur stopped us in our tracks, and I was screaming before my feet left the ground and Owen was racing down the street, carrying me in his arms like a fireman would carry a victim out of a burning building.

“What the hell was—”

“Ahhhhh!” We both screamed again as a Highland coo materialized in front of us, bellowing.

“What does it want?” Owen demanded.

“How the hell do I know?” I gasped, wrapping my arms so tightly around Owen’s neck that he choked.

“You live here.”

“That doesn’t mean I know what the ghosts want.” I eyed the coo dubiously as it tilted its head at us.

He disappeared.

“What the hell?” Owen gasped, and I realized I was crushing his windpipe. I eased my grip.

“Sorry about that.”

“Was that a ghost cow?”

“A coo,” I corrected. “A Highland coo, to be exact. I think his name is Clyde.”

“Clyde? You name your ghost coos here?”

Another bellow sounded directly behind us, almost taking us to the brink of death from fright, and Owen careened in a wide arc, turning until we saw Clyde with my walking stick at his feet. I’d dropped it in fright.

“He brought you your stick,” Owen said, marveling at the coo. I released my arms and slid down his body, gingerly bending to pick up my cane, praying the coo didn’t make any sudden movements.

“Thanks, Clyde.”

“I have to get this on camera,” Owen said, reaching for the camera bag slung around his shoulder.

Instantly, Clyde disappeared. Owen frowned.

“Clyde? Buddy? Come on back. We want to play!”

“I don’t think he wants to be on camera,” I said.

None of us wanted this to be on camera, I added silently.

Owen caught my expression and stopped fiddling with his camera bag. He was astute, I’d give him that.

“That’s fair. We should all have a choice in what we want to share.”

The way he said it, like he knew that I was holding back on him, made my stomach twist. Even so, I wasn’t yet ready to tell him about my magick.

The right time would present itself. I took his hand.
“Come on, Hollywood. Let’s get food.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



SHONA

After a delicious takeaway dinner of fish and chips from the chippie and several soul-sizzling kisses that—that, much to my embarrassment, made me almost beg for Owen to join me in the bedroom—we’d gone our separate ways.

Apparently, he wanted to take his time with me on a night he hadn’t been drinking.

Those were his words.

Mine were a bit less polite.

The thought was enough to make me dizzy, and I was caught between frustration and arousal as he’d left me, my lips swollen from his kisses. The man either had mind-boggling self-control, or he enjoyed taking his time. If I went with the side of me that was frustrated, then I was half-convinced he was enjoying drawing out the wait, building up the tension. It felt like a “filmmaker move”, building us toward the big climax.

So to speak.

Annoyed with him, and myself, because as much as I wanted the man, I was still holding secrets back from him. Which meant I’d probably not be comfortable taking him to my bed until I was honest about who and what I was. Which was also annoying, in its own right, because all of a sudden this was all feeling so much bigger than just a flirtation with someone traveling through for a few weeks. I wanted to keep

things light, and Owen kept doing things like leaving me notes, buying me flowers, and kissing me until I started to rearrange my future around him.

Entering the greenhouse the following morning, I chose some Bob Marley as background music, needing a bit of a lift today. A soft grunt caught my attention, and I bent my head below the table to see Eugene scuttle from his nest of blankets.

“Hey, buddy, how’s the job going?”

Eugene grinned up at me, which I took to mean he was on top of the pests in the greenhouse, and I picked him up to take him over to the tomatoes. Once we’d selected one that met his favor, I put him back so he could nestle into his towels with his treat. Freshening up his water, I returned to the closet where my gran’s carved box was. I still felt like there was more to discover, and I hadn’t had as much time as I wanted to really delve into what she’d left for me.

Humming along to the music, I struck gold when I dug to the bottom of the box and found a small leather-bound notebook beneath the stacks of seeds. Thumbing through it, tears sprung into my eyes at Gran’s careful handwriting.

I missed her.

But, at the very least, I had this. I had her flowers, her magick, and our memories. I would hold those to my heart every time I thought about her. My eyes caught on a note about the autumnal equinox, and I paused to read.

““The equinox is a special time of year to celebrate endings and new beginnings. Though the spring equinox is often considered the one of new birth and beginnings, I’ve always thought autumn to be so. Autumn is when we put our seeds in the ground to grow for the following year, after all. Now is the time of harvest, of growth, and new beginnings. To celebrate, do the following ritual under the full moon.”” My eyes widened when it suggested the ritual be done sky-clad. “Does she mean naked?”

“Aye lass, naked as a wee bairn.”

I dropped the notebook, clasping a hand over my heart.

“Damn it. We talked about this.”

“And yet, here we are. You keep forgetting that you live with a gnome.” Gnorman shrugged, walking over to look down at the notebook. “Yes, sky-clad is better.”

“It’s cold.”

“Deal with it.”

“What’s the point?”

“You should honor the change of seasons and connect with your magick. It will only make you more powerful.”

“Why?”

“The more you connect with nature’s power, the more in harmony you will be.”

I arched an eyebrow at the gnome, whose baseline ran more to disgruntled and grumpy than harmonious. I tried to imagine him, sitting cross-legged, meditating beneath a full moon, and the image was enough to cheer me up.

“Speaking of connecting with nature, I was wondering if you could come with me today.”

“Come with you? Are you getting rid of me?” Gnorman eyed me, suspicion written on his face.

“Yeah, I was going to tie you to a stone and dump you in the loch.” I laughed outright at the gnome’s horrified expression.

“And here I thought we were finally getting along.”

Touched, I bent to Gnorman. True, the gnome was a pain in my arse more often than not, but he’d grown on me.

“It was a joke, wee one.”

“There you are with the size thing again.”

“I never once have said something about your size.” I rolled my eyes, straightening. “God knows you can never bring up size around men in any capacity. They lose their damn minds.”

“Och, lass, if you’re now insulting my—”

“I’m not!” I raised my hand to stop him, desperately trying to push away any of that imagery. “Come with me to the orchard today, please.”

“The orchard?” Gnorman stopped in mid-sentence, his hand raised with a finger in the air. “Which orchard?”

“Derek’s orchard. It’s, mmm, like twenty minutes west of here? You’ll have to come in the van with me.”

“A trip? A proper trip?” Excitement gleamed in Gnorman’s eyes, and I realized he probably didn’t get to leave the property all that much.

“Aye. His trees aren’t producing, and his family will fall on tough times this winter. I’m wondering if you’d be able to help me understand what is going on. Maybe I can do something.”

“An entire orchard not producing?” Gnorman squinted, looking off in the distance as he thought. His little red hat bobbed as he stroked his beard. “That’s unusual. Do you know why?”

“That’s what I want to find out today. I was hoping to maybe bring the oil I asked you to infuse, if it’s ready of course. Maybe there’s some sort of energy block? Derek’s a good gardener, I can’t imagine he’s ignored any of the warning signs of rot, or soil changes, that kind of thing.”

“How long has he been with his orchard?”

I paused, amused at the way Gnorman phrased it. Like Derek and the orchard were in a relationship. I suppose they were, as I thought about my own gardens, and how being among the plants and caring for them was so interlinked with who I was as a person. I cast my mind back to how long Derek had been coming to the markets for.

“I’d say at least five years, since I’ve been back in Loren Brae.”

“Hmm. We’ll get to the bottom of this. The oil is ready.”

True to his word, I found small bottles of oil next to the pot of thyme, which had expanded in size again overnight. I’d

need to move it to a bigger spot or—

Reaching out, I traced my finger down a stem of the thyme plant.

“It’s okay to slow down now. You don’t have to grow so fast anymore. It’s time for a rest.”

The plant seemed to shudder under my touch, as though letting out a huge sigh of relief, and then relaxed. Well, that was interesting. Filing that experience away to examine more closely later, I picked up the bottles of oil, noting the twine and the little red seal with the gnome hat on it. Despite the gruff exterior, Gnorman had a flair for presentation.

“How do I transport you?” I looked down at him, unsure what the correct protocol was for taking your gnome with you.

“In that bag of yours.” Gnorman nodded to my tote bag and pulled the side down so he could clamber in. Giving him the bottles of oil, I picked up the bag, and peered down at him.

“All good?”

“Nae bother, lass. This will be fun.”

Leaving Eugene cozied up with his tomato, I left the lights on for two of my assistants who would be in today to continue winterizing my garden. I’d already texted them I’d be out for the morning. They’d met Eugene, and they knew what tasks needed to be done. That was one thing I liked about gardening, in general, was that I didn’t need to micromanage others all that much. Once I showed someone how to do things, it usually didn’t take them all that long to learn. Oftentimes, I’d have days in the garden, with my assistants where we barely spoke, each of us listening to our own music or podcasts on headphones, or if we were in the greenhouse, an agreed-upon show to listen to. It worked for us, and it was a way for me to be social without having to talk much.

The drive to the orchard was uneventful, other than Gnorman sitting with his hands plastered to the window, his mouth hanging open in awe as we drove. He commented on literally everything, keeping up a constant stream of chatter, so

that by the time we arrived I was both irked and charmed with his excitement.

“Can you really not travel far from your own lands then?” I asked him as I hitched the tote bag on my shoulder.

“We can, but it’s not easy, lass. Without transportation, there’s only so much distance we can cover.”

That made sense, and less I risk getting yelled at for commenting on his size, I didn’t want to say anything about his wee legs and trying to cover ground.

“Shona, is that you?” Derek called from behind a fence, holding a hand up to shade his eyes as he waved at me. Perfect, I wouldn’t have to go inside and make small talk with the family. I was feeling peopled out from the trip here. *Or maybe that should be gnomed out ...*

Sutton Orchards was a favorite in the area. Not only did they have the best apples at the market, but during the autumn, they’d have apple-picking, bonfires, and hot cider. Usually, the car park would be full this time of year. Looking around, a pang of sadness hit my heart. There was a lot of tradition for people to enjoy here. This was more than just about Derek’s family making money for the winter.

“Hiya, Derek. How are you getting on? Edith told me the orchard’s not been producing.” Why dance around the glaringly obvious issue at hand. I came to lean on the other side of the fence, shaking Derek’s hand. In his early fifties, with a ruddy complexion and a smile that warmed his eyes, Derek was the kind of man who helped little old ladies cross the street and talked gently to his trees.

“I can’t make heads or tails of it,” Derek said, shaking his head, his eyes heavy with sadness. Turning, we both studied the wide expanse of seemingly healthy trees.

Except that, not a single one bore fruit.

“Mind if I have a look around?” I asked, nodding toward the gate. “I’m sure you’ve thought of most things, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to get another set of eyes on it.”

Magickal ones at that.

“Please, be my guest. I could use any and all help I can get. I’ve tested the soil, looked for disease, tested the water, used different fertilizer, looked for pests ... I’m at an absolute loss. Conditions should have been great for a healthy harvest this year. Leaves are green, bark is healthy.” Derek shook his head, tugging at the brim of the cap he wore. “I wish I knew what was going on.”

“Well, I’ll take a wee wander. Happy to go alone if you’re busy.”

“By all means. I’ve got to run in and take a call with a supplier just now. We’ll have to renegotiate my contract for next year if I can’t deliver.”

“I hope that won’t be the case.”

Derek left me and headed inside, and I wandered through the rows of trees, sunlight filtering through their branches. When I was far enough away from the house, I knelt and put the bag on the ground for Gnorman to clamber out. He stood for a moment, hands on his hips, sniffing the wind.

“Good air here,” Gnorman said.

“Trees look healthy. The fruit buds started”—I pointed to the branches—“but then they didn’t keep going. What happened here?”

I also wondered if—and that was a big if—I was able to help, would the potential accelerated growth set off alarm bells for Derek? I had to weigh the pros and cons of helping carefully. Hearing a car door slam, I peeked around a trunk to the car park where Derek’s wife was getting their baby out of the car, two other young ones running in circles close by. I pressed my lips together. They were a nice family, always donating when they could, providing extra apples to food banks in the area. I’d never heard a bad word said about them. Reasonable prices, helpful people, and a bonus to the community. I might have to push my worries for my own reputation aside and just do what I could to help.

We carried on, weaving through the trees, Gnorman having fallen silent as we tried to get a vibe for what was going on

here. When we reached the edge of the orchard, we were met with another fence and a narrow dirt road on the other side of it. The trees on this end looked particularly unhappy, with the least amount of fruit buds on their branches. Contemplating what could have happened, I reached out and pressed my hands to the bark of one.

Pain flashed through me.

Fear.

Gasping, I pulled my hands away and looked down at them and then up at the tree.

“Gnorman?”

“Aye?” Gnorman poked his head around the trunk of another tree.

“Can you talk to the trees? Because when I just put my hands on them, I got like ... like they’re in pain? Or scared? Or is that just me projecting?”

“Let me see. Give a hand up, would you?” Gnorman nodded to the tree, and I bent and picked him up, lifting him as far as he would go, and he scrambled nimbly up the trunk until all I could see were small flashes of his red cap among the leaves. Turning once more, I scanned the small dirt road. No traffic came by, but there was a cluster of small homes at the end of the road.

“That’s me ready to come down,” Gnorman called, and I edged back to the trunk, lifting my hands as high as they would go so Gnorman could slide down into my palms. I moved with him to the fence, placing him gently on the railing, and he swung his legs over, an angry look on his face.

“What’s going on?”

“Och, there’s negative energy here all right. A curse.”

I gasped.

“A curse? Who cursed it?”

“Well, maybe I’m exaggerating. Stupid boys,” Gnorman grumbled. Turning, he lifted his chin in the direction of the

houses at the end of the road. “Group of lads. Using the trees for sling shot practice. It’s happening so often now, the trees are hurting and scared. Feel like they’re under attack. If you don’t have happy trees, you don’t have happy fruit.”

“Those little shites,” I said, straightening my shoulders and moving to the gate.

“Nae, hen. You’ll need to put the oil on the trees first. Have to move the negative energy through. Then you talk to the farmer. Look. You can see all the rocks. And the marks on the bark.”

He was right. Now that I looked more closely, I could see where tons of pebbles were hidden among the thick grass of the orchard bed. Upon closer examination, I could see the small scars on the bark of the trees where the rocks had gouged them.

“I’m sorry,” I said, reaching out to brush my hand over a tree. I pulled out the oil and looked at Gnorman. “How do I do this?”

“A few drops on each. Intent is to remove the negative energy, let the good flow again. They need to feel safe.”

I looked at the expanse of trees in the orchard. This was going to be quite a task.

“Think you can take a bottle and help?”

“Nae bother, lass.” Gnorman scrambled over and I handed him a bottle. “Remember, it’s all about intent.”

“Got it.” Opening the bottle, I dribbled a few drops at the base of the trunk and pressed my hand to the tree. “You’re safe now. We’ll take care of this, I promise. You’re free to grow.”

Over and over, I repeated some iteration of that chant, as I worked my way tirelessly through the orchard, doing my best to remove whatever fears and negative blocks the trees had. By the time I reached the front of the orchard, I’d used up all the oil I’d brought with me, but I could physically feel a palpable shift in the energy of the orchard. I didn’t know how to explain it, but a lightness now rippled through me when I placed my hands on a tree trunk.

“Come on, G. Best to get back in the bag before Derek comes out.”

“The G is— You know what? Never mind, I’m too happy to argue with you.” The gnome was actually smiling, something I had yet to see him do, and I realized how much he must have enjoyed a task that he could be helpful with. Putting the bag down, I let him scramble inside, before crossing the lot to meet Derek who had come back outside, the baby tucked at his hip.

“How’d you get on then?” Derek asked, juggling the baby who looked to be on the edges of a crying jag.

“I think I’ve found your problem,” I said, trying to choose my words carefully. I’d decided not to mention anything about my powers, or the oil I added to the tree. If the trees did end up producing fast enough for Derek to still have a harvest, well, I was just going to let him consider that a miracle of sorts. Not everything in life needed an explanation.

“Is that right?” Hope bloomed on Derek’s face.

“I found a lot of rocks in the grass along the fence in the back there. And marks consistent with slingshots on the trees. Any idea what could be going on there?”

“Bloody hell.” Derek shook his head. “I’ve told those lads that next time I was involving their parents.”

“I get the sense that the trees don’t feel safe to grow. Maybe that sounds weird, but ...” I shrugged one shoulder.

“Nope, totally makes sense. I get it.” Derek nodded at me, his face serious. “I pride myself on having happy trees. And if they’re getting hurt, well, they’re not happy. I should have caught that.”

“Well, you’re busy.” I nodded to the sniffling baby on his hip.

“I guess it just takes another gardener to see it. Not everyone is as in tune with nature as we are. You’ve got your gran’s touch, Shona. Thanks for coming by. I appreciate that you care.”

My heart warmed at his words, his smile like a cozy jumper on a cold winter's night.

"I hope to see you back at the market soon."

"You'll be the first to get some of our cider, I promise. Now, seems I have to sort out a few hellions." With that, Derek strode inside, and I smiled, feeling thankful for my gift and grateful to hopefully help.

On the drive home, Gnorman lounged on the seat, much more at ease than on the way over.

"You did a good job today, Shona."

"Thanks, G. You did as well."

"The man was right. Your gran would be proud. She had a kind heart. Gave as much of herself to others as she could. I miss her."

I blinked at the tears that wanted to rise. I hadn't even considered the fact that Gnorman might have formed an attachment to my gran as well.

"I do too."

I couldn't help wondering how long Gran and Gnorman spent together. I wished I'd known more about Gran's magick—*it might help me navigate this new world*. It was nice to be "working with" someone else who had been close to Gran. It was like having her with me again in some senses. I pulled into my driveway, humming absentmindedly, pleased with a morning's work well done. Hitching the bag onto my shoulder, I continued to chat.

"You know, G, I think we deserve a little treat."

"Perfect timing then."

I screamed and tripped over my feet, sprawling into Owen's arms, well, arm, as he caught me one-handed and held the bouquet of flowers away from my flailing arms.

"Whoa, there, darlin', calm down. It's just me."

Annoyed grumbles came from my bag as I righted myself, holding my hand to my heart. Owen grinned at me, rocking

back on his heels.

“I swear I’m not usually this clumsy.”

“I don’t mind being the reason for sweeping someone off their feet.”

Before I could offer a retort, Owen handed me the flowers. Rust-orange roses, just tingeing to red at the tips of the petals. I sighed. They were gorgeous, and he had to be traveling quite far to source these as I was the only real florist in town.

“These are stunning, Owen, thank you.”

“Is that the gnome in your purse ... or are you just happy to see me?” Owen laughed when I blinked up at him, confused, before looking down to see Gnorman in resting gnome face, poking out of my bag.

“Oh, right. Yeah, just taking him for a day out.” As soon as I said it, I could have kicked myself. *Who even does that?* I had to sound like I was completely out of touch with reality. Which, I was, but that was due to legitimate reasons like magick, not because I was incoherent.

“You take your gnome for a day out?”

“Sure, I mean, who doesn’t?”

I carefully placed the bundle of roses in my bag, covering Gnorman, and biting back a smile at his soft sound of protest.

“You continue to fascinate me, Shona.” Owen leaned in, and I tilted my head up, waiting for his kiss, as if I did this every day of the week. When his lips met mine, my heart shivered in my chest. “I’ve come to ask you for a date. I made reservations at Grasshopper tonight. Think you can join me?”

