

Lachlan

The Ghosts of Culloden Moor, #2

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Dedication



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To the keepers of Culloden's secrets...

Chapter 1

Lachlan noted the speed and the distance of the oncoming train and decided to wait for it to pass before crossing the busy street. There was time a' plenty, and he was unused to rushing about—after being naught more than a ghost for the past two hundred and seventy years. Besides, he thought it wise to take things slowly this first day of being alive again.

One day, the witch had promised. Two at the most.

But Soncerae had always had a twinkle in her eye for him. Surely she'd gift him with two full days to perform his heroic deed—which would mean two glorious days of feeling the ground beneath his feet, tasting the subtle tang of sunshine, and smelling the sweet, piercing scents of the world blossoming around him.

And if he was only given the time it took for the sun to rise and set but once, he would savor the minutes no matter where he happened to be.

A very young lassie dropped her pink backpack on the tracks just after the bend. The contents scattered across the rails, and when she paused to collect them, Lachlan realized his slow-paced plans might not be possible.

The train still came. Its route was clear. Straight a bit more, then the turn.

The lassie hurried, but she wasn't paying any mind to the locomotive bearing down on her, so Lachlan started running, knowing as he did so that saving the sprite might well be the heroic act required of him. He'd expected it to take longer, for he'd only awakened in the park a bare five minutes before. But no matter. Tastes and sensations were hardly as important when compared with finally exacting his revenge! In truth, he'd be more than happy to move on right away, to claim his boon and have his tête-à-tête with Bonny Prince Charlie. *In the flesh.*

He reached the lassie's side and shouted in his most compelling voice, "Move!" Then he turned his boot to the side and gave the backpack and most of its spilled contents a good swift kick that sent it farther into the road and away from the tracks. With a frown on her face, the lass hurried around him to pick up a small blue box his kick had missed, so he had no choice but to grab her wrist and pull her out of danger.

But the stubborn thing moved not at all.

He found that a young woman had a hold of the lassie's other arm and was trying to pull her back toward the safety of the platform. The child finally noted

the train and wrestled herself out of both their grasps, then scurried out of danger on her own. In the doing, however, she'd managed to pull her other would-be rescuer directly into the path of the train that now bore down on them with its horn blaring loud enough to wake the dead.

Lachlan wrapped his arms around the woman and spun her out of harm's way. She landed on top of him and together they rolled toward the far side of the road. Small bits of rock pushed into the flesh of his half-bared arms as they went, and the sting of it shocked him, causing him to pause for a heartbeat or two while he reveled in the knowledge that he was, indeed, human again. Luckily, there were no cars at the moment or they might have been struck in any case.

The damsel struggled out of his hold and fumbled with her brown scarf, pulling it over her head before standing and running away down the wide pavement. No word of thanks. No word of any kind. But he didn't need her gratitude. It was enough that she was safe and the younger lass as well. And perhaps the latter had been frightened enough that she would be more careful around train tracks in the future.

Lachlan got to his feet, moved out of the gutter and onto the pavement, then braced himself for what would surely feel like a short flight of some sort.

But nothing happened.

If his sense of direction could be trusted, the sun proved it was mid-afternoon and he faced it, enjoying the warmth on his skin and the smell of salty sweat rising from his face while he waited for Soni, his precious witch, to call him back.

But she didn't.

"Blast ye, Soncerae!" he shouted to the heavens. "Take me back!"

Lachlan paid no mind to the way people looked at him. He'd be far removed from the spot at any moment. And how else was he to communicate with the young Muir witch?

Any moment now.

Any moment now.

She was likely occupied with another of his comrades. As soon as she placed the fellow where she wanted him, she could then turn her attention back to Lachlan.

Yes. Sound reasoning, that.

Soni simply hadn't been prepared for the swiftness in which he'd been able to complete his task, 'twas all. She'd be impressed, surely, with his heroic deed, but even more impressed that he'd been in human form only a handful of minutes before he'd come to someone's rescue.

He had no doubt that his brothers in arms would have similar success. To his way of thinking, a Highland warrior was needed on every corner in the current day and age in which he found himself. Perhaps the lot of them would be able to perform their heroic deeds and gather again on Culloden Moor before the sun set that evening.

He'd learned of the current state of society as the other spirits had—for the most part—from the wee devices the tourists carried on their persons while visiting Culloden. Especially did they learn from the younger visitors who were far more concerned with their toys than with the history of a stone, or the dissolution of an entire clan system.

‘Twas best the youngsters weren’t aware of the dozens of ghosties who milled over their shoulders, pushing one another aside for a better view of the small screens.

The grandest education came from the guards who neglected their duties in order to watch larger screens indoors. For how else would Lachlan and the others have learned to appreciate their own lifetime of the 18th century, before vampires and werewolves began hiding among men? Of course, he was of a mind that the movies that featured such monsters were little better than gossips, spreading superstition alone.

He’d watched the tellie enough that he was unsurprised by the light rail system of the city in which he’d landed. However, he had been disappointed by the younger lassie’s lack of respect for something so large, so powerful, and so dangerous as the long locomotive.

He’d not been thinking of his duty at that moment, had no thoughts but to save the lass from her own foolishness. Thus he should be quite pleased, as should Soni, that brave acts came naturally to him.

Unfortunately, that delicate woman had stepped in and thwarted his first noble deed. Only then did he realize she might be taking more from him than a little glory. She was tugging away at his chance to be the first to meet with Bonnie Prince Charlie. Surely no other spirit would step so swiftly from Culloden, to proving himself, to collecting his boon.

And it would be Lachlan’s pleasure to watch Charlie’s face when the blackheart was made to realize how the defeat—nay, the massacre—of Scotland truly lay at his feet. And because of the prince’s failings, an untold number of souls were unable to truly go to their rest.

Damn him to Hell.

Yes, Lachlan was sure to be the first... if Soni could just see that he’d finished his quest. Even if the woman had snatched the lassie’s rescue from him, he’d ended up rescuing that woman in the lassie’s stead. And he was only required to prove himself once.

Of course he could appreciate the pretty usurper’s quick mind, her own heroic intentions, but he didn’t have to appreciate them truly until he’d had his boon. Then he’d enjoy the memory of her at his leisure, when the rains kept the tourists away and there was naught else to occupy his thoughts, when a quiet mind would find him face down with his legs pinned beneath Alan McHenish.

But that wasn’t right. If Soni Muir was to be believed—and she’d made some fairly miraculous things happen thus far—then he wouldn’t be returning to Culloden Moor. Ever.

The witch called it moving on, crossing over. ‘Tis what was expected of him after he spoke his piece with the prince. ‘Twas the bargain. But what gave her the right to bargain for Culloden’s 79? And with whom did she bargain? She’d claimed she’d had no dealings with the devil, but how else could she have brought him back to life? And what kind of witch would be so interested in a troop of long-dead Highlanders in any case?

At the last moment, before he “moved on”, he would demand to know.

He'd been standing in the middle of the walkway brooding for far too long. The young witch should have appeared already. So Lachlan turned his sullen thoughts back to the heavens. "Soni Muir! Move yer arse!"

Birds rose in a flurry from the branches of a tree planted in a giant bowl and he glowered. Did people not know trees should be planted in the ground? Both sides of the street were lined with the same bowls, and the trees inside them were brothers to the one before him. They'd be dead by winter. The fools who placed them would likely plant others, the eejits.

Perhaps a fine industry in this century would be the caring of trees, to spare them from foolish men.

It seemed Soni was no more impressed with his summons than were the birds, for she neither showed herself nor removed Lachlan to his pressing appointment. So he sat on the rim of the offensive bowl and tucked his bonny red kilt a bit between his knees. No use exciting the local women when he wasn't going to linger enough to satisfy their curiosity.

Any minute now.

He thought of the comely lass whom he had saved. A brave lass who might have died had Lachlan not been there. Although, it stood to reason that if he'd not been there, she would have succeeded in getting the young lass and herself to safety in plenty of time. So, was it his fault she'd been in danger? Did that nullify his heroic deed?

Was that why Soni hadn't shown herself?

Auch! It must be so! Blast the woman's hide!

A bonny lass, sure, but perhaps delicate in health. For surely the way she was clothed indicated an inability to warm herself. Even lying in the street, against his warm form, she'd shivered and ducked beneath a fold of her scarf.

But now that he considered, the day and place to which he'd been sent didn't suffer from the chill spring wind of the Highlands. There was no moisture to the air and only a few clouds. In Scotland, it would have been considered a fine late-summer day. And looking about him, he realized that few people bothered with more than a shirt.

As for himself, a cursory glance proved his clothes were missing the mud and wrinkles of two hundred and seventy years. In his opinion, he looked fairly presentable, even to a twenty-first century eye. His fine shirt was much warmer than it had been that long-ago morning on Drumossie Moor, as it used to be called. His knees knew no chill even as a breeze swirled around them, and there was no indication it might grow to a wind strong enough to even lift his kilt.

The woman couldn't have been cold then. She must have been trying to avoid recognition. And with all the commotion of the child's things spilling on the ground, with a train bearing down on them all with its ear-splitting trumpet—the attention they had drawn couldn't have made the pretty lass happy. So it was no wonder she gave him a scowl before she hurried away.

He glanced in the direction she'd gone. East, toward the mountains. Yes, she'd been a bonny thing with her warm brown hair and her fathomless eyes. In fact, he'd like the chance to look her over again, perhaps speak with her a bit, for it seemed as if he had a wee more time on his hands.

A cheery thought occurred to him—if the lass were hiding from someone, she likely needed the aid of a braw Scottish warrior. Aye, she just might be the one he'd been meant to save all along. His chance at redemption.

And she was getting away!

He jumped back to his feet, gave a quick nod to a group of admiring old women, and started after the lass. He would save her, no matter what the threat, and Soni would come.

Any moment now.

Chapter 2

Six blocks. Down two, over one, down one, over two. Harper couldn't go on. The stitch in her side felt like she'd been ripped open by one of those serrated things her stepfather, Robert St. Clair, hung on his office wall.

She pushed at the pain with her right hand and risked a glimpse over her shoulder. No one behind her seemed to be in a rush. No big Scotsman lumbered after her.

Thank goodness! She hadn't run a mile since high school more than three years ago, and her out-of-shape body had given everything it had. All she had left was her brain—if she could only get some oxygen to it.

The large glass-and-beam city library loomed over her from across 2nd East.

Public. Lots of bathrooms. Perfect. She would have run through the crosswalk, but she couldn't both run and push on her side at the same time.

Vagrants draped themselves around the low concrete walls like they were taking a coffee break, but they didn't seem menacing. They were Americans, probably. So maybe, if the Scot tried to grab her, she could holler at them for help. Unless they were so impressed by the big oaf they ended up helping him.

Maybe if she yelled, "Stop him, he's anti-American!"

Yeah, maybe not. No time for long sentences when you're being trussed up and hauled away to the looney bin like her stepfather had promised. The pretend Scot probably had a nice gag in the large leather sporran that hung in front of his kilt. Plenty of room for some rope or zip ties too.

But seriously, a kilt? Then again, when you're that size, it's probably hard to be stealthy so it wouldn't matter what you wore. Was he supposed to catch her, or just scare her? She had no doubt the kilt was a clear message from St. Clair. Her stepfather was a big fan of all kinds of weapons, but especially his Scottish Claymores. So he had to be taunting her.

Go ahead and run, he was saying. *Even with all the eyes of Salt Lake on you, I can still chase you down and bring you back again.*

As soon as she was safely inside the large glass doors, she turned to look at the street, hanging on to the handle so she could at least try to hold it closed against any pursuers.

A dark car turned the corner and stopped. Two kids climbed out and headed for the crosswalk. Some mom using the library as a babysitter, no doubt. Couldn't

she be bothered to see them safely inside? *They were what? 8? 10? Okay, maybe 12, but still.*

Harper looked at the faces surrounding the boys. Heads down. No eye contact. So it wasn't the friendliest town, but at least no one seemed to pose a threat to the kids. That was something, at least.

Nobody noticed her on display in the large pane of glass. No one even glanced at her unless they were about to come in the door she was holding onto. And even then, it took them less than a second to move on to the next door, happy to ignore her.

Harper took a deep breath, tried to relax, and went to find a drinking fountain. The stitch in her side made her slow down, but the shine on the floor soothed her. It was good to be somewhere clean.

She found a fountain and drank like a camel. And while she drank, a body leaned itself against the corner, invading her personal space like no stranger would do.

She froze.

"Well, hello there." A familiar male voice.

Dark shadows reflected all around the stainless steel as she let the water drool off her lips and into the drain.

Library. What a stupid idea. It's where vagrants hung out, and she was a vagrant. Of course St. Clair would send his minions to watch for her there.

I'm such an idiot!

So the big Scot had seriously been a prod to get her moving. The shepherd chasing her to the wolves. And she'd fallen for it like a stupid sheep. But what really pissed her off at the moment was that she'd wasted all that energy running when she could just as well have *walked* to her doom.

And her side *still* hurt.

Finally, she straightened and raised a sleeve to wipe a few drops of water from her chin. "Hello Bart." She let the name burst through her lips like a private joke. *Bart. Ha ha ha.*

"It's Brad," he snarled.

St. Clair didn't usually hire someone emotional, but he'd screwed up when he'd taken Bart on. And provoking the nasty man was the only amusement she'd had for two months. The guy obviously wouldn't last.

Only the boss was allowed to be emotional, although he usually reserved it for when his pet psychiatrist was listening. Her stepfather loved to get all choked up over Harper's supposed slither into the world of drugs, or sex, or crime, or the latest, insanity.

If not for St. Clair, the quack would have no patients, so he usually took the murderer's word for everything. Never once had she been tested for drugs. She was still a virgin, though she wasn't about to let someone prove it. And the doctor never asked to see any police report for the mindless crimes she'd supposedly committed.

Harper wondered sometimes, after she was taken from the quack's office, if St. Clair and Bart had a good laugh. Unfortunately, Dr. Quack bought every word, and the way his eyes sparkled, he must have hoped it was all true too.

Someone to fix. Someone to treat. Someone no one cared about, no matter how St. Clair went on and on about taking good care of his dead wife's only child.

Only *heir*, that was.

And if Dr. Quack could smell the money on St. Clair, he could certainly smell it on her. Maybe all those times he'd leaned close he'd been hoping for a whiff of fresh currency—and here she'd thought he'd only been trying to look down her shirt.

At least she'd gotten in a good head-butt. She'd been planning it for weeks and finally got the chance. Her timing had been perfect. The look on his face, priceless. And the guy's nose had bled so badly he and Bart had been distracted just enough...

She'd gotten away then, to her grandmother's neighborhood. Oh, grandmother was gone, but there were plenty of people still around who'd been fond of the old woman and had been happy to put Harper up for a while. She'd hired her own body guard then, just before St. Clair had discovered where she was staying. She thought she'd been so safe, going home with Milton watching her back.

She wished she'd never done it, of course. Milton had been great. She'd been able to sleep through the night and feel normal again. But Milton hadn't lasted. It wasn't that he was bribed to leave, either. The guy was loyal to a fault, and he was willing and able to wait until Harper got her money before he expected to be paid.

It was that generosity and devotion that got him killed.

So St. Clair made his point. He was God of Harper's little world and could destroy anyone in it. She'd understood perfectly, and fled again. But she wasn't stupid enough to go to people she knew this time. Yeah, she'd been extremely clever.

But apparently, not clever enough...

Chapter 3

Lachlan had no trouble tracking the lass. She had a fair lead on him, but he had something as well—everyone's attention. The Highlands must have been far away indeed for folks to be so taken with his plaid. Back home, few men wore a kilt when touring Culloden, excepting the pipers, of course, and the memorial parties, but these city folk acted as if they'd never seen a proper bit of plaid before. Had they no tellies?

With such rapt attention, all Lachlan had to do was shout for what he sought. "Young woman in a hurry. Black coat with no sleeves." He simply followed the pointing fingers.

'Twas the truth, the lass made enough turns to lose a hunter.

Finally, he spotted her at the base of a great building foolishly made of glass. A trio of villains dragged her toward a long dark van parked at the curb. The scene was not unlike some of the more violent stories he'd watched over the shoulder of the security guards, though he'd discovered those things were but play acting.