“A date?”

“Yes, a date. A real one. With food, and sultry looks, and a sexy good night kiss.”

Just a kiss?

At my pout, Owen threw his head back and laughed.

“Savor this time, Shona. The buildup makes it better.”

“Does it?” Or it made me extremely on edge and put much more weight on the big “moment” than I needed to be on there. I wasn’t good with added pressure, which is why I’d never been good at taking exams in school.

“Promise. So, see you at seven?”

Remembering my manners, I pasted a smile on my face, and Owen’s expression turned knowing.

“Aye, Owen. I’ll see you at seven. Thank you for inviting me.”

“Trust me, Shona. It’ll be worth the wait.” With one last kiss, he whistled his way back toward the cottage while I tried not to stamp my foot in frustration. That or melt into a pool of lust on the spot. It was a toss-up.

“It’ll be worth the wait,” Gnorman mimicked in a high voice, the flowers rustling as he jostled around in the bag.

“Remember the loch, Gnorman? I bet I could launch you in it from here.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



SHONA

A second agate had shown up in my cane—a lovely banded stone from what I could tell—and Agnes was over the moon. It seemed the Stone of Truth liked when we were altruistic with our powers, so I guess I just needed to find one more person to help and I'd be good to go. An official garden witch and all that. I hadn't shared the same over-the-top reaction as Agnes, as truly, I'd simply used something I was starting to believe in to help someone in dire need of help. It's just what we should do for one another. Gran had always said something along those lines. *Be generous with your gifts, sweet Shona. You have what others don't. Now I wondered if she'd been trying to tell me something more all along.*

A knock at the door sounded as I hung some turquoise drops from my ears, and I swore, checking the time on my phone. I was running late. Mainly because it took me half an hour to find the box with one of the few dresses I had. Then I had to steam the damn thing because I'd tossed it in the box when I'd moved and never pulled it out since. A moss-green velvet that fell in tiers at my feet, with wide sweeping sleeves and a low-cut V at the neckline, the dress was boho chic and sexy at the same time. I'd worn it often in Glasgow, but I hadn't found much occasion to here. I swung the door open as I finished fastening an earring and gestured for Owen to come inside while I fiddled with the clasp at my ear.

“Sorry I'm running late, I just need to—”

I was cut off by his lips on mine, hungry, and my body was flattened against the back of the door. His hard body pressed against me, pinning me, and my entire body sprung alive at his nearness.

Yes, yes, yes. Just like this. Hard and fast and without a second thought.

His mouth seared mine as he feasted on me, devouring my kisses like a starving man being offered food. He fanned his hands down my sides and my skin burned at his touch. I arched my body into his, moaning as his tongue licked across mine, needing, needing, needing.

He broke the kiss, and I was so mad I almost kned him in the crotch.

“Oh, mama, you are madder than a cat in a bathtub, aren’t you?” Owen correctly surmised my intention, angling his body away from mine, as he reached out and ran his hands down my arms to soothe me.

“Your choice of stopping points infuriates me,” I said.

“I understand, darlin’, but we’ll be late for our reservation if this continues.” Owen eased back from me and held out a bag that I hadn’t seen him put on the counter before he’d wall-slammed me and almost made me beg for release.

“Then why did you kiss me like that?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Because you looked so pretty in your dress that I couldn’t help myself.”

“Mmm,” I said, narrowing my eyes at the gift bag he held. “Why do you keep bringing me stuff?”

“Because I like to?”

“You know you don’t have to do that, right?” I reluctantly accepted the bag from him.

“I don’t have to do anything that I don’t want to do.”

I flashed Owen a look, and he sighed, pinching his nose.

“My mother’s only love language was gift giving. It’s engrained. Would you open it so we can go to dinner please?”

“Fine, but just know that I don’t expect this from you. I don’t—” I gasped as I pulled a gnome statue from the bag. This was a woman in a flirty bar wench type outfit, with a tartan skirt and a cheeky wink. “You got me a *gnome*?”

“You seem to really have a thing for gnomes.” Owen shrugged as I carefully placed the gnome on the counter, being as gentle as I could with it. It was hard for me to tell, but I was getting the distinct impression that this was not just a statue gnome either. Oh man, Gnorman was going to have a *fit*.

“Where did you find her?”

“At a resale shop in the town where I got your flowers.”

“Which are also lovely by the way.” I crouched and brought my face close to hers, blocking her from Owen’s views. When her eyes shifted slightly, I grinned. “Welcome, beautiful. I’m going to put you in the greenhouse with my other gnome, Gnorman. If that is okay with you?”

Her eyes gleamed, and I took that as acceptance.

“Yeah, I figured G could use a friend.”

“They’ll make a lovely pairing.” I was positively cheerful now, knowing how much Gnorman liked to be in control of his own little world. I couldn’t wait to see how this new arrival ruffled his feathers. She looked feisty. “Quick detour to drop her off and check on Eugene before we go?”

“Of course. How’s he doing?” Owen asked as I grabbed my handbag and coat, and he picked up the gnome. Together, we crossed the garden to the greenhouse, the night air crisp on my face and reminding me that winter was around the corner.

“He loves your toy,” I said, heaving the door open and spying Eugene racing around a corner. He skidded to a stop at my feet, toy in his mouth, and I grinned down at him. “He really likes it when you throw it for him.”

“No way. Like fetch? I’m in.” Owen ran an absentminded hand down my back as he crouched by Eugene and my entire

body shivered at his touch. He was so casual with his affection for me, touching, kissing, light caresses. I don't even think he realized he was doing it half the time, but it had reminded me of how little I was touched these days. I'd been out of the dating scene for so long that I realized just how much I missed it. Hugging, the weight of a man's body on mine, even just the casual brush of a fingertip across my cheek. Breaking my train of thought, I took the bag with the girl gnome and headed back toward the attached rooms where I'd last left Gnorman.

"I'll be right back, just want to put her down in a safe spot," I called.

"Yeah, buddy! Nice catch," Owen crowed, Eugene neatly distracting him. I tiptoed into the closet, for once catching Gnorman off guard.

"Gnormannnnn," I singsonged and he jumped, turning from where he'd been standing protection over my gran's ornamental chest.

"For fern's sake, hen." Gnorman glared at me.

"I have a wee surprise for you," I said, knowing my time was limited. Digging the gnome out of the gift bag, I put her on the table in front of Gnorman. He froze, his mouth hanging open.

"You going to stare at me all night, sugar, or introduce yourself?" The female gnome morphed to life and Gnorman snapped to attention.

"Um, I ... I ..."

Oh my God, was he stammering? I'm not going to lie, I was taking serious pleasure in seeing Gnorman disrupted. He crossed his arms over his chest, and I almost choked. *Is he flexing his muscles?*

"His name's Gnorman. But I call him G," I said, taking up the thread of conversation when Gnorman just stared pie-eyed at the little beauty. "I'm Shona, by the way, and this is my greenhouse. You're welcome here."

"You're the garden witch? I heard we had some fresh blood in town." The gnome smirked at me, fluffing her curls,

and I smiled. “I’m Gnora, by the way. Also with a silent G.”

Gnorman almost fell over.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I shook my head as Gnorman stumbled for words. “What are the odds?”

“I’d say they’re pretty good, wouldn’t you, hot stuff?” Gnora winked at Gnorman, and his chest puffed up, but he still seemed incapable of forming words. She looked up at me. “I love when they get all tongue-tied, don’t you?”

Did I? I had no idea. I’d never really tried to wield my feminine wiles as power, and I’d always admired women who were so confident in doing so.

“Hey,” Owen said, and both gnomes froze. He peered over my shoulder, and I shivered at his closeness. “Aw, they look cute together, don’t they?”

“I don’t know. She might be too good for Gnorman.” Gnorman’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly at me.

“No way, my man G has it going on. He’ll win her over, no problem.”

“We’ll see about that.” I turned, poking Owen in the stomach to get him to move back, and my legs almost went liquid under me when it felt like I was poking a cement wall. The man was seriously fit. “Let’s go.”

“Eugene is surprisingly fast,” Owen said as we left the greenhouse. “And far more agile than I expected. I didn’t even know that hedgehogs had the capacity for playing fetch.”

“Neither did I until you brought him a toy.”

On the drive to the castle, Owen’s phone rang, and he grimaced when his mother’s name came up on the console.

“Go ahead, answer it. It’s fine.”

Owen sighed.

“Mother, you’re on speaker phone, and I have a friend in the car with me.”

Just a friend? I pushed the thought away.

“Hi, Mrs. Williams. It’s Shona. We met briefly at your daughter’s wedding.”

“My name isn’t Williams any longer.” Her annoyed tone filled the car, and I grimaced.

“And how would Shona know that? What’s up, Mom?”

Another audible sniff.

“Well, now, I wouldn’t possibly want to interrupt.” *Sniff*. “I guess this explains why I haven’t heard from you like usual. You’ve got some plaything who is more important than me.” *Sniff*.

“Nope. Sorry, Mom. You don’t get to talk about a woman that I care deeply about like that. Don’t call me again unless it’s to apologize. I’m hanging up now.”

With that, Owen disconnected, and I stared at him in disbelief.

“Wow, is she really like that all the time?”

“The world is nothing but an inconvenience for Angela. Always the victim. Always.” His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, and I could just make out a muscle ticking in his cheek. Sympathy filled me.

The phone rang again, but Owen ignored the call.

“Do you want to see if she’ll apologize?”

“She won’t. She’s incapable of apologies. I thought a lot about what you said the other night, about her not getting a front-row seat to my life anymore. She had an opportunity to be kind there but didn’t. Hell, she had an opportunity to be remotely interested, *actually* interested, in something in my life outside of how much money my next movie will be making. But she chose not to. So, she can live with her choices.”

The phone rang again, and Owen silenced it. My emotions were at war inside me. One was absolute glee at the way he’d stood up for me in front of his mother as a woman he *cared deeply about*, and the other was sadness for this sweet man who was trying very hard to be a good son to his difficult

mother. I tried to gauge which route was the best to take with him at the moment. I suspected sympathy wouldn't land well, based on that muscle tic in his jaw.

“So, you care about me, huh?”

“Slightly.” Owen shrugged, a grin flirting at his lips.

“Just a little? A lot? Like how much?”

“Nosy little shit, aren't you? What's the scale?”

“Mmm, chocolate bars,” I said, tapping my lips with my finger, relieved to see some of the tension easing from his face.

“Almond Joy.” He looked at me in disbelief when I grimaced. “What? Oh, come on, they're my favorite.”

“Really? Of *all* the chocolate bars?”

“Yes, because they're different. I mean ... Snickers, Mars bar, they're all just chocolate, right? But Almond Joy sought to be something wildly different. I admire the Almond Joy. It's not basic even though its ingredients are simple.”

“I'm partial to KitKats,” I admitted, and Owen rolled his eyes as he pulled into a parking spot.

“Are those even considered a candy bar?”

“Of course, they are,” I exclaimed, bringing a hand to my heart. “They literally are, like, four bars. You break them apart. More to party with.”

“Want to know a dirty secret of mine?” Owen leaned and dropped his voice low and, why yes, *yes*, I did want to know every last one of his dirty secrets.

“Do tell.” I swallowed.

“I don't break the KitKat bars apart. I just bite them. All together.”

My mouth dropped open as Owen rounded the car and opened the door for me.

“Are you an absolute maniac?” I asked, holding the back of my hand to my head. “I fear I can't go to dinner, sir. You

must rush me to the hospital instead. Shock has rattled my nerves.”

“I bet they have smelling salts here. Come on, drama queen, you’ll survive this information.” Owen tugged me from the car even though I shook my head, biting back a smile.

“I’m not certain I can come back from this. I was waiting to find a fatal flaw, and I think this may be the thing that ruins us.”

“It’s unbe-leaf-able that you’ll let this destroy us. Can’t you go out on a limb for me?” It took me a moment to realize that Owen was using gardening puns on me.

“This is all a bit mulch for me,” I quipped, and Owen threw his head back and laughed. The little knot of tension that had formed in my gut when his mother called eased, and I let him escort me into the restaurant while we continued to tease each other mercilessly.

DINNER WAS PERFECT. It wasn’t just the delicious food or the pretty ambience of the restaurant, it was also this glow that seemed to surround our table, enveloping me in this little bubble of happiness. Grasshopper, Lia’s high-end comfort-food restaurant was doing great, and I was happy to see that most of the tables were filled. Located in what had once been a banquet hall for the castle, she’d halved the size of the hall by installing tall faux greenery walls, and sprinkled candles along the uneven stone walls. Fresh greenery centerpieces, crisp white linens, and thick wood beams in the ceiling made for a rustic and clean space, and I was delighted to finally be enjoying a proper dinner at the restaurant.

Except for one thing.

Eyes gleamed at me from a dark corner of the restaurant, making it hard for me to focus on the conversation. Every time I looked into the shadows, I could have sworn I was seeing eyes. Finally, I grew so flustered that I knew I had to talk to Lia.

I smiled at Owen before our dessert arrived and said, “Do you mind if I quickly pop through to the kitchen to tell Lia

how great this has all been? I'd invite you, but I'm not sure if I can get away with bringing a guest into her kitchen."

"No problem. I have a few quick emails to respond to anyway." Owen pulled out his phone, and I caught a quick glimpse of the missed calls before he swiped the notifications away.

"Be right back. I won't be long."

"Take your time. Tell her this was delicious."

I threaded my way through the tables, smiling at people I knew, my heart hammering in my chest. By the time I got to the kitchen, I was relieved to see there was a lull in service, and Lia was taking a sip of wine at the butcherblock countertop.

"Shona! Don't you look pretty?" Lia gave me a quick hug, and I pulled back, smiling at the bonnie American. She had her curls tucked under a bandana, apron on, her skin was flushed a pretty pink from the stove and a sparkly grasshopper pendant shone at her neck.

"Thank you. Dinner was fabulous, seriously out of this world. I can't believe it has taken me so long to properly eat here."

"It's only been a few months since we've opened." Lia laughed. "It's fine."

"Um, can I talk to you for a moment?" I shot a nervous look over her shoulder at the other people in the kitchen.

"Sure, come with me. Back in a minute," Lia called to her team. A chorus of, "Yes, Chef!" met her words. Lia laughed and shook her head. "They've all been watching *The Bear*."

"I don't know it." I rarely got a chance to watch television these days. Lia pulled me into an expansive pantry and crossed her arms.

"An American cooking drama. Kind of. Anyway, what's up? You look flustered. Is it your date? I got a look at him. He's hot. He's the film producer, right?"

There were no secrets in Loren Brae.

“Yeah, and he’s asking questions. He wants to film the Kelpies.” I pinched my nose as Lia’s eyes widened. “I know, I know, I’m not telling him about it.”

“Why not?” Lia asked.

“Are you kidding me? Agnes would be livid. She’s worried he’ll expose us to the world.”

“Do you think he will?”

Did I? Knowing him now, I wasn’t so sure.

“I don’t know.”

“So? Be honest with him. I mean, listen, at any time anyone can see the Kelpies. We can’t hide it forever. If it happens, it happens.”

That wasn’t what I had come in here to talk about, but it did soothe some of the worries I had. Maybe I needed to stop using Agnes as a sounding board and just trust my own gut.

“I’ll think about it. Hey, not to be like weird or anything, but I keep seeing eyes in a dark corner. Is that ... like is that your kitchen elf that Sophie told me about?”

“Brice, yes. Was he causing problems?” Lia whirled, hands on hips. “Brice!”

“No, no, no.” I put my hands in the air. “I was just wondering. Because I could see him.”

“Most people can’t. Unless he lets himself be seen. That’s his way of acknowledging who you are. As part of the Order.” Lia smiled, squeezing my arm, and lifted her chin toward a corner. Where it had once been empty, now a wee man sat, in overalls and a red cap.

“Brice, this is Shona.”

My eyes widened. You’d think I would have accepted seeing magickal beings, what with the gnomes and all, but still it shocked me to see a broonie.

“Pleased to meet you, Brice.” He chattered something indecipherable up at me and then winked out of sight.

I blew out a breath. And then dragged another one in. I mean, I was getting used to this whole magick thing, but truly, it was kind of wild.

“I have gnomes,” I blurted out and Lia squealed, grabbing my arm.

“No way! Oh, I’m going to have to come meet them.”

“Please do.”

A knock sounded at the door and one of Lia’s servers stuck their head in. “Sorry to interrupt, Chef.”

“Go, go. We’ll catch up soon. I’m glad we had this talk.”

“Here.” Lia reached above my head for a jar and handed it to me.

“What is this?”

“Tea.”

“For what?”

“To open your heart.”

“What? No, I don’t need that.” I pushed the tea back toward her, but she put her hands behind her back like a child.

“Just take it. Use it if you’re struggling. It’ll set you on the right course.”

“I ...” I saw the stubborn lift of her chin. “Fine, thank you, Lia.”

“Now go make out with that fine man of yours.”

“He’s not mine.”

Lia tapped the jar of tea as she left the pantry.

“Not yet, he’s not.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



SHONA

When Owen parked the car by his cottage, instead of stopping at mine, my nerves kicked up.

“Can I invite you in for a glass of wine?”

Owen’s voice rasped in the darkness of the car, and a long pull of awareness sizzled through me. Even though I’d practically begged him, twice now, to take me to bed, now that possibility actually presented itself, a million worries kicked up. What if he didn’t think I was attractive enough? What if I didn’t perform as well as those Hollywood actresses that knew every angle of their bodies and how to move to showcase themselves flawlessly?

I want to take my time with you ...

His words flashed back to me, and my skin tingled, as though I could already feel his touch. Without waiting for a response, Owen exited the car and hurried round to pull my door open, reaching for my hand. I took it, moving to step out, and jerked back as the seatbelt slammed into lock-mode.

“Shit,” I mumbled, unclicking the seatbelt. Was I doomed to hopelessly embarrass myself in front of this man? Owen pulled me gently from the car, kind enough not to remark on my tussle with the seatbelt, and I promptly caught my foot on a rock and sprawled forward.

Owen caught me before I fell, lifting me into his arms, his breath hot at my ear.

“Why, Miss Shona, I do believe you’ve fall-en for me.”

His words caused my brain to short-circuit, because no, he wasn’t wrong, but also, no, I wasn’t quite ready to share that information yet. That was my secret to hold in my heart and pull out to examine when nobody else was around to tell me that I was being stupid to fall for a man that lived a world away and had famous people on speed dial.

“Just one of *rose* things,” I said, when my brain caught up to garden puns.

Owen paused at his door, sliding me down the front of his body, and pressed me against the cottage. It had gotten colder, cold enough that I could see my breath come out in sharp pants in the soft light hanging over the door. Owen leaned down, bringing his forehead to mine, everywhere his body touched me causing little mini explosions of excitement. He shocked me by bringing his hard thigh between my legs, and pressing upward, until I locked my thighs around his.

I squirmed at the friction.

There was something deeply erotic about being pinned to the door like this, the cold air misting lightly with rain against my face, his thick thigh forcing me to brush myself against him. He didn’t move, his breath tickling my lips and the moment drew out between us, my insides going liquid.

I squeezed my thighs around his leg, craving more, and he moved, almost imperceptibly, but enough to have every nerve ending come to attention.

I hadn’t thought about how the velvet would feel, brushing against the soft silk of my underwear, when I’d dressed earlier that night. But now I rocked my hips, the silky slide of fabric between my legs meeting the hard muscles of his thigh. It felt wild, and wanton, standing in the misting rain, rocking my hips against his body as he held me pinned against the door.

I wanted more.

Reaching up, I gripped his neck and closed the gap between our mouths. Our teeth clinked, and I pulled back,

shocked and embarrassed. A low growl sounded in his throat when I broke the kiss, and then he was on me.

It was like being tossed into a fire.

Owen hauled me forward, his hands cupping my bum, digging into the flesh there and holding so tightly I was certain he'd leave fingerprints. He pulled me forward until I hung, suspended, and devoured my lips as he rocked me on his leg, the friction driving me crazy. Moaning into his mouth, I shamelessly rode him, bringing myself to the brink, desire making little spots dance across my eyes as I gasped for breath.

“Inside now.”

Owen broke the kiss to fumble with the door behind me, pushing it open, and I clung to him, burying my face in his neck, as my entire body shivered with unspent need. He carried me, literally *carried me* to the bed, and dropped me on the corner.

“Stay.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, but did as I was told, vibrating out of my skin with need for him. Owen crossed the cottage, closing and locking the front door, and turned the switch on a small lamp on a side table with a blush pink lampshade. A rosy glow filled the room, and Owen made quick work of starting a fire, before crossing the room and lighting several of the candles I'd placed on shelves.

Owen turned, scanning the room, his face unreadable as he took in every detail. Setting the scene. Always a director, I realized.

Thunder rumbled, and the clouds unleashed their contents, rain pattering heavily against the roof, matching the pattering of nerves in my stomach. The way Owen was looking at me right now, like I was a picture to be painted, made my mouth grow dry. I swallowed as he brought his fingers up in the air, framing me.

“You're stunning, Shona.”

I went to dismiss the compliment, but stopped, because I could read the truth of it in his eyes. He did think that I was stunning, his arousal pressing hard against his pants, his gaze hungry and yearning. This was not a man who lied. Keeping my eyes on his, I lifted the hem of my dress. Immediately, Owen crossed to me and stopped me, kneeling at my feet.

“Let me. I want to watch you bloom.”

Could I be both aroused and sad at the same time? Was it because I’d never been treated with such care before? Or was it because a part of me knew that I didn’t get to keep Owen forever?

He slipped my shoes off, his fingers caressing my feet lightly, and I jumped, almost kicking him in the face.

“Ticklish?” Owen laughed, once he’d recovered from me almost breaking his nose.

“Aye. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting that.” My cheeks burned. I would dearly love it if I could proceed with some modicum of grace around this man who was currently unraveling me from the inside out as his hands stroked lightly up my calves, inching my dress higher. My breath hitched as he revealed my thighs, and I jumped when he pressed his lips to the sensitive skin there. Luckily, he anticipated me this time and stopped my leg from flailing out.

“Ah, Shona. You’re going to make it hard to be careful with you.” Owen’s eyes had the look of a man enraptured, and I looked down to see his eyes focused on my purple silk underwear, with delicate lace edging. Reaching out, he traced a finger lightly across the silk, driving me closer to the edge with just the slightest brush of his finger.

“What if I don’t want you to be careful?” This was excruciating, the wait for him to touch me. The longer we drew this out, the more I could second-guess every last thing. Right now, I wanted to live in this moment, savoring this so when the time came that he had to leave I could tuck this memory away like a snow globe in my mind, taking it out every once in a while, to shake it and remember how magical it was.

“You say things like that, but you don’t know what I ...” Owen swallowed as he slipped a finger beneath the silk and found me warm and slick with need for him. I pressed myself forward, rocking my hips against his hand. “Damn it, Shona.”

“Don’t hold back, please.” I didn’t care how much I had to beg, I wanted Owen to consume me.

In one swift motion, Owen lifted my hips and pulled my dress so that my arms came over my head. Pushing me back on the bed, one hand to my chest, he looped the dress around my wrists so that my arms were locked in place over my head, and then he sat back, admiring me as I lay spread out before him in glorious purple silk.

“I have to say, I am a huge fan of your underwear choices.” I gasped as he reached out, lightly flicking at my breast until my nipple puckered beneath the silk, and then he found it with his mouth, dampening the cloth. Moaning, I arched against the heat of his tongue, as he dedicated himself to my breasts, my skin warming beneath the slippery silk.

“I like pretty sets,” I gasped, actively rolling my hips against him, needing, no, craving any friction I could find. Pleasure built inside me, and I wanted that delicious release of desire to take me careening off the edge.

“I love knowing this about you. Like you have this secret wanton side that nobody knows about. Like it’s our little secret. When you’re out in the garden, in your dirt-covered jeans, I can imagine what it would be like to unwrap you.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I wore somewhat more serviceable choices when I was working in the garden. He’d clamped his teeth down on the side of my breast, causing me to squeal as he bit hard enough to leave a mark.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help myself. I just ... I want all of you,” Owen gasped, licking his way down my stomach, and I shivered as he slipped my underwear off. He gave me no time to think, returning his attention so quickly to me that I arched my back off the bed and shouted when he slid two fingers inside me and found me with his mouth. Instantly, the wet heat of his tongue shot me over the edge, and I came apart,

unraveling around him as he drove me home. My body shook as he played me, like a master musician plays an instrument, and I sat up, struggling with the dress around my arms.

“Untie me, untie me,” I begged, awkwardly knocking his head with my flailing arms. Owen laughed, grabbing my arms to stop the jerky movements, and untangled me from the fabric. Once free, I launched myself at him, surprising him, and we tumbled down to the floor.

“Oof!” Owen, laughed, catching me as I landed on top of him.

“I need to touch you,” I panted, sinking into a kiss that made my thoughts blur around the edges.

“By all means.” Owen smiled that wicked smile of his. “Be my guest.”

I needed no further prodding. I didn’t trust myself to do one of those cool moves in the movies where the girl ripped the guy’s shirt open and buttons went flying, because knowing my clumsiness, I’d likely hit him in the eye with a button or accidentally choke him as I was trying to take it off. Instead, I slowly unbuttoned his shirt, kissing my way down his chest until I reached his belt buckle. Freeing him from his jeans, I tossed them aside and knelt over him, my eyes widening.

“You’re, well, you’ve certainly got something to be proud of, don’t you?” I admired him, stroking his length, and cutting off his chuckle by taking him into my mouth. Now it was his turn to buck against me as I took my damned time, enjoying being the one in control for once. Owen had done nothing but throw me off-kilter since the moment I’d met him, and now I wanted to be the one in charge.

“Eeek,” I squealed when Owen lifted me off him. Damn, but he was strong. He put me on the bed and pointed at me.

“Stay.” Once again, a demand.

“Yes, sir.” I tried for breathy but just ended up laughing at myself. Right, sex kitten I was not, but either way, I was having a hell of a good time. Owen dug in his pack and pulled

out a strip of condoms before ripping one off and sheathing himself.

My body shook, hating his loss, and relief rushed through me when he returned quickly to the bed and covered me. I discovered that I loved his weight pressing down on me, pinning me to the bed, and I widened my legs as he teased me.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Shona,” Owen said, his eyes so close that I could just make out little flecks of gold in their depths. “You’re the first thing I think about in the morning, and the last thing I think about before I go to bed. You haunt my dreams. I drive an hour out of my way to get you flowers.”

“Owen,” I breathed, touched. My heart melted into a puddle.

“I’m crazy about you,” Owen said, and I caught that fleeting look of vulnerability in his eyes. “Tell me it’s not just me. Tell me you feel it too.”

“I do,” I whispered against his mouth, his kisses turning wet and loose as he drove into me, filling me so deeply that I gasped for breath, my body loosening and adjusting to him before tightening once more. We matched each other, thrust for thrust, whispering words of yearning, promises to be fulfilled, until we met each other and fell off the cliff together, riding the waves of pleasure until we collapsed, spent.

It only took about a minute before my awkwardness set in.

“Should I ... I should probably go, no? Let you get your rest?” I mean, the man was renting this cottage from me. I shouldn’t force him to share the bed.

Owen simply angled his head from where he lay flat on his back, his chest heaving.

“If you set one foot off this bed, I’m going to be on you so fast, you won’t know what hit you. And this time, I won’t play nice.”

“That was nice?” I asked, secretly pleased that he wanted me to stay.

“It was medium nice. But I can be a lot less polite. And I will be if you try to leave. Don’t piss me off when I’m enjoying my afterglow, Shona.”

“Duly noted. Are there rules I should be writing down then? Don’t make Owen angry after sex?” I pretended to jot the rule down in the air.

“Less talking during the afterglow would also be nice,” Owen mumbled, and I gasped, smacking him on the chest.

“Hey!”

“Oh, so you’re one of those, are you?” Owen sighed and rolled to me, fitting his body over mine once more, and I gaped up at him.

“One of those what?” I asked, both intrigued and annoyed as I thought about him with other women.

“You’re chatty after sex. It revs you up. See, with guys, it just makes us all lethargic and chill, but with women ... well, it depends.”

“I can’t believe you right now.” Annoyed, I made to shove him off me, but he didn’t budge. “Talking about other women while on top of me.”

“It was a general observation, Shona.” Owen licked at my neck, sending shivers across my skin, and my eyes widened as I felt him harden against me again.

So he was one of those.

“Mm-hmm, I don’t know that I care for it. It’s not my fault that I’m cheerful after a good orgasm. It’s meant to boost serotonin, isn’t it?” I gasped as Owen rocked against me, my body still sensitive from his touch, and then he caught my lower lip with his mouth, biting down lightly.

“Shona?”

“Yes, Owen?” I trembled beneath him.

“Shut up.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



SHONA

For some reason, I hadn't expected it to be easy around us. Or maybe I hadn't much thought past the getting him to bed moment, the ... *what happens next*. But next looked a lot like a very sexy man wearing nothing but grey sweatpants, pouring me a cup of coffee the next morning.

"I can feel your eyes boring holes in my back," Owen said, and I muffled a laugh.

"Busted."

"How do you take your coffee?"

"Two and a coo," I said, and then laughed out loud when he shot me a confused look.

"Our cows are called coos here, remember? Two sugars and some milk if you have it."

"Two and a coo," Owen repeated as he bent to the little fridge and pulled out a bottle of milk. "Could that be a movie title?"

"About what, precisely?" I looked around, realizing I had nothing to put on but my dress, and instead pulled his button-down shirt on over my underwear. I wasn't skinny enough that I could look all cute and ruffled with the man's oversized shirt hanging down to my knees or anything, so I didn't even bother trying to button it closed. From what I could tell by the four, yes four, times we'd been together last night, the man had no problem with my body.

If anything, my curves had inflamed his need more.

“Good morning, beautiful.” Owen brushed a kiss at my lips, and I winced, knowing I likely had morning breath. He slid a cup of coffee to me on the counter and then did the cutest thing. Coming to stand behind me, he wrapped his arms around my waist and nuzzled his face into my hair, pulling me tight against his chest. I said nothing, my heart cracking open at this simple intimacy, and stared blindly out the window as my world shifted to try and recalibrate around the before and after of one Owen Williams.

“What the hell?”

Owen’s words had me blinking, and I tried to turn but he nudged me.

“Look.” His voice was hushed but laced with excitement.

A unicorn stood outside the window, at the edge of the patio, its head tilted as it studied us through the glass.

I think my heart stopped beating for a moment.

An actual freaking unicorn.

Unless I was hallucinating, or still dreaming, this unicorn was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in real life. A stunning pearlescent white, with a shimmering horn jutting from its head, a fine ethereal glow surrounded it. It huffed out a breath, bobbing its head at us, and stomped the ground with a hoof before turning and trotting into the distance.

I exhaled the breath I’d been holding.

“Holy shit.” Owen shot into action, and I turned to see him grabbing his camera. Unlocking the door, he raced outside, while I held a hand to my stomach, trying to soothe my nerves.

There it was.

The stark reminder that he was still here to shoot a movie about the mythical elements that inhabited Loren Brae—and clearly there were far more than I had any idea of—and I needed to choose my steps forward with him carefully.

“She’s gone,” Owen said, returning to the cottage. His face was lit with excitement, and I watched as he crossed to a small table by the fire with a notebook and jotted something down. I didn’t say anything, just watched him, my lips pressed together. When he finished writing, he glanced up and caught something in my expression. Putting the camera down, Owen crossed to me and put his hands on my shoulders.

“That was pretty amazing, wasn’t it, Shona? Did you know that unicorns existed?”

“I didn’t, no,” I said, faintly. At least that was something I could be truthful with him about. Something flashed in Owen’s eyes.

“But you know about other stuff, don’t you?”

I had a choice to make. I’d given myself to this man the night before, and yet I hadn’t, still holding a part, a very important, part of me back. Yet when I tried to speak, tried to tell him that I was magick, the words lodged in my throat.

“It’s the Kelpies, isn’t it? They’re real?” Owen asked and I seized on his answer. Meeting his eyes, I nodded. Excitement lit on his face. “I knew it!”

“I mean, they’re as real as people say they are, I guess. I haven’t seen them, Owen. Not really. I thought I did, once, but I can’t honestly say. It happened so fast.” Turning, I picked up my coffee and took a sip to settle my nerves.

“Are you ready to tell me what you know?” Owen asked and I tilted my head at him in surprise.

“You knew?”

“I knew you were holding something back. But that’s also fair. You told me the topic made you uncomfortable, so I’ve done my best to respect that and not badger you with questions. Which, by the way, I have a bad habit of doing. It’s easier for me not to start the conversation than it is to stop it once my brain starts rolling. I just have this insatiable thirst for knowledge.” Owen drew me over to the loveseat by the fire and plopped next to me. For a moment, his gaze caught on my purple silk bra and his eyes dilated slightly. Honestly? I could

physically feel the punch of his lust as he ogled me, and I wet my lips.

“Here.” Owen grabbed a throw blanket from the back of the couch and hurriedly covered my body with it. “There, now I can concentrate.”

I smirked, understanding now what it was like to confidently use feminine wiles for a man’s attention, and filed that feeling away for closer examination at another time.

“What do you want to know, Owen? More importantly, what will you do with the information?” I asked, holding my mug with both hands. He flipped pages in his notebook until he found a fresh page, and he looked so damn adorable and sexy with his rumpled hair and loose grey sweatpants, that I wanted him all over again. It was hard to resist the enthusiasm he had for his job, even if it meant exposing Loren Brae’s secrets.

Who was I kidding?

Loren Brae was exposing herself to Owen. She’d just sent a unicorn to our doorstep. There wasn’t much else to be said about trying to hide the Kelpies from Owen anymore.

What about your own magick?

The words slid through my brain, and I shifted, bringing my legs underneath me, worried about what he would think of me if he learned that I was a garden witch. I resigned myself to taking this one step at a time, and seeing how he handled the Kelpies, before I dropped anything else on him.

“Okay, I’m ready. Tell me about the Kelpies.” Owen looked so eager, his pen poised, that I smiled.

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, everything really. Don’t hold anything back. No detail is too small. You never know where it might lead me.”

“That’s kind of what I’m worried about,” I admitted, taking another sip of my coffee as I studied him over the rim. “What this will lead to.”

“The film, you mean?” Owen’s eyebrows winged up his forehead.

“Precisely. What are your plans for it?”

“I ... I don’t know yet. I never really know until a project like this is finished. If I already had investors and a pitch for a movie, that would be one thing, because I’d be indebted to them and anyone else attached to the project. But this is just me, investigating on behalf of a friend.”

“So, you’re just doing this for Ryan?”

“No.” Owen shook his head. “I’m also doing it because I’m fascinated.”

“And what about Loren Brae?”

“What about it?”

I gestured with my coffee cup.

“What about us? If you produce and sell this movie, and it’s seen worldwide, don’t you think that could have catastrophic effects for our wee town?”

“I ...” Owen trailed off, squinting as he thought about it. “Honestly, I hadn’t thought that far in advance. Couldn’t it be good for your town?”

“How? That murderous mythological water horses are hurting people? Tell me, Owen, how would that be good for us?”

“Oh.” Owen’s face fell. “I suppose when you put it like that, it doesn’t sound good. But I’m sure it would help with tourism, right? There’d be plenty of people who’d want to come see for themselves, right? Like Nessie?”

“Nessie isn’t known for maiming people. Not only would it create more people asking questions of locals, but it would put more people in harm’s way. Until the Kelpies are restrained, it’s in everyone’s best interest that this remain quiet, don’t you see?”

Owen’s eyes sharpened.

“You can restrain them?”

“Owen, focus on what I am saying for a moment. Can you promise me that you won’t share this film with the world?”

Owen pursed his lips together, and he got up, pacing the room with his hands caught behind his back, talking out loud as he thought it through.

“I can’t say that I don’t see your side of things, now that you’ve brought them to my attention. That being said, if the Kelpies are real, and they’re hard to contain, who’s to say that someone else won’t come along and do the same? At the very least, you’d have a benevolent view from behind the lens, right?”

My heart dropped. He wasn’t going to let this go. All thoughts of telling him that I was magick, too, fled my mind and self-preservation reared its head.

“I mean, anyone with a phone could capture it, right? Like if they’re here, they’re here. At least I could shed some light on the history, or the why, or even serve as a warning to stay away. But unless you give me all the information, how am I going to be able to portray things accurately?”

“When has warning people to stay away ever actually caused them to stay away?”

Owen’s mouth quirked in a smile.

“Fair point. How about this? Tell me what you know, and I’ll let you be involved in the making of the movie. Or documentary. I have no idea what this could be yet, but I have a gut feeling that it will be incredible.”

It was a startling offer, particularly from a man as accomplished as Owen, and I knew this was his way of offering his trust to me. I took a deep breath. I couldn’t well stop the man from making a film, could I? Whether I was involved with him or not. Unless someone ran him from town, he was free to do what he wanted. And Owen was right, anyone with an iPhone could record the Kelpies at any point. It was only a matter of time.

And I think Agnes knew that too.

Taking a deep breath, I looked up at him.

“There’s one part that nobody can know. Ever. I’d like you to sign something, and give it to me, that it won’t be revealed in whatever you create.”

“Um, I’m not sure I can ...” Owen studied my face. “That important, huh?”

“It’s the kind of secret that can, quite literally, destroy worlds. It’s not worth it for me to share unless I know you’ll protect it. And Loren Brae.”

“Deal.” Owen scribbled in his notebook and ripped off the sheet, handing it to me. I read it, seeing he’d agreed to my terms, and tucked it into my bra.

“Thank you. You see, the Kelpies are here because they’re protecting something on the island, something that can alter worlds. The holy grail, if you will.”

“Shut up.” Owen’s eyes tracked to my bra, and I knew he was immediately regretting his decision to sign away his film rights to that part of the story.

“The Clach na Fìrinn—the Stone of Truth—lies buried on the island in the middle of Loch Mirren. The Kelpies protect it.”

“The Stone of Truth,” Owen whispered. “Like a sentient being?”

I nodded. “It contains all universal knowledge. In the wrong hands, it can destroy worlds. Which is why it is protected so fiercely. Better for nobody to possess it than to have it fall into the wrong ownership.”