He'd been relieved to find such things didn't truly happen, at least not often, else what had mankind come to?

But he doubted this was the filming of a movie.

She was putting up a struggle, smart lass. If she could but keep from the bowels of the van until he could reach her, he could easily save her from the villains' clutches and have his heroic deed accomplished in truth.

He hoped Soni was watching from a nearby perch, that she might sense his success was immanent and would prefer to witness it firsthand.

Hopefully, she wasn't fully occupied with sending his fellow soldiers as far away from Scotland as she'd sent him. And if he had a chance to warn them, before he moved on, he would. For he doubted many among Culloden's 79 would appreciate having to leave Bonny Scotia in order to prove themselves. Surely Soni could find many a Scottish lass that needed saving.

Although his fellow ghosts might enjoy, as he had, the feeling of flight...

When or how he'd come to the city, he knew not. That weightless feeling had ended with the feel of soft turf at his back. He'd opened his eyes to find trees above his head, and a tattered man tugging at his boots like the vulturous, two-footed scavengers of a battlefield.

After he'd assured the industrious man he was still alive, and indeed capable of a hearty roar, he'd made his way toward the tallest of buildings in the city, for surely, those ruling over the town would be found there. But ultimately, there had been no need. Plenty of lassies had needed saving without any guidance from some magistrate.

Surely, all of this damsel-saving, near-damsel-saving, and villain-discovery would have drawn the young witch's attention. Thus, he wanted to get it right this time so he could go home. After nearly three centuries in one place, he expected leaving the moors would bring him joy. But to the contrary, he'd become attached to it. And he was anxious to return to something familiar...like the familiar weight of McHenish across his legs as he lay in the mud.

The only thing comforting about his current surroundings was the long line of tall mountains to the east. At least he thought it was east.

Pitiful. A homesick lad still wet behind the ears.

He sucked air deep into his lungs and stepped into the street. The lass called out to a row of characters that appeared as tattered as the one who had tried to steal his boots. She had their complete attention as if she herself were wearing a kilt. But they didn't seem inclined to help her as he'd been helped by folks along her route.

"Help me," she urged. "They're... anti-American!"

The onlookers only shrunk back. No doubt the villains had guns. She really ought not to provoke them.

Suddenly two young lads snuck out the giant slabs of glass that served as doors and ran at the men struggling to get her to the van. They jumped on the backs of two villains and began pinching at their eyes and yanking on their hair from behind.

Lachlan was so surprised by their courage he stopped in the center of the intersection. The honk of a car got him moving again. The bonnie lass looked up

and saw him, but instead of cheering at the sight of him, she stopped fighting all together, as if he'd stolen all hope. Did she think him in league with the others?

Surely not. He'd already saved her life once, his fault notwithstanding. How could she think he was a threat?

The third man finally had to release her to help remove the little warriors from the backs of his cohorts, and she got free completely. Instead of running toward Lachlan, however, she ran in the opposite direction, farther east.

One of the blackhearts called out to her. "Come back or I'll kill the boy!" He held the smaller one against him with his hand grasping the child's chin. With a quick movement, he could easily break the laddie's neck.

The woman stopped running, but her feet kept moving as she stomped out her frustration on the pavement. She soon settled, but held her ground.

"Everybody hear that?" She looked about her, but the cowardly witnesses were escaping like water out a hole in the bottom of a cup. Her would-be rescuers were now hostages and were glaring at each other as if the other were to blame for their present predicament.

A stand off then. The perfect time for a Highland warrior to step in a save the day, and use his substantial acting skills learned on every small screen to cross Culloden soil.

Chapter 4

Men suck.

If Harper would have cried out for help in a mall, you could bet those goons would have been pepper-sprayed, tasered, and beaten within an inch of their lives with giant, heavy shopping bags. Then, if they'd threatened to hurt a child, they'd have been revived and beaten again before the cops would be allowed to save them. If they could be saved.

But no. Heaven forbid a man should be expected to defend anyone he wasn't required to.

If Harper ever got free, she was going to pay a little visit to the wrong side of the tracks and give those bums a piece of her mind. But she'd never get that chance. Even standing there, twenty feet away from anyone, she was caught.

She'd seen the boys on the stairs, watching as she'd been forcibly escorted out of the library. Bart had held her arm up behind her to get her to cooperate, but she'd gotten it free as he'd pushed her through the big entrance doors. She was sure she'd be able to get away then.

Turns out, she'd needed rescuing.

The bums ignored her outright, then scattered. How stupid she was to imagine that most men living on the street was an old war vet! Too many commercials, maybe. But she hadn't been defeated until the stupid Scot joined the party. Her stomach had fallen into her shoes. St. Clair had been so many steps ahead of her, it wasn't funny. All her fighting had been for nothing.

When her little heroes had come, she'd taken off because she was sure that no one was stupid enough to hurt a child with people looking on. But she'd been wrong about that too. And she sure wasn't going to let Bart hurt them. And he would—if he was able to get them away from the Trax platform with all those waiting passengers—passengers who would have been witnesses if the van wasn't blocking their view.

She was certain Bart had been the one to kill Milton. And if he could kill a gentle giant like that, he would certainly hurt a kid if it served his purpose.

She started back slowly, hoping they'd let the boys go a second or two before they expected to get their hands on her again. But Bart turned the younger one over to one of the others and was careful not to let him get free.

Then something weird happened.

Bart seemed surprised when the Scotsman stepped close behind him. He straightened like the big dude was poking a gun in his back. Then slowly, he raised his hands.

"Tell yer friends to release the laddies," the Scot said.

"Mind your own business," Bart said through his teeth.

The Scot glanced at her and winked before turning a frown on the others. "This is my business. Scotland Yard."

Is he joking?

Bart turned slightly. "Look, Sherlock, get the hell out of here now, and you won't get hurt."

The Scotsman laughed.

Bart jumped forward and turned, but he paid for it. He contorted in pain and tried to reach his back.

The Scot hadn't really moved, but he was holding a wicked looking knife and the tip might have had a little blood on it.

Bart growled like a pissed mountain lion while he dug out his gun. "Take him!"

The other two hesitated, looking from Bart to the Scot, then at the little boys. Harper was forgotten. The goons finally pushed the boys away from them and went after the Scot. But putting their hands in their jackets for their guns was their mistake.

The big man shoved them together, hugged them as one, pinning their arms to their sides. Then he rushed them, hopping and sliding, through the open door of the van. Bart aimed his weapon at the big man's back, but the Scot turned before he got a shot off and twisted Bart's arm until the gun dropped to the ground. Bart tried to put some distance between them, but three seconds later, he went flying into the van to land on top of his buddies.

Harper would have applauded if she could have moved.

When the Scot slid the van door, he didn't wait for the others to pull in their legs, and the three cried out when they realized they might lose more than a little flesh. Metal clamped loudly on metal when the door slammed into place. An empty black loafer thumped into the gutter.

The boys disappeared through the heavy glass doors. Maybe their mother would be a little more careful about dropping them off with no supervision. Maybe they'd be the ones to make sure she didn't. Then again, maybe they wouldn't tell her a

thing. Harper just hoped they were smart enough to hide. In another minute or two, Bart would be on the warpath and he might check the library first.

“Move!” The big Scot’s voice hit her like a sonic boom as he ran toward her.

She turned and fled, miraculously, without wetting her pants. The stitch in her side was gone, but even if it hadn’t been, her feet would have taken wing. The guy was so terrifying it didn’t matter if he was with St. Clair or not. The fact that he was chasing her was enough to keep her airborne.

Chapter 5

Dang it! She was running east again. She’d never be able to get out of town if she kept heading toward the mountains!

She reached the corner of the library block and turned south. Paths shot off to the right that would plunge her back into the library campus, and eventually into the library. From just about anywhere in the glass building, Bart could stand and watch where she went.

Whose idea was a glass building anyway?!

She stopped. No more running blind. She wasn’t about to ride herself into the ground again just to end up face to face with Bart and his goons. If she could take second to think, she might come up with a good plan.

She turned back to the Scot just as he barreled into her.

Her body went flying at the sidewalk but stopped just short of the concrete. She was suspended, held by one of the man’s arms around her back. His other arm was planted on the ground like the support beam of a bridge—an impressive one-armed push up.

He lowered her to the ground and growled. “Are ye daft?” He asked the question as if it weren’t insulting at all, like he thought she might even admit it. Something as harmless as, “Do you like catchup with your fries?”

“We don’t have time for this crap,” she said breathlessly. “We have to run!” What she really didn’t have time for was to appreciate how nice it felt to have someone so strong and male hovering above her, looking down into her eyes with real concern. Any distraction could be the death of her, and his kind of distraction was the most dangerous kind. He was mesmerizing in a way that had nothing to do with his kilt or his bare knees. It was kind of... unearthly... like he had some mystical power to lead her into oncoming traffic without her caring...

“Yes. We must run. So why did ye stop doing just that?” He stood and pulled her to her feet. His kilt swung back into its rightful position.

Okay. So maybe it was his knees.

She shook her head to break the spell. “I stopped because... I should have turned left.” She gestured toward the corner.

He grabbed her upper arm and started dragging her north. She was airborne again, and she was anything but cool. But since they were making great time, she pushed aside her pride and concentrated on keeping her feet under her.

They crossed the street and looked back at where the van still sat near the library entrance. Bart and his boys were on their feet again, but their heads were down like they were searching. None of them looked her way.

“Did you get his gun?” she asked her escort without slowing. His grip on her arm was still firm, but it didn’t hurt, even though he was lifting her a bit.

“No.” His scowl said he wasn’t pleased about it.

They walked for a few blocks in silence, turning at just about every corner as she’d done before. When she couldn’t bear the quiet anymore, she decided it was about time she thanked him for saving her.

When she opened her mouth to speak, however, he pulled her to the left, toward an old office building. Thankfully, the door was unlocked even though the place might seriously have been abandoned. They walked quickly but calmly to the elevator ten yards down the hall. Every second the main door stayed closed behind them gave her hope.

If no one noticed us coming inside, we might be safe for a while.

We. It was so weird, worrying about someone else again. She didn’t need to stay safe anymore. They did.

The elevator opened and one guy got off. He did a double take on the kilt, then looked at her.

“Photo shoot,” she said with a smile.

“Ah.” The guy nodded knowingly and grinned as he walked away.

Inside the elevator, she pushed the 8 button, the top floor. Was that stupid? If Bart came looking, would he assume they’d gone as high as possible?

She had to calm down. Her imagination was going to trigger a heart attack. After all, the Scot hadn’t been sent by her stepfather—she’d only imagined he had. And maybe it was just her bad luck that she’d run into Bart at the library. He could have been tipped off after the Trax incident. So maybe St. Clair wasn’t a dozen steps ahead of her.

The elevator opened onto an empty hallway. There was a sign on a door that advertised eyelash extensions. Another with a for rent sign. Harper tried that one, but it was locked. Further down, there were two doors standing open. The offices inside looked like someone had recently moved out and not bothered to clean up. The big Scot nudged her inside the second of those and closed it behind him.

They sighed in unison, then laughed lightly. A silent gasp escaped her at the sight of his dimpled smile, but she didn’t think he noticed.

He gestured toward a cheap metal-based chair and sat on an end table that didn’t look too sturdy. She just hoped he sat really still because a guy like that wouldn’t worry about keeping his knees together if he went toppling over.

For a minute, they just breathed, like they hadn’t had a chance to catch their breath in the elevator.

“Why the kilt?” She gestured in the general direction of his sporrán and averted her eyes.

“I’m Scottish,” he said, like that was reason enough.

His accent was catchy, so she wanted to hear him talk some more. “So if I were to ever to go to Scotland, do you mean to tell me that all the Scotsmen wear kilts? Like, every day?”

“Sadly, no. They’re rare enough, now. Even in my day, they weren’t worn by all.”

“In your day?”

He grimaced. “Auch, aye. I shouldna said it that way.”

“Something lost in translation?”

He jumped on it. “Exactly so.”

“So what did you mean to say?”

He shrugged one shoulder like he was embarrassed. “I’ve forgotten.”

“That’s all right. I only wanted to hear you speak some more. Your accent is... I like it, that’s all.” She could feel herself blushing, so she got up and started snooping. A door led to another office. “Hey! This one has a window!”

He came up behind her as she peeked out between vertical blinds. “Do ye see the van anywhere?”

“Crap!” She pointed across the street where that familiar dark vehicle moved slowly. Beside it, on the sidewalk, was one of Bart’s goons. She figured the second one was combing the near side that was blocked from view by a line of trees. Suddenly, the van jerked to a stop and Bart, behind the wheel, stuck his head out the window and looked up.

She and the Scot jerked back, but she kept her hand on the blind to keep it from swinging.

“Do you think he saw us?”

He shook his head. “I think they decided to search here before that fellow ever looked up at the window. We’ll just have to hope they don’t come knocking on every door.”

Chapter 6

The Scot went back to the inner office and fiddled with the knob.

She had to ask. “Can you lock it?”

He shook his head, and the look he gave her said it all. If Bart came looking, they were screwed.

She bit her lip and nodded, trying not to fall apart. It had been a long afternoon. If she’d caught the Trax train just a few minutes earlier, she would have been at the south end of the valley by now, hitching a ride to St. George where she could blend in with thousands of college students and lay low until she could figure things out. If St. Clair got his hands on her one more time, she’d spend the rest of her life in a psych ward being over-medicated under the orders of Dr. Quack, with regular electric shock therapy sessions to keep her in La La Land.

She’d overheard him bragging to Bart late one night when they thought she was sleeping. It was enough to convince her she was fighting for her life, not just her trust fund. And if she hadn’t known in her bones that he’d poisoned her mother and had Milton killed, she might have been willing to hand over her money just to get away from the man.

But she wasn’t about to let the monster win.

She shuddered to think of how close Bart had come to getting her into that van. If those boys wouldn’t have intervened... And then the Scot...

“What’s your name,” she whispered. “I haven’t thanked you for saving my life.”

With just his head, he gave her a little bow. “My name is Lachlan MacLean. Of Drimnin.” Then he frowned. “No. That’s not right, is it? They call me *Number 18*. I’m the eighteenth of Culloden’s 79.” He shook his head and paced, stirring up dust. “Just a moment.” Then he repeated it over and over again. “Just a moment. Just a moment.”

Harper’s stomach sank as she realized her rescuer was in serious distress. And no wonder. He’d been through a scare himself, almost shot by Bart with no one coming to help. No one had even called the cops.

She moved to stand in his way when he paced back toward the table. He looked up from the dirty purple carpet and stopped, surprised, as if he’d forgotten she was there.

She waved her fingers. “Hello.”

“Hello,” he said, and his features relaxed. “Sorry. I just... had a thought and I wanted to think it through before it slipped away, do ye ken?”

“Do I what?”

“Do ye understand?”

“Yeah. I understand. I do that too. I have to have it completely quiet if I need to concentrate.”

He nodded and his shoulders dropped a little more.

“So? Did you figure it out?”

He frowned again, but only slightly. “It’s passing strange. I’d all but forgotten my name, and yet it surfaced just for the asking.”

Forgotten his name? Thought he was Number 18? She suddenly pictured him escaping a psych ward in Scotland, where he’d spent most of his life behind a door with the number 18 above a little window. Maybe he’d made it to the states by sheer luck.

He rolled his eyes and grunted. “I’m not daft, lass. I can tell yer thoughts by the look on yer face, aye?”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but didn’t bother. She’d always been easy to read.

“Ye see, I’m part of a... large organization of Highland lads, and we’ve always given ourselves numbers—”

“Seventy-nine of you?”

“Aye. Seventy-nine. And I’ve always been 18 because, well, I was the eighteenth to rise—that is to say, I was the eighteenth to join the organization. Ye see?”

She shrugged. “I don’t understand how you could forget your name—unless this was some kind of cult.”

His frown deepened and his eyes were focused on somewhere far away. “Weel, I doona care much for the word, but perhaps that is as good as any.”

“You had a leader?”

“Aye. I suppose we did—”

She nodded. “And you weren’t allowed to leave?”

“Auch, now.” He gnawed on the corner of his lip. “I canna say, because I never truly tried.” Then his focus was gone again.