“And the Kelpies patrol the loch, trying to kill anyone that gets too close?”

“Pretty much,” I said.

“That’s equal parts terrifying and exciting,” Owen said, pacing the room once more.

I could see it though, the moment he decided he needed to know more, to get the footage.

“I have to go out there.”

“Absolutely not.” I stood, hands on my hips, fury rising.

“But if I do, the Kelpies will come. If I have my cameras set up, I’ll be the first in the world to record them. Can you imagine, Shona? This would be documenting history! It’s incredible that this exists. This needs to be documented. Even if it never leaves Loren Brae. If it goes to whomever the guardians of such knowledge are ... don’t you think you should have these recordings? For future generations?”

The man made a compelling argument. But I couldn’t have him putting his life in danger.

“I don’t know what the right answer to that is,” I admitted, my heart hammering in my chest. “But I do know that I can’t have you go to the island. I just can’t. Owen, I’d be ...” My voice caught, and Owen crossed to me, cradling me in his arms.

“Baby, I’ll be fine. I promise you I won’t do anything stupid,” Owen said, kissing me as tears sprung to my eyes.

“You don’t get it,” I said, furious with myself. “This isn’t something you can control, Owen, or even anticipate. You could die.”

“I could die every time I walk out of the house, darlin’.” Owen kissed away my protests until I subsided, blinking the tears from my eyes.

“It’s going to be okay, I promise you.”

“I don’t know if you can promise me that. Surely you can see by what happened to Ryan.”

“Water horses,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Water horses. That’s what Ryan said he saw. They came up out of the water and attacked him.”

At least he knows what can and will happen to him. My heart ached, and already I could kick myself for sharing this information with Owen. Now I wasn’t just worried about Loren Brae.

My heart belonged to Owen.

“I’ll make smart choices.”

“I really wish you didn’t have to make this film. Couldn’t you pick up another project? I’m sure you have dozens of offers.”

“I do. But this is where I want to be, Shona. Right here. With you. And learning about one of the greatest legends of all time.”

“At least you put me before the Kelpies.” I sniffed, and Owen grinned, tossing the notebook aside. I gasped when he lifted me, tossing me effortlessly on the bed and crawled on top of me.

“Sexy Shona, of the silky panties and soulful eyes, I’ll always put you first.”

It was all I could think about as his kisses took me under. I hope he remembered his words to me when the time came to decide on the movie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



SHONA

As predicted, over the next two weeks my life shifted into “after-Owen” status. It was, quite simply, almost overwhelming how much he filled my life. His enthusiasm knew no bounds, he constantly followed me with a camera, and when he wasn’t with me, he was down by the banks of Loch Mirren.

He’d set up shop there, bringing with him a chair, a cooler, and an umbrella.

And he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Until everyone in town became interested in his project, and soon, he had people passing by each day to have a wee chat with him.

Some of which included personal tidbits about their own experience with the Kelpies through the years.

Many even agreed to be on film.

Agnes was fuming, but to her credit, she didn’t direct her fury my way. Which I appreciated, because I wasn’t sure how I’d react if she tried to push me to decide between Loren Brae and my heart. It was all getting muddled and mixed up in my head, but all I knew was that every day I was falling more deeply in love with Owen.

He'd extended his stay.

The fool hadn't even asked me. I'd been sitting across from him, reading a book, when my phone had buzzed and showed a new booking. I looked up at him, and he'd grinned, then returned to the video footage he was editing. That was it. No discussion, no questions—he'd just gone ahead and booked two more months at the cottage. Which was stupid, really, because I'd have let him stay for free.

Which is probably why he'd booked it without asking me.

Frustrated, charmed, and overwhelmed. *This was my new status quo.*

Our nights consisted of one of us sleeping in the other's bed, and when Owen wasn't off investigating for his documentary, he'd grab a rake and help me in the garden. I never asked him, but oftentimes I'd find him already at work, spreading mulch or moving bags of dirt. It kind of scared me how seamlessly he'd moved into my life, because when he left, I was fairly certain I'd never get over it.

Tonight was the Autumnal Equinox, and I'd taken the time to read through Gran's book. Now, I just had to find a way to do my ceremony without Owen around. An idea occurred to me, and I texted Sophie to see if Lachlan could invite Owen to the pub. When she agreed, I dusted off my hands and smiled. There, I was free to do my witchy work in peace, and yes, I knew that I needed to tell him at some point.

Just not yet.

I didn't know how to explain it, but the magick was my own secret. I mean, of course Agnes, Sophie, and Lia knew about it. They were involved with the Order of Caledonia in one way or another. But for the rest of my world? Nobody knew I was a garden witch. And I just kind of wanted to spend time discovering what that meant for me, all on my own. I wanted to be steady on my feet, certain in my power, when, or if, I shared it with anyone else. Now that I understood Owen's endless thirst for knowledge, I also understood that he'd never ease up on me about my magick until he overturned every stone in his quest for knowledge.

But this was my gift.

My power.

I wanted to overturn those stones by myself.

And maybe I was a touch nervous about how he'd react. I hoped he'd be accepting, yet I was still trying to navigate the nuances of Owen's relationship with his family, and how it all played into the day-to-day decisions he made. On one hand, he seemed to have made strides with putting up some boundaries with his mother. On the other, it was hard for me to miss how unforgiving he could be with seemingly small things. I wondered if that was from a lifetime of catering to a narcissistic mother who lived for being a victim. Maybe he'd run out of compassion for seemingly silly mistakes, or perhaps it was he had a built-in distrust for reasons presented behind said mistakes. I'd overheard him firing an employee of his, and when I'd questioned him on it, he'd grown dismissive of my attempts to unpack his reasoning. Every time I'd work up the courage to tell him about my magick, I'd bump my head against an instance like that and hold back, wondering if he would dismiss me just as easily as he'd done his assistant.

I blew out a breath of frustration.

“What are you moaning about now?”

“I wasn't moaning, I was sighing,” I said, turning to see Gnorman dangling his legs off a shelf in the greenhouse closet where I prepared my supplies for the evening ritual.

“Fine, sighing. What are you in a huff about?”

“I'm not in a huff,” I insisted.

“The only thing to make a woman sigh like that is a man, am I right, cutie?” Gnora winked at Gnorman as she strolled across the table. Gnorman sucked in his belly, almost toppling off the shelf in the process, and glared at me when I snorted.

Much to my everlasting delight, Gnora had taken one look at my greenhouse, determined it more than appropriate for her new accommodations, and had moved in. Gnorman had about passed out on the spot when she'd told him. Since then, they'd been doing this dance where Gnorman was increasingly

flustered and frustrated around her, clearly a besotted male if I'd ever seen one, yet hadn't yet worked up the courage to make a move. On her part, Gnora was firmly aware of her charms, used them at her whim, and left Gnorman stammering and stuttering in her wake.

"I think your girlfriend has the right of it," I said, knowing the word girlfriend would send Gnorman into a tizzy, and was rewarded when he sprang up and patted his kilt, as though he was looking for something.

"I've just got to ... there's a thing. Eugene? What's that, lad?" Gnorman cupped a hand to his ear, pretending that he heard Eugene calling, and scrambled down the shelves, racing into the greenhouse.

Gnora pursed her lips, shaking her head after him.

"You know he's sensitive about me."

"Sensitive? You've got to be kidding me. That gnome has done nothing but needle me about my love life. I'm delighted I get to return the favor."

"Och, he *is* sensitive. He brought me flowers last night and serenaded me when the moon rose."

She might as well have told me that aliens landed and performed some weird experiment on everyone in Loren Brae.

"I'm sorry, what?" I pointed over my shoulder with my thumb. "That crabbit beastie ... serenaded you?"

"He's not so grumpy once you get to know him." Gnora walked over to the candle that I was engraving with symbols for the equinox.

"Tell me what he sang."

"You Look Wonderful Tonight." Gnora sighed and clasped her hands in front of her. "Now if only he'd make a move."

"Clapton? Nice." I desperately didn't want to think of the gnomes going at it in my greenhouse. Poor Eugene. Like he needed to be subjected to that. "No sexy time around the hedgehog, you hear me?"

“Obviously.” Gnora rolled her eyes. “Like I give free shows.”

My eyebrows rose. That was one way to look at it, I suppose.

“Plus, he needs to loosen up and actually kiss me.”

“Maybe you should kiss him first.”

“Mmm, and ruin all this fun? It’s nice when a man chases you, you know? It all changes once you couple up.”

Would that be the case with Owen? He still brought me flowers, and books, and basically anything he saw that made him think of me. I hadn’t yet convinced him that I didn’t need him to bring me a bevy of gifts every day, and it was hard to say no when he took such joy in presenting me with presents. It just made me feel a bit like the scales were uneven. He never seemed to expect anything back, however, and truly just seemed to take joy in giving.

“Does it? I wouldn’t really know.”

“Trust me on this one, dear. You need to keep them on their toes.”

“Well, you’ve got G on his toes. So much so he ran from you.”

Gnora’s grin widened. “I like it when they run. Makes them more fun to catch.”

“Och, that’s a sadistic heart you’ve got there, Gnora.”

“Just a wee bit. The suffering makes it sweeter, doesn’t it?”

I smirked, it was hard not to admire the wee gnome, as she owned her prowess through and through.

“This ritual says I need to go sky-clad, know anything about it?” I nodded to the notebook my gran had left behind. Gnora walked over and studied the words.

“Well, it’s Mabon. So, yes, if you’re looking to celebrate second harvest and honor the seasons, then fewer barriers between you and the goddesses is considered a good thing.”

The goddesses? Oof, I had a lot to learn.

“Gnorman seems to think it’s important I do this ritual. Will it matter that I’m new to this? That I don’t really know what I’m doing?”

“Nature is surprisingly forgiving, Shona. Intent is what matters here, not perfection. You’ll do just fine.”

“But it doesn’t even give me a chant or whatever I’m supposed to do,” I griped, pointing at the book. “It says to write your own.”

“Och, it’s *your* practice. You’re the witch. Write your own ritual. You are just giving thanks for harvest and acknowledging the change of season. Rituals matter.”

“Why?”

I didn’t mean to be rude, but I was genuinely curious.

Gnora sighed, leaning against the ornamental box and crossing her arms over her very ample chest. “It’s easy, isn’t it, to settle into the mundane? Time passes, lives are busy, and your mind gets crowded with too many distractions. Ritual pulls you out of that. Honoring the change of season is a simple thing, but it gives you a moment to pause, to ground yourself, and to give thanks for Mother Earth. Without ritual, it’s just another day. And what’s the point of it all, if you don’t take time to stop and celebrate this life you’re living?”

It was an excellent explanation and one that gave me pause. More often than not I’d let a birthday go by without too much pomp and circumstance or some other holiday with barely a nod to the day. But Gnora was right, these moments were meant to be celebrated.

“Will you keep Gnorman away? I’m not sure I can go through with being sky-clad if I know the wee man is around making fun of me.”

“Oh, I’ll gladly distract the lad,” Gnora purred and sauntered away.

Gathering my candles, my baskets of seeds, herbs, salt, and a mini cauldron, I left the greenhouse, nerves kicking low in

my stomach. I mean, I was in my own backyard, wasn't I? Being naked in the dark should hardly be an issue.

Pushing my nerves aside, and reminding myself about what Gnora had said, I rounded the side of the greenhouse, so I was blocked from the view of the street. There, I knelt and put everything on the ground, and then looked wildly around. The moon rose, her light softly blanketing the hills that rose over the loch and illuminated a few puffy clouds that floated by in the night sky.

Was it weird that I was about to get naked and sprinkle salt all over my yard?

Likely so.

Did I care all that much?

No, not really. This was for Loren Brae, for the protection of the town and its people. *It's not about you, Shona. Keep your focus on the greater good.*

Taking a deep breath, I stripped my clothes. The cold night air hit my skin, and I giggled, digging my bare feet into the damp grass. This was ... weird. And outrageous.

And my blood sang to the moon as it continued to rise above me.

Energized, I gathered my supplies and sprinkled salt in a circle, walking three times around it in a clockwise motion. Then, I crouched and lit a candle. I'd brought several of them with me, but I started with the one that Owen had bought for me at the market. It was marketed as an equinox candle, so I figured it would do the trick. Turning, I lifted the candle to the north.

"Um." I cleared my throat. "Ah, guardians? Goddesses? Super cool magickal beings of the cardinal directions? I ask you for protection." I repeated the request in each direction, working my way around the circle, and finished, holding the candle.

"Thank you for this second harvest."

I pulled the cauldron toward me. Granted, I used the term cauldron lightly. It was basically a feed bucket for a horse, but one must improvise where they can, right? I placed the candle inside, threw some herbs in there, and then straightened. Now was the time I was supposed to chant. I cleared my throat again, feeling both a bit ridiculous, and at the same time awesomely powerful, as I extended my arms to the sky and dug my toes into the ground. Moonlight bathed my skin and I smiled to the sky.

“With a nod to the tartan and heather’s grace, Mabon’s light shines on this ancient place. A gift of bonnie Scotland’s heart we share, with thistles wild and spirit rare. Between the Highlands and Lowlands, here I stand, and honor the bounty of this sacred land. Caledonia, true and bold, bagpipes lilting, our stories are told. As of the time of Scotland’s lore, I celebrate as in days of yore. Mabon’s blessings, strong and free, in my garden, so mote it be.”

I can’t even begin to tell you how long that took me to write out, so I dearly hoped that this chant was accepted by whatever earthly energy was currently making my feet tingle so much that I wanted to dance around the garden and throw my head back and scream to the inky night sky. Reaching down, I grabbed my pouch of seeds and nuts, tossing them indiscriminately around. It was meant to symbolize harvest, and planting new beginnings, but honestly, I was just enjoying throwing things.

“Ow?”

I screeched and dropped to a crouch, covering what I could of my body. I scuttled, like a freaking crab, forward, trying to reach my pile of clothes.

“Shona? What are you doing?”

I blinked up at Owen, as he rubbed his eye where apparently, I’d seed-bombed him, and swallowed.

“Um, Mabon blessing? For the land?” My voice rasped in the night.

“Naked?”

“I’m told that’s the preferred way to do it.”

“I’m not against this preference, I’ll admit.”

My body was buzzing, literally vibrating. With energy from the ritual, Owen’s nearness, whatever it was, but I couldn’t stay crouched anymore. I needed to move. To touch.

To feast.

Striding forward, I wrapped an arm around Owen’s neck, pulling his mouth to mine, and claimed him with a kiss that I could feel all the way down to my toes. The icy night air slapped my backside, and I pressed against him, the rough fabric of his coat chaffing against my sensitive breasts, and he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me tight.

I wanted, no needed, him inside me. I needed to feel him wrapped around me, hovering over me, filling me, until the only thing I could think about was him.

I mewled against his mouth, clamoring for more, and Owen broke the kiss, sucking in air.

“Holy hell, woman. You’re going to eat me alive. Come on.” Hoisting me up, he carried me across the moonlit garden, while I writhed against him like a madwoman, my skin burning with the need for his touch.

And when he sank to his knees, taking me on the floor of the cottage, because we couldn’t stand to be apart a moment longer, I laughed long and loud.

This one.

He was meant for me and I for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



OWEN

Turns out, my goddess of a woman was a Pagan. At least that was as much as I could ascertain from her Mabon ritual in her garden. I wasn't wholly unfamiliar with it, as Scotland was well known for her Pagan history, but I was surprised she hadn't told me. Not that it mattered much, because she'd been so consumed with me when I found her that I didn't care what deity we were worshipping so long as I could sink into her softness for the rest of my living days.

Yeah, I had it bad.

Now, as I googled Paganism on my phone while Shona slept deeply, I smiled at the words on the screen. Of course, my woman would be into a religion that celebrated nature. That totally tracked. I couldn't wait to ask her more about it in the morning.

Well, it was *almost* morning now.

I was riding a high. I'd had a fun night at the pub with the "lads," discovered my woman naked in the garden, and was getting closer to finding out more about the Kelpies. No complaints from this end. Grinning, I sipped my whisky, relaxed and happy, as Shona snored ever so lightly in my bed.

God, but she was beautiful.

Truly, the woman had no idea just how much of a punch she packed. There was zero artifice about her when it came to her looks, and I was constantly wiping the dirt from her face or

pulling a twig from her hair. And then I'd strip her down and find the silkiest, prettiest, naughtiest underwear under her clothes, as though it was a secret just for me to discover. I loved the contrasts of who she was, both in and out of the bedroom. Serious when it came to business, silly when it came to her favorite movies and music. She fit me, so well, and listened—*truly* listened. This wasn't a woman who bided her time while I spoke just to wait for an opportune moment to jump in and tell me more about herself. No, this was a woman who was attentive, and oftentimes I'd have to pry her thoughts out of her. She fascinated me, and I was dying to get her in a film.

And at the same time, not.

Hollywood would eat her up.

Truly.

With her stunning looks, that gorgeous accent, and her complete indifference to being in front of a camera, oh yeah, she'd be a riveting actress. I could already see my friends clamoring to get her on screen.

Which is why I wanted to keep her here, with me, away from it all. The longer I stayed in Loren Brae, the more the town was growing on me. Even though I tended to be a restless sort, always taking on my next project, I could feel myself growing roots here.

An otherworldly shriek split the night, and my whisky glass toppled out of my hand as I shot to my feet. Whirling, I ran for the window, staring out into the darkness, the hairs standing up at the back of my neck.

The Kelpies.

I couldn't miss this opportunity.

Grabbing my fleece jacket, my camera, and shoving my feet into my sneakers, I gave Shona a quick glance. Should I wake her? She shifted, pulling the blanket with her as she rolled, and I decided against it. I suspected she would only try to stop me from going out there, and I might lose the

opportunity I'd been waiting for. Slipping from the cottage, I closed the door quietly behind me.

Movement caught my eye in the garden, and I saw not one, but several hedgies slip into the bushes. Eugene must have found friends. For some reason, the thought of Eugene inviting friends to play catch put a smile at my lips even as another shriek split the inky black sky.

They say it's always darkest just before dawn.

I raced across the garden, grateful for Shona's twinkle lights that offered a soft glow, so I didn't trip over anything, and hit the road at a dead run. Shona's place was situated at the bottom of a hill, just outside Loren Brae, and I panted as I crested the top of the hill, camera lifted.

There, the village of Loren Brae spread out before me, soft lights reflected across the rocky surface of the water, paint smudges on a dark canvas. Something shifted in the water, a shadow of darkness, and I strained my eyes. My camera was already on, recording. Force of habit or refusal to miss a moment, I held it at my chest, hoping it would catch something that I wouldn't be able to make out with the naked eye.

I wasn't even sure what I was looking for.

Were the Kelpies big? Would they tower over me as they formed from a swell of water? Or perhaps they were smaller, like regular sized horses.

A shriek rattled me from my thoughts, careening across the frigid waters of Loch Mirren, the force of it slapping me back across the road. Fear warred with excitement as I tried to push forward, my camera raised. Again, some impenetrable force slapped me backwards.

A shape began to form in the water.

My breath caught.

A soft chuffing noise caught my attention, a snorting of sorts, and I twisted to see Eugene scuttling across the road.

"Eugene! No!"