“Mm hmm. Well, I’m sorry you were called a number.” She wasn’t just sorry, she was horrified, but she wasn’t going to embarrass him if she could help it.

They were still standing close and it was tempting to put her arms around him and show him sympathy too. But it was awkward. In the end, she patted the side of his arm.

His attention returned instantly, and after he glanced at her hand on his sleeve, his eyes locked with hers. “Naught to be sorry for. I was not alone, and there are few things in this world that are worse than being alone, aye?”

She nodded because it was impossible to find enough breath to make her voice work when he was staring down into her eyes like he was. That idea returned—that he could lead her anywhere and she wouldn’t resist—and she just prayed it wasn’t written all over her face too.

Alone? Yeah. She knew all about being alone. But if Bart came knocking on that office door, she’d never be alone again. She’d have plenty of company in the mental institution of Dr. Quack’s choice.

Lachlan lifted his hands to touch the sides of her face. “And once more, I am not alone.” He frowned slightly. “But why *you*, I wonder?”

“Why me?”

“Were ye chance? Or were ye chosen?”

For a second, she wondered if maybe the guy didn’t realize he was speaking out loud. “You think you and I meeting wasn’t a coincidence?” She remembered thinking he was working for her stepfather and now she felt bad about it. But paranoia was what had kept her alive these days.

He grinned and pulled his hands away. Then he yawned and stretched like he was just waking up. “Tis nothing, truly. Just the tail of a mystery. A mystery I mean to solve in a day... or two.”

The distant ding of the elevator got her attention and she automatically reached out for him. “Lachlan?”

He gathered her against him and stepped back to the wall behind the door. Thankfully, he held her tight enough to keep her from shaking. “Aye, lass?”

“I’m Harper.”

“Sorry?”

“That’s my name. Harper. If we end up dead, I just wanted you to know. And I’m sorry. You know, if we end up dead.” By the end of the sentence, her whisper was only slightly more substantial than her breath.

“That’s all right,” he whispered against her head. Then she could have sworn he added, “I’ve been dead before.”

Chapter 7

Harper exhaled silently. Whoever had gotten off the elevator moved down the hall without knocking on any doors. Did they go into an office? Or had Bart seen the blinds move and knew just where to find them?

A door squeaked, then snapped shut. Then... nothing. She was dying to peek into the hallway, but was scared enough to huddle against the wall with her

disturbingly *disturbing* savior—for days if necessary—to make sure the coast was clear.

She was about to ask Lachlan what he thought, but he stopped her lips with a gentle press of his fingers. He shook his head, leaned forward, and breathed into her ear. “Put yer arms about my neck and lock yer fingers.”

The hard muscles beneath her hands grew harder still. She reached under his hair behind his head and grabbed one wrist. She was touched, actually, that he’d want her close with trouble possibly coming through the door.

The knob turned with a squeak. But trouble didn’t come in—*they* went out.

Lachlan bent and lifted her by the knees, pulled them up around his hips, and used her butt as a battering ram to break the door down! The goon who’d probably been turning the knob fell on his back and clutched his forehead. She could see him over the Scot’s shoulder while her butt was used again, with a little help from centrifugal force, to mow the other two down.

Three seconds, tops.

Then they were sprinting down the hall, or the Scot was, at least. She was still playing the part of bouncing necklace/battering ram. Absently, she wondered what other uses he might have for her derriere. Hail a cab? Well, in a city with maybe a hundred cabs, and all of those sniffing around the airport, maybe not.

Since she was facing backward, she saw the instant Bart made it to his feet and reached into his jacket.

“He’s got a gun!”

Her ride didn’t react, he just kept running.

“Almost there,” he grunted.

Then he grunted again at the same second the shot rang out. Funny thing about long corridors—you can hear a bullet coming toward you *after* it’s already hit.

Lachlan went down on one knee.

Harper tried to get free. “Let go of my legs!” He wasn’t listening, so she had to wiggle herself out of his grasp.

Bart kicked at the other two, still on the ground. He must have been pretty sure of his accuracy if he wasn’t in any hurry to catch up.

She didn’t want to look at Lachlan’s face, to add it to the collection of people who’d been hurt or killed by St. Clair because of her mother’s money, but she didn’t need to look at him to help. She tried to pull him up, but he was too big to budge.

He touched his hand to his chest and when he pulled it away, there was no blood. The bullet hadn’t gone through. Even she knew that was a bad thing.

He looked up at her. How could she not look him in the eye? She had no choice.

“Can you stand?” She tugged on his arm again. “Maybe we can make it to the elevator. But we have to hurry.”

He stood and shook his head. “It didn’t...”

“It didn’t go all the way through, that’s all. We’ll get to the street and call an ambulance. Come on.” She put her shoulder under his and tried to take on part of his weight, but the guy was too tall for her to be of much help.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Bart dropped the guy he’d been helping and ran toward them. His hand slipped under his jacket and around behind his back. But he

wasn't paying attention and a chunk of the broken door caught on one shoe and he stumbled and fell.

Five feet from the elevator, she ducked out from under Lachlan's shoulder to push the down button, then hurried back to catch him. But he seemed to be standing on his own.

The doors slid open and she dragged him inside.

Bart stopped about ten feet back and frowned at Lachlan's chest. When the doors started to close, he finally realized they were getting away, so he quickly pointed his gun at the disappearing gap.

"No!" Harper tried to step in front of the Scot, but he shoved her hard. Her left shoulder smacked against the elevator wall just as the gun fired and the doors closed. She had enough sense to jump forward and push the button for the main floor while holding down the one to keep the doors shut. Once the big box started to drop, she could finally let go and help the man who had saved her life yet again.

The second shot had pinned him to the back wall, still on his feet.

She couldn't hold back her tears as she reassumed her role of crutch. The door would open any second. They were already to the sixth floor.

5

4

"You shoved me," she said.

"I did that." He didn't sound repentant.

"Thank you."

3

"Ye're most welcome, though I do hope ye're credited for the heroic deeds ye've intended this day."

2

She sniffed and tried to mop her face without being obvious. "I hope you get credit too."

He snorted. "Surely... this time."

The doors opened. She urged him forward, but he stubbornly refused to lean on her. Stubbornness also got him out the main door. She was relieved there wasn't another of St. Clair's goons waiting for them.

They needed to be seen. They needed a dozen drivers to call 911! They'd take the first ambulance that showed up. Forcing his heavy arm over her shoulder, she led him toward the street. She intended to let him prop up the street lamp while she stood in the middle of the road and forced cars to stop. But he wouldn't be led. Finally, she turned to face him with her hands on her hips.

"Look, buddy."

He grimaced. "Forgive me, lass."

"Forgive you for wh—"

He bent forward. She thought he was collapsing, to die at her feet. But instead, he rushed at her legs and tossed her over his shoulder!

"For this," he answered her forgotten question and ran down the narrow sidewalk of 7th East. She didn't have it in her to argue with him. If he wanted to use his last gasp to get her farther away from Bart and the boys, who was she to argue? He'd be haunting her for the rest of her life whether he died in a hospital or on the move.

Chapter 8

Could people survive a couple of shots to the chest?

Harper supposed, since he was still able to carry her, he hadn't been shot in any major organs, so maybe he would live through the day in spite of getting mixed up with her.

"We can get to a hospital a lot faster in an ambulance," she yelled against his back. Then she wondered, hanging against it like she was, why she wasn't getting all bloody? There was a thick sash of plaid wool that crossed his body and she assumed the wounds were beneath it, so she reached for the material and pressed hard on the cloth.

He reacted immediately, spinning in a circle, sending her scarf and hair flying.

"What do ye do there?" He stopped turning and went back to running.

"I'm sorry. I was trying to stop the bleeding. I didn't mean to hurt you."

They were at a corner. Plenty of cars. Plenty of witnesses.

"This would be a good place to put me down," she hollered.

"No. It wouldn't."

Someone honked. A guy hung out his window and whistled as he made a left turn.

She patted the side of his leg. "Why not?"

He dawdled. She assumed he was waiting for the light. Finally, he said, "Because, when ye realize... Well, ye'll only fall when ye faint."

Harper didn't know if it was from all the blood engorging her head or not, but she started to laugh. He was nuts. He was going to fall down, dead. Bart was going to pull up and take her away, and she wouldn't have to worry about the poor Scotsman haunting her because she'd be dead too.

Maybe they could haunt the Salt Lake Library together. He was a pretty piece of work. Spending a decade or so with the man, looking at his face, and his knees, could be an easy way to pass the time—until the right ghost whisperer came along and made them stop playing footsy and walk into the light.

She could catch up on some reading.

"Hold tight," he called out and they left the sidewalk.

From upside down, it looked like someone had decorated their yard waaay too early for Christmas. And it was just the last part of June.

But it wasn't a house they were headed for, it was another big-windowed building. It took her a second to read upside down.

Modern Display.

A glass door swung past her head, then banged shut on it. She figured Lachlan must be very close to giving out if he couldn't think to get his favorite battering ram clear of the door.

And *still* he didn't put her down.

The floor came up to meet her, then turned into green, thinly carpeted stairs. She only noticed how thin because she thought her head was going to land on it. Some things you can judge in a split second.

Finally he lowered her feet to the ground and jumped back like he thought she might go ape on him. She was too dizzy to go ape. And she was seeing things. A giant purple flower hovered above his head like it was going to devour him, like a snake.

The purple really clashed with his red kilt.

She shook her head. Maybe it was just the atmosphere that had her thinking like some designer. Or maybe that's what everyone in their growing audience thought about the massive purple thing hanging over his head. A couple of smartly dressed men were looking at her Scot like they shared the same appetite as the damned flower. She hoped, when Lachlan collapsed in a pool of blood, they'd feel like jerks.

She widened her eyes at them. "Would someone please call an ambulance?"

Nobody moved.

Lachlan turned to the others. "She's mistaken. I have no need of an ambulance. Would ye mind givin' us a wee bit o' peace? Thank ye." Harper reached for the plaid sash across his chest, but he caught her hands and held them.

The well-dressed duo gave her a snotty look and walked away. A woman wearing an apron and a name tag opened her mouth to say something, then must have realized she was drooling and hurried off. Two other people rifled through boxes of Christmas lights nearby. Packages spilled past their elbows onto the floor. No one looked up.

"Got 'em!" A short man held a package over his head like it was filled with gold, not just gold lights.

A woman snatched the man's box away. "Should we see if there's more?" Her arm disappeared before anyone answered.

"No. We need go!" The short man left her behind. He shouted, "Just one!" to the girl in the apron and ran out the door without paying. The woman swore and dropped the box before running after him. Harper was just glad they were gone.

"Idiot." She ground the word out between her teeth, dying from frustration because Lachlan wouldn't allow anyone help him.

"Florists." The girl with the apron grumbled, mistaking Harper's meaning. She bent to clean up the mess. "They have an account." She dropped to her knees and started scooping up noisy packs of clear plastic.

Harper turned back to plead over their entwined hands. "Please, let me call an ambulance. I don't care if it leads Bart to us. You have to let me help you."

He raised his eyebrows, trying to look sincere. "No, lass. I have no need."

She wasn't about to let him be a martyr. If calling an ambulance gave away her location, then so be it. If he was still on his feet, surely that meant he could be helped!

She pulled her hands out of his grasp and put them on her hips again, something she never remembered doing much before that day. "You mean to tell me you didn't get shot? Twice?"

He frowned and looked at the floor for a second. "Apparently not?"

He was asking?

“What?!”

Apron Girl got to her feet and brushed her hands together. When she walked away, Harper could almost see her ears straining to hear more.

Lachlan shifted from foot to foot and glanced at the large store windows, doing anything to avoid looking at her.

“You aren’t bleeding? You could have told me sooner! You could have said something when we made it to the street, instead of throwing me over your shoulder and running away! I thought you were as good as dead! For protecting *me!*”

Yes, they’d needed to keep running, especially if he wasn’t dying, but she’d been expecting him to drop dead that whole time, and feeling sick about it. And now, she wanted to jump around and celebrate, but she’d made such a fuss, she felt foolish.

And feeling foolish had a tendency to make her tear up.

“Forgive me, lass.” He cautiously wrapped his arms around her while she fell apart. But before she got very far in the unraveling process, she remembered something he’d said and pulled back to look at his face.

“Just why did you think I would faint, Mac?”

“Mac? Nay. My name is Lachlan. Do ye not remember?”

“Okay, Lachlan. Don’t change the subject. I’ll faint when I realize *what?*”

He looked around nervously and turned her so both their backs were to Apron Girl. “Oh. That. Well, uh, from... shock, I’m sure.” His arms dropped to his sides and he took a step back. “It was a terrible fright, being shot at—the pair of us. Weren’t ye afeared?”

“I guess so. But I’ve been pretty *afeared* for a long time, so I guess it didn’t register.”

“Aye. I’m right sorry for it, I am.” He did his nervous dance again.

She finally got it. “Look. Do you need a restroom or something?” She looked around and saw a unisex sign. “It’s right over there.”

He shook his head, then his eyes widened and he nodded, like it was suddenly a great idea. “I’ll just go to it then, shall I?” But instead of heading toward the restroom, he frowned and looked around the place. She had no idea what he was looking for. But suddenly, he leapt forward and lifted her by the waist.

“Don’t you dare put me over your shoulder!”

He froze. They were nose to nose. Her hands were back on his biceps.

“Was it so unpleasant for ye before?” The possibility seemed to worry him.

Harper shook her head and closed her eyes to keep from staring at his lips. And before she opened them again, her battering ram was abruptly dropped onto the seat of a life-sized, pink sleigh covered in enormous candy. She had just become part of a *Christmas in July* display marked ‘SOLD.’ A gumdrop the size of a softball teetered and fell, then rolled across the floor, leaving small, artificial sugar crystals in its wake.

A blanket of bubblegum-pink velvet, edged with white fur, landed on her, then Lachlan pushed the excess over her head.

“Stay put, so the villain doesn’t find ye while I am indisposed.” His footsteps faded in the direction of the restroom. But she was pretty sure he’d mumbled something more—something about a witch.

“The villain’s *name* is Bart,” she said through the blanket. *Bart. Ha ha ha.*

She sat as still as she could, not minding the chance to breathe quietly for a minute, snuggling into the soft blanket, knowing her protector wasn’t far away. What she worried about was the chick with the apron. Was she going to come rip off the blanket and toss her out of the store? Or was she stalking Harper’s big Scot to the men’s room?

And just when had he become *her* Scot?

Chapter 9

Heaven help him, what could he tell the lass? He’d survived two shots to his torso without a scratch to show for them. Without a drop of blood spilt. Thankfully, for the moment, her relief at finding him whole distracted her from the fact she’d witnessed the gun firing, had seen him fall to one knee the first time, and be knocked to the back of the elevator the second. It wouldn’t be long before she considered it more closely and would press him for an explanation.

Bulletproof?

A chill ran down his spine and he couldn’t help wish that he’d been that invincible during the battle at Culloden. How much might have changed if they’d had a Muir witch or two burning fires and making bargains on the Stuart’s behalf?

The comforting heat of the water pouring over his hands brought his attention back from what might have been. From the commercials he’d seen, he’d learned disgusting things about germs and was determined to keep them from his newly animated body.

Warmth was no longer just a pleasant memory. It was something fresh and new that, after a minute, reached the bones of his hands and warmed the blood pumping through his arms. Blood that had found no means of escape out his back, where a bullet had definitely entered!

A miracle not to be believed.

Being shot at Culloden had been painful, aye. But this time, when both bullets had caught him, the hurt had been more akin to the *memory* of pain than pain itself. And he well knew the memory of pain. Though it rarely made a man cry out, it was enough to make him stir from his grave...

He was determined to question Soni about it when next they met. He hadn’t expected to be brought back to life in truth. But once alive, he’d never imagined he might be indestructible as well.

He dared not take his time in the lavatory, in spite of the temptation to dally. But he wondered, as he toyed with the paper towel machine, what the witch was thinking, sending him to this city, entwining his fate with the lovely lass. Had Soni known of Harper and her pursuers? Or had she simply expected the modern city to be ripe with danger?

So many questions to ask. He only hoped he would have time to ask them.