I didn't know what was about to happen, but I wouldn't be able to live with myself if Eugene got hurt. The hedgehog picked up pace, running along the side of the loch, and torn, I looked back to the water where a distinctive shape was starting to form, and then back to where the hedgie scuttled along.

"Damn it!" I dropped my camera, so it bounced at my neck, and ran after the hedgehog, needing to get him clear of the loch.

Truly, I had no idea how fast the little buggers were. My feet pounded on the pavement, my heart hammering in my chest, until Eugene skidded to a stop, and I scooped him up on the run like he was a little football.

A horrible crashing noise sounded behind me, and I whirled, Eugene tucked under my arm, to see a wall of water shattering down upon the exact spot where I'd just been standing. Without hesitation, I ran until I was back at the cottage, sweat dripping down my back under the fleece. Once there, I dropped onto the grass and put Eugene down on my lap.

The hedgie turned, lifting its little head up at me as I worked to catch my breath, a slow smile spreading on its face.

I realized what he'd done.

Eugene had saved me.

"You're my hero, buddy." I scratched his little belly when he flopped over, while I took a moment to calm my racing heart.

The door to the cottage opened behind me.

"Owen?" Shona stepped out, letting out a soft gasp when she saw me on the ground. "Oh no, is Eugene hurt?"

"On the contrary." I smiled down at him. "He's very much a hero."

"A hero? What do you mean? What happened?" Shona had pulled on baggy sweats and was rubbing sleep from her eyes as the first light of dawn scratched the night sky. Crouching,

she took in my face. “Owen, you’re sweating. What’s going on?”

“I almost got them on camera,” I said, excitement pouring through my veins. “I was so close. They’d just begun to form in the water, but—”

“Wait, are you saying you went to see the Kelpies?”

“I heard them. Their scream.” I shuddered. “Incredible. Terrifying, isn’t it? I needed to go see them.”

“You’re not just a fool, you’re incredibly stupid, aren’t you?”

My eyebrows shot up as I saw the anger on Shona’s face.

“It’s part of making a film, Shona. I have to get the evidence.”

“Get the evidence he says.” Shona sprang up and began pacing in front of me, smacking her fist into her palm like she wanted to do the same to my face. “Get the evidence? What? Like you’re some crime reporter hot on the trail of a murderer? Get over yourself.”

“Um—”

“No, Owen. Just stop. What you did was irresponsible, stupid, and frankly hurtful.”

“Hurtful, how?” I stood, feeling at a disadvantage, and cradled Eugene in my arms.

“How do you think I’d feel? Lying back here in bed while you were hurt, or worse, killed? Do you ever think about anything other than your stupid project? Screw your film, Owen. You could have been killed.”

It was then that I saw the tears reflected in her eyes, and my heart softened.

Nobody had ever been waiting at home for me before.

I’d spent years traveling the world, taking whatever projects fancied me, without ever having to worry about or be responsible for a wife or family. I’d say my mother worried about me, but only so much in the “when would I be next

available to serve” capacity. This was something new. Different. My mindset shifted as I understood what was happening.

“Shona, baby, come here.”

“Don’t baby me, you fecking eejit.”

“Darling, love, beautiful goddess of my heart who dances naked under full moons. Please, come here.”

At that, Shona dropped her face into her hands and openly cried.

“Oh shit.” I put Eugene carefully down on the grass and went to her, pulling her into my arms.

“Baby, I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I was too caught up in the moment. I wasn’t thinking about getting hurt or how it would make you feel.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” Shona said, burying her face in my fleece, and I tightened my grip.

“I’m not going anywhere. How could I when the woman I’ve fallen for is right here?”

“Really?” Shona blinked up at me, tears making her eyes look impossibly beautiful.

“Really, Shona. You’re ... not like anyone else I’ve ever met. You’re honest, without hidden agendas, and you’re just ... freaking pure. In a way that I need and crave. You listen to all my crazy family stories and seem to know when to help and when to give me space, you’re interested in my career, but have your own amazing thing going so you don’t need me for career advancement or anything like that. You’re funny, impossibly clumsy, breathtakingly beautiful, and truly a sweet soul. I love you, and I’m so sorry for scaring you.”

“I love you too. And if the Kelpies don’t murder you, I’ll do it myself if you pull a stunt like that next time.”

“Reallllly?” A tight band around my chest eased.

“Really, Owen. Though I might use you for career advancement one day if I give up this whole gardening thing.”

Shona winked at me.

“I can’t bring you around my friends. They’ll fight to get you on screen.” Shona’s mouth dropped open.

“Me? Seriously?” A considering light entered her eyes, and I shifted to change the subject.

“Just to be clear, what specifically are the rules here? When it comes to the Kelpies? You don’t want me going after them or you just want me to tell you when I do?”

“I’d rather you drop the project entirely.”

“I’m not sure if I can do that,” I admitted. I was invested in this now, maybe too invested, though I hadn’t shared this project with any of my colleagues. I needed to see this through, and then, when it was finished, I would show it to Shona and let her decide if we shared it with the world. I’d never in my career allowed someone that kind of say over my work before, and that alone told me just how much I cared for her. Before I could tell her this, she kept talking.

“What can I do to make you be sure? I’m worried.”

“I need to finish it out. I have to get on that island.” I’m not sure what made me say it, but I might as well have kicked a can of gasoline into the fire, because Shona stomped off, raging.

“Get on the island? The island? The one place where the Kelpies will most definitely try to kill you?”

“But then I’ll be guaranteed to see them, won’t I? Listen, I don’t care about the Stone of Truth, as I’ve promised not to reveal that, plus filming a stone in the ground or whatever isn’t all that exciting. But the Kelpies? Getting those on film?”

“Have you lost your mind? What are you even saying?” Shona stood, her hands on her hips, her mouth hanging open.

“There’s this perfect little beach for easy access. I could pull the boat right up, hop out, and set up my camera. I’m sure it won’t be so hard.”

“I can’t. I just can’t let you. No, Owen. You’ll die.”

“You just told me that I had to tell you if I was going to do something, so, you know, I’m telling you.”

“And I’m telling you not to go.”

I shrugged, uncertain how to respond. I just knew I had to see this through.

“This? This is why it’s easier being single.” Shona stabbed a finger in the air, and instead of returning to my cottage, she stormed across to hers, slamming the door behind her.

It wasn’t the first time a woman had stormed away from me. But Shona wasn’t like the other women in my past. Her objections were based on her fear for me, not anger at something I’d said. Her opinion mattered to me.

I looked down at Eugene.

“Women, huh?”

Eugene snorted and scuttled into the bushes.

Smart hedgeie. Following suit, I returned to my cottage to see if I got any footage on my camera.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



SHONA

Anxiety ate at me as I paced the cottage after I'd left Owen. That stupid eejit. Did he really think he was any match for the Kelpies? And now he wanted to go to the island?

His friend nearly died trying to do the same thing. *Why isn't that enough to scare him away? What was it with men?*

I had to figure out a way to stop him. If only to stop his dumb arse from doing something so irrevocably stupid like getting himself killed.

Fury mixed with worry as I fumed.

How can I stop him? He's a grown man who can do what he wants to do.

The depth of my feelings for him shook me, and I balled up my fists at my stomach, wanting to scream. In an instant, I could have lost him. And now he wanted to go to the damn island? Briefly I considered breaking his camera equipment, but then pushed that thought aside. There were certain lines I couldn't cross, and sabotaging his project was one of them. But ...

I walked over to the front window of the cottage and looked out at Loch Mirren. I could just make out the island from here, and though I couldn't see the beach that Owen was talking about, I knew it was there.

What if he couldn't get on the island?

Tapping my finger on my lips, I whirled, crossing the room to pull out Gran's notebook she'd left for me. I paged through until I found the information I was looking for.

Not that I really needed the spell.

I was a garden witch, wasn't I?

This was in my blood, after all.

It was time to make things grow.

I took my time getting ready, having a leisurely shower, enjoying a relaxed breakfast, while I waited for the boat rental to open. Now that I had a plan, much of my anxiety had abated. My eyes landed on the first bunch of roses that Owen had brought me weeks ago. I hadn't had the heart to throw them out, and I watched as another petal drifted to the floor. I hoped that wasn't a sign. Steeling myself, I went over to the vase and picked the dried flowers up. I should really bin these.

My hand hovered over the rubbish bin, but I couldn't do it. I sighed. They were the first flowers he'd ever given me. Maybe that made me sentimental, or maybe I was just in a mood this morning, but I toweled off the stems and clipped them to a clothing line in my mudroom so that I could properly dry them.

By the time I arrived at the boat rental, I'd had a fairly productive morning. I'd answered emails, responded to inquiries for the cottage rental, and had booked a new supplier account with a local coffee shop. Did I sneak out the front door so Owen didn't see me leave the cottage and walk to town? Absolutely I did. Did that make me selfish or uncaring? It did not. Owen wasn't listening to reason, so the only way that I could stop him from going to the island was to physically bar him from landing on it.

I'd brought with me a few of my magickal seeds, along with my magickal gardening staff. A trickle of nerves slipped through my stomach as I smiled at the lad behind the counter.

"Hi ya, John. I'll be needing a boat for an hour."

"Canoe or kayak suit you? Or are you wanting a Zodiac?"

A Zodiac was an inflatable style boat with a wee motor, but I'd never driven one before. I wasn't sure that today needed to be my learning curve when it came to piloting an entirely new type of boat.

"No, kayak is fine. Thanks, mate."

I waited while he rung up my payment and then pointed to the row of kayaks pulled up on the rocky beach across the road.

"Pick any one you like. Need help getting it in the water?"

"Nae, lad. I've been kayaking for years." You couldn't grow up on the water and not learn a few basics. Clipping the life vest on over my waterproofs, I grabbed my bag and trudged across the beach, nudging my kayak into the water. While I didn't particularly want to step in the water, it was hard to launch a kayak while keeping your feet dry, and I'd worn water shoes because of it. Even so, the shock of the cold water against my skin was enough to send shivers through my body. Steadying the kayak, I hauled myself in and settled myself, reaching for the oar to paddle a few strokes out into the calm water. There, I paused while I gathered my courage.

Upon further reflection, this potentially could be deeply, fundamentally stupid, as well. I'd just screamed at Owen for trying to get photos of the Kelpies, and here I was possibly putting myself in the same danger.

But this was different.

I was one of the Order of Caledonia, sent to protect the Stone of Truth, one of the chosen. Surely the Kelpies wouldn't come after the very person they needed to shore up their line of defenses?

Maybe that would have been information you should have shared with Owen.

Pushing that thought aside, I took a deep breath, and then dipped my paddle into the water. It was too late now. I just needed to get in, get out, and secure the island so nobody else tried to walk on shore. Easy peasy.

It was one of those late autumn days that made you think that winter was still ages away. The sun had shooed the morning fog away, and a gentle breeze tickled my cheeks as I paddled across the loch. I wasn't making a direct line for the island, because anyone watching from the shore would be able to see what I was doing. Instead, I gave it a wide berth by paddling almost to the other side, away from it, and then I planned to circle the island, hoping that angle would conceal my actions from anyone standing on the shore.

I used to love paddling.

It had been ages since I'd been out in a boat, likely because of that whole Kelpie thing, and I had to wonder how the boat guys were even staying in business. Frankly, the presence of the Kelpies had hit the town of Loren Brae hard, and though Sophie was working diligently on her marketing campaign, and Lia was drawing people in with her new restaurant, tourism was still stuttering along like a car running out of petrol.

Three crows swooped over me, and I glanced up, surprised to see them this far out on the loch. I was even more surprised when they landed on my kayak.

Three black birds lined up in a row on the front of my boat, tilting and turning their heads at me, their dark beady eyes seeming to question my choices.

Hell, *I* was questioning my life choices.

“Hey, guys, what are you doing here?”

One of the birds flew over to where I'd laid my walking stick on the floor of the kayak. Landing on the wood, he tilted his head at the agate stones in the handle. He let out a single caw, and before I knew it, the other two had joined him on the staff.

A second later, they flew away with my walking cane.

“Hey!” I shouted, disbelief in my voice. Had that really just happened? “Bring that back! That's mine!”

Oh shit, what was I going to do now? The staff was meant to be my magickal power weapon and now I was just a witch,

without her tools. Nerves kicked up as I drifted closer to the island, my mind whirling with possibilities. Trepidation made my breathing shallow, and I had to force myself to dip the paddle in the water to edge the boat closer to the island. This wasn't about me. This was about protecting Owen from his own damn self. Determination filled me.

I would get this done and get out. Simple.

Studying the water around the island, I noted that the surface was smooth, the sun's rays sparkling across the surface like someone had tossed a handful of diamonds.

I waited, for anything, to tell me to stop, to nudge me back, to warn me. But nothing came. So I paddled forward, easing my kayak closer, until the tip of it bumped along the beach.

I was here.

My heart hammered in my chest as I waited for something to happen, like I was Indiana Jones about to trip on a wire and unleash a thousand poisoned darts into the air.

"Right, best get on with it."

Pulling out my seeds, I pursed my lips, the boat rocking gently beneath me. When I'd first thought about doing this, I'd figured it was best to actually get on the island and plant the seeds, but now that I was out here, and realized just how far away from shore I was, I hesitated.

Maybe it would be in my best interests to perform my magick from the boat—just in case I needed a quick getaway. I couldn't quite know what would happen if I stepped foot on the actual island, and now that I was here, I found my courage slipping away. Had the birds stealing my cane been a warning?

"Just get it done and get out."

Opening the packet of seeds, I leaned as far as I could toward the land and tossed them. Some landed in the water, but a few made it onto land. That was all I needed.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, and pulled at that thread of magick that curled around my core, and let it fill me.

“From tiny sprout to leafy green, let growth and life be clearly seen. By earth and sun, with love so bold, I cast this spell to make you grow. On this land, I plant with care, a hedge so lush, a natural snare. Grow fast and tall, please form a wall, protect and shield, so mote it be.”

Again, I wasn't a wordsmith, but my intent was clear. As the first green shoots unfurled from the seeds, I sighed, relieved that it was working.

A shout sounded behind me, and I whipped my head around.

My heart dropped into my stomach like a lead weight tied to a fishing line.

“No, no, no,” I shouted, already moving.

Owen.

He'd come for me, racing forward in a Zodiac, waving one arm.

No, Owen. You eejit. Turn back.

Then I felt it. Power rippled across my skin, magick brushing against my own, the rush of wind blowing my hair forward.

A shadow loomed over my shoulder.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



OWEN

My phone rang, an unknown number, and I almost didn't answer it, but something nudged me to do so. It was a UK number, perhaps one of the lads from the pub.

"Owen, is Shona with you?"

"I'm sorry, who is this?" I stood, crossing to the front of the cottage to peer out the window.

"It's Sophie, from the castle."

"Right, hi. Um, her van is still here."

"But have you seen her?"

"No, why? Is something wrong?" My pulse kicked up as I pulled on my shoes.

"I don't know, but, well, yes?"

"What's going on?" I grabbed my fleece, my wallet, and my car keys, and held my phone to my ear as I locked the cottage door. Jogging lightly across the garden, I poked my head into the greenhouse. "Louise, have you seen Shona?"

"Not yet today. She must be having a lie-in."

"She's not at the greenhouse." I jogged to her cottage and banged on the door, sighing when the knob turned easily under my hand. Small towns, man. They blew my mind sometimes with how trusting they were. Stomping inside, my heart racing, I called for her, but I could already tell by the stillness

of the cottage that nobody was there. Peeking my head in the bedroom, I saw the bed neatly made.

Unusual for her.

“She’s not at her cottage. What’s going on?”

“Um, it’s just my crows dropped her walking cane at the castle.”

“Excuse me?” There was a lot to unpack in that sentence, but I wasn’t sure I had time for it.

“Long story. Any idea where she might have gotten off to?”

Movement in the window caught my eye, and my stomach twisted as Eugene narrowly missed getting hit by a passing car as he scuttled across the road. What the hell was he doing out of the greenhouse? This was supposed to be his sleeping time. Cursing, phone at my ear, I ran outside and after Eugene.

“Dude, you gotta stop doing this,” I hissed, when I caught up with him, scooping him up. When I straightened, my eyes caught on movement out on the loch.

A kayak.

Heading toward the island.

And a woman with the same sunny blonde hair as Shona, and the same blue sweater I’d seen her in the day before, paddling furiously.

“God damn it!”

“What? What’s happening over there?” Sophie demanded.

“Shona’s gone to the island.”

“What the— Lachlan!” Sophie shouted and then disconnected the phone. *Why, Shona? Why do what you’d specifically warned me not to do? Nothing can happen to you. I can’t lose you.*

Panic sweeping over me, I deposited Eugene on his towel and instructed Louise to not let him leave the greenhouse.

Hopping in my car, I sped to the docks. I could have gone on foot but protecting Eugene had shaved precious seconds from my time.

What was she thinking?

Squealing to a stop, I parked my car haphazardly, throwing the caution lights on. Fear lanced my gut, and I ran out onto the dock, jumping into a Zodiac tied at the end. I was pleased to see the keys in it. Small towns for the win. Unlooping the rope from the hook—

“Hey!” A shout sounded at the shore, and I turned to see the boat rental guys running across the road. Praying the engine would start, I turned the key and was rewarded with the engine rumbling to life. Pushing the throttle forward, I zipped away from the dock just before the guys reached me.

“I’m bringing it right back,” I called over my shoulder. “It’s ... someone’s in trouble.”

I didn’t know if they heard me over the engine or not, and frankly, I didn’t care. All I could think about was getting to Shona before something catastrophic happened.

Don’t go to the island.

Everyone here had told me that. From day one. And yet what was Shona doing? She was kayaking up to the damn island. I would throttle her if I wasn’t so damned worried for her.

And, yes, the irony wasn’t lost on me, given Shona had said almost the same thing. *But I get it, Shona. I can’t lose you when I’ve just found you.*

I rounded the island, directing the boat to where I’d seen her last. There, I found her sitting in her kayak, waving her hands at the shore. *Is she ... is she chanting? What the ...*

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Plants sprang, literally sprang up from the ground, weaving tightly together as they grew toward the treetops, quickly forming a dense and impenetrable hedge at the waterline.

How on earth is that happening?

Did she?

No, don't be a fool, Williams. There was no way ...

What could that possibly mean?

Shona. Had. Done. That.

What was that? Magick?

Confusion caused me to slow the boat. *If Shona made those plants happen ... then she has been hiding things from me all along.*

My mind flashed to Shona, naked, chanting in her garden to celebrate Mabon. The mystery that surrounded her. The hesitation to share more of herself. And now, plants growing out of thin air. My conclusion *was not* logical, but as a storyteller, the puzzle pieces were coming together. *Ryan said he'd seen water horses.*

To protect the island.

And yet, Shona had been safe until I arrived ... a stranger.

Shit.

Shona's involved in all of this.

The guileless and beautiful woman I'd fallen in love with had ... lied to me?

The water shifted, moving at an unnatural angle, and panic gripped me.

"Shona!" I shouted, and she turned, horror on her pretty face.

"Owen, no! Go back!" Shona screamed, grabbing her paddle, and pushing away from the beach.

It all happened so fast and yet, seemingly in slow motion. Three horses rose, taller than the tallest tree on the island, formed entirely of the water. The loch seemed to heave, like someone pulling the rug out from under you, and my boat was dragged toward Shona. For one heartbreaking second, her eyes caught on mine, and then the water horses ran her over, tossing her high into the air before she landed with a sickening plop in

the water. I dove into the loch as they turned and aimed for me, wanting to be clear of any potential danger from the boat. I swam as rapidly as I could in shoes and a sweater and when the Kelpies raced over me, I sucked in a breath of air. I couldn't tell which was down or up, I just held my breath and let my body get tossed around until the water calmed slightly. Risking opening my eyes, I spied sun, and swam toward the surface.

Breaking the top, I gasped for air, and spun around, seeing Shona in the water nearby. She floated, her life jacket holding her head up, blood running down her face. I jumped into action.

If this was how I'd lost her I would never forgive myself.

Or her.

"Shona, baby, come on. Wake up," I crooned to her when I reached her. Pulling her close so that her body rested on top of mine, I held two fingers to her neck, panic making my hand slip. The water was cold, colder than I'd anticipated, and tremors racked my body as I fought to stay warm. When I felt her pulse flutter under the tips of my fingers, I almost cried. "Come on, pretty girl, time to wake up."

Shona's eyelashes fluttered, inky spikes against a bone white face.

A shadow loomed, and I looked up to see the three Kelpies, veering a sharp turn around the island, and setting their course straight for us once again. They were starkly and terrifyingly beautiful, and if I wasn't in their direct path of destruction, I'd stay to admire their beauty. Instead, I turned, tugging Shona along with me, as I tried to swim toward shore.

"As first Knight of the Order of Caledonia, I command you to stand down!"

I sputtered, taking in a mouthful of water, as another Zodiac raced directly toward the Kelpies, Lachlan driving, and Sophie at the bow, a sword in hand.

What the hell?

Just before the Kelpies were upon us, they dissolved in front of Sophie, like a crystal glass shattering into a thousand pieces, and dropped back into the water. Lachlan turned, dropping speed as he neared us, and then cut the engine as they bobbed close.

“Is she okay?” Sophie screeched, and Lachlan pushed her out of the way. Leaning over, he grabbed Shona by her life preserver and dragged her into the boat. I treaded water, the burn from the cold water beginning to shift to numbness, and darted looks over my shoulder at the new hedge wall that lined the narrow beach of the island.

The only access point to the island.

Shona *had* done that.

But how?

“Come on, mate.” Lachlan reached out a hand and hauled me into the boat. I landed on the floor, sputtering and shaking, and crawled to where Shona was propped in a sitting position.

“Did she wake up yet?”

“No.” Sophie held a towel to the cut on Shona’s head as Lachlan raced toward shore.

“Shona, baby, wake up. Please.”

Suddenly, her eyes were open, bottomless blue orbs, staring into my soul, and the tension released so suddenly that I could have cried.

Instead, I got mad.

“What the hell was that?” I asked and Sophie glared at me.

“There’s plenty of time to get mad later,” Sophie hissed at me. “Though I most certainly will be having a few words with you, Shona.”

“I had to stop him from going to the island.” Shona’s words were shaky, but at least the color was starting to return to her face.

“Stop me? You had to stop me by going yourself? That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” I began, and Sophie smacked

my arm.

“Knock it off.”

The boat bumped against the dock, and then everyone was everywhere at once. Shona was lifted, blankets were brought, hot water bottles were shoved down my back. It was like an aggressive hug from the townspeople as people kept showing up to make sure that we were okay. By the time I'd warmed up and waded my way through the sea of people, a hot toddy clutched in my hand, I found Shona swaddled in blankets with a bandage on her forehead, sitting on a bench, bookended by Sophie and Agnes. I could have lost her. *I could have lost the woman I love with all my heart.* Instead of pain, there was fury. Absolutely irrational rage.

“What the hell was that, Shona?” I threw my hand out. Shona's eyebrows drew together.

“I could be asking you the same question, Owen. If you'd just stayed at home, none of this would have happened.”

I noticed she said home, and not on the land, and realized her deeper meaning.

“Now, kids, maybe there's a better time to discuss this,” Agnes began. “You've both had—”

“Oh, now you want to be quiet about it? When you've been fighting for him to stop making his movie since day one? Well, I tried, okay? And he won't stop. He's relentless.”

I drew back, hurt seeping through me. While I'd known that Shona wasn't keen on the movie, I hadn't thought it went this deep.

Agnes pressed her lips together and fell silent.

“And you're a hypocrite,” I said, anger fueling me.

Sophie gasped, while Shona's eyes narrowed.

“Well? You are. Yelling at me this morning about trying to see the damn Kelpies and making me promise to tell you if I go again. All while you sneak off and do the exact same thing behind my back. Do as I say not as I do, huh?” I stabbed a

finger in the air, hurt driving me. “And what even was that? By the way. On the beach?”

“Owen.” Sophie’s voice was a sharp warning, and I turned to see many of the people avidly listening in.

I lowered my voice.

“You’ve lied to me all along, haven’t you? About ... whatever it was you were doing out there. You’re far more involved in all of this. I asked you for the truth, didn’t I?”

“I was going to ...” Shona’s voice cracked. “I was trying to find a way to tell you, Owen. You were so focused on this movie, and I didn’t want to be just another one of your subjects. Not me. Not this. It’s all too new to me.”

“New to you?” I threw out my hands. “What about me? This is *all* new to me.”

“Because you didn’t give me reason to feel confident in telling you, Owen,” Shona hissed. “You talk about trust, but you’re so sure you know what’s right in this situation that you don’t bend an inch. I asked you to stop filming. I asked you to protect this town, yet you just barreled on, so certain what you were doing was right. Where, in all of that, do you think there is space for me to trust you with more?”

“When you told me you loved me,” I said. A low rumble went through the crowd. “*That* is when you should trust me.”

Shona flinched.

“That’s enough.” Graham took my arm and held it strong when I tried to wrench it away. “No, lad. I said that’s enough. You’ve both had a tough go of it. But she’s shaking, bleeding, and clearly traumatized.”

“But ...” I wrenched my arm forward and Lachlan stepped up, grabbing the other one.

“He said that’s enough.” The guys dragged me away, while Sophie and Agnes converged on a now-crying Shona.

“Damn it all to bloody hell,” I swore, my heart torn in a million pieces in my chest.

“Come on, lad, we’ll take you home. But if I hear one word of you harassing Shona again, I will come and beat the bloody hell out of your sorry arse, understood?” Graham surprised me by grabbing my neck in a chokehold with his hand, his eyes furious.

Now that the adrenaline was beginning to subside, I just wanted to take a hot shower and forget this day had ever happened.

Was Shona a witch?

Who is she? What is she?

And what is Sophie? How did she stop the Kelpies from attacking us?

For the first time in my life, I didn’t want to complete a project. But not because Shona wanted me to stop. Because it hurt too much to think of staying here. I’d risked my heart with Loren Brae and Shona Scott. And I would never do that again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



OWEN

I didn't see Shona at all the next day.

Well, I saw her once when she stomped past, dragging a bin of garden waste, the white bandage standing out starkly against her forehead. I almost went to her. She turned, saw me in the window, flipped me off, and that was that.

The day after, an eviction notice was slipped under my door.

At that, I smiled. I'd been a model tenant, so she had no right to evict me. I simply wrote "NO" on it in big block letters and slipped it back beneath her door.

By day three, I was aching to speak to her. The lines were beginning to blur in my head about why we were mad at each other, and I just wanted to sink into her softness and figure it out together. Yet I couldn't. I simply, physically, could not bring myself to go to her. It was like I had a wall in my mind, and I slammed against it every time I thought of her hiding something from me. I'd drawn such a hard line about trust for such a long time now, I had no idea how to circumvent the box that I'd put myself in.

And yet, I hadn't been able to leave Loren Brae. *I haven't been able to leave Shona.* Even though she'd lied to me. My phone buzzed, and I answered it absentmindedly, instantly regretting it when my mother's voice rang out over the speaker.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Well, it’s about time you answered a call. You’ve been practically ignoring me these past few weeks while I’ve been in desperate need of you.”

Yes, Mom, I’m doing great, thanks for asking.

“What’s wrong now?”

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Because you always call with something wrong. So, what is it? Hit me with it.”

“I don’t like your tone, Owen. I’ve done nothing to deserve this insouciance.”

There were moments, when she used words like these, that I was reminded how sharply brilliant my mother was, and well capable of finding a job or looking after herself.

“Haven’t you?”

But she was already prattling on, revving up for whatever she needed to get off her chest that day. I kicked back in the lounge and stared at the wood beams crisscrossing the ceiling.

“Oh, and can you believe this? I’ve fired David.”

That got my attention.

“You what?” I sat up, dropping my feet to the floor with a thump. David was my lifeline. David was the only one who served as a buffer between my mother and me. “You can’t fire him. I pay his salary.”

“Yes, well, I did anyway.” My mother sniffed.

“What happened? Mom, David is an angel who makes your life run smoothly and puts up with your nonsense. Hire him back immediately. There’s no way he’s done something to deserve a firing.”

“He was meant to pick me up from a doctor’s appointment in Manhattan and didn’t show up until an hour later. I was standing there, in the freezing rain, waiting to get back to my

hotel. It's unforgivable, and I refuse to change my mind. You don't get second chances in life."

You don't get second chances in life.

Angela had stopped giving second chances when she'd stayed with my father after Kennedy was born. Bringing Kennedy into the family, raising her as her own, she'd hoped to start fresh. Instead, my father hadn't changed his path of destruction, and my mother's ability to forgive had subsequently died in its path.

I pinched my nose, as something broke open inside of me.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I know, isn't that awful? It was freezing, and I—"

"Not him, you, Mother. *You*. You are the problem."

My mother gasped, but I railroaded her.

"You're telling me that as an adult woman you were incapable of caring for yourself in one of the most accessible cities in the world? There's a subway. There are taxis. Ubers. Bike taxis. Buses. And you couldn't just handle the decision to return to your hotel yourself? So just like that you fired a good man who has put up with your shit for years?"

"Owen, you will not speak to me this way."

"Actually, yeah, I will. Because nobody else will say it to your face. Your helpless victim mode sucks, and I'm done catering to it. You've got enough smarts and money to figure it out on your own. Goodbye, Mother."

"Owen!" my mother shrieked, but I clicked off, staring blindly at the floor as fury rose inside me. *You don't get second chances in life*. Perhaps Mother needed to learn her own lesson for once. *Oh man, I sound just like her*. Shit.

Was that what I'd done with Shona? She'd made one mistake, and I froze her out, refusing to accept any explanation?

Like mother like son.

“Hell,” I muttered, crossing the room and pouring myself a healthy slug of whisky. Standing at the kitchen sink, I looked out the window. A flash of red caught my eye. Was the gnome ... moving? I looked down at my drink, and then back outside, but the gnome was gone. Curious, I put on my jacket, thinking I might as well sit outside by the fire while I mulled over my latest epiphany.

Everyone always talked about how life changing epiphanies were, but nobody talked about how much they hurt.

And yeah, this one hurt. A lot.

Stepping outside into the crisp fall air, I rounded the cottage and poked around in the bushes, but there was no gnome to be found. Weird. Maybe I’d just imagined the flash of red. Quickly, I started the fire, vaguely wishing for a cigar, and settled back into my chair. Taking a sip of whisky, I put the glass down and steepled my hands, staring into the flames.

The sound of clapping startled me.

Thank God I wasn’t still holding my glass of whisky, or it would be shattered on the ground. My mouth dropped open as the gnome walked around the side of the patio, clapping his hands.

“Well done, sir. It’s about bloody time.”

“What the fu—”

“Fern. What the *fern* is what we say here.” The gnome scowled at me, crossing his arms over his leather biker vest, his kilt shifting in the wind. Eugene skidded around the corner of the cottage, tumbling into the gnome, and he sighed, helping to right the hedgie.

“Are you real? Is this really happening?” I asked. Eugene danced over to me and put his little paws on my foot, and I pulled him onto my lap. He felt real.

“Aye, lad, it’s all real. Just needed you to open your eyes. Like you just did with your mum. Well done.” The gnome clapped again. “Sounds like she had it coming to her.”

“You heard that?”

“Aye, lad. She’s a difficult one, isn’t she?”

“The worst,” I said faintly, my heart pounding in my chest. “Gnorman, right?”

“That’s right.” Gnorman beamed at me. “You’re catching on now, lad.”

“It’s been you all along. Shona didn’t buy twenty gnome statues and put them all over the yard, did she? It’s just been you. Alive. Being here. A real gnome. Wandering the garden of his own accord.” Reaching down, I picked up my whisky and downed it in one gulp. *And now, I’m talking to a gnome. You’ve lost it, Williams.* “What the hell is going on in this town?”

“Och, you’d know the answer to that if you stopped trying to put us in your movies and you started talking to the wee lass, wouldn’t you?”

“This *is* about the movie, isn’t it?” I hung my head, absentmindedly scratching Eugene’s belly.

“I mean, *I* wouldn’t mind being in a movie.” Gnorman flexed his arms, admiring his muscles. “I’m practically a star as it is. But not everyone is as open as I am. Magick isn’t for everyone, Owen.”

“Magick,” I said, faintly. “That’s what Shona is, isn’t she? She’s not real.”

“Och, lad, listen to yourself. Of course, she’s real. She’s just a wee garden witch. Cut the lass a break, would you? She only just discovered her power a few weeks ago. She’s figuring it out.”

“A garden witch.” That explained the instant hedge she’d grown on the island. “And you’re her gnome?”

“I like to think it’s the other way around. She’s my witch.”

“And you’re all out here living your magickal lives while the Kelpies wreak havoc on Loren Brae. Got it.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “How come Shona just found out about her powers? Wouldn’t that be something she learned at an early age?”

“They manifest when they’re needed. She’s needed now. All of them are being called.”

“All of whom?”

“The members of the Order. They’re needed to banish the Kelpies.”

Banish Kelpies ... right. *Members of the Order.*

Wait ... what had Sophie said from the boat?

“As first Knight of the Order of Caledonia, I command you to stand down!” And when she said that, they had. The Kelpies had stood down. But Shona needs to fight them? But—

“She has to fight the Kelpies again?” At that, trepidation filled me. I was mad at Shona, but I still loved her.

“Why do you care?” Gnorman raised an eyebrow at me.

“Come on, G. Help me out.”

“She might, we don’t know yet. She’s still coming into her own, figuring out her power. Can you blame her for not immediately sharing it with the stranger renting her cottage?”

“No, but we went from strangers to being in love pretty fast.”

“Yes, and from where I’m standing, she was right not to trust you with her most important secrets. Because look how quickly you threw her away.”

My heart constricted at his words, like a tight band pulling together and knotting, and I gasped for breath. The gnome was one hundred percent right. Shona knew me better than I’d known myself, and she’d done what she needed to do to protect herself.

And to protect me.

The only reason she’d been at the island that day was to try and keep me off it. Because she was scared I’d get hurt. And instead, she’d been injured in the process of trying to protect me.

“I’m a fu—”

“Flowering,” Gnorman interrupted. “A flowering moron.”

“Yeah, that. Right. Okay, so how do I win her back?”

“I can’t tell you what to do, but I can help. You just have to ask.”

“Let’s start with my man Eugene.” The hedgie perked up at his name. “How do you feel about being a messenger?”

He grinned up at me, seemingly up for the task. I looked over at Gnorman.

“And how are your acting skills?”

“Superb, naturally.” Gnorman flexed his muscles.

“How do you feel about being in a movie?” The gnome brightened.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



SHONA

Have you tried my tea yet? It will help you open your heart.

I stared down at the text from Lia, annoyed. Just because she was a kitchen witch with all sorts of magickal teas and whatnot, didn't mean she had to boss me around. What if I didn't feel like opening my heart? Particularly to Owen after he'd gouged it out so neatly and stomped all over it.

The third agate had appeared in my gardening stick. Sophie had returned it to me, explaining that her crows had brought it to her as a warning, which is why she'd been able to help us so fast.

My third challenge must have been trying to protect Owen. Or shoring up protection of the stone. Either way, I'd passed, and almost died in the process.

I was officially a member of the magickal Order of Caledonia.

I celebrated by crying in the shower.

A soft scratching at the back door to my cottage had me tilting my head, and I wandered over to open the door. Nobody was there. I couldn't help but look toward the cottage. Seeing Owen's light on made me want to go to him.

And throat punch him.

I was still just so mad at him.

A grunting sound drew my eyes down, and my heart twisted.

“Eugene. Buddy.”

The little hedgie had a rose in his mouth. I gently accepted it, and he turned in a wee circle of excitement, like a dog doing zoomies around the yard, and then raced back into the garden. I watched him until he disappeared, and then just when I was about to close the door, he returned with another rose.

“Where are you getting these?”

But I knew.

Owen was sending them.

And I didn't know if I was ready to receive them.

But the look on Eugene's face was too excited, that I couldn't crush the wee lad, could I? I accepted each rose he brought me, until I had a vase full of flowers, and a heart full of confusion. I wanted to stay mad at Owen, didn't I? That was a low blow, sending Eugene, because nobody could resist his cuteness.

“I asked you for the truth, didn't I?” Owen's words echoed back to me, and I winced. Neither of us were in the right here, which is also why I was probably still so mad.

Despite my anger with Owen, I carried the vase into my bedroom, and put it on my table.

Damn it, but I missed Owen. He'd done exactly what I'd worried he would, cut me out of his life the minute he'd learned of my magick, and now I had this Owen-sized hole where my heart used to be. I was miserable, and I could kick myself for ever allowing him to kiss me. I'd known, even then, that he was the type of man that I'd never be able to get over.

But with his flowers on my bedside table, I slept peacefully for the first time since the day at the island.

The next day it was chocolates.

Individually wrapped Tunnocks tea cakes. After the third one that Eugene brought over, I stopped him and scribbled a

note for Eugene to give him.

That's enough.

Twenty minutes later, Eugene scuttled back with half a scone in his paw and laid it gently at my feet.

I laughed.

I couldn't help it.

He was trying, even if he was too chicken to come speak to me to my face.

The next day it was socks.

Hot pink socks with hedgehogs on them to be exact. I loved them. *Of course* I did. How could I not?

A small sliver of hope bloomed, yet I didn't know what to think. Or how I felt about Owen at the moment. All these emotions were jumbled up in my head, and I needed some sort of clarity.

Lia's jar of tea sat smack dab in the middle of my counter, and I sighed, reaching for the kettle. *What if my heart wasn't ready to be open?* The last thought was said in the tone of a petulant child. Great, now I was even annoying myself. I pressed my lips together as I stared out the window to Owen's cottage, waiting for the water to boil. Maybe I just needed to go talk to him. Clear the air. At the very least I'd get closure, right?

My kettle clicked, and I poured it in my favorite mug of gran's, one shaped like a squash, and scooped Lia's loose tea into my diffuser. Dangling it in the hot water, I waited while the tea brewed, tracing a finger over an apple in the bowl on the counter.

Derek's orchard had produced, fast. About a week later, I'd received a bushel of apples and a bottle of cider along with a handwritten note.

I won't ask any questions. As I said before, you've got your gran's touch. She'd be proud of you, and we can't thank you enough for saving our orchard.