If his duty was to protect the lass from the three blackguards, he’d already done that. And yet he remained. So a moment or two of safety was not enough. He

would need to discover her true problem and help her solve it. And although it meant he might need every minute of his invincible-yet-mortal visit, he didn't mind. He was, strangely, in no hurry to see the familiar stretch of the moors. In fact, there had been moments when he'd forgotten the holy ground altogether—moments when a certain bonny lass found his arms impressive.

He flexed those arms in front of his reflection, then blanched when he looked into his own eyes. Heaven help him, he'd been mortal less than a pair of hours and already he was growing vain.

Sober now from the headiness of invincibility, he hurried to the door. They'd left Bart whole and hale outside that elevator. His accomplices would have only taken a moment to rouse, so he'd be sniffing along behind them any minute.

Lachlan simply had to keep the lass moving and distracted, so she would not have time to realize that he was immortal. Though, in truth, only spirit.

Goose bumps rose along his well-warmed arms. Something was wrong.

He turned off the light switch and peered out into the store. Bart stood just inside the door at the top of the steps, hands on hips, glaring around the fantastical place.

"Can I help you?" The aproned lass approached him.

"F.B.I. A dangerous man came in here, with a woman in a black jacket. Tell me where they are, and then get your people out of the store."

What a clever liar. If the young miss believed him, they were caught. Lachlan knew she'd watched him when he tossed the great pink cloth over Harper's head. All she had to do was point.

But the aproned lass was unimpressed. "Are you sure they came in here?"

Bart glared. "I assure you, I saw them come in through this door. He was wearing a kilt and was carrying her over his shoulder. You couldn't have missed them." He took a step toward her, but the brave lass laughed lightly.

"I would have liked to have seen that. I must have had my head stuffed down in the bottom of a box of lights. We're pretty busy around here. Our Christmas in July events are huge." She looked over her shoulder, in the direction of the sleigh. A man stood near it and reached for the pink cloth.

Lachlan braced himself to fly to Harper's aid.

"Brian!" the lass snapped. "That pink blanket goes with the sleigh. Some of the candies will have to be reattached, so I'm sending the blanket for compensation. One of the gumdrops rolled under the blue reindeer. Don't leave it behind."

When she turned back to Bart, Lachlan thought her eye caught on the door he hid behind.

"Look," she said, her tone edged with impatience. "You're welcome to look around, but if they came through here, they probably went out that door down there. It leads to the alley. If I see some guy in a kilt, with or without a woman over his shoulder, I promise to call 911." She laughed. "Right after I stop swooning."

She turned away from Bart and headed down to the next level. Bart and his slower pair of ruffians glanced around the store for a bit, then followed. Lachlan had to stick his head out the door to keep them in view. Eventually, the trio wandered toward the sleigh—or at least where the sleigh had been.

Blast!

Lachlan left the restroom behind him and crept quickly to the corner of the wall. Two wide doors stood open to the alley beyond. The trio stepped outside, so he was freer to move about. He hurried to the open doors, but stayed just inside, his colorful plaid hidden for the most part by a slender box a full foot taller than he was.

The sleigh sat unattended while a large platform was lowered from the back of a lorry. The brightly colored decorations sparkled in the sunlight. Colors that had never been so impressive without mortal eyes.

What a truly sad place he had chosen to spend the last two hundred and seventy years.

The aproned lass argued with Brian, the tall black-haired fellow who kept gesturing back to the blanket. The soft pink fabric hadn't moved an inch since Lachlan had tossed it over Harper's head. Bart and company debated near the front of the sleigh, disturbingly close to the seat. And it tore at Lachlan to imagine how frightened Harper must be to hear those voices so near.

Brian reached once again for the blanket and yanked it off Harper, stopping Lachlan's newly revived heart. But the man took no notice of the lass cowering in the seat.

Lachlan couldn't breathe. If she made the merest sound Bart would need only reach out to place his hand on her head.

The troublesome fellow found a tag on the blanket and held it up for the aproned lass to read, then he tossed it at her. He turned back toward the sleigh and froze.

Bart glanced at Brian, then over his shoulder at the window before motioning for one of his men to precede him farther down the alley. But Lachlan's relief was short lived when Bart waved the second man back to the doors. He had to run full out to make it around a wall before the henchman re-entered.

It seemed an eternity before the man finally gave up searching and went back to the alley. A second eternity passed while Lachlan waited for the man to disappear altogether. But by then, the sleigh was loaded.

He had no need to wonder if his Harper was still on board for she stood just inside the box of the lorry as it began to move. Lachlan hurried to help her down, but she looked at his raised arms and shook her head. Her face was streaked with tears.

She needs me! Why does she not jump?

"Go home, Lachlan. I won't watch you die for me."

He hurried to keep pace, glad the vehicle was moving in the opposite direction of Bart and his fools. "Ye need me, Sweeting. I'll not leave ye... until yer safe." How he hated to say the last three words.

She shook her head and the door began to lower. Only then did he realize the lass held the rope in her hand. She truly meant to shut him out.

With a determination he summoned only for those nights when he and the lads reenacted the Battle of Culloden, he focused all his concentration on leaping into the truck. But just then, the truck turned and thundered out into the road. Lachlan increased his speed, but so did the vehicle and inch by inch, the distance between himself and his lass increased.

There was no time left to leap. His only hope was a thin metal handle just above the floor, but the door was falling fast. He had to hurry.

He stretched and touched the handle with his fingertips, but the gap widened again. Harper disappeared behind the falling door.

Faster!

The edge of the door jerked to a stop with still a foot and a half left to fall. The lass raised a foot to force it down. But he couldn't let her succeed! She needed him, whether she admitted it or not!

When the driver let off the accelerator to change gears, Lachlan recognized his last chance. He surged forward, praying for God to give him but a fair chance, and got close enough to wrap his fingers around the thin handle! He then pulled himself near enough to get a sure hold with his entire hand. He swung his legs out to the side, then up toward the floor, but there was no time to rejoice when he landed on the edge of the bed. No time to solidify his hold. He had to let go again and hope his momentum could get him beyond the door before it slammed shut.

He dropped his shoulder and rolled with all his might. The front wedge of the platform stopped his progress. He turned onto his back and looked up into that bonny, misguided face a moment before the door slammed shut and plunged them into darkness.

She appeared to be a wee bit pleased, a wee bit disappointed, and a wee bit afeared...

Chapter 10

The inside of the truck was as cold as a winter's night in the Highlands. A large fan blew the chilled air through the metal box and chill bumps rose on Lachlan's arms. It was a thrill to be reminded of what cold really was when, for so long, he'd only been able to draw from his imagination. Of course he'd been able to empathize with the Culloden tourists, but there had been no real feeling to it.

He spread his feet apart to keep his balance while the lorry made its way down the road. And he rubbed his sleeves to see if that grand body of his could generate any heat.

He grinned into the darkness. It could.

"Lass," he said clearly, but quietly so as not to alarm her.

She said nothing.

He moved toward her, careful to keep his balance, sensing where she stood by the flow of the chilled air circling them.

A thin line of light seeped around the edges of the door and his eyes began to adjust. He could see her form against the wall, her raised chin, her hands pressed to the wall behind her helping her balance.

Since her eyes would be adjusting as well, he closed the space between them quickly before she thought to make him chase her through the darkness. He stopped with barely an inch between them, set his hands on her shoulders, and felt a tremor wrack through her.

“Easy now. Ye should ken by now I wouldna harm ye for all the potatoes in Ireland.”

He leaned down, drawn to the warmth of her face, eager for a tender word. But it was enough that she raised her face—a sign that a kiss from him wouldna go amiss.

Bless ye, Soncerae.

He was a breath away from accepting Harper’s invitation when the inside of the truck began to lighten from an expanding mist of green.

Heaven help me! I’ve summoned the wee witch with my blasted benediction!

Only when the green phantoms began to circle did young Soni appear. Her typically generous smile illuminated the box even more than the fog of her protective ancestors.

“Lachlan!” She seemed pleased to see him, as if they’d not just parted earlier in the day.

“Soni, forgive me. I did not intend to summon ye.” He took a step back from Harper and turned so he could introduce the two, but his modern day lass was still waiting for her kiss. Her eyes were closed and her face was as still as death.

He would know!

“Be easy, Lachlan. She is fine. It is ye and I who have been taken out of the moment.”

The rumbling of the engine, the whirring of the fans, all gone. Time, it seemed, had truly stopped.

Reluctantly, he nodded and relaxed. “Truly, Soncerae, I did not mean to summon ye—”

“Ye didn’t.”

“Then why—”

“I’ve come to collect ye, Lachlan McLean. Ye’ve done what was required and ye’ve earned yer boon. Prince Charles Stuart awaits yer pleasure.”

His chest bubbled with outright joy. “Truly?”

Soni nodded. “Truly.”

After two hundred and seventy years, he was about to have peace restored to him. The bitterness and frustration of the prince’s betrayal were soon to be removed from his breast. Finally.

Oh, finally.

He took a deep breath of chilled air that proved he was still, as yet, a living man. He glanced at Harper’s waiting lips, then back at Soni. The witch’s attention was on the lass as well.

“She’s lovely,” she said.

He took advantage of the excuse to look his fill. “Aye. She is. And braver than ye would ever guess. She tried to keep me away, as a matter of fact—”

“Yes. I know. Very brave.” Soni sighed and turned her attention back to him. “So, are ye ready? Would ye prefer I allow ye that kiss before we go? Seems as though Harper thinks ye’ve earned it.”

The lass’s lips still waited.

“And then we simply... go?”

“Aye. But dinna fash. She will remember little. Naught more than a dream.”

If he set aside the fact he didn't necessarily wish to be forgotten, it seemed wrong to leave her as she was. "She's still in grave danger, Soni."

The witch's brows rose. "Oh, aye. But she's a resourceful lass. And moving away from the danger even as we speak. I wouldn't worry about her."

Not worry about her? Soni, please. I've not had a whole day yet. Can ye not give me two? I'm certain I can see her safe, in truth, if I am given the time. And I'm not asking for more than ye promised.

Soni shook her head and the action was like a fist to his guts. "Nay, Lachlan. I said ye'd be given enough time for a brave deed, and ye've had that. And more. I might have come for ye just after ye tried to pull the wee lassie from the train tracks, aye?"

Gazing as Harper caused him pain, then, but he couldn't look away. "So I was never meant to save her?"

"What?" Soni shook her head. "No, my friend. Just a brave deed. And for no one in particular.

The disappointment he felt surprised him. There was nothing special here, just as there was nothing special about him being chosen to die at Culloden. And the randomness of it all made his middle feel as empty and sullen as Culloden Moor itself.

"So, do ye want yer kiss then? Or shall we just be on our way?"

Those waiting lips beckoned. But when those eyes opened, he knew the loneliness they would hold, and it broke his all-too-feeling heart.

"What's it to be?" Soni prodded again. Would she give him not a moment of peace?

Bereft, he shook his head. If Harper wouldn't remember his kiss he had no business taking it from her. But his head took up shaking again before he realized what he meant to say.

"I won't leave her," he said, and the words themselves stirred his sad blood back to life again. "Tell me the cost and I'll pay it. There must be something ye can undo here, with yer obviously substantial powers."

Soni shook her head to mirror his denial. "Nay, Lachlan. I've but borrowed these powers from my great uncle Wickham. I've made bargains too. And the only way for me to allow ye more time is to break the first bargain we made. It would mean giving up the revenge ye've waited centuries for. And Bonnie Prince Charlie is waitin'."

"I care not," he lied, though it sounded strangely true. He stepped close to Harper, wrapped an arm around her waist, and faced his wee witch. "I want no more of yer bargain, Soncerae."

The lass quickly swallowed her surprise and nodded once. And truly, a burdensome weight was lifted from his chest, perhaps from his soul. His ease fled, however, when he noted the regret on Soni's face.

"I'm sorry, Lachlan. There is still a reckoning to be made. And we cannot rob justice, aye?"

"Justice?"

She nodded slowly. "I've already paid to have ye brought back to life, and kept alive, while ye did yer noble deed. But I was only able to pay for a day, ye ken? A day for each of the 79, or two if the deed is not yet done. I can give ye until the

moon rises perhaps, but that is all the time ye can have. I'm sorry." She watched him closely for a moment. "And now, knowing that, would ye rather take yer boon and meet with the prince? It can't be an easy exchange—years of revenge for a handful of hours at most."

She was right. It was a hard exchange to make. But he wouldn't take back the weight he'd just lost from his chest when he surrendered his need for revenge on the prince. And he would not be haunted by the sight of his brave lass standing with her eyes closed, waiting for a kiss that never came.

He faced Harper again, taking the same position he'd been in when Soni had interrupted. Over his shoulder, he said, "I'll see this evening, then."

Soni's gasp of surprise pleased him. But he was even more pleased when the green glow of her mist left him in peace with his sweet lass. The rumble beneath his feet resumed. The skin on his arms rose again to welcome the chilled air of the refrigerated lorry.

It was his cue.

Chapter 11

Lachlan pressed his mouth against the warmth of Harper's waiting lips. A chaste kiss filled with all the emotion of a conversation she hadn't witnessed. "A priceless kiss," he whispered, when it was over.

Her hands released the cold wall behind her and she slid them up his chest and around his neck. He pulled her against him and held tight, absorbing her trembling.

"Are ye cold?"

She nodded her head against his chest and he hurried to get her settled on the seat of the sleigh with the velvet blanket over her once more. He sat beside her and heard the hushed impact of half a dozen decorations falling to the floor. No doubt they'd become brittle from the cold transportation.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her expression was impossible to see so far away from the cracks of light, but her voice conveyed the rest.

"No need." He stroked her hair absently. "Ye already explained—"

"If Bart finds us, he'll kill you now. And I will really end up in a psych ward if that happens, you know? I can't live with it. And he knows that. He'll use you against me, and then he'll kill you anyway."

"Hush now. We're miles away. And I'd like to forget about everyone but ye, do ye ken?"

The chilled air swirled between them and he finally admitted that he was shivering too. But it was a grand excuse to pull her against him and hold her closer. The feel of her, crushed in his embrace, left his body and his soul swimming in the sweetest sense of belonging, though that belonging was temporary. Even the soft down of her wee black jacket was a bliss he would never forget.

Had Simon felt such joy when he'd been able to pull Soni to him and kiss her? Perhaps, if the wee witch had felt the same, she wasn't too surprised at Lachlan's sacrifice.

Harper sniffed and he didn't have to feel her face to know it would be wet with tears. "They killed another man that tried to protect me. His name was Milton." Her body jerked against him and he realized she was greetin' in earnest. And sometimes, a body needed to greet, so he didn't interrupt for a good five minutes.

"Did ye... love this Milton?" It was ridiculous for him to feel any kind of jealousy toward a poor man who had met his end at the hands of another, as he and the fallen of Culloden had. But he was jealous. He had a charming image in his head of Harper gazing up into his eyes with true adoration on her face and the idea that she'd been in love with another man interfered with that image.

"No. I didn't love him. I hired him to be my bodyguard. I thought that was all I needed to keep my stepfather from messing with me until July."

"Bodyguard?" Well, then, the pretty image in his head could remain intact for a while. "How did they kill him?"

"Poison. I'm sure of it. But the doctor said it was the flu. I'm sure he was paid off."

"Poison!" Lachlan grunted. "A woman's weapon."

The lass nodded. "A monster's weapon."

He had to agree. Any woman that poisoned another was a monster indeed.

"I'm sorry, lass."

She took a deep breath and eased away from him a bit. "I'm going to be twenty-one in July and I will have my trust fund. So St. Clair needs to get control of me before then. Everything he's tried has failed so far. So I'm sure he plans to have me committed to a mental hospital, where he can control me with medication. After he empties the fund, he'll probably...make it look like an overdose. He's made sure there is a record, at least with the psychiatrist, a history of drug abuse."

Lachlan had watched the better part of many a movie—enough to know the scenario she suggested was a plausible one. But it was the inevitability in her voice that frightened him.

"Harper, sweeting, doona fash so. Do ye suppose I would let such a thing happen to ye?"

She eased farther back, nearly out of his arms. "Oh, really? Are you going to run and hide with me for another month?"

His gut twisted. He only had a few hours. If he'd failed to see her safe before nightfall, he would simply disappear, forced to move on and leave her to fend for herself. Would she know she'd been abandoned? Would she reach for him and find him gone? Or would he dissolve from her memories and leave gaps she couldn't explain?

"We'll find a solution today, lass. I vow it."

She sighed softly. "I didn't think so." When she pressed her back against the seat again, she left a great deal of cold space between them. Apparently her ire was enough to warm her.

While he tried to devise a plan, they sat in silence except for the sound of the fan blowing that cold air about. It also smelled a bit like rotting flowers—another

sense for which he was grateful, even though the smell was none so pleasant. But with all his senses alert, it was difficult for him to think clearly.

She was the one to speak first. "Look. Buddy. Just get out when the truck stops again."

"I'm not Buddy. I'm Lachlan. And I'm going to prove myself to ye. I'm just not certain how... as yet."

"Just be honest with me. Is that so hard? Admit that there's nothing you can do to help me, that you've already saved my butt enough times to earn yourself a Boy Scout badge, and you need to look out for yourself now. Which you do. I'm serious. I don't want you coming back to haunt me. And I'll be able to figure something out just fine on my own, and I'll live a good long time, so you'd really regret the whole haunting thing."

Haunting? "Of course!" He was so excited he had to force himself to stay seated. "That's how I can stay with ye until July!"

"Sorry?"

"I'll haunt ye!"

The lass was as silent as the clan stones on the moor. He couldn't resist reaching out for her, to make sure she hadn't disappeared on him. She tried to avoid his grasp, but he got a hold on her shoulders and forced her to face him, even though they couldn't see each other well.

"Harper," he began, but couldn't think of how to continue.

"Lachlan..."

The hairs on the back of his head tingled at the sound of his name on her lips, but he didn't have the luxury to ask her to repeat herself.

"Harper, my name is Lachlan McLean of the Clan McLean."

"What is this, a Highlander sequel?"

"Nay, lass. That's McLeod." He wished he didn't know to what she was referring, but he did. "I fought on the field of Culloden on April 16, in the year of our Lord, 1746. And I died there."

She tried to wiggle free, but he held tight to her shoulders.

"Oh my gosh! You're a Highlander nut just like St. Clair. What will you tell me next, that you can't be kill—" The choked silence was telling. He could easily imagine the look on her face.

She slammed up against him and wrapped her arms around him. While he enjoyed the contact, he wondered at the way her hands dug beneath his plaid at his back. Then he realized she was looking for the gunshot wound that had never been.

He pushed her arms wider, then took a hold of them, keeping them still.

"Harper, please—"

"Don't you dare!" She jerked her shoulders and backed away though she remained inside the sleigh. The lorry made a sharp turn just then, but he didn't reach out to her. There was enough she needed to deal with without worrying where he was touching her.

"I didna intend to tell ye I was a ghostie brought back to life, though temporarily invincible... It would be much easier if the witch were here to explain. But I pray I won't see her again for a long while."

“Swear to me you’re not working for St. Clair! Tell me Bart didn’t have blanks in his gun, that you weren’t willing to take a bullet for me because you knew about it.”

“The bullets were real enough. I felt them...though vaguely. But forgive me if I canna produce them at the moment for yer inspection.” He couldn’t help the rise of his temper. The lass’s thoughts had taken a bad turn, and he was more than a little disappointed she could suspect him of such betrayal. Though, to be fair, she would have to take his word on faith alone.

“It wasn’t just the kilt,” she said. “It was the whole Highlander package. What’s he going to do, have you cut off my head when the farce is over?” Her voice had risen with the sound of the engine as the vehicle sped up, likely entering the thoroughfare. But he believed she would have shouted at him anyway. Adrenaline is a hard thing to control when one believes they are facing an enemy.

“I do not know or work for yer stepfather,” he said firmly. “What I told ye about myself is true. I fell at Culloden. I have haunted that place for two hundred and seventy years, and now a witch has released me with a charge to perform some heroic deed. I only have until the moon rises to help ye find true safety. I wish I had more time, but—”

“What happens when the moon rises? You become a ghost again? Go back to Scotland?”

“Nay. My time at Culloden is over. I agreed to move on, and so I must.”

“Move on? Like, into the light?”

“Wherever I deserve to go, I suppose.” If she heard the last, he didn’t know, but he no longer felt like shouting. Perhaps his own adrenaline was spent. Perhaps he simply didn’t want to think about Heaven or Hell or his worthiness of either.

He made out her face in the shadows. She frowned as fiercely as he did, obviously no more happy with him than he was with her at the moment.

“Ask me something,” he said. “Anything that might help ye believe I am not in league with yer villains.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she lifted her shoulders while holding her hands out, as if to prove her powerlessness. “I have no idea what you could say to make me believe you. I mean, it’s not like I can put my hand through you or anything, right?”

He nodded. “As I said, I am flesh and blood for the moment.”

She nodded too. “Yeah. Sure.”

He looked up and said a quick prayer for inspiration.

“You know what I think?”

He was but happy she was still speaking to him. “What is that?”

“I think, if St. Clair planned this, you were his cruelest joke of all, getting me to believe I actually had someone on my side, willing to defend me like Milton was. I think your job was to make me believe I was going crazy. Or else he wanted me to catch on, just about now, to pull the rug out from under me.”

“Ah, lass—” He so wanted to gather her to him and prove through his touch alone that he was, indeed, on her side. She was far too wary, too shell-shocked to trust him now. He’d just have to put more effort into thinking of a solution. But what did a ghost—tethered to a moor, 78 comrades, and a wee witch—know that might impress a girl from—

“Where are we?”

She gave him an unkind look, even if he couldn't see her clearly.

“Just tell me. What city is this?”

“Salt Lake. Salt Lake City, Utah. Don't tell me you can't read signs.”

Salt Lake? He had a memory attached to the place. And when he recalled it, he suddenly had his inspiration.

“We need to find a lawyer,” he said.

She gasped. “Oh, really? Jeez. I hadn't thought of that. All this time I've been running around, trying to keep St. Clair from putting me in jail or an institution, I never thought once to hire a lawyer! Duh!”

He didn't appreciate the sarcasm, but he would overlook it. “I know a lawyer from Salt Lake City, Utah.”

“Hey. For a Scottish ghost, you get around. But it doesn't matter when no lawyer will talk to me without a parent or a retainer. And I've barely got enough money to get by for the next month, if I live that long. And lawyers demand thousands just to listen to me. I tried to convince this secretary, once, that I was going to inherit millions in another month, but apparently desperate people have already used that line on her. And I got the same answer from the next, and the next. There's no way I can get their attention long enough to explain anything.”

She scowled at him harder and he thought better than to interrupt.

“But you probably already know that, don't you? Did you and St. Clair have a good laugh when he explained what was going on? When he was hiring you to act as my personal tracking device?” Her gaze looked him over, to his toes and up again. “And the next move was supposed to be what, to seduce me? Will someone be on hand with a camera?”

If she'd been a man, he would have struck her for suggesting it. But he couldn't do that. And even if she was a man, a little violence would only convince her that he had no true interest in protecting her.

So what did you do with a woman who needed a good shock?

Lachlan shrugged inwardly and convinced himself there was no real choice in the matter. He needed to kiss her again.

So he did.

Chapter 12

The truck began to slow—or maybe it was just her brain function. What other explanation was there for kissing a guy who was either out of his mind, or her enemy?

He certainly didn't feel like the enemy, though. He didn't taste like an enemy either. And if she was being completely honest with herself, she really couldn't believe, deep down, that the guy wasn't 100% on her side.

Bad news was it meant he was crazy.

A ghost from Scotland? She didn't believe in ghosts, but even if she did, he couldn't actually expect her to believe he was one, right?

Those lips should be cold—but he had an excuse for that.

And her face should be sliding right through his—but it wasn't.

She really wanted him to not be crazy. But what other alternative was there? That he was telling the truth? And if he was telling the truth, that meant he wasn't going to be around tomorrow and she'd be alone again. She was used to it, of course. Except for her grandma's old neighbor,Carolynn, and Milton, she'd been basically alone for months, since her mom died. Being alone again, in the morning, wasn't going to be such a big deal. But never seeing Lachlan again?

Thinking about it sent a little pain through her chest that originated just left of center.

Who was she kidding? It was just a little heartburn...caused by a couple of exposed knees. And the fact that she'd gotten used to having him around, like a stray puppy that didn't know enough to take care of himself. Although, Lachlan didn't have that problem. Of course, if he went around claiming to be a ghost, he'd find himself in all kinds of trouble. She was practically obligated to stick with him.

Finally, she either had to end the kiss or admit that she liked the guy. And since admitting anything might keep him around long enough to get hurt, she ended the kiss and pulled back.

"I've thought about it," she said. "And I don't think you're working for my stepfather."

She could tell he was grinning, even in the dark.

"But it wasn't because you kissed me, all right?"

"Of course," he said, but she could hear laughter in his voice. She couldn't help herself and laughed a little too.

The truck turned and accelerated and she toppled into him. A few seconds later, she was able to scoot back again but she was a little surprised he hadn't tried to take advantage.

"Harper, listen well. I will prove myself to ye. I vow it. I will take ye to see this lawyer fellow and I will prove what I say is true. Ye will be safe before I leave ye."

"Don't worry about it. I think there is a real chance you're out of your mind, but since I don't think you're a danger, to me at least, then let's not dig too deep, all right?"

The truck turned twice more while they sat in silence, waiting for it to stop. After a third turn, it tilted forward, throwing them against the back of the velvet seat, and they were plunged back into total darkness again.

"Underground, I suppose." His deep voice surrounded her with a little help from the fan.

She figured if he were really a ghost, underground wouldn't bother him, but he made it sound like it did.

It was pretty sad that "delusional" was the better alternative. But really, there wasn't any doubt. He'd been running around downtown Salt Lake in a Highlander costume and it wasn't even Comicon season. And the big Scottish festival had been earlier in the month.

The truck stopped. Her heart raced while they waited for the door to rise. She only hoped the guy that opened it would be the guy who'd closed it in the first place.

The metal door roared up into the ceiling and after her eyes adjusted to the light, she was relieved to see Brian, yet another guy who had taken a risk by helping her.

In spite of the fact they needed to stay out of sight, Lachlan insisted on helping the guy unload the truck. And only after the sleigh was rolling through the wide doors that led into the shopping mall was she finally able to pull him away.

She rolled her eyes and pointed to the hallway with restroom signs and a drinking fountain.

“It was the least I could do,” he grumbled. “The man transported us a good distance from Bart and company, did he not?”

“Yeah. You’re right.” She turned toward the women’s restroom door and he followed. She had to press a hand against his chest to get him to stop. The flesh under his pirate shirt was disturbingly firm. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He looked at the sign and frowned. “Ye’ll run from me. I won’t allow ye to go inside alone.”

A woman with orange and pink hair hurried toward them and gave the Scot a long look while she backed into the ladies room.

“Go ahead, honey. Bring him inside.” Her eyebrows wagged in a truly disgusting way that made Harper think twice about going inside herself. She glanced up at Lachlan to see he was just as uncomfortable.

“I’ll hurry,” she said, hoping that was enough to make him stay put, then she followed Creepy Chick.

Chapter 13

It was the creepiest feeling in the world to be sitting on the toilet in a public restroom wishing a guy was in there with you—and only if he turned his back—so you could feel safe.

She remembered thinking she was done for when Bart started talking just a few feet from where she hid in the sleigh. She’d wanted Lachlan beside her then too. At first, she’d wished he would fly out the door and take out Bart and the boys like some highly trained government agent. But then she’d realized that he’d probably end up dead if he did. She’d convinced Brian to let her shut the door after Lachlan jumped in, but when the engine started, she realized it was the perfect chance to leave him behind, to keep him alive. A chance to make up for what had happened to Milton.

But she’d failed at that too. When the door got stuck, she hadn’t moved fast enough to lock him out. She’d also screwed up at the Trax platform, and hadn’t been much help to the little girl with the spilled backpack.

Pitiful. She was lucky she was still alive after being on the streets for over a week.

Since she was warm enough to think clearly again, she worried she might not be tough enough to do what was in Lachlan’s best interest. Poor guy. Delusional or not, he’d hitched his wagon to the wrong person.

She could hear Creepy Chick playing with her phone in the next stall.

“Uh, oh.” The woman gasped. “Um, honey?”

Harper closed her eyes and prayed the woman wasn’t out of toilet paper.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t suppose you’re fifteen, are you?”

Fifteen? “Uh, no...”

A toilet flushed and a few seconds later, the chick was standing outside Harper’s stall. “You’re gonna want to see this.” She held her phone above the door.

While Harper straightened her clothes, she tried to make out the picture. “What is it?”

“It’s an Amber Alert. For *you*. Last seen with a disturbed man in a Scottish kilt.”

Oh, great. She left the stall and hurried to wash her hands, then turned to take a closer look at the phone—the phone of a woman who had not washed her hands. But she didn’t have time to worry about that.

There was even a picture. St. Clair had to have kept it on him, ready to play the Amber Alert card the first chance he got.

“I’m not fifteen. I’m twenty.” She gave the phone back. “And he’s not disturbed.”

“Yeah.” The woman put a piece of gum in her mouth, still, without washing her hands. “I didn’t think you looked like a child.” Her creepy grin returned. “Not with that Irish guy all over you like that.”

Harper hoped her shudder wasn’t too obvious as she hurried toward the door. “Thanks for the heads up.”

Lachlan looked relieved, but unhappy. “Ye took time to make friends?”

Harper shook her head and headed straight to the drinking fountain. The need to wash her hands again was just too strong to ignore. “No. I wasn’t making friends. Do you know what an Amber Alert is?” She hoped ice cold water would do as much damage to germs as hot water did and imagined the microscopic creatures turning to ice and dropping off her fingers.

“Tell me,” he said.

“It’s a... warning that goes out to phones and televisions, and signs over the freeway. The police have put out an alert saying I’ve been abducted by a man in a kilt. St. Clair must have told them I was fifteen, so they’d post it. If we walk through that mall, or down the street, someone’s going to call the cops.”

“A kilt?” He looked down at himself and stroked the material over his thighs. “I must leave it behind?”

“Whoa!” She held up her hands and averted her eyes. “Unless you’ve got pants on under there, don’t be unwrapping...anything.”

“I have no pants.” He made it sound like he’d no sooner wear pants than a tutu.

She nodded toward the door of the men’s room. “You can hide in the stall, in there. I’ll go get you some slacks or something.”

“Jeans. I’d like jeans.”

Of course he would. “What size?”

He shrugged, then put his hands next to his hips and pulled them forward to show her the size of the gap. “This size, I suppose.”

She groaned and walked away.

“Ye’ll return, Harper? Sweeting? I’d have yer word before ye go.”

“Yes. I’ll come back.” He wouldn’t survive a minute without me. “Now get in there!”

She didn’t look back to make sure because she knew the sight of him—standing there in his Scottish stuff, with his hands held out to show her how wide his hips were—was a sight she would never be able to get out of her head. And if anything happened to him, she didn’t want to be haunted by that image. He was just so... *innocent* wasn’t the right word. Neither was *gullible*. But there was something... *naïve* about the guy that she’d be better off ignoring. And he needed her for a change.

It was enough to make her grin like an idiot.

She pulled her scarf up around her head and after a couple of twists, there was no way someone was going to confuse her with a picture of a fifteen year old on the news. She also tucked her black vest into the first trash can she came across since it had been listed on the alert.

Buying him a cheap pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and a ball cap took almost half of her remaining money. The Broncos ball cap was pricey, but he couldn’t be wearing his hair down around his shoulders because even in regular clothes he would have a Highlander/ romance novel-look about him. And that might prompt some jealous dude to call the cops just out of spite.

There were plenty of Broncos fans in Utah. He’d blend right in.

While she headed back to the hallway where she’d left him, she started thinking. *What if I broke my promise and ditched him? Would he be safe then?*

No. The police would come for him, thanks to the Amber Alert, and he’d only end up in a psych ward. Maybe for good. She imagined them both sitting in an overly sanitized room playing chess while other patients wandered around mumbling. It was disturbing how pleasant the idea seemed.