I'd tucked the note away, pleased that my magick had worked for the apple trees. I'd also heard that Greta was starting to leave her home a little more. Had a few gentle smiles to share with her kids and others. It warmed my soul, knowing I'd been used to help her in that way. That was what it was all about, right? Helping others. I had to stay focused on the good my magick could do in this world.

The tea was delicious, a delicate herbal and floral blend, that made me feel a touch giddy when I sipped it. Was that the purpose of the tea then? To make me feel lighter? Buzzing a bit, I turned at the tell-tale scratching of Eugene at the door.

"Oh my, well hello to you, good sir." I pretended to bow for Eugene as he sported a wee bowtie around his neck. In his paws he held a little scroll of paper tied with a ribbon. "Aren't you the distinguished gentleman?"

Eugene waited, grinning up at me, which I took as my indicator that I was meant to read his note. Unrolling the tube of paper, I read the words out loud.

"You are cordially invited to Eugene's first movie premier. 7:00 p.m. behind Owen's cottage. Will you attend?"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Did you make it into the movies, buddy? Well, I suppose I can't miss that, can I?" Finding a pen, I wrote yes on the note and handed it back to him. Eugene raced off, and I checked the time. Only five hours or so to obsess over seeing Owen again. Lovely. *And he was still making movies when that's what had started our fight in the first place.* What was I to make of that?

By the time the evening neared, I'd worked myself into a small tizzy. Agnes had called, talking me down from canceling, and I felt a touch calmer. We'd had some long talks this past week, she and I, and she'd apologized for putting so much pressure on me to try to stop Owen from making the movie. At the end of the day, we realized what we should have understood all along, at some point, the story of the Kelpies would be shared. Owen had been right, it might be better to have some control over it, than to let a random person with an iPhone share it to the world.

Taking a deep breath to relax, I crossed the garden toward the cottage, pausing as soft music drifted in the air. Steeling myself, I took one more deep breath, and stepped around the side of the cottage.

My mouth dropped open.

Candles lined the patio, creating a makeshift aisle up to two seats that faced the back fence. There, a projector had been set up, and a sheet hung as a screen. Rose petals were scattered about, a fire was crackling in the fire pit. Owen stood at the end of the aisle in his tuxedo from the wedding. He held a singular rose in his hand, and I could have kicked myself for not dressing more nicely than jeans and a red jumper. Granted, the invitation had not indicated black tie, so that was on Owen, not me.

“I feel underdressed.”

“Don’t. You look stunning. Incredible.” Owen’s eyes tracked to the bruise on my forehead, and his lips pressed into a thin line. “Does it still hurt?”

“Oh, this?” I brushed my fingers over the cut, nervous and jittery as I took a step forward and immediately caught my foot on a stone. I went flying.

Straight into Owen’s arms.

He was there, just like he’d been every time before, and while my face was smushed awkwardly against his chest, I took a deep inhale of his scent. He smelled earthy and clean, like soap mixed with cedar trees, and I never wanted him to let go.

Owen steadied me, and I looked up at him, at a loss for words.

“You okay?” Owen asked, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

My eyes filled.

“Oh no, don’t. Not yet. Here. I have this all planned out. Just ...” Owen turned and handed me a glass of champagne, and I took it, gulping it blindly, the bubbles screaming a path

down my throat. “Please will you join me? The movie starts soon.”

“Of course, thank you.” I took Owen’s arm, and he led me the few steps to a chair. Once he was sure I was settled, he sat next to me and reached for the remote. I wanted to ask him where he’d gotten the fancy projector, but that was a question for another time.

I suspected this was the movie about the Kelpies. I’d known it was coming, I just didn’t know if I was ready for how it would make me feel. Or if I could make any decisions on it yet. I kind of felt like maybe Agnes needed to watch it first, as she was far more passionate about the outcome of this movie than I was. Steeling myself, I took another sip of my champagne as the opening music started.

Owen placed his hand on the arm of his chair, inches from mine, and I wanted to reach out and link my fingers with his.

“There once was a boy ...”

I jerked my eyes away from Owen’s hand and gasped as Eugene toddled on screen, a wee baseball cap on his head. He chased after a ball, playing with his other hedgehog friends.

“He was a happy boy, for the most part, living a normal life in Texas with his sister and his parents.”

A hedgie ran onto the screen in a pink bow and blonde wig and a giggle escaped me.

“Kennedy.” I laughed, glancing at Owen, and his lips twitched.

“But then one day his parents split, and the boy went to live with his mother. His father wasn’t even there to say goodbye on the day they left.”

Eugene appeared on screen pushing a little suitcase with his nose, and my heart twisted.

“The boy tried to make friends in his new town, but his mother’s demands made it difficult. And his dad never called like he said he would.”

A hedgie in a silky head scarf herded Eugene away from his friends.

“After years of this, it became second nature to keep everything surface level with people. If the boy didn’t get too close to anyone, he didn’t have to say goodbye to them.”

My heart clenched as Eugene walked past the other hedgies. He smiled and looked confident, yet he didn’t stop to engage with the others. *He just kept walking.*

“The boy watched as his mother constantly found fault with others, cutting people off at the smallest indiscretion, never letting anyone get too close. He soon followed suit.”

Eugene kicked another hedgie on the screen, turning his back and stomping away with his nose in the air.

“Then one day, the boy became a man.”

Gnorman stepped on screen, and I gasped, gripping Owen’s hand tightly.

The gnomes.

Owen *knew*. There was nothing more to hide.

Gnorman strolled on screen, peacocking as he pretended to flirt.

“The man dated easily, but never let anyone too close, always finding fault with his dates. He pretended it was because he was always on the search for the truth, holding his dates to an impossibly high standard.”

The screen showed Gnorman on a date with a hedgie in a pink wig, and the hedgie threw a mini glass of wine at him.

“But then one day, a woman like no other, walked into his life and changed the path of his future forever.”

Gnora walked on screen, wearing jeans and a jumper similar to mine, carrying a gardening rake. Tears filled my eyes.

Gnora, being Gnora, tossed her hair and openly flirted with Gnorman on screen, even though I was sure I didn’t flirt quite

like that. Then she caught her toe, tripping forward, and Gnorman caught her in his arms.

“Damn you.” I laughed through my tears.

“The man fell for the woman, understanding he’d never meet another like her in his life. Except, old patterns are hard to break. You see, he’d learned from his mother that people were disposable when they did wrong. And from his father that being truthful was merely a suggestion at best. The man’s biggest insecurity was being lied to, being kept in the dark, feeling helpless with his own emotions. It was easier not to trust, you see? And because of that, when he was scared of losing his newfound love, he seized the first reason he could not to trust her and pushed her away. Just like his mother had taught him to.”

Gnorman crossed his arms over his chest, pretending to scoff as Gnora pleaded with him on camera.

“The woman was cautious. She was right to not share herself with the man, for she could sense that he’d reject her. And for that, the man is very sorry.”

Owen sighed.

“Not my best work, but we do the best we can, don’t we?”

The screen faded, as tears streamed down my face. I turned to Owen, opening my mouth, but he held a finger in the air.

“The big finale,” Owen whispered. Taking my hand, he drew me to standing and pointed to the grass.

“All right, gentlemen, don’t screw this up!” The hedgehogs stood in a line along the yard.

Eugene skidded around the corner, racing into a spot at the front of the line and my heart clenched.

Gnorman had put him in the front.

“And, one, two, three, four, go!” Gnorman shouted, and the hedgies scuttled forward. Together they formed the words: *I’m Sorry*.

“Oh, Owen.”

The hedgies disappeared and came together for another formation.

Will you forgive me?

How could I not? I went to turn to Owen, but he held me in place, nodding to the grass where the hedgehogs dispersed and then came together to form the shape of a heart. In the middle, Eugene held up a rose.

Now I was just a mess, openly crying, as Owen turned me to him.

“Owen, I’m sorry,” I began, and he cut me off with a finger to my lips.

“No, please. Don’t apologize. I didn’t make you feel safe enough to share with me. And I’ve learned from my gnomie, G, that you’re new to magick. You were still just figuring it out. I can’t be mad at you for not being ready to share that with me. I’m the one who should apologize. I got too bullheaded with having to make this movie. I’ve always been that way, hyper focused on something often to my detriment. I did it again this time, but I hurt you in the process.”

“You have every right to make your movie, Owen,” I said, blinking up at him through tears. “It’s what you love to do. I should’ve—”

“No, Shona. We both made choices. You made your decision based on the information you had—which was that you knew I cut people from my life fast. It’s not a good trait, and one I’m determined to work on. I kind of got slapped in the face with it, when I realized how much my mother had ingrained that habit in me. I don’t want to be so unforgiving that I cut everyone out of my life, Shona. And I did that with you because I was so scared, I was so damned scared to lose you that it was easier to push you away first.”

My heart bloomed. Be it the tea I drank or my understanding of how hard it was for this man to see things with fresh eyes, but either way I was irrevocably, head over heels in love with him.

“I know you don’t want me to tell you how sorry I am for shutting you out. I do want to share my magick with you. I’m ... it’s incredible. I’m still learning, but I hope you’ll learn along with me.”

“I’m here, Shona. For whatever you want. Every step of the way.”

Owen leaned over and plucked the rose from Eugene’s paws and held it in the air.

“Do you know what I love about the rose?”

“What’s that?” I whispered, my heart hammering in my chest.

“They’re alluring flowers, aren’t they? The softness of their petals hides the strength of their stems. Their thorns remind you to treat them with care, that the beauty they choose to give you comes at a price and must be protected.” I cried as Owen repeated my words back to me from our first date. “I’m sorry I didn’t protect you. I was careless with your heart. I won’t be again if you give me a chance.”

“I love you, Owen Williams. Thorns and all.”

And then his lips were on mine, and my heart exploded in joy, the world fading away.

Until a gagging sound tore us apart.

“Gross,” Gnorman grumbled, covering Eugene’s eyes.

“You weren’t saying that last night, sugar.” Gnora winked at Gnorman and waggled her fingers at him from the side of the garden. Seeing her *come hither* look, he dropped his hands from Eugene and raced after her, laughing as he chased her through the gardens.

“Do you ever get used to having them around?” Owen wondered, wrapping his arm around me, and pulling me in for a hug.

“I don’t know. They’re new to me too. I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

“Here. Together,” Owen agreed, making my heart sing that he planned to stay.

I grinned, unable to help myself.

“There’s no place like gnome.”

EPILOGUE



OWEN

“Hey, man. Great to hear from you.” I looked out the window to where Shona was crouched, having what looked to be a very serious conversation with Eugene. I checked the time. It was late in the morning for the lad to be awake. He should be tucked into his nest in the greenhouse around now. Confirming my suspicions that Shona was scolding him for being awake, she scooped him up and carried him toward the greenhouse. “How’s the new movie been?”

“You know what? I kind of dig shooting a romcom. It’s actually a lot of fun.”

“As it should be. I bet the blooper reels will be legendary.”

“Oh man, so many good ones. One of our actresses squirted water through her nose she was laughing so hard the other day.”

I chuckled. “Epic, man.”

“The shoot is staying on schedule, and not over budget, so honestly, no complaints.”

I felt a subtle tug in my chest, that I always felt when speaking about new projects. I loved the excitement of creating the next enticing project, but I was beginning to realize that some of my relentless drive that had fueled me over the years had also been me running from my own loneliness. Now, being in Loren Brae with Shona, setting down roots so to speak, didn’t make me miss the mad

scramble of the industry so much. I'd always make films, but I planned to be much more particular in choosing my projects moving forward. Especially if they took me away from Shona for too long.

“Even better.”

“How about you? You've been quiet for a while. How's the documentary coming along?”

“Mmm, honestly, Ryan?” I steeled myself, for I was about to do the one thing that I really hated. Well, not entirely, but close. “I've kind of pivoted to something else. Turns out this town really needs help. I'm going to help MacAlpine Castle with a tourism campaign they're working on, and in the meantime, I've also started writing an original screenplay.”

“No kidding? You haven't really delved into writing your own screenplays before. That's awesome, man. What's it about?”

“Some Scottish myths. The Kelpies to be exact.”

“Water horses, right?”

“Right.” I held my breath, wondering if he would connect the two. Ryan paused.

“Is that what ...”

“Hard to say, man. I haven't been able to record any evidence of them.” It wasn't a lie, but it still wasn't the whole truth. I had resigned myself to walking that line, in order to protect Loren Brae. I'd promised myself, since Ryan was all healed up, that one day long down the road when the Kelpies were quieted and Loren Brae was at peace, I'd tell him over a pint. Until then, I'd stand by Shona's side.

“Fair enough. It's all a bit fuzzy for me, to be honest.”

“No kidding, you knocked your head pretty hard. Any residuals from that?”

“Nah, man, I'm good. Gotta run though, can't wait to meet this Shona of yours. Sounds like you finally landed a good one.”

“The best.”

I clicked off, feeling lighter for having navigated a conversation that I’d been putting off for a while now.

“Ready to go?”

I turned to where Shona stood in the doorway, in jeans and a frayed sweater, the knit cap with the pink pom-pom I’d bought for her pulled over her hair. My heart smiled whenever I saw her.

“How can I be ready when I don’t know where you’re taking me?”

“I’m not telling you because you tried to hide your birthday from me.”

“I did *not* hide it. It just didn’t occur to me to share it. Honestly, I just forgot.”

“Who forgets their birthday?” Shona narrowed her eyes when I moved closer, helpless to not touch her in some way when she was in the same room as I was.

“I mean, I remember the date. I just wasn’t paying attention. My mind’s been on other things.”

“Aye, I know it. I’m proud of you, you know.” Shona stretched up and gave me a lingering kiss that had me thinking about dragging her back to the bedroom. Pulling back, she smiled. “I think your fantasy movie about the Kelpies will be fantastic, plus it will highlight Scotland’s myths and legends. And give work to Scottish actors. It’s going to be grand, I’m sure of it.”

“Well, I’m still a long way out from all of that. But I’m enjoying the process.” Much to my surprise, I was. I’d taken over Shona’s cottage as my writing studio, continuing to pay Shona rent, even though she’d stomped her foot and had a “wee” tantrum about it. When I finally calmed her down and explained it was a business expense, she accepted the money, and I had a charming spot to dive into a part of the industry that I’d never really given a proper go before.

The cold had settled into Loren Brae, and I zipped my coat as Shona dragged me to the car.

“Did I tell you that I heard from Greta? She’s doing much better, well, I suppose as well as she can be. She’ll be at the market this weekend.”

“It’ll be nice to meet her.” Reaching over, I squeezed Shona’s leg as she drove.

Once I’d been able to wrap my head around Shona being a garden witch, I’d pestered her with an endless slew of questions until she’d limited me to three a day. I respected the limit but kept a running list in my phone as they occurred to me. I knew my thirst for knowledge could be exhaustive, and since she was still learning about her magick, I realized it was probably like me learning to write a screenplay. I’d likely be deeply annoyed by someone bugging me with a crap ton of questions about something that was still new to me as well.

My gaze fell on the island.

Even now, weeks later, my heart skipped a beat when I saw it. I’d been so close to losing Shona, all because of my own stubbornness. I never looked away though, I refused to. I needed the reminder that refusing to bend, even when the person you care about most is asking you to, can break you in more ways than one.

Shona’s wall of greenery still stood, protecting the island from anyone who would even think about trying to penetrate it. For a moment, the moody grey clouds shifted, and a shaft of wan autumn sunlight speared down, highlighting the island. The water rippled around it, shifting ever so slightly, and I realized I’d never look at a loch in quite the same light again.

Shona slowed, turning down a lane of the village that I hadn’t explored yet, and pulled to a stop in front of a rustic grey stone building, with a deep green door, and a wooden sign hanging over the front. *Ramsay Kilts*.

“You’re buying me a kilt?” I asked, surprise filling me.

“Aye.” Shona laughed at my surprised look. Kilts weren’t cheap, and I immediately felt guilty about her spending the

money. “Don’t try and talk me out of it. Scottish lads get theirs on their eighteenth birthday, and I want to do this for you.”

“Is this just because you want to see me in a kilt?”

Shona’s cheeks reddened but she threw me a cheeky wink as she exited the car.

“I can have more than one reason for wanting to do this.”

“I’m in.”

Rounding the hood of the van, I grabbed her and dipped her in a dramatic kiss, that had her laughing by the time I brought her back to standing. We pushed inside the door, a small bell signaling our entrance, and a man turned from where he was hanging a kilt up.

“I’m going to toss that bell in the loch.”

Tall, with a foreboding build that made him look like he should be in a job with strenuous labor, the man crossed thick arms across his chest as he narrowed his eyes at us. Dark hair, bright blue eyes, and tattoos on the forearms made me think he’d like to hang out with Gnorman and his biker gang one day.

“I don’t blame you,” Shona agreed, smiling up at the brooding man. “Nevertheless, it must be helpful to signal that people have arrived.”

“I’ve got eyes, don’t I?”

“It’s good to see you, Ramsay.” Shona grinned when Ramsay only nodded once, as close to affection as he seemed likely to show. “I can’t tell you how happy we are that you’ve decided to open a branch here.” Shona turned to me, grabbing my hand and drawing me closer. “Ramsay owns a very successful chain of kilt shops all around Scotland, but he’s just recently opened a shop here. He grew up one village over and we’d see each other from time to time at various functions. Ramsay, this is Owen.”

“Hello,” Ramsay said.

I waited for more, but that was it. Brevity must be his thing. His eyes narrowed at something over my shoulder, and I

turned to see a car had pulled up next to ours. Muttering under his breath, Ramsay stormed to the door and flipped the lock, turning the sign in the window to *Closed*. As if on cue, the phone began to ring.

“Bloody hell,” Ramsay muttered.

I took in the shop while he handled the call with the curt gruffness that a part of me wished I could carry off when I was sick of small talk. The shop itself was impressive, with dark wood floors, grey stone walls, and stunning kilts hung on wood hooks and railings that matched the color of the floor. Rock music played, but low enough to not be jarring, and a small platform stood in front of a trio of mirrors.

“He’s one of the best kiltmakers in Scotland,” Shona promised me.

Ramsay slammed the phone down, writing something into a paper calendar on his desk, and then glanced up.

“Have you decided on a pattern yet or would you like to have a look?” Ramsay gestured to two tartan armchairs in deep green with a stack of sample books on a small table between them.

“We’ll just have a quick look,” Shona said, hurrying me toward the chair. The phone began to ring again.

“Bloody hell. All day long.” Ramsay picked up the phone, slammed it back down, and then left it off the hook.

I instantly wanted to put him in a movie.

“I struggle with dealing with customers as well,” Shona said, casually, as she flipped through the book of samples. “It’s why I’m done with weddings.”

“Aye. Don’t blame you. I just don’t have the time.” Ramsay came around the desk and stood in front of us, his thick arms crossed over his chest once more. I wondered if he had any idea how menacing he looked.

“You could hire someone,” I suggested. “Might take the load off.”

Ramsay stroked his beard.

“Might do. It’s inevitable. I just wanted a little peace and quiet to myself for once.”

“I might know a few people who could help. Then you could go hide in your workshop and not scare people away from the shop.” Shona grinned when one side of his lips quirked up in an almost smile, acknowledging her dig.