A perfectly normal, gorgeous man stepped out of the restroom wearing the clothes she’d bought. His boots worked just fine with the jeans and t-shirt, and he’d tied his hair behind his head. With what, she didn’t know.

“Lachlan? Is that you?”

He tipped his hat like an old fashioned cowboy. “Maybe ye should call me John.”

She could have cried. “Absolutely not. You just got your name back, remember? I’m not going to take it away from you again.”

His smile fell away and he stepped close, then herded her back against the tiled wall. He swept off the hat, flared his nostrils, and kissed the daylight out of her until she got dizzy from a lack of oxygen.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “Thank ye for that, my sweet Harper. For hearing my name on yer tongue is something I shall always savor.” Another kiss—a short one that left her feeling cheated—and they headed for the information desk.

Again, she promised herself it wasn’t the kiss that swayed her, but she decided she wasn’t going to ditch him even though he no longer matched the description of her abductor. With that red kilt hidden inside a shopping bag, no one was going to be calling the cops, so he’d get along just as well as he would have if they’d never met. So leaving him, for his own good, wouldn’t be mean.

But why upset the guy, right? He said he wasn't going to be around after it got dark, which meant she only needed to patronize him a few more hours. And then he'd be gone—to wherever he expected to go.

He can't be a ghost. He just can't.

And to prove how talented she was getting in the denial department, she decided to ignore the return of her heartburn...

Chapter 14

She couldn't bring herself to risk taking the bus in case someone overheard his accent and put two and two together. So, against her better judgement, they used a payphone and called a taxi. Thankfully, the driver was able to find the address for Ewan MacFarland, Attorney at Law.

On the ride to his offices, located on the mountainside above the city, near the University of Utah, she caught Lachlan frowning at the sun headed toward the opposite horizon. He forced a smile and turned his attention to the road, but he squeezed her fingers a lot tighter after that.

Tears gathered in her eyes and she realized she'd just been fooling herself. She wasn't patronizing him, she was patronizing herself.

Please let him be crazy. Please let him be crazy.

Because crazy people didn't disappear when the sun went down.

The taxi stopped at the first of three low brick buildings just inside Research Park. A police car was backed into the outside row of the lot. Empty. It was impossible for St. Clair to have known where they were going. So it wasn't like the police could be lying in wait for them, but it still made her nervous.

She handed over the fare and a tip even though she didn't know how she'd eat for the next month. Then she let Lachlan lead her into the building. He didn't seem to mind that her hand was cold and clammy and he held on tight, giving her an extra squeeze now and then while they went looking for some guy who supposedly knew a ghost from Scotland.

It was hard to hold out hope—she'd tried too many lawyers' offices already. There was just no way anyone would waste time listening to her if she didn't have enough money to get their attention, and at the moment, she wasn't sure she had enough to buy a Big Mac.

They found it. *MacFarland and MacFarland, Attorneys at Law*. Her stomach dropped into her shoes, knowing she was about to be rejected again. She was almost disappointed when the massive oak door wasn't locked.

Lachlan removed his cap, pulled off the string holding his shoulder length hair behind his head, and strolled into the office like he owned the place. He smiled at the older woman behind the desk, whose gaze started at his waist and meandered up his form-fitting t-shirt. When she got to his face, Harper thought she might fall out of her chair.

Yeah. She could relate.

“Good day, Lass.” He gave her a big smile which Harper thought was a little too friendly. And she didn’t care for him calling someone else Lass, either, especially someone’s grandmother.

“Good day,” the woman said, a little too breathy for her age. “How may I help you?”

“I was told to ask for Ewan MacFarland,” he said casually.

“Oh?” The woman’s smile was suddenly all business. The gatekeeper had awakened. “And may I ask who suggested you ask for Mr. MacFarland?”

“Aye. That would be Ewan MacFarland. He insisted I ring him up when I came to town, but we’re staying close by, so... I thought I’d call in person, ye see.”

“Oh, I see.” Her smile was still forced. “Did he give you his card?” She held out her hand like she was asking to see his passport.”

Lachlan shook his head. “Just tell him I’m the bloke from Scotland. He’ll know.”

“Just a moment.” The woman stood and walked down a short hall, knocked lightly on a door, then let herself in.

Harper started pacing around the room, dreading what came next. She could tell by the way the woman had acted. They wouldn’t be allowed into the inner sanctum.

The door opened, but it wasn’t the woman who came back down the hall. It was an extremely tall man in an expensive suit. His face was open and friendly. His hair was a washed out mix of strawberry blond and gray that looked a little messy, like he might have been running his fingers through it. Or maybe napping.

He held his hand far out in front of him, and gave Lachlan’s a good shake. “Hello, there. I’m Ewan MacFarland.”

“Lachlan McLean, at yer service.”

The lawyer seemed pleased by his accent. “You’ll have to forgive my memory, but I’m afraid I don’t recognize you. You say we met in Scotland?”

“Aye. This past April, at Culloden.”

The man nodded, then gestured toward the hall. “Please, come in. Come in.” He offered his hand to Harper. “And you are?”

“Harper...” Too late, she realized the man might have seen a recent Amber Alert.

He led them into a spacious office with a large family crest on the far wall. Family pictures littered the tables, and a framed, crayon drawing occupied a prominent space to the left.

“Harper? Lovely name. Won’t you have a seat?” He looked out the door. “Mildred? Would you join us?”

She and Lachlan took the seats directly in front of an ornately carved desk, and, with a suspicious look on her face, the older woman took a seat in the corner with a notepad in her hand.

“My wife and I loved Scotland. I’d like to go back, but she wants to see Rome next.” The man leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. “I’ll admit, I’m intrigued, Mr. McLean. Because I don’t remember seeing you at Culloden or anywhere else. And I believe I would have remembered you.”

Lachlan put a hand on Harper’s knee like he knew she was getting ready to run. Then he shrugged. “Oh, ye didn’t see me, Mr. MacFarland. But I was there beside ye when ye placed a wreath of red and white flowers against the memorial cairn.”

He frowned suddenly, and tilted his head to the side. "If I remember rightly, ye said, *I would have fought with you*. Do ye remember that?"

The man got misty-eyed and nodded, though reluctantly. "Yes. I did. And I was alone at the time. I remember that clearly."

"Oh, aye. Alone with the dead, ye might say."

"You mean ghosts?" The man snorted. "It is supposed to be one of the most haunted places on Earth, so I suppose that's accurate. So tell me, were you filming people? Without their knowledge and consent?"

"Nay." Lachlan bit one side of his lip and she realized he was enjoying himself, toying with the guy.

Not smart, with cops nearby. But there wasn't a lot she could do. His hand basically had her pinned to the chair.

MacFarland grinned and she relaxed a little. At least he was enjoying having a mystery dangling in front of his nose like a carrot. He shook a finger at the Scot. "I signed the guest book. Is that how you learned my name?"

Lachlan shook his head slowly. "Nay."

The guy tossed his hands in the air. "I give up. How do you know what I said at Culloden?"

"Auch, well, the impressive thing is that after hundreds of thousands of visitors—"

"That many?"

"In over two hundred seventy years, that I'd remember yer name and from whence ye hail."

"Remember?" He grunted. "How did you even hear me? I'm not so sure I even said it out loud!"

"I remember, because so few sentiments uttered on the moor make much of an impression on the ghosts of soldiers. But every now and again, a man comes along who wishes he could have fought beside us, and means it." It was his turn to shake a finger at MacFarland. "And aye, ye did say so aloud. We're not mind-readers, ye ken."

The lawyer's mouth hung open and Harper wondered if the guy was going to buy Lachlan's story, or if they were going to be laughed out of the office. But at least it would be a change from being kicked out.

MacFarland closed his mouth, swallowed, and became a lawyer again. "Let me get this straight, he said, and tapped the end of his pencil on a leather blotter, punctuating his points. "You're telling me you're a ghost from the Battle of Culloden Moor? In Scotland?" He leaned forward to take a long look at the jeans and t-shirt.

"I had to hide my plaid in this bag," Lachlan said. "Her stepfather, the blackheart, arranged for a Golden Alert for an abductor in a kilt."

"Amber Alert," she corrected.

The man nodded, like he'd solved the mystery. "Oh, I see. So you are in trouble and you needed the ghost story to get past my secretary."

"I do not tell tales, sir."

MacFarland rose to his feet and Lachlan did too. Harper thought sitting tight was a better strategy. At least she might be able to get part of her story out before

the cops arrived. And she'd know where her next few meals were coming from—until St. Clair found her and his lawyers came to her “rescue.”

But the guy didn't call for security. He and the Scot seemed to be having some kind of staring contest that must have ended in a draw because they both lowered themselves back to their seats like a couple of bulls deciding not to lock horns.

“Seriously,” the man grinned, “how did you know what I said at Culloden? Is that monument hollow? Are there camera's?” He glanced at her. “Do *you* know?”

Harper bit her bottom lip for a second, then looked at Lachlan, who nodded and sat back. Apparently, he wanted her to back up his story. And since he'd gotten them this far, she was going to do whatever he asked.

“He knows because... he really *is* a ghost from Scotland.” She'd even managed to say it with a straight face.

The man rolled his eyes, but didn't stop smiling. “I don't suppose you'd like to walk through that wall to prove it?” He pointed at the wall next to his secretary. She rolled her eyes and scribbled away.

Lachlan squeezed his own arm. “I'm afraid I'm temporarily mortal.”

“Mm hmm.” MacFarland took a deep breath and studied his desktop for a minute, then he nodded. “Okay, well, you were clever enough to get in here, so I'll give you five minutes. That's all I've got to spare today.” He checked his watch, then hit a timer on his desk. It started at 5:00 and counted down. Apparently, he gave a lot of people a five minute time limit.

Chapter 15

Harper introduced herself again, adding her last name.

He wrote it down, even though the woman was already taking notes. “And is there an Amber Alert out for you, Harper?”

“Yes. But I'm twenty, not fifteen. My stepfather must have lied to the police.”

He nodded once. “Go on. But know that I will be calling the authorities when your five minutes are up. You can either use that time to get away, or you can keep talking.”

She chose to talk. It might be the last time she could be heard without someone shutting her up.

“My mother married this creep two and a half years ago. She was rich. He was younger than her. I believe he started poisoning her soon after that. She was seriously ill by Christmas. He would take her to doctors. At home, he'd talk about cancer even though they never found any. She kept getting worse.” It physically hurt to finally talk about it, but she didn't have time to eek it out. “She died three months ago. St. Clair was pissed—”

“St. Clair is your stepfather?”

“Yes.”

“Go on.” He scribbled again.

“He was pissed when the will was read. Everything was left in a trust for me.”

MacFarland shook his head. "If he were capable of murder, and really wanted her money, he would forge another will and it would all go into probate. In Utah, a handwritten will is legal, with or without witnesses. And that dispute would most likely end in his favor, as the spouse."

She shook her head. "He's not a patient man. He'd kill me first if he thought the money would go directly to him. And there was a pre-nup. Can't that represent my mother's wishes? If they divorced, he got only what he brought to the marriage, which was a vehicle and not much else. It was all listed. They kept separate accounts, no matter how he insisted they not. I think that's why he started poisoning her right away."

"The pre-nup only shows her wishes if they'd divorced, not if she died and they were still on good terms. Autopsy?"

She shook her head. "He had her cremated too fast. I was out of town. He already had it done before I got back. I never got to see her, say goodbye..."

MacFarland absentmindedly shoved a box of tissue her way but kept writing. "And because she'd been under a doctor's care, they didn't have to call anyone but the mortuary."

She nodded. "That's what he said."

He set his pencil down and looked at her, deadly serious. "And why are you here? You want a probate lawyer? That's not me." His smile returned. "But I guess a ghost from 18th century Scotland wouldn't know there is a difference between lawyers."

Harper glanced nervously at the timer and thought she'd better hurry and tell him the important part. "St. Clair is trying to have me committed to get control of my trust fund. He's got a quack all lined up to claim I'm certifiable. Once he has my money in his pocket, he plans to kill me, make it look like an overdose. I heard him telling one of his goons."

"Hearsay."

Lachlan got to his feet.

The lawyer gestured for him to sit back down. "I assume you're interested in my professional opinion. We can't present hearsay to a judge."

"A judge?" Harper tried not to get too excited, but her lungs overfilled and she was having a hard time exhaling.

"I assume this will end up before a judge. Just being honest here. Probate court is a bitch. That's why I don't practice probate law." He looked pointedly at Lachlan.

The Scot shook his head. "A judge will never hear of it if we cannot keep the lass safe until she turns twenty-one next month."

"Next month?" MacFarland pushed the notepad away and sent the pencil rolling after it. "If all you have to do is wait a month before you can access the money yourself, then do it. No lawyer fees that way. Just stay with a friend."

"You don't understand," Harper said, trying to keep the whine out of her voice. "They've already killed my bodyguard. I got away, but today, they found me again and tried to get me into a van, but this guy stopped them. We've been shot at twice. And now there is an Amber Alert so they can get me separated from..." She nodded at Lachlan, not knowing what to call him. A few kisses didn't make him her boyfriend or anything. Not after knowing him for only a few hours. And she wasn't about to call him her bodyguard, in case the title was unlucky.

“Her protector,” Lachlan said. “The problem is, I won’t be around to protect her after another hour or two.”

The lawyer waved his hand like he was setting the Scot’s comment aside for the moment. “Shots fired? Was that near 7th east and fourth south?”

“It was. And we were at the library when they tried to force me into the van.”

The timer went off. The three of them stared at it. Finally, MacFarland turned it off, but her ears still rang.

He leaned forward, laced his fingers together, and exhaled. “I’ll need fifteen thousand for a retainer. But I will also put you in a safe place until—”

“Nay.” Lachlan flattened a hand against the top of the desk. “No charging the lass, Ewan MacFarland.” The men stared at each other in silence for half a minute. “Ye said it. At Culloden. *I would have fought beside ye.* Well, here is yer chance. Fight beside me. And if it happens that I am called back—”

MacFarland cocked his head. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. You can’t still be trying to convince me you’re a ghost.” It seemed to tick him off that Lachlan was sticking with his story. But he’d stuck to it long enough already that Harper was starting to worry it was true.

“If I am called back,” the Scot repeated, “I’ll have yer vow that ye’ll see to the lass’s safety. That ye won’t take lightly the threat of St. Clair and his men. That ye’ll make well and sure that the blackheart never has the chance to harm her, out of revenge, even after it is settled.”

“My vow.” The man snorted again. “My vow...” He waved both hands like he was being pestered by a fly. “I’m afraid it just doesn’t work like that, Mr. McLean.”

Lachlan didn’t even look worried. “Yer ancestor, for whom ye were named, was pleased with yer pledge at Culloden. I’m certain he’d be pleased again to see ye prove yerself now.”

MacFarland pointed an accusing finger at the Scot’s head. “*You’ve* been talking to my wife!”

Lachlan shrugged one of those t-shirt stretching shoulders. “She’s a lovely woman. But those heels of hers were hardly fit for the moors. Next time ye come, she’ll need warm boots I think. But to answer the charge, no, I have never spoken with yer wife.”

“Then how do you know about the man I was named after? It’s nowhere on the internet.”

“MacFarland was there, at the cairn, when ye placed the wreath in his honor. He heard ye as well. He truly couldna been more pleased—”

“Look—”

“Short man. Hairless but for the great mustache that starts at one ear,” Lachlan pointed a finger at his own ear in demonstration, “crosses beneath his nose, and ends at the other. He was one of Lord Lewis Gordon’s. A brave man...who also bore the same birthmark on his backside. Did ye know that?”

The man’s head turned red and his hand dropped to his thigh but he stopped himself and set it back on the table. “I’m sure there is some way of knowing that. You’ve done your research, but you’ve said nothing that proves you’re a ghost. Now. Maybe if you could walk through that wall...”

“I’m afraid I find myself to be mortal at the moment. Perhaps later, if I’m still here after the sun has set.”

It was over. She'd been distracted, watching the men go back and forth, and hadn't noticed that old familiar raincloud rolling in. Next, they'd be asked to leave.

MacFarland turned to her and his smile was more like a grimace.

Here it comes.

"Harper. I'm sorry. I'm not going to be able to help you. I can give you the name of a probate lawyer—"

Lachlan jumped to his feet and the woman in the corner squeaked. He leaned slightly forward and his fists opened and closed, opened and closed, like he was trying to control himself. MacFarland lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes but kept his butt in the chair.

"Ye must have proof? Fine, then. Though yer great grandsire would be more impressed if ye showed a bit of faith, aye?" He bent over and rested one hand on the desk, fingers spread. Then, with the other, he rolled the discarded pencil across the surface. But instead of stopping when it ran into his flattened hand, it rolled through it and out the other side.

Harper wasn't aware she'd done anything at all until Lachlan hurried over to her where she had apparently backed up against the office door. She didn't realize she'd left her chair, but she did remember feeling like she suddenly needed to be far, far away from that pencil... and that hand.

"I'm sorry, lass. Forgive me. Strange things seem to be possible when emotions are high, but I didn't know that it would work. Look!" He pinched his hand, then held it up to her. "It feels real enough now, does it not?"

He wanted her to touch it?!

She shook her head. "I believe you."

His worried gaze flew back and forth as he searched deep into her eyes. Then he stepped quickly away like he thought he might smell offensive or something. The devastated look on his face made her forget about anything but making it go away, so she stepped up to him and took a hold of his hands.

"I'm sorry. I was just... freaked out is all. I'm fine now. I am." She wasn't, though. Not by a long shot. But she thought if she concentrated really hard, she could keep from shaking.

He only looked a little relieved. Still unsure.

"So. You're a ghost. You've been trying to tell me that all day, right? I'm sorry I didn't believe you, but I didn't want it to be true, you know?"

He smiled then. "Ye didn't?"

"Of course not. I mean... Of course not."

She was grateful when Mildred knocked her knobby knuckles on the desk to get their attention. MacFarland's jaw looked like it might be permanently unhinged.

"Could you do that again, sir?" the woman said.

It didn't work the second time, and the woman exchanged a look with her boss.

The man shook his head rapidly. "It was no magic trick, Milly. I was right here." He looked still as shocked as Harper felt. She just hid it better.

"Well, it's up to you, Ewan," Mildred said, "but I'd waive your retainer."

Chapter 16

Harper and Lachlan were led into a private lounge to take a breather while their new buddy, Ewan, made some phone calls. He'd promised not only to waive his retainer and represent her, but to keep her safe too. So he was working on the safe part.

Her gut told her not to trust anyone but Lachlan and to stay on her toes. But she and the lawyer now shared a secret that made her feel like there was a bond between them. Nothing dramatic, but a bond just the same—kind of like knowing someone's ultimate secret, and them knowing yours. Maybe they could cause trouble for each other, sharing the fact that they had seen a ghost, spoke with one, made deals with one. It was the kind of story Dr. Quack would have loved to add to her list of mental illnesses.

There were two long leather couches that called out for her to lie down and rest while she had the chance. She glanced at Lachlan and he released her hand and nodded for her to go ahead. The soft white leather made no sound when she stretched out on the couch to the right. Her Scot sat at the far end of the other one, facing her, but he let his head fall against the wide back and closed his eyes.

She closed hers too, amazed she wasn't more freaked out at being alone in the room with a guy who had just proven he was a ghost. But it was *Lachlan*. How could she not feel safe with him? Sure, they'd only known each other for half a day, but it seemed like a lifetime.

As her body relaxed, she sank deeper into the luxurious cushions. Unfortunately, her mind wandered back to that pencil. And a memory rose in her mind of the first time he'd held her close, behind that door in the half-abandoned building. *I've been dead before*, he'd said, and she was swamped with an all too familiar sadness.

Lachlan had *died*. Just like her mother. Only, for some reason, he'd been allowed to come back. She could only imagine how great it would be if her mother could do the same. Even if it was only for a day.

"Lachlan?" She opened her eyes and stared at the coffered ceiling that was much like the one in her mother's bedroom, once upon a time. The light of the sunset, coming through the panoramic windows, made it glow orange.

"Yes, Sweeting?" His voice was low and far too sexy for her own good.

"You're really a ghost then?"

"Aye. Are ye terribly disappointed?"

Disappointed? Yeah, she was. It was almost as if he'd just died, but she was allowed to talk to him a little longer. If she was smart, she'd put a little distance between them so, when he did go away, she wouldn't be devastated. But it was almost too late for that. He was the only good thing that had happened to her in three long, painful months. And it was possible he might be her last good memory ever.

She decided to ignore the question, afraid her answer might ruin what time they had left together. Instead, she asked him how he'd died.

“In battle. A bullet to the thigh stopped me. A bayonet finished me, as the enemy gave no quarter—took no prisoners. Surely ye’ve heard of the great Battle of Culloden Moor.”

“Uh, sorry. I don’t know Scottish history.” And whatever St. Clair might have tried to teach her, she’d ignored.

“Mmm.” He sounded pretty disappointed himself.

She looked over at him. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank ye, lass.” He forced a smile. “But it was long ago. The pain was long forgotten.”

“I remember you tried to tell me... that you’d died before.”

“Ah, so ye heard me.”

“Yeah, but I thought that I couldn’t have heard right.” She watched him for a few seconds. Sitting all alone on that couch. And with so little time left.

Her first move was to sit up. “So... how did you get from Scotland to here?”

He narrowed his eyes a little, watching her. “I was sent by a witch.”

“I didn’t think there were real witches.” She stood up and looked around the room like she was bored.

He sat back and folded his arms. “Auch, aye. There are witches a’ plenty in Scotland. Even today.”

She swung a foot and stepped to the end of his couch to look at the statue on the end table. “Why did she send you here?”

He shook his head. “A story too long to tell now. I’ve no idea how much time I have left, lass. I could go at any moment. If ye mean to kiss me, ye’d best get to it, aye?”

She thought about denying it, but his smile had her unraveling at record speed. A second later, she was sitting on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tight.

“What? No kiss, then?” he asked over her shoulder.

She pulled back. His eyes sparkled with amusement. She tried not to look at his lips.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I can weigh you down. And if you start to fade, I can grab you and keep them from taking you.”

He laughed, and when the laughter died, he was stone sober. “My sweet Harper. I cannot stay. I’ve already bargained away... everything... to stay with ye until I could see ye safe.”

“I understand. I mean, it’s not like—”

She found it hard to finish her sentence with his lips pressed against hers. Warm, firm, and... determined. But he was right not to let her waste any more time talking about stupid stuff.

When the kiss ended, she opened her eyes and grinned.

“What is it, lass?”

“You’re still here.”

“Oh, aye. Would ye look at that?”

She leaned in and kissed him again. No way could he be a ghost and be so warm and solid against her. And no ghost could make her feel so... alive.

After minute, she needed to catch her breath and get a grip. “Thank you for saving me from the train,” she said in a rush. “And at the library. I’m sorry I

thought you were with Bart. And he shot you! I'm so sorry you got shot! But I'm glad you weren't hurt..."

He lifted his shoulder briefly, and with it, one of her arms. Again, she couldn't imagine someone so solid turning into something intangible. But he already had, if only for a few seconds! He really *was* going to disappear on her!

"It was like Culloden. A bullet stopped me, but this time, a lass saved me from being finished off." He sighed. "T'would be a grand way to re-write my own history."

She glanced at the window. The sunset was growing dimmer. She had to talk fast!

"I'm sorry I tried to lock you out of the truck. It's just, I thought I'd rather never see you again than see you get killed trying to help me. And I—"

"Harper—"

"I'm just glad you were here. That's all. I mean, I wasn't alone anymore. And it was...great not being alone anymore."

"Hush, lass. The moon has yet to rise. No need to rush anything." He took her face in his hands and lowered his brow. "I want ye to have faith in Ewan MacFarland. He will keep ye safe until St. Clair is no longer a threat. He has given his pledge, aye?"

She nodded just so she could feel the strength of his hands rubbing against her cheeks.

"If only we'd met in another time, my sweet."

She smiled. "Yeah, in Scotland."

"Aye. I'd have done anything for a lass so brave as ye."

"And I'd have persuaded you not to go off to war that day..."

He made a guttural sound. "If only..."

"MacLean," Ewan called from the adjoining office. "I think we've got trouble!"

Chapter 17

The hairs rose on the back of Lachlan's neck. The sounds of the city below seemed normal enough, but there was a rapid succession of thumps, as if many car doors had closed.

"What is it?" she whispered, her mouth only a few inches from his, and he couldn't help himself. It might be his last chance. So he leaned forward and indulged himself, like moss drinking greedily of the spring rain.

Yes, he thought. Just the taste of her was worth giving up his revenge. Soni had been right to put an end to it all.

The double doors swung wide and Ewan stood in the opening with a gun in his hand. "They probably found you through the cab company. My people won't be here for another half hour at least. I'll try to hold off St. Clair until then." He tucked his gun behind his back. "I've also called the police, so I want you two to hide. There was an officer here earlier, but his car is gone. And Salt Lake's finest may not get here soon enough either."

He strode quickly to the bathroom door, pushed it open, and with his gun he pointed to the ceiling inside.

“There’s a drop ceiling. I’m not sure if you can get up there or not. But at least lock yourselves inside if you can’t figure out something better.” He hurried back through the doors. Just before he pulled them closed, he looked at Harper. “I’m sorry I didn’t take the threat more seriously. I could have had some men here...”

As it turned out, the panels in the bathroom ceiling were nothing but foam. There was no miraculous air shaft or vent to climb into.

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “Ewan has a gun, but that won’t stop Bart. We know that. And a witness or two hasn’t seemed to bother him all day.” She started for the double doors, shaking her head. “I can’t allow these people get hurt for me either.”

Lachlan took her hand and kept her from reaching the knob. “Dinna go, lass. Give MacFarland a chance. Perhaps he’ll convince them we’ve already gone, aye?”

“I can’t risk that. Not if Bart comes in shooting.”

“Alright then.” And to her surprise, he opened the doors for her without argument. Together, they walked into Ewan’s office and Lachlan gave a helpless shrug. “She wants no one else to end up as a ghost this day.”

Ewan frowned, but nodded. “Milly, you stay in here.” And together, the three of them stepped into the outer office.

He and Ewan stood together facing the large oak door and gave Harper only a few inches to see between them. But the lass didn’t complain, for which he was grateful.

The door opened wide. Bart gave them a sneer, then stepped back to let another man enter ahead of him—a man in a dull black suit and artificially blond hair.

St. Clair.

“Hello.” The man’s lips stretched into a sly smile. “I’ve come to collect my stepdaughter.” He tipped his head to the side and looked Lachlan over. “You must be the Scot she dragged into her little tantrum. Tell me your name.”

“No.” Harper pushed her way between himself and Ewan. “You don’t get to talk to him. Do you understand?”

St. Clair’s jaw flexed and the look he gave the lass was pure loathing. “You hold your tongue. You’re in enough trouble—”

“Shut up, Robert. We all know what you’re capable of, but I won’t allow you to hurt these people. I’ll come along with you, willingly, but only if you keep quiet and get back in the car.”

St. Clair simply breathed at the brave lass for a moment, probably trying to decide how important her cooperation was to him.

“Go,” she barked, and the man flinched. The look in his eye promised she’d pay for embarrassing him.

“You know,” Ewan began, then nodded to Lachlan. “I think maybe we should all sit down and work things out. What do you say, St. Clair? That’s a Scottish name, too. Maybe the three of us have more in common than we might think.”

The man was trying to stall until reinforcements arrived. Aiding him in that regard was the least Lachlan could do.

“Aye. And let’s no’ be rude, Harper. The man asked my name. ‘Tis the least I can do to introduce myself.”

Harper turned and gave him a warning look, then shook her head at St. Clair. “Don’t listen to him, Daddy Dearest. They’re only trying to stall you until the police get here. Let’s go.”

He felt like a battering ram had struck his middle, he was that surprised by her betrayal. But when he considered the last long look of regret in her eyes as she stepped into the hallway, he realized she was still just trying to protect them all. Had she no faith in anyone being able to help her?

The party turned a corner and he finally risked speaking. “Ewan. I’m going after the lass. Have ye another weapon?”

“I don’t,” he said. “He pulled his gun from behind his back and pointed it skyward.”

Lachlan worried the man wasn’t thinking clearly. “What are ye about? Ye ken ye may lose yer profession, if ye kill a man.”

Ewan smiled. “I thought I’d show a little faith. And besides, I have a pledge to keep.”

“Well, then. Come fight alongside me, MacFarland.”

Chapter 18

Being a martyr is overrated.

Harper tried to tell herself, over and over again, that she was taking one for the team, that the rest of them were safe—well, except for Lachlan, who’d never been safe in the first place—but it didn’t help calm her down. She was scared to death.

When she stepped outside, surrounded by the small party of goons, her attention first went to the parking stall where the cop had been. Too bad he hadn’t stuck around a while longer. Next, she gave the sunset a nice glare. There was little more than some red clouds left above the Great Salt Lake, and a very distant glow of yellow over Nevada.

She paused and searched the darkening blue for the moon, but there were only stars trying to turn up their intensity so they could be seen.

If the moon wasn’t up yet, there was still time—only she wouldn’t be around to enjoy it.

She remembered the conversation inside the cold truck. Lachlan had been so excited by the idea of haunting her, so he could be with her until July. And now she realized he hadn’t been kidding.

“Haunt me, Lachlan McLean,” she whispered. “I dare you.” Too bad, as a ghost, he wouldn’t be able to do much more than be a lookout. He wouldn’t be solid enough to use his warrior moves on Bart and the boys again.

Bart gave her a little shove—speak of the devil. But she was still high on adrenaline and defended herself—with the back of her elbow applied to the front of his face. She felt a satisfying crunch. His screech was like a song she’d been dying to hear on the radio.

“Leave her alone, Bart,” St. Clair snapped. “She’s coming willingly. Are you blind?”

Bent in half, Bart groaned into the hand he held over his nose. One of the others offered him a handkerchief to stop the bleeding and he ripped it out of the guy's hand. "It's Brad," he grumbled.

Harper threw her head back and laughed...and did it just in time to see a Scotsman, in jeans, flying over her head to land on top St. Clair's town car!

Lachlan McLean was a beautiful sight, but she didn't take time to stare. She ducked and backed away from the open door she'd been about to climb into, careful not to bump into Bart, who was still bent over trying not to get blood on his clothes. He had no idea!

Lachlan stepped to the far edge of the roof and kicked the driver in the face like a punter would. The guy went flying backward. Another goon stepped up and reached for him, and Lachlan stepped on the guy's hand with one foot, then stomped on his head like he was trying to drive a nail home. When he stepped off his fingers, the guy slithered out of sight.

Harper kept backing away, taking it all in, wondering if fleeing would be the smartest thing for her to do. But she couldn't stand the thought of leaving her Scot again.

Two bodies lay prone on the sidewalk with Ewan MacFarland standing over them in his shirt sleeves, like he'd jumped on them from the roof above. She wouldn't have been surprised if he started beating on his chest, he was so pleased with himself. With a grin on his face and his eyes flashing, he looked for his next target.

There were two suits standing next to a second car. Their attention was torn between MacFarland and watching St. Clair for orders. But her stepfather was only concerned with Lachlan.

"Shoot him," he barked.

His nose still bleeding, Bart pulled out his gun and aimed. Lachlan grinned at him and hopped onto the hood of the car. He ripped one of the windshield wipers off, then dropped to the ground and struck a pose, holding the long black wiper blade like a sword.

Bart laughed and aimed at Lachlan's heart. Harper screamed, and drew everyone's attention to the fact that she was halfway across the parking lot.

"Harper, honey!" Mildred called out from an open window. She held a tablet up in front of her. "Come back this way a little," she hollered. "I'm streaming this live and I need to keep you in the shot!"

Bart whipped his gun arm around behind him to hide from the camera. The two guys by the second car jerked their doors open and disappeared inside. St. Clair waved at the only goon left not bleeding or unconscious, who then ran toward Mildred, but he was taken down from behind by MacFarland who moved impressively for a man his age.

Harper didn't dare move. Was Mildred telling the truth? Was the fight streaming on the internet? Or had she said it to save Lachlan?

Since no one was left to do his dirty work, St. Clair ran toward Harper. She stood her ground even when he slammed into her and wrapped his arm around her neck.

"Smile for the camera," she growled.