“I’ll admit that customer service is not my strong suit,” Ramsay conceded.

“Well, let’s crack on with it then and get out of your hair.”

“Take your time.” Ramsay waved a hand in the air and went through a door in the back of the shop. “I’ll just put some tea on.”

Shona laughed when I lifted my eyebrows at her. By the time we’d settled on a dark green, blue, and red pattern—turns out there was a Williams pattern after all—we’d learned that Ramsay’s most recent shopgirl had quit, and he wasn’t too keen on interviewing anyone else at the moment. The man did warm up after a while, though I still wouldn’t categorize him as particularly chatty. Once we’d finished, Shona promised to send some names over, and we left, Ramsay flipping the sign back to open once we were gone.

“That’s one way to run a business.” I laughed.

“He doesn’t need the money. He’s wildly successful. So I imagine he’s just frustrated by constant demands on his time. He’s always loved the traditions of making kilts and what they symbolize to Scotland. But we can’t love all aspects of our business, can we?”

“No, I don’t suppose we can. But if the good outweighs the bad, I call that a win,” I said as Shona drove us back home.

Home.

I was working on securing a work visa to stay in Scotland longer, but now, Loren Brae had become home, and I truly was delighted with Shona’s pretty spot. I wanted to be there when spring came and the plants began to bloom again. I wanted to watch as Shona learned more about her magick, and the

different ways she'd come up with helping people, and to see how Gnorman and Gnora's relationship got on.

They wouldn't let me film them anymore, as much as I wanted to, but watching how Gnora kept Gnorman on his toes was a constant delight for me. She was sassy as could be and kept Gnorman's head spinning.

"Come on." Shona grabbed my hand, pulling me from my thoughts, and dragged me toward the greenhouse. "Eugene wanted to tell you happy birthday as well."

"Did he now? Has he developed the ability to speak finally?"

"Alas, my magick has not extended that far just yet." Shona shook her head sadly, and I tugged on a lock of hair, forcing her to tilt her head up so I could linger over a kiss in the crisp afternoon air. She leaned into me, our foreheads touching, and I sighed against her lips.

"I'm so glad I found you," I murmured.

"It's the truth of it, isn't it? You've gone and taken my whole heart, Owen Williams."

"And you mine, sweet Shona Scott. Watching you bloom has been the greatest honor of my life. Thank you for letting me stay."

"Hardly letting you," Shona grumbled, "as you still pay me."

"As I should."

"Listen it's not fair ..." She shook her head and bit off the words, holding a hand in the air. "Right. It's your birthday, and I'm not going to fuss at you about this. Close your eyes."

Closing my eyes, I allowed her to pull me around the corner of the greenhouse.

"All right, lads, as practiced!" Gnorman shouted, and I opened my eyes to see the hedgehog army in neat rows behind Gnora who now wore a sparkling dress.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Williams ...” Gnora sang, kicking one leg out, and doing a breathy rendition of the famous Marilyn Monroe birthday song. Gnorman’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and I had to reach down to keep him from beelining for the other gnome.

“Oh, right. *Right*. Focus,” Gnorman muttered. “And one, two, three!”

The hedgies took their cue, racing in circles until they formed a symbol that only took me a moment to realize was meant to be in the shape of a camera. Then they disbanded, while Gnora continued her husky song, and reconvened to form the words, Happy Birthday. Finally, they came in line to form an arrow and I followed the direction it was pointing.

There on a small table outside the greenhouse, sat Eugene with a striped party hat on his head, and a cake with a lit candle. Laughing, I clapped for everyone, before walking over to look at the cake.

“Looking pretty fancy there, buddy,” I said, reaching out to scratch behind Eugene’s ears. He grinned up at me and happiness cascaded through me as I read the inscription on the cake. “Time to turnip the music and celebrate!”

“I couldn’t help myself,” Shona said in an apologetic tone, wrapping her arm through mine.

“As you shouldn’t. Honestly, there’s never a dill moment around here anyway.”

Her laughter was all I needed to make this the best birthday ever.

It doesn’t seem quite fair that Gnorman could find love, but not Eugene, does it? If you’d like a peek into Eugene’s new love interest sign up to my newsletter and check out this sweet bonus scene: Eugene Finds Love!

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WILD SCOTTISH BEAUTY

WILLOW

I wasn't doing it *just* for the wine.

Okay, so maybe that played a small part in my decision to accept an internship position at a fashion house in Milan, but only, like, ten percent. Fifteen, tops. The rest was rooted firmly in my need to get away from a failed business venture that doubled as a bad breakup.

If you're going to fail, you might as well do it catastrophically. At least you'll be the best at something.

I laughed, amazed that my innate optimism could somehow manage to turn even my most recent dumpster fire of a life into a positive thing. But maybe it was. If my boyfriend hadn't stolen all the money I'd invested in our fashion line, along with the heart of the very first employee we'd hired, well then, I wouldn't be able to take this internship in Milan, would I? Instead, I'd still be stuck in a closet of a studio, desperately working on designs, sucking down instant ramen from the bodega next to the artist warehouse in Brooklyn, and dreaming of being able to afford a one-bedroom apartment someday.

Moving to Brooklyn from the Midwest had been like jumping into an icy lake in the dead of winter where at first, you're so shocked it hurts, and then you're so busy trying to survive that you just grow numb to it all. I was in the numb stage—perhaps *too* numb—after my boyfriend had charmingly talked me out of all of my savings and taken off with our new seamstress.

Now, as I stared at the snow gusting across the frozen tundra of my father's backyard in Minnesota, I dreamed of warm Italian nights, good food, and learning at the helm of a larger fashion house. Maybe I just needed to set aside the dream of starting my own line for a while, get more experience, and see where it took me. It was standard operating procedure for me, really, to dive in headfirst, which was also what had landed me in my most recent pickle. Ah, well. Live and learn.

Some would say I needed to learn faster.

“Hey, Threads. You doing okay?”

I turned to see my father hovering in the doorway to the living room, two glasses of red wine in his hands, a concerned look on his face. He'd started calling me Threads when I became obsessed with fashion after we'd gone on a trip to Chicago and a woman dressed in high, high heels, a leopard-print dress, and screaming red lipstick had enraptured seven-year-old me. Upon return, I'd thrown myself into playing dress up with a vengeance, demanding trips to the store for more material, and had become the clothing designer for all of my dolls.

My father says my mother would have been proud.

It's hard to know, really, as she died four years after I was born. It had been just my dad, and my older brother Miles, and me for years now, a small team unit. Miles fancied himself the captain of our team, and if I didn't love him so much, his overbearing nature would be enough for me to hem all his pants too short.

“Actually, I am.” I beamed at him and accepted the glass he offered me, leaning up to kiss his cheek. He smelled like

Old Spice and cedar, likely having come in from his workshop where he built custom cabinetry, and the scent was as familiar to me as the feel of a sewing machine under my hands. “I just got a new opportunity, and I think I’m going to take it.”

“New opportunity?” I glanced up to see my brother, my complete opposite, standing at the door to the living room. Tall, wickedly handsome, and dressed in what I referred to as Minnesota chic—Carhartt chinos, a flannel, and a Twins baseball cap—Miles was confident in a way that I aspired to be some day. He’d always been so certain of his path in life, and doors had just opened for him. Whereas for me, even though I *knew* what I wanted to do, it seemed like I had to slam into a few walls, fall into the bushes, climb a hedge, trip on a boobytrap, and tumble down a hill before I made any headway in life.

Which was fine. It was totally fine.

“Yes.” I beamed, and we settled into the living room, Miles stretching out in a lounge chair, feet crossed, fingers steepled at his chest as he regarded me. My dad sat with me on the couch, curiosity in his warm brown eyes.

“Tell us, Threads. You look excited.”

“I just got accepted for an internship at Dolce and Gabbana in Milan!” I squealed, doing a little happy dance in my seat.

“Italy?”

“Internship?”

They both spoke at once, and I sipped my wine, anticipating their reactions. Dad would be upset that I was leaving again. Miles was going to lose his mind when he heard it was an unpaid internship. There *was* a meager stipend for living expenses, but based on apartment prices I’d had a quick glance at in Milan, I knew it would be much like trying to find a place to live in New York.

“Is this paid?” Miles asked, his eyes narrowing, confirming my suspicions.

“There’s a living stipend,” I assured him quickly, taking a gulp of my wine.

“A stipend? What about actual wages?” Miles shifted, leaning forward into his interrogation position.

“Yes, well, that’s the goal, isn’t it? You have to work up to that.”

“Willow, what are you even doing? You just lost everything that you’ve worked for. Now you’re going to run off to Italy with no money and no promise of an actual job? This is idiotic, even for you.”

I flinched, stung by his words.

“That’s enough, Miles. Let’s just talk this through, and we’ll figure something out. Your sister has every right to chase her dream,” my father said, always the voice of reason, and I calmed down.

“For how long though? The fashion industry is notoriously difficult, and she’s too nice. New York already chewed her up and spat her out, so what do you think Milan’s going to do? There’s a language barrier, she has no money, and we don’t know anyone there who can help her.”

“Come with me then,” I practically purred at him, and Miles rolled his eyes in response.

“Unlike you, I have gainful employment. Here. Where you should stay as well and start looking into other career opportunities. Maybe you can go into something fashion adjacent, I don’t know ... merchandising or marketing and branding. Something like that. This is getting ridiculous, Willow. How often do we have to come bail you out?”

“Excuse me? There’s only been like—”

“Three times now,” Miles said.

“Oh, come on, you can hardly call the first two bailing out. This was the worst of them, wasn’t it?” I rolled my eyes. Annoyance bloomed. Miles dearly loved holding up my failures for me as reminders that I should be heading in the direction he wanted, which appeared to be firmly settled into Minnesota forever, where he could always check on me and make sure that I was safe.

He's a few years older than me, and I think Mom's loss made him overly controlling of those he loved, as though if he could keep an eye on them at all times then he could ensure their safety. I tried to remember that when he was annoying the shit out of me, like now, but it wasn't always easy. My temper heated.

"Miles, back off. Her Scottish is heating up."

It was rare for me to get well and truly angry, but when I did, look out. My mother was Scottish, and my father always said I had the same temperament as she did. Calm, even keeled, until pushed just a smidge too far. It was true, too. I could feel the anger boiling up.

"Let me read this offer."

Standing up, I grabbed my laptop and opened the email with the offer and handed it to Miles before returning to the couch.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Threads? What opportunities will come from something like this?" My dad reached out and squeezed my arm, concern in his eyes. *How can he not know how interning for Dolce and Gabbana could influence my future?*

"It's a foot in the door. If I'm lucky, I might be able to work my way up to in-house designer, maybe contributing ideas that get used in collections, that kind of thing. If anything, it will look great on my résumé. It's an internationally successful, upmarket brand, somewhat exclusive, and I might get a recommendation out of it too. It's a step forward, albeit a small one, since I won't be designing my own label, but I guess that's just how the industry works. I think I'll always be fighting for opportunities."

"And is that what you want?"

"I mean ..." I tapped my fingernail, painted in Chanel Ballerina, against my wine glass. "I don't think I'm in a position to say no to opportunities."

"One hundred euro a month is hardly a living stipend." Miles handed my closed laptop back to me, and I glared at

him.

“I’ll get a second job. Like everyone else in the world who has to make ends meet.”

“I can help—”

“No, Dad. *No*. I can do this. Trust me, it’s going to be great.” I drained my wine, picked up my laptop, and stood. “Now, I need to research flights and look at housing options. I love you both. Thank you for caring, but this is what I want to do.”

With that, I left the living room and climbed the stairs to my childhood bedroom, which my father had left exactly as I loved—colorful, chock-full of art, and stacked with books on fashion. Flopping onto the bed, I stared at the ceiling, my heart hammering in my chest. It wasn’t like their concerns were wrong. It was just they were people who wanted every T crossed and every I dotted before they took on an opportunity. I was a touch more haphazard with my approach to life.

Opening my laptop, my emails flashed on the screen at the same time my phone rang.

An international number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, I am looking for Willow Barlowe?”

“Yup, that’s me.” The woman had an American accent, but her number certainly wasn’t local. “And who is this?”

“My name is Sophie, and I run MacAlpine Castle in Scotland.”

Scotland. A ripple of recognition went through me, as it always did when speaking of my mother’s homeland. We’d spent many a summer there, my father leaving us with our mother’s family, and it was a country I loved dearly.

“MacAlpine ... is that in Loren Brae?”

“It is! That’s awesome you know it.”

“My mother grew up nearby, so I’ve visited a few times over the years.”

“Did she? Even better.”

My email pinged on my open laptop, and automatically I went to silence the sound, but my eyes caught on the subject line. It was a reply to my offer of internship.

Except I hadn't replied yet.

Sophie's words faded in the background as I clicked the email open, my stomach plummeting as I read the words.

Thank you for your reply. We've offered the position to the next intern on the list.

Tears flooded my eyes as I saw the reply that my brother must have written, declining the offer on my behalf.

“Willow?”

“Oh, shoot. Sorry. The line must have broken up for a moment. Can you repeat that?” Dashing the back of my hand against my cheeks, I slammed the laptop shut, trying to tamp down my fury. I wanted to run downstairs and kick my brother in the crotch for interfering in my life. Again.

“Of course. I'm calling because we have a unique opportunity to offer you at MacAlpine Castle. Our castle is rich in history, and we're working on increasing the tourism to the area. We have a gift shop here that really could use some help. Apparel is our largest seller, but frankly, our designs aren't that great. We'd like to offer you an opportunity to come work with our kiltmaker to design an exclusive line of merchandise for our visitors.”

“Wait, you're offering me a job?” My brain was sluggish to catch up to her words.

“Absolutely. Full-time, with accommodation at the castle.”

“I could live in a castle?” I sucked in a breath, shock propelling me to standing. “In Scotland?”

“Aye, lassie.” Sophie's laugh rang through the phone. “Sorry, I tried, but my Scottish accent still isn't great.”

“Why me? How did you even find me?”

“Your website! You had some great tartan pieces in your last line, and your background says you have ties to Scotland. If you’re interested, I can email you the offer.”

“Oh, I’m interested. *Very* interested.”

“Great, I’ll ping it over now. Do you want me to stay on the phone while you review it?”

“Please.” If this was as good an opportunity as I hoped it might be, I wanted this signed, sealed, and delivered before Miles could get his grubby mitts on it again. I scanned the exceedingly generous offer, my mouth dropping open at the salary, and list of perks that came with it. “How did you end up in Scotland? You sound American.”

“Oh, I am.” Sophie laughed again. “It’s a long story. I’m from California, and while I dearly miss the sunshine, Scotland has my heart now. Basically, I inherited the castle, and now I’m determined to bring tourists back to Loren Brae.”

“Sophie, you know what?” Nerves hummed, causing me to pace my room. “I’d love to come work for you. This sounds fantastic.”

“It is. Trust me, you won’t be disappointed. If you send me the dates you can come, I’ll arrange your flights.”

“You don’t need me to book them?” I asked, incredulousness filling my voice and Sophie laughed again.

“No, Willow. We’ll handle that. You’re part of the team now.”

At that, my heart sighed, happy that I had a place to go—and I didn’t have to give up my dream. First, I needed to pack. And then, only when I was at the airport, would I tell my brother where I was really going.

Nobody was going to take my chance away from me again.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sometimes I surprise myself with where my brain takes me, particularly under stress. It's been a busy year, and I overscheduled myself, so when it came time to write this book, I looked at the approaching editing date with dread. Okay, and a bit of panic. But sometimes there's nothing to be done but get on with it. And so, I dove into Shona and Owen's story and didn't come up until it was finished, and boy, am I happy I did! It was so lovely to live in their story for a month, writing from the couch, the bed, and my office. I'm really loving this series and being able to live in this world I've created for Loren Brae. Typically, I tend to bounce between series and worlds when I write, and it has been really lovely to stay in one spot and see how the stories bloom.

For those who noticed the dedication to Shona and Hedgie, I'll explain. Shona is a superfan of mine and when she heard about Wild Scottish Rose and that I'd named the main character Shona, she reached out to tell me how excited she was about the book because not only does she live in the area where I base Loren Brae upon, her recently departed mother's name was Agnes, her gran's name was Rose, and her name, of course, is Shona. Shona, Agnes, and Rose! After I started writing the book, I learned her dog is also named Hedgie *and* that her brother's name is Scott. You can't make this stuff up.

Thank you, my amazing readers, for being my constant cheerleaders – you all are amazing!

As I write this Author's Note, it is the last few days of 2023, and I suppose I am feeling a bit reflective as one does around this time of year. There's something about endings and new beginnings that gives you permission to take stock of your life. As I look back on 2023, I suppose, more than anything, I find myself sitting in a place of gratitude. From the outside, I know it looks to most like I live a fairytale life split between the Caribbean and Scotland. And don't get me wrong—I still pinch myself at times because I can't believe it either—but that doesn't mean my life is always picture perfect. Running two full-time businesses comes with its own unique set of challenges and producing creative work at a high rate of output (I wrote five books this past year) brings its own pitfalls. On top of that, working with your partner can produce its own unique stresses.

As much as I like to advocate that we should all “Sparkle On,” I'm also realistic that some days it can feel a bit harder to sparkle. That's where gratitude comes into play. Whenever I bump up against burn out or reach the edges of my patience, I try to pull myself back in and sit in gratitude for this beautiful life that I get to live. How lucky am I that I get to create stories that resonate with so many people? I love that I'm able to give light to the world, even when I'm not always feeling so shiny myself. On tough days, I know that my books are out there sparkling for me, and I hope you all feel my love and magic coming through my words and stories that I built.

Special thanks to The Scotsman on this one because he basically managed everything household related while I disappeared into writing this book. He's quite simply the best man and partner that I could wish for. Love you, handsome.

Thanks as always, to my lovely editors, Marion Archer, David Burness, and Trish Long for helping me to get this book across the finish line.

And last, but never least, a special shout out to my soul puppy, Blue, for his snuggles and companionship. Best doggo in the world.

And, thank you, my dear readers, for continuing on this journey with me and loving the worlds I create. Maybe this note is just a reminder to you all that even if some days it is hard to sparkle at your brightest, never stop shining. The world needs your magic as much as it does mine. Collectively we can all shimmer and shine and bring light and joy wherever we go.

Sparkle on, friends! Show 2024 just how fabulous you are.

XX,

Tricia

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, as always, to my incredible readers for continuing on this lovely journey with me. I know I say it all the time, but I really do have the best readers. While I love nothing more than to put stories about love and light into the world, I can't help but feel so lucky to have that love mirrored back to me from all of you. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your support. Even when I can't respond to every email or social media comment, please know that I feel your support.

Thank you to Marion, my fabulous editor, who constantly makes me laugh with her pointed feedback and entertaining comments.

Thank you to the Scotsman's family for their help with this story, from answering random questions about all things Scottish to proofing and editing the final product. You all do such a fabulous job in helping to make my books shine.

Finally, thank you to my handsome Scotsman, a man I'm lucky enough to call my partner, my best friend, and my soul mate. Love you forever.

CONTACT ME

I hope my books have added a little magick into your life. If you have a moment to add some to my day, you can help by telling your friends and leaving a review. Word-of-mouth is the most powerful way to share my stories. Thank you.

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