“You think I care who’s watching?” he hissed. “We’ll be in Rio by morning. And I’m sure the asylums there won’t be nearly as pleasant as the ones you’ve been imagining.”

Not if she could help it. “Rio!” she shouted to Mildred, just before her air was cut off. She could barely breathe and had to use all her energy to pull his arm away from her throat.

Bart held his left arm out toward Lachlan like he was trying to talk a jumper off a ledge, all the while hiding his gun from the camera. Mildred kept filming. Ewan approached the second car and started taunting the men inside to come out. Instead, they started the engine and drove off. St. Clair gave Harper’s head a little twist, shooting pain down her neck, and she figured that was his way of saying it was her fault he’d just lost two goons.

“Lass?” Lachlan glanced briefly her way. “How do ye fare?”

She raised an arm and gave him a thumbs up and hoped he knew what it meant. He nodded, then turned all his attention to Bart. Ewan headed in her direction with a gun in his hand, but St. Clair jerked her sideways so they were both facing the lawyer.

“Drop the gun or she dies!”

The tall man raised his hands and sent his weapon skittering twenty feet away. At least St. Clair wouldn’t have the chance to get a hold of it.

“Get back,” St. Clair snapped.

Ewan backed away slowly. Little steps, little progress, but it was enough to make St. Clair relax his grip a little and she was able to take a deep breath.

Lachlan swatted Bart with the black plastic, over and over again, pissing him off. Did he want to be shot? Was he hoping Bart would be sent to jail for killing him? Surely not, if there was no body to show for it. She didn’t understand.

Suddenly Lachlan moved in close, his improvised weapon whipping in a dozen angles. Bart screamed, his voice strident with anger. His gun clattered on the asphalt. He stepped back and looked at his hands for a second, then he started searching for his gun.

Lachlan moved in again. This time, Harper saw the flash of a metal blade and realized the Scot was armed better than she’d thought. It had to be the little knife he had worn in his sock. And she could have laughed—Bart probably thought he was being sliced up by a wiper blade!

Frantic, Bart fell to the ground, no longer trying to defend himself so he could find his gun. His screams became grunts of pain. He lunged under the car, landing on his stomach, and Lachlan retreated. By the time Bart was on his feet with his gun in hand, Lachlan had backed up all the way to the brick wall.

St. Clair’s body stiffened at her back and he made sure her head was facing the drama.

“I don’t want you to miss this,” he said. “It’s your fault for getting another body guard. And here I thought you’d learned your lesson.”

“Would you shut up so I can see this?” she yelled. If bullets bounced off Lachlan like they did off vampires, she wanted to see the look on Bart’s face when he realized his opponent was unstoppable. And if the moon came out and turned Lachlan back into a spirit, she wanted to be able to tell him goodbye before he faded.

Lachlan raised a hand, then dropped it quickly. His knife flew so fast she lost track of it. Bart grunted, then fell forward. His gun never went off.

St. Clair's surprise didn't last long. He produced a gun she hadn't realized he had and aimed it at Ewan. "Back inside," he said calmly. "I'll shoot all of you if I must." He turned and aimed at the window where Milly stood. Harper struck his arm just as the gun went off. The bullet hit the brick.

Lachlan walked straight for them, his chin lowered, his eyes narrow. St. Clair had to give up his hold around her neck in order to pin her arms down. While he wrestled with her, he had to use the gun hand. But when the Scot was still five feet away, the monster was able to aim again.

The weapon fired and her heart jumped—the sound matched perfectly with the fear exploding in her chest—and all for a guy who was already dead.

Lachlan went down on one knee, but unlike the shot he took in the hallway a lifetime ago, he wavered like he was going down! His hair fell forward and she couldn't see his face. Had he lost his invincibility when the sun went down?

"Lachlan!" Tears poured down her face. Her body cramped from the pain she imagined he suffered.

Ewan moved cautiously toward Lachlan, his hands held out to his sides and empty. In the distance, sirens began, multiplied, and grew louder.

Suddenly the heavy point of the gun pushed against the base of her skull. "Hold it," St. Clair said, and Ewan halted. "You either let us leave now, or she dies. If I can't take her with me, I'm certainly not going to let her live."

Ewan held up one hand, reached into his pocket, and produced a set of keys. "The Lexus. There." He pointed the keys at a silver SUV in the corner, unencumbered by bodies, and pushed a button. The lights flashed and the alarm began to squawk.

Lachlan rose up before her with a roar, like something fierce rising from the sea. She had no time to turn or duck, but St. Clair never had a chance to pull the trigger. Lachlan's body pushed her to the right, and by the time his feet landed back on the blacktop, it was over.

The gun fell from St. Clair's open hand. He hit his knees first, his surprised gaze focused on nothing as he fell forward. The end of a wiper blade protruded out of his neck on one side. The handle of a small black knife stuck out the other. A circle of blood expanded beneath him.

The car alarm honked in a steady rhythm—a heartbeat that continued while St. Clair's was slowing to a stop.

Lachlan gathered her in his arms to shield her from the sight while he moved her away from the body. But it was a sight she could never un-see.

She was struck by the irony. With all those intricate weapons her stepfather fawned over and hung on his walls, he would probably be humiliated to know that he'd been taken out by a short, little knife and a piece of plastic.

Chapter 19

Lachlan pulled Harper close, trying to still her shaking. With an unsteady hand, Ewan pressed his key and the car alarm ceased.

“It is normal to quake after a battle is done,” he said to her and Ewan both. “All the horror of what ye were forced to do, what ye chose to do, and the violence aimed at yer person gathers together and tries to fit inside yer heart all at once.”

Ewan nodded down the hill. Red and blue lights flashed and headed their way. Then all at once, they froze. The world was suddenly silent in the absence of sirens.

The hairs on the back of Lachlan’s neck rose. He knew what was coming—Soncerae. But the woman, stiff in his embrace, was able to move this time.

“What’s going on?” Harper whispered.

He took her by the arms and faced her, but the words wouldn’t come. Then his attention was caught by a slender wisp of green mist slithering across the car park and his heart jumped up into his throat.

‘Tis time. ‘Tis over! All over!

He watched to see if Harper noticed the mist. When she took a step away from it he knew that this visit from his wee witch would be different. Perhaps she meant to allow him to say goodbye properly.

His instincts told him to shield his lass from all he could, so he moved her between himself and the immobile form of Ewan MacFarland.

Dread and adrenaline warred in his veins as it had the morning of the battle. But there was a difference. At Culloden, he’d been anxious to get started, anxious to know the outcome. But standing there, knowing that warmth at his back would soon be gone, that he’d never pull those shoulders to him again, made him anxious to draw out the next moments and make them last a lifetime.

The mist began to build, like the tendrils that stalked across the moor as often as the sun rose. Like the beginnings of that fire Soni lit on the solstice.

There was no mistaking the Muir mist now.

His heart cried out and began breaking at the seams. And without it, he suddenly wasn’t brave enough to look at Harper’s face and say goodbye.

“What is that?” Harper’s plaintive voice quivered. *Poor lass must be so weary of surprises.*

“Fear not, Sweeting. ‘Tis just my wee witchling come to call.”

She pulled on his sleeve but he resisted. “But the moon isn’t up!”

He had to swallow to get the words past his throat. “Aye, lassie. But yer safe now. ‘Tis all I bargained for. Ewan’s a good man, Harper. I want ye to trust him. MacFarland ancestors stay close about that one. They’ll see that he does honorably by ye.”

“Lachlan!” she pled. “You can’t leave me! You can’t!” She tried to push him aside, but he held fast with both hands, pinning her behind him from both sides. “Where is she? I want to talk to this witch!”

“Ah, Lachlan.” Suddenly Soni was standing ten feet away, still in the robes of Summer Solstice. The mist grew thick and gathered about her, moving slowly, clockwise. Ethereal forms took shape, then faded and were replaced by others. He wished he could spare Harper from the sight of something so unearthly, but she would have to be blind not to see it.

“The lass is safe then?” Soni nodded over his shoulder, then waved. Her wide sleeve fell back to her elbow. Her smile fled and she hurried to cover her arm again, but Lachlan had gotten a good look at it. There was something wrong there.

“What ails ye, Soni?”

The witch lass rolled her eyes. “Nothing. I promise. I’ll be good as new in a few days. I swear it.”

Lachlan wondered if his friend had just lied to him for the first time. But he would be able to speak with her later, after they were far away from Salt Lake City and the brave young woman at his back.

Soni exhaled sharply. “Now. She wants to speak to me, Lachlan. Step aside.” She waved her hand, careful to hold her sleeve against her arm.

He hesitated. Now that Soncerae had shown herself as a woman with power, would she meddle with anyone besides her pet ghosties?

As foolish as it felt to do it, he asked her.

Soni’s smile pulled to one side. “Ye mean, will I send Harper off somewhere? I will not. I cannot. I was blessed with...gifts...so that I might aid Culloden’s brave lads. Seventy-nine of them, as ye know, so I’ve little time for others. Now, let Harper have her say.”

He pulled in a deep breath—possibly his last real breath—and released it slowly before stepping aside. He still couldn’t bear to look at Harper, so he kept his eyes on Soni and put his hands behind his back, content to be able to stand beside his lass for a moment or two longer.

“Harper?” Soni bore herself as someone much older than the 16-year-old he knew her to be. Like a queen, in fact.

The lass stepped out from behind him. She tucked a few fingers into Lachlan’s belt and held tight, but he sensed it was more from being nervous than an attempt to keep him earthbound. Perhaps it was both. He took hold of her distant shoulder and pulled her up against his side in any case.

Dear Soni pretended not to notice.

“Well,” Harper said. “First, I guess I should thank you for sending him to rescue me.”

“Ye’re welcome.” Soni tilted her chin and stared straight into his eyes, and the truth dawned like the morning sun. She’d been lying before when she’d said Harper was only a random damsel in need of saving! The lass was meant to be his, even if only for a day! And his heart soared in spite of its broken pieces.

The moisture gathering in his eyes was yet more proof he was still alive. But for how long?

Harper cleared her throat. “But I’d like to ask you to leave him with me.” Her voice broke, but she recovered. “Please.” And that last word exposed every emotion he was feeling himself.

Please, Soni!

“I need him like I’ve never needed anything in my life. And without him, I’ll... To be honest, I’ll be fine. My life will be fine. I’ll figure out a way to be fine. But I’ll never be more than that. Does that make sense?”

“Oh, aye.” Soni gave her a sad smile. “And I’m sorry for it. But truly, there is nothing I can do to change what must happen now. With the help of my uncle

Wickham, I've borrowed 79 spirits from the other side, ye ken. And I must send a spirit back.

Harper jumped forward, out of his embrace. "Then take me."

He tried to pull her back, but she shrugged him off. "She doesna understand, Soni."

"I do understand. Take me!" She turned to face him, then backed toward Soni. "Don't you see? Letting you die again would be like standing by and... and watching while someone murdered a beautiful animal. I can't let that happen." She turned back to Soni and realized she was standing inside the misty circle of green, but she didn't panic. Instead, she repeated herself. "Take me instead."

Lachlan tried to reach her, but the mist was a barrier he was unable to cross.

"Soncerae! Do it and I shall never forgive ye. I will hound ye to hell, I will."

"Hush, Lachlan." Soni grinned. "I'll not be taking the lass anywhere."

The mist fell like a weak cloud washed into the ground by a heavy rain. The glow of green disappeared and, seeing the barrier gone, Lachlan tried to reach Harper again. But something unseen remained, something he couldn't get past!

"Uh, oh." Soni bit her lip.

Lachlan spread his feet to keep his balance in a windstorm that came out of nowhere. When the air settled, a man, dressed in modern clothing, stood face to face with Soni, and far too close to Harper for Lachlan's peace of mind. He stepped around the group so he could see their faces and force Harper to look at him. Hopefully, he could lure her away from the others.

"Ye gave yer word, Soncerae!" The man's outrage sliced through the air like a lion's roar.

The wee witch dared to smile up at him. "And I have not broken it, Uncle."

"Ye must have hinted at it," he said, though the anger was receding as quickly as the wind storm had. "Else how would she have known what was required?"

"I tell ye, Uncle. The woman seemed earnest."

"Ye canna take her," Lachlan bellowed. "Give her over!"

Soni's uncle turned and glared. "Ye! Ye and yer Highland friends—"

"Uncle Wickham! Ye gave yer word as well."

The man seethed for a moment, then inclined his head to Lachlan as if begrudgingly granting him some sort of forgiveness. He turned back to the witch. "Aye. I have given it. I have given ye much, Our Soncerae. And I wish I could take it all back." He reached out and patted her cheek.

"Yes, Uncle."

The man sighed loudly... and vanished.

Lachlan didn't understand their argument, but he wasted no time. He hurried to Harper, thankful nothing stopped him, and pulled her back, expecting the green mist to return at any second and separate them again. He smiled into her tearstained face, but had no words to thank her for the sacrifice she'd tried to make. So he thanked her with a tender kiss.

If Soni hadn't shuffled her feet behind him, he could have gone on kissing Harper for a good two hundred years at least. But alas, it was time to pay the piper.

"I hope, Sweeting, that someone worthy makes ye take back yer words. That he makes yer life much more than fine."

Her eyes flashed in Soni's direction and back again. "Just ignore her, Lachlan. Maybe she'll go away."

"Come, my bonny laddie," the witch called. "Come and bid me a proper farewell, aye?"

He spun on his boot heel and kept Harper behind him. "Nay, Soni. I care not what she offered. I will not allow ye to take her in my stead, do ye hear? Call that Wickham back if needs be."

Soni rolled her eyes. "I won't be taken yer woman, Lachlan. Are ye daft? Did ye pay no attention to what happened here?" She huffed out her breath. "She stays. Ye, Lachlan McLean, are to be left here to live or perish how ye will. The lass has bought ye another mortal life."

"What?" Harper jumped out from behind him in her excitement. "He gets to stay?"

"He gets to stay." And to him Soni said, "I've got others to see to, Lachlan. Give us a kiss."

He hurried to her and took her wee hands in his. "How have ye accomplished such a thing, Soncerae? Have ye sold yer soul—"

"Posh! Go on with ye. Ye've seen Wickham for yerself. No devil shall have me, I swear it."

"And yer arm?"

"Mind yer business." She slapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"And the others? Will they be as fortunate as I?"

Her smile turned sad. "It is too soon to ken how many will fare well. Ye're fortunate, as ye say."

"He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Thank ye, lass. I get the sense yer uncle doesna believe the 79 of us are worth whatever sacrifice ye've made for us, but I thank ye just the same." He leaned close to her ear. "And thank ye for Harper."

"Oh?" She pulled back, all wide eyes and innocence. "I'm not Fate, Lachlan." She dropped his hands and stepped back. Her form began to fade, and just before she was gone altogether, she giggled. "But I may know Her."

Chapter 20

Red, white, and blue lights flashed across the Scot's t-shirt and he turned to grin at Harper. When he opened his arms, she was happy to run and jump into them like a teenage cheerleader. They were too busy grinning into each other's faces to worry about the police cars tearing into the parking lot.

"I'll take good care of you, Lachlan. I promise. You won't regret staying."

"Auch, lass. Why would I regret staying? I've my life back and a beautiful woman to share it with. It's fine compensation. Fine indeed." He slowly lowered her to the ground and she realized he was shaking like a leaf.

"Are you all right?"

“Aye. I’m fine, lass,” he said loudly as he got down on his knees and put his hands above his head as he was ordered to do. Ewan was on his knees too, smiling at the poor police officer who was being harangued by Millie, who insisted he watch the footage right away so her boss, *the attorney*, could get off his knees.”

A cop came up to her. “Are you Harper? From the Amber Alert?”

She nodded, then waved for him to get out of her face. Eventually, she had to get down on her knees too in order to talk to her own personal Scot. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’re shaking.”

“Trembling, lass. Apparently there are a great many things trying to get inside my heart at the same time.” He was hauled to his feet and another cop tried to keep her from following him.

“Well, I hope I’m one of them,” she shouted.

A man pushed on Lachlan’s head as he was placed in the back of a squad car. Then the door was shut and his smiling face was visible again. ““Auch, lass,” he said through the half-open window. “Ye’re all of them.”